

REEL TWO

Send in the Clones

1

Clarinet intro. Then bass and soft piano. “Maybe next time, I’ll be Kander.” Kweenie parodied the blues, doing Liza doing Judy. “Maybe next time, he’ll be Ebb.” In the baby pinpoint spot, she was all bowler hat, big eyelashes, red lipstick, and spit curls pasted on each cheek. “Maybe next time for the best time...” Her red-sequined Judy-jacket reflected darts of spotlight around the supper club. “... he’ll be totally gay.” She blew a kiss to her drummer brushing her beat. “He will do me? Fast! I’ll be homo? At last!” Outing her lust for gay men, she teased the lyrics. “Not a ‘lady’ anymore like the last hag and the hag before.” She picked up the chorus. “Everybody loves a lover.” She expanded. “So everybody loves me.” Her green fingernails clawed the air above her head. “Lady Castro. Lady Folsom. Take a big look at me!” She hit all the right poses to make them love her. “When all you boys are in my corner, I’ll blow you all away!” Channeling Judy’s invincible voice, she became Liza the Conqueror. “Call me Kweenie! Call me Kweenie!” She thrust jazz hands up framing her face. As the audience rose to their feet, she exploded. “Maybe next time, maybe next time, you’ll love me!”

The supper crowd at Fanny’s loved Kweenasheba. She was as good as Ryan at being other people, but she, singing torch usually best sung by divas one scotch-and-soda past their prime, knew when to quit. She finished her set and came to my table. “What movie am I?” she asked.

Before I could say, “*Cabaret*,” she said, “*Imitation of Life*.” She affected a certain world-weariness.

“Seen much of Ry?” I asked.

“Not since Kick moved in.” She had an envious look in her eye. “Do you blame either of them?”

“Solly says Ry’s writing some top-secret project.”

“You sound like a reporter for the *National Intruder*,” she said. “Are you keeping notes?”

“The unexamined lifestyle is not worth living.”

“Magnus, dear Magnus.” She took my hand. “You’re such a bag of horseshit. All I know is Ryan is holed up with Kick. Solly Blue is pissed. He has—how do you say in English?—no love for Kick.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t ask,” Kweenie said. “Solly says he has reasons.”

“Such as?”

“He won’t say. At least, he won’t tell me.” She signaled for an orange juice. “I think he’s jealous. Ryan told him that Kick’s the Most Original Thinker he knows.”

“That used to be Solly’s title.”

“Precisely,” Kweenie said. “But these days nobody’s as good as Kick.” She threw her hands up. “Ryan says they discuss stuff. He calls it *stuff*”

“Stuff? What kind of stuff?”

“Mantalk,” Kweenie said. “Ry told me it was mantalk.”

“He means it’s none of your business.”

“And none of yours.” She disliked her brother excluding her with a word like *mantalk*. She knew if she had been born Ryan’s brother, their relationship would be quite different. They would have made love, which he denied her and himself, not because she was his sibling, but because she was female.

“They’re in-love,” I said.

“They’re two gifted boys playing grown-ups and getting away with it.”

Because of Kick, Ryan’s life, like his erotic writing, had assumed a creamy, dreamy, soft-core porno look: everything slightly more real than real. Kick was one of his fictional superheroes incarnated like Pygmalion’s Galatea and Henry Higgins’ Eliza. Their life together was an enameled dreamtime: clothes by *Gentlemen’s Quarterly*, sets by *Architectural Digest*, bodies by Colt Studios out of *Iron Man*, script by Ryan out of Lewis Carroll by de Sade.

“Living off center is a necessity,” Ryan said.

What neither Kweenie nor I knew then was that Ryan was in the last throes of his final draft of his *Masculinist Manifesto*, which

he subtitled *A Man's Man*. I think he had some idea of the sensation, but had no idea of the controversy, the long essay would cause when printed with erotic photos and distributed in tabloid format on San Francisco street corners. Not that Kick and Ryan invented everything in the *Manifesto*. More that Ryan pulled together something growing and mobilizing toward a confrontation in San Francisco: the singular popular front of freshly uncloseted male homosexuals was breaking up into subgroups of politics and attitude fueled by lesbian feminist separatist women.

Ryan intended the *Manifesto* as the very off-center voice of the most invisible queer of them all: the manly homosexual.

The *Manifesto's* opening line read: "The hardest thing to be in America today is a man."

"They're probably holed up," Kweenie said, "writing dirty stories and taking dirty pictures."

"*Maneuvers* keeps them off the streets," I said. "That's the function of gay porn."

"Without it what would little boys do?"

"Forget it," I said. "They're in-love"

"I know they're in-love," Kweenie said. Her orange juice arrived. "Just like the movies. There's the smell of popcorn in the air."

2

Solomon Bluestein was a movie mogul. He was the Sam Goldwyn of the Tenderloin. He started out in 1969 shooting little porno films on Super 8 and evolved into erotic videotapes he sold mail order. Solid Blue Video, Inc., was a money machine paying quarterly taxes. Solly never hired the expensive, interchangeable blond twits or the coltish modelles who populated gay films. His stars were real trash: runaways, throwaways, street hustlers, excons. He was a grand cross between Fagin and Father Flanagan.

"I'd rather smell the sweat from a straight young wrestler's dripping armpit than have sex with a gay boy."

His *cinema verite* videotapes were legendary on the pubbuster circuit. His technique was high-toned. His material was low-down. His gross was boffo. For thirty bucks, he out hustled his hustlers. He

coached from his tough guys the hard-assed Attitude that attracted and frightened people in the street. He understood beauty and terror.

Ignoring his own advice, he warned his customers in his brochures: "Never take these boys to your lovely home."

His stars were dangerous graduates of the best Youth Authorities from east coast to west and points south. To a trick, they were, so they said, personally straight, professionally mercenary, living in cheap rooms in sleaze-bag hotels, drinking beer and Jack Daniel's when they could cadge it, smoking cigarettes and dope, shooting up, screwing with tough little teen hookers, proud of their hustling, bragging, "Shit! The old lady's a working girl. So I work the streets too."

One after the other the boys stripped for his color-sound camera, posing solo, oiling up naked, running their mouths, flexing, spitting, grinning, flipping the bird, showing their muscles, delighting in abusing fags for money, flipping their dicks, bending over and spreading their assholes, spouting clichés like "Eat it, queer," finally lying back, pounding their pud, jerking off watching straight porn on video, cuming for the camera, inviting dirty fags, oh yeah, to lick up their big loads from their tight bellies and big balls.

"Ah yes," Solly Blue said. "I give them a chance to spill their guts. How novel. They've always been told to shut up. Nobody ever asked them what they think about anything. I do. I let them be. No censorship, no direction, no nothing. It's sex. It's always sex. Does anyone realize I make Andy Warhol movies? All I tell them is their performance is supposed to be jack-off material. They don't need a government grant for the arts. They've hustled enough faggots. They know what faggots want. I know what faggots buy. Faggots don't buy love and kisses. Faggots buy verbal abuse and physical domination. So that's what I sell. Supply and demand. They can never get enough. Thank God. I'm the only one selling rough trade."

Once plugged into the network of San Francisco hustlers, Solly never had to leave his apartment. Word got around about his ten dollar finder's fee. Every model had a homeboy. "Hey, bro, it's cool." The buddy made a videotape and introduced the next guy.

“My boys are not gay,” Solly said, “and they’re not straight. They prefer easy women, but they love easier money. They don’t like to work, so they hustle. As long as they’ve got the bodies for it.”

He poured himself another in his chain-glasses of real Coca-Cola. With sugar. With caffeine.

“My boys may not know much, but they know sex and violence. My only control over them in this penthouse is to get the violence out of them on videotape, and the sex out of them in bed.”

Solly Blue’s position was no pose. “I’m an existentialist, minimalist realist.” He was bottom-line honest. He hadn’t darkened the door of a synagogue in years, but he was a major patron of the ACLU, which, he said, was the same thing. He had taken his kinky personal obsessions and ingeniously turned them into a commercially successful business. “Terror is my only hard-on,” Solly said. “I’m only happy when a bully roughs me up in the sack. I’ve never liked sex with gay men. I like the danger of these street boys who strip and strut and show me their muscles and tattoos. I like the way they sit on my chest, twist my tits, and spit in my face. I like to see their hard dicks bobbing while they’ve got their hands around my throat tight enough to convince me to cum.”

Ryan called Solly at least twice a day. If he failed to answer, Ryan immediately feared the worst. Guns. Knives. Blood on the mirror. Brains on the carpet. Terminal choke holds. The swollen tongue protruding black from the mouth. Roaches feasting on the undiscovered corpse. The traffic in Solly Blue’s Tenderloin penthouse, where every room was painted the same dark blue, was dangerous.

“Everybody who comes through my door,” Solly said, “is either buying or selling something: bodies, drugs, you name it.”

Solly had been robbed at gunpoint, knifepoint, and fistpoint. He had been roughed up and tied up. He had been burglarized even though he rarely left his apartment. His boys watched his comings and goings from the street. They spied on him. So he stayed put on his couch, connected to his friends over the telephone, and wired to his boys through the network of the streets. In a way, his boys held him hostage for his art.

“I have the only penthouse in the City furnished in early Salvation Army.” He gestured at oddments of recycled blond end

tables, pole lamps, and faded chairs and sofas. “The movie set of the damned,” he said. As low-class props, the junk furniture fit the hustlers videotaped upon them. “I can’t have anything here that anybody would want,” he said. “The tape recorder, the tape duplicator, the color TV. They’re temptation enough. To say nothing of all my blank tapes and my master videotapes these boys would erase to record wrestling.” Solly always expected the bottom line of abuse from his boys. “One day one of them will kill me,” he said. “I’ve already lived too long anyway. There’s only one thing to be in life and that’s twenty-one and tough.” Solomon Bluestein saw his boys the way he saw his life: in finite terms. “What is, is.”

Ryan saw his own life as the launchpad to infinity, to transcendence, to spirituality, to purity, to idealism, to life everlasting. Classic, clean, athletic manliness turned Ryan’s head, but he appreciated Solly’s Sartrean pursuit of mean street hustlers whose tattoos, lean hard bodies, and redneck attitudes took no shit. Their penchant for boxing, wrestling, and karate led Solly to a deep-seated respect for their knives, guns, and deadly nunchuks. He courted their danger. He found honest excitement in victimization.

“I pay them money to spit on me,” Solly said.

Ryan understood his friend’s sexual preference, but for his own part he had no intention of being a victim. His sexual preference was not victimization; it was celebration. Solly warned him that the difference between them was semantics.

“What kind of fool am I?” Solly Blue asked. He paused and pointed at Ryan. “A kind no different than you.”

“Then we’re both fools,” Ryan said.

Ryan loved Solly because Solly dared to please himself living out a dimension of sex that Ryan understood but found foreign. “The sex games Kick and I play,” he said, “are different from you and your boys. We may play similar games, but we do it with mutuality, with regard for one another.”

“My boys regard me,” Solly said, “as the source of the cash. How does Kick regard you?”

“He regards me as the person he’s let in closer to him than he’s ever let anyone.”

“How genteel! How aristocratic! How southern-fried!”

“How unlike the low-rent ingenues that sit on your face!”

Tiger was a case in point.

Tiger was a fresh seventeen when he zoomed on his skateboard past Solly on that block of Market Street in front of the hustler bar called the Old Crow, the oldest operating gay bar in town. Solly's head turned. This boy was special. He had potential. Solly pulled two twenties from his pocket and rubbed them under his nose across his moustache. His eyes locked straight into Tiger who glided back to a fancy stop.

"Follow me," Solly said. He was intense. Tiger could not resist. Solly knew immediately what it would take Tiger five years to learn: this boy was the hustler he would take on as his son.

Solly grew more firm in his dick and in his fatherly resolve when he learned that three years before, Tiger had pleaded guilty of attempted murder after he smashed his mother's skull with a hammer and stabbed her in the chest with a screwdriver as she slept on the sofa in their Daly City home. Then he masturbated, cut his wrists, and drove, bleeding, to the police station. In the hospital he managed to get off a karate kick that broke a policeman's jaw. His mother survived the attack and visited him twice in the two years he was sentenced to the California Youth Authority. She scolded him for the several prison tattoos etched on his arms. When he was released, he called her from a phone booth. All she said was, "Hello?" And he hung up. He headed for the Tenderloin. In the Youth Authority he had learned the street value of a healthy, muscular, suckable young body. He had the mean good looks. Solomon Bluestein had the bucks.

"He calls me 'Dear Old Dad,'" Solly said. "We're made for each other. Maybe more than you and Kick."

3

Ryan's paradigmatic scene with his father in the woods captured the essence of his male self in relation to all other men. To Ryan, writing retrospectively in his *Journal* when his father had driven him to the woods to instruct him in sex before he left for Misericordia Seminary, it was the primordial ritual of the older man initiating the younger man into the fraternity of men.

Ryan's father, trying to reveal the secrets of sex had simply touched his son's knee, but he set off in Ryan the first realization, the first startling realization, of what Ryan wanted: men, and the company of men. Exclusively.

The last weekend in Peoria confirmed Ryan's spiritual resolve to go off to Misericordia to live with other males. Ryan knew that as a priest he could not, would not be expected to, associate with women. The priesthood was the perfect closet, the idealized, spiritualized, socially acceptable way of stating a preference for men's company over women's.

As a boy, Ryan had wandered equally between the porch where the men talked and the kitchen where the women talked, until the women dismissed him. The men never dismissed him. They acted as if he weren't around them enough. They included him. They teased him, poked at him, picked him up and played with him, told him jokes—even dirty ones, which they laughed at doubly hard when he did not understand. They wrestled him about, tousled his curly hair. They picked him up in their arms and tossed him sky high.

"When I was a child," Ry said, "I rarely touched the ground. I thought I could fly. I was always being thrown up in the air."

Between flights, the women brushed the smudges off his clothes, combed his hair, made him wash his face and hands. The women tried to ground and tame him. The men circled about him with an air of wildness.

"Are you your mama's boy," his uncle Leslie asked him, "or are you your daddy's son?"

Leslie O'Hara was Ryan's youngest uncle, himself hardly more than a grown boy. He leaned on the porch rail waiting Ryan's answer. Leslie O'Hara, the uncle he adored most, was a Catholic seminarian, husky for his age, smaller than his older brother, Charley-Pop, and almost ready for ordination to the priesthood. He was twenty-four but he had not given up liking to tease his oldest nephew.

Ryan was seven years old. He was puzzled. He thought he was the child of both his parents, and yet his seminarian uncle broke down that balance in his riddle and made Ryan choose. The circle of men watched him, Charley-Pop especially. His uncle Leslie grinned at him. "Speak up, Ry."

Ryan thought hard about it: he was his mama's boy, and he was his daddy's boy. "I am," Ryan answered, staring straight at his father's boots resting on the wood porch floor, "my daddy's boy."

His father picked him up and threw him into the air, twirling him around, and landing him in his lap. "Hey, Les," Charley-Pop said. "How's that for an answer!"

"You'll be a man's man," his uncle Les said, "more than you'll be a ladies' man. I can tell."

Years later, when Ryan had left Misericordia at the age of twenty-four, his uncle Leslie, who had been an ordained priest for nearly fifteen years, asked him again the same question in a different way.

They stood alone in the privacy of the locked sacristy room off the main altar of Saint Patrick's Church. Ryan had served as altar boy at Leslie's mass and was helping him remove and fold his vestments.

"So now you're out in the world," Leslie said. "Do you like teaching boys or girls better?"

Ryan was puzzled again. He suspected another trick question. A student was a student, but there was a look in his uncle Leslie's eye that made him say, "I like teaching boys better."

His uncle moved toward him, put his anointed hand on the back of Ryan's neck, and kissed him on the mouth. "I love you, Ryan," Leslie said.

His uncle, a year past forty, was handsome in his roman collar. They stared eye to eye. Leslie smiled. He knew Ryan better than Ryan knew himself. He moved his strong hand to the back of Ryan's head and pulled his nephew into a close hug. He pressed his hard cock through his black cassock against Ryan's virginal groin. Ryan felt his own cock hardening. He did not resist what he knew he wanted. He stood passive, feeling his dick straining in his corduroys to be freed, released, liberated by a priest, by his uncle.

"It's okay," Leslie said.

His hand unzipped Ryan's pants and pulled his nephew's stiffening cock from his white cotton undershorts. His own erect penis stood out at hard attention from his black cassock. He was a grown man, the best kind of man, a priest. He was handsome with the mature athletic look of the jock he had been in the seminary. He

checked the locked door to the sacristy and pulled off his cassock. In his black pants and white tee shirt, he was the image of his brother, Charley-Pop.

“It’s a...mortal sin of impurity,” Ryan said. The head of his cock glistened with a dear pearl of anticipation. “Isn’t it?”

“Not,” Leslie said, “when it’s done with love.”

Ryan regretted more than ever the lost moment with Dave Fahnhorst, but the muscles of Leslie’s arms and chest felt good to Ryan’s tentative touch. “Hold me,” Ryan said.

“Trust me,” Leslie said. He fell to his knees and put both his big hands on Ryan’s butt. His warm, wet mouth descended slowly down the length of Ryan’s hard shaft.

For the first time, the time he realized he had been waiting for all his life, Ryan was made love to by a man, and more than a man, his uncle, a priest.

4

From the first, in those early liberated days after Stonewall, as the sixties became the seventies, men slid easily from nights on Folsom to afternoons on Castro looking for ways to kill time till another night South of the Slot. Castro was a street awakening with a certain post-Beat and post-hippie style. Like time-lapse photography, the Castro Cafe, Tommy’s Plants, and Paperback Traffic kick-started the funky revival of the lazy old neighborhood.

The Castro merchants who weren’t charmed were alarmed. They remembered how fast Haight Street had declined to a hippie skid row in the three years after the famous Summer of Love in ’67. Some jumped at the chance to escape. Homosexuals in a changing Catholic neighborhood frightened them more than blacks. Gay sex reared its head. The shopkeepers sold cheap and doubled their money. They fled from brisk new businesses like the Jaguar Bookstore. The Jaguar, with its twenty-five cent admission to its backroom rendezvous, made turnstile sex, with In-and-Out privileges, a convenient trysting place for strangers cruising the streets for tricks with no place to go.

Bars blossomed on Castro with trippy acid names like the Midnight Sun, Toad Hall, and Bear Hollow. A gay man could buy a used book at Paperback Traffic to read over eggs and coffee in the Castro Cafe before having sex at the Jaguar, drinking a beer at the Midnight Sun, getting some steam and some more head at the Castro Rocks bath, and heading home with flowers from Tommy's Plants.

Communes and salons sprang up. The artist Cirby, Robert Kirk, the star bartender at the Midnight Sun, lived above the Owl Cleaners at 19th and Castro with nine roommates. They called their Victorian flat the Hula Palace, so dedicated was its decor to thirties' and forties' Deco. From windows draped with flowered fabric, they surveyed the growing phenomenon of the Castro. Once a month, they opened their doors: a poet reading in one room; a photographer exhibiting in another; a dancer pirouetting among the palms in an archway while a scene from a two-character play was read. Sylvester, young, black, and not yet a star, sang for the elite. The infamous performing group, the Cockettes, sat about on white-wicker chairs dreaming up their stage names: Pristine Condition, Filthy Ritz, and Goldie Glitters. Mink Stole and the two-ton actperson, Divine, both East Coast crossovers from filmmaker John Waters' Baltimore entourage often sat in state, holding the A-Group in hilarious thrall.

In 1973, the Hula Palace combined with two other flats full of neighbors to throw a tasteful, gargantuan garage sale. Their corner, that Sunday, was so spontaneously mobbed, Sylvester couldn't keep himself from singing for pure joy in the middle of the intersection with his two backup singers, the Weather Girls. The Hula Palace's extempore garage sale blossomed exactly one year later into the first Castro Street Fair.

Everybody was an excited, uncloseted refugee, come from somewhere under the rainbow to Oz aspiring to accomplish something openly gay and grand. Whitman's all-gender barbaric Yawp was howled in the streets round the clock. The Castro Cafe changed from greasy spoon to a sort of Algonquin Club for writers. Claude Duvall established the Noh Oratorio Society in his communal apartment. Harvey Milk, clerking his own camera shop, developed, besides film, a neighborly interest in politics which early earned

him the sobriquet, “The Mayor of Castro Street.” Liberation, as a pop culture movement, was more than sex; it was tea and art, rights and outrage, parties and bars, costume and creativity, the fun and celebration of inventing one’s new self, free, within the group identity.

The good times rolled. Word was out. Cross-country long-distance lines lit up like the telephone scene in *Bye Bye Birdie*. San Francisco called like Bali Hai. The crowds on the sidewalks doubled. A man was a tourist one summer and a resident by the next. Robert Kirk, walking a block to work from the Hula Palace to the Midnight Sun, purposely, one afternoon, spoke to everyone he knew, stopped and talked, not just waving a passing *hello*. Ninety minutes and 118 men later, he arrived at the Sun where everyone knew everyone else. The parade of immigrants was wonderful, and the melting pot was hot, but the population explosion meant there were no degrees of separation. Everyone knew everything about everybody. The next day, Robert Kirk, overwhelmed by all the sex refugees, moved to El Lay.

Meanwhile, on Castro, *Attitude*, the ultimate gay posing routine, was born and found a welcome place to hang out. Attitude was the style. Attitude leaned against lampposts and lounged in doorways on Castro. Attitude was the invited guest at brunch and the meat pursued at the baths. Attitude determined who was hot and who was not. Attitude was an aggressive statement of gay identity and fraternity. Attitude found strength in numbers; and there were more numbers on Castro than any of the immigrants had ever imagined hiding out in their closets in Keokuk, Kokomo, and Kalamazoo. Attitude gave the finger to everything that was past. Attitude was calculated to scare the horses. Attitude saluted the free new lifestyle that each day invented itself at the ground zero of 18th and Castro.

The fragile alliance of gays began to build to a strong sense of community on the Castro strip. When the closet doors opened all across America, the gay men walked out with their bags packed and headed to the Mecca of Sodom-Oz.

Who were all these strange young men and what did they want?

How exactly did Castro happen? I want to know what it was that suddenly summoned such a vast variety of homosexuals to San Francisco. What was the mysterious call they heeded during the very early 1970's, congregating from all across America into the freewheeling spin of the most permissive City in the nation's most progressive state? What jungle drums called so many living so singularly to come at the same time to the same place?

"It's a divine call," Ryan said. "Gay people have a vocation."

"A vocation?" Solly said. "To what?"

"To finally show the world, once and for all, what homosexuality is really all about."

"Call Anita Bryant," Solly said. "Call Jerry Falwell."

"I came to San Francisco following the same voice that called me to Misericordia and the priesthood."

"Nu-nu nu-nu," Solly hummed the "Theme from *The Twilight Zone*."

"What movie are you?" I asked.

"I'm not any movie," Ryan said.

"You're *Close Encounters*. You're Richard Dreyfus piling dirt in his living room. You're all those characters in the movie trying to get to that mountain where Truffaut played a musical light show for the aliens."

"Aliens?" Ryan said. "I think we homosexuals are the aliens. The outsiders. The outlaws. The refugees."

"Give me your tired, your poor, your wrinkled," Solly said.

"The greatest treason," Ryan said, "is to do the right thing for the wrong reason."

"What's that mean?" Solly said.

"Ask T. S. Eliot," I said.

"Some have come to Mecca for the wrong reasons," Ryan said.

"Give me a wrong reason." I was making mental notes.

"A professor at Loyola told me that a priest had to be more than a priest to get invited into his house."

"Can't say that I blame him," Solly said.

"I mean a man has to be more than a homosexual to justify his existence."

Solly smirked. "This sounds like Kick talking."

“I want to know,” Ryan said. “Who are all these immigrants and sexual refugees and what are they besides homosexual?”

“They’re meat.” Solly was direct. “Like you and me. And Kick. Meat. That’s what. That’s what they are. Meat.”

“So why are they all here?” I asked.

“Many are called,” Ryan said, “but few are chosen.”

“Are you chosen?” Solomon Blustein pointed his finger directly at Ryan.

“Kick chose me,” he said. “That makes me one kind of chosen.”

“Personally, I’ve never been chosen,” Solly said. “Never. Not even for a pickup game when I was a kid. Those boys on the playground ignored me. Except when they beat me up. That’s why I came here. Now I do the choosing. I take my money and I hit the Tenderloin and I point at a hustler and he comes home and does what I choose him to do. That’s why we all came here. To choose what we want to get and what we need.”

Cliff’s Variety and the Star Pharmacy at 18th and Castro understood. The sexual refugees wanted everything. They wanted more. They wanted it now. Cliff’s and the Star gave good Attitude. Money was money and discretionary gay cash was fine U.S. tender. Both businesses catered to the new neighborhood and survived. The pharmacy across 18th street didn’t, and died, and became the upscale Elephant Walk bar. One straight storefront after another fell before the trendy onslaught of gay money.

Bored with renting, the new immigrants started a real estate boom. The tired Victorian flats surrounding Castro changed from straight hands to gay and then changed looks. The gay restoration was in full swing with hammers and paint brushes. Off with the asbestos siding! On with the colorful post-hippie paint jobs! In with the track lights! In with the plants in woven baskets! Up with the Levolor blinds! Fairy dusting, buying a dump and making it pretty, changed the look of the Castro. The *Chronicle* and *Examiner* took notice. Remodeling the bourgeois Victorians created homes and laid-back jobs for gay entrepreneurs otherwise unemployed back in those tie-dyed, Day-Glo days when, as Solly said, “Every faggot on Castro claims he’s a carpenter.”

The early gay renaissance saved the classic Castro Theatre from demolition to make way for condos at the crossroads of Market and Castro. At the eleventh hour, the Castro Theatre, long since a second-run grind house, was restored to its movie-palace glory and declared a historic landmark, running repertory cinema, and featuring between the nightly double features a live organ recital that always ended with Jeanette MacDonald's "San Francisco" to remind the audience that they had arrived where they had always wanted to be: in a City risen from rubble while a dizzy soprano warbled.

The Castro crowds grew. Hippies worked the street shaking donation boxes for the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic. An artist with colored chalk drew huge Sistine Chapel heroic figures of muscular naked men on the sidewalk; his transitory street artistry was erased by thousands of pairs of cowboy boots, combat boots, hiking boots, high-heeled sneakers, and toe shoes. Male belly dancers took up Sunday afternoon residence in front of the Hibernia Bank filling the air with drums and tiny finger cymbals. Street traffic gridlocked at 18th and Castro. Cars and pickup trucks and motorcycles ate up the parking.

Things happened.

A gay man who had a bit part in *Chinatown* went berserk inside his giant-tired Ford F150 in the middle of the intersection of 18th and Castro, rubbing Oil of Olay all over his face, screaming in three languages how moist he was. At the same corner, a woman, early one morning, aided only by gay bartenders with white towels, gave birth to a baby on an 8 Market/Ferry Muni bus. A robber was shot to death by a cop in front of the Hibernia Bank, right in the street in the middle of the crowd, during the first Castro Street Fair. The *Chronicle* the next morning printed a photo of the street scene with Ryan caught standing near the dead body. A runaway roofing truck aflame with hot tar slammed into a car on 19th Street and burned two young women to Death.

Castro was a cruising ground. Everyone was young and in heat. Castronauts jammed the sidewalks. Dopers and drinkers weaved in and out of the bars. Small-time dealers, loitering in the doorways up and down Castro, brazenly hawked joints and speed and Quaaludes. Men hung out to see and be seen. They congregated

around the Harleys, Kawasakis, and Mopeds parked side by side in front of the All American Boy clothiers and the Nothing Special bar.

“Vehicles are an extension of gay sexlife,” *Maneuvers* said. “You are what you drive.”

Burnt out on Castro? Cruise over to Polk. Bored by Polk? Head down to Folsom. Tired of Folsom? Try Land’s End. There’s always a blow job waiting out on the wooded trails winding down to the ocean rocks. The best gay sex is always public sex. With the sex, especially on the rocky outcroppings of Land’s End, there’s always danger, the kind delivered by the fag-bashing hoods up from Daly City driving the parking lot at Land’s End and cruising the dark back streets of the Castro. The gay community united against violence. Referee whistles became *de rigueur* first for safety then for dancing.

Castro characters emerged. On Sundays, when the Star Pharmacy was closed and aspirin was most needed, where was the lacquered Jackie, the bouffanted white-wigged cashier and sweetheart of the Castro?

Every morning, at the kiosk in front of the Star, an ancient peg-legged newsboy cackled out the single, grating, raw word, “*Chronicle*,” until one morning, he didn’t, and no one asked his whereabouts.

On Castro, most people existed only when you saw them; not seeing them, you did not even think of them. On Castro, most people existed only when you cruised them; once you had them they were rarely thought of again. So many men. So little time.

Kweenie was quick to study the eccentricities around her. San Francisco had a tradition for tolerating the odd. Castro was pushing the City’s limits. Gay women became feminists parsing themselves as radical lesbians, growing hair in their armpits and letting their bodies bloat and sag in parodies of male truck drivers gone to pot and seed. Leather jackets and feathered boas came out of men’s closets. Both sexes took advantage of San Francisco’s tolerance and Castro’s encouragement to find new ways to express themselves so long repressed by the folks back home.

“This planet in its variety,” *Maneuvers* said, “suggests so many others.”

The street became a district. Castro Street became “The Castro.” Things divided, mixed, changed, grew, and blossomed with the new gay pride grown heady with its strength in numbers. Evidence was everywhere. Canny straights went along for the ride.

Mena’s Norse Cove Deli was the town pump.

The only thing Swedish about the Norse Cove was the name on the blue awning. The inimitable Mena was, so legend had it, an Egyptian Jew who had lost everything when her husband and family were run by anti-Semites out of Cairo. They fled to Paris where they took refuge before landing finally on Castro with all the other immigrants.

Maybe that common immigrant experience gave Mena her empathy for homosexuals. Mena was a legend herself on a street of legends. She was, in fact, practically the only woman many gay men encountered almost daily. She saw to it that they were well fed. She was a businesswoman. The value of the volume of foot traffic on Castro was not lost on her. She had an uncanny head for figures. No Norse Cove customer ever received a written check. Mena knew, absolutely to the penny, what each one owed.

For two years, Ryan ordered various breakfasts: cheese omelet, French toast, corned beef hash and eggs. For two years, when he approached Mena leaning on her cash register, she said, “\$2.82” or “\$3.12” or “\$2.16.” Always perfect, correct, exact.

One morning Ryan walked in and reversed the ritual. He said to her, reversing her code, “\$2.82.”

Mena gave the slightest sliver of a smile, as much as she ever gave anyone, and within minutes that particular breakfast was brought to him.

Every morning Mena’s Norse Cove Deli roared with as much chatter as any dining hall on any campus. On Annie Laurie’s first visit to San Francisco, she looked around the Norse Cove, saying in all innocence, “Is there a boys’ school nearby?”

Small fraternities emerged. Lions and tigers and bears. Some were organized like the California Motor Club with its annual CMC carnival, and the Pacific Drill Patrol with its members strutting about town in police and military uniforms. Others were looser, sicker, and more elite like the hyper-exclusive Rainbow Motorcycle

Club whose members were chosen because they were sex maniacs with public style.

Acid, and poppers particularly, caused more serious gay mutations. Some gays, overdosed on Brut cologne, turned into twinkies. After assassin Dan White's "Twinkie Defense," they mutated further into clones living on Crisco and disco in San Francisco.

"Twinkies and clones live in the Castro," *Maneuvers* said. "They are always twenty-four and always no taller than five-foot-six. They sport clipped black moustaches and short black hair, often with a gratuitous bleached-blond lock left at the nape of the neck. Who can figure the source of the breed? They are born to be gay waiters. They walk too fast from here to there. They smoke Kents. They snort poppers while they dance shirtless at discos. They wear size-small Lacoste crocodile shirts and size 28-28 pressed jeans from All American Boy. They tuck red hankies in their rear pockets. They prefer cleat-soled black logging boots to gain an inch or two in height. They are so petite they can run under tables in restaurants and scrape gum without bending over, because the only time they bend over is for Mr. Fist."

If the Castro was Oz, everyone—man, woman, or in between—could be any fantasy desired. Anything could happen. And often did. In those early days, Ryan ran with the circus. If he was analytical, he wanted only to find the answer to San Francisco's most asked question, "How do I get over the rainbow?"

He sent up the Castro in the Bicentennial issue of *Maneuvers*. Within six weeks, the satire became a best-selling poster.

DESIDERATA OF GAY DETERIORATA

Go placidly amid the boys and taste, and remember what Southern Comfort there may be in grabbing a piece thereof. Avoid quiet and passive men unless you are in need of Quaaludes. Keep your act together. Speak glowingly of those hotter than yourself, and heed well their color-coded hankies. Know what to suck and when. Consider that two lovers do not a three-way make. Wherever possible, write your number on toilet walls. Be comforted that in the

jaded face of all serial fucking and despite the changing fortunes of time, somewhere in Iowa a chicken is coming out. Remember to clip your nails. Strive at all times to fist, suck, fuck, snort, and stand erect. Douche yourself. If you need help, call the fire department. Exercise caution in your affairnettes, especially with those closest to you: that dildo you live with, for instance. Be assured that a walk through a backroom bar will wet your feet. Fall not in the urinal therefore; you will chip your caps. Gracefully surrender the things of youth: constant hard-ons, size 28 Levi's, tight ass, new tattoos, boot-camp fantasies, and wet dreams. Let not your popper spill down your nose. Hire models from ads. For a good time, sit on your own face. Take heart amid the deepening gloom that your stretch marks do not show in the red lights at the baths. Reflect that whatever misfortune is your lot, it could only be worse in Dade County. You are a jerk off of the Universe. You have no right to be here, especially in full leather on a bus at 3 AM. Remember that behind the cosmos, there is no great mystery—only a couple of joke books. Therefore, make peace with your master, whatever you consider him to be: Hell's Angel biker or Sugar Plum fairy. With all its talk of gyms, real estate, and rising consciousness, the world continues to fuck up. You may as well fiddle as Rome burns. Be happy. Do what you must and call it by the best name possible. Fist yourself, jack-off, and try not to drool. And, above all, remember that if wrinkles hurt, you'd be screaming. Be thankful you were ever laid in the first place. (This inscription was found in the 8th century carved on the wall of the first gay bar at Stonehenge.)

5

Once upon a time, when Kick was graduating college in 1967, he broke off his engagement to Catharine Holly, the Third Runner-Up in the Miss Alabama contest. He was straight arrow. He leveled with her about his preference for men.

“But we make love,” Catharine Holly said. “We’ve made love since we were juniors in high school.” She stared at him incredulously. “How could you do that? How could you do that if it were true?”

“Yes,” Ryan said. “How could you?”

“She liked my body. I got off because she dug my body. The same as I get off because you like my body.”

Miss Third Runner-Up had been riding in Kick’s red Mustang convertible when he told her his secret truth.

“How could you?” Catharine had repeated. She had been in no mood to understand that his truth was no personal rejection of her as a woman. Hysterical, she had opened the door of his car and thrown herself into the road. She had skidded on her beautiful face across the gravel on the shoulder of the highway.

When Kick’s parents, to whom she had long been the daughter they never had, came to visit her, Catharine had wasted no time, crying her truth from behind her bandages that it wasn’t Kick’s fault, it was her fault and she was so sorry.

At first Kick’s parents had thought Catharine Holly meant the accident. Then, finally, through the girl’s sobs, they heard what parents hope they will never hear.

Kick’s mother confronted him in the hospital corridor. His father hung back, sheepish, as if he had heard nothing, but had heard too much to even find his voice. His mother’s only visions of homosexuality were the prancing sisterboys she had seen in downtown Birmingham.

“You’re not one of them,” she declared, as only southern women can declare. “You’re not one of them, are you?”

“No,” Kick said, and he said it truthfully. He knew even then he was the stuff of a different breed. “I’m not one of those...people...you see downtown.”

“I’d rather be dead,” his mother drawled, “then evah, evAH, EVAH to think you were like them.”

Kick met his mother’s searching gaze. “Me too,” he said. “I’d rather be dead than ever be like that.”

Holding her in his muscular arms, he hugged the accusation from her eyes. His father smiled in relief. He was their golden boy.

He was their big, handsome, athletic son, and his hug around his mother's small body answered all their questions.

"Too bad, too bad," his father said, "about young Miss Catharine."

"I can understand," his mother said, "if you never see her again. I pity mean-spirited girls who lie with a vengeance when they lose their gentleman caller."

6

The mind of a writer is a wild country. Anything can happen there. Maybe that's what made Ryan an aggressive success with his *Maneuvers* readers. They wrote him obscene fan mail. They sent him sweaty, piss-soaked jockstraps, used rubbers, and cigars they asked him to shove up his ass and return to them. Ryan never wrote back.

"I don't want fans," he said. "You gotta have friends." He was a magazine writer, not a letter writer.

"My writing to readers is my published stuff. Anything personal I have to say I say in print. My private self is not much different from my public self, but never try to read anything I write as actual autobiography. I always twist the slant on anything that might be true. You have to juice it up to give them what they want, or at least what they think they want."

Over Ryan's desk Kick hung a handlettered sign: "You have to live it up to write it down."

Ryan's stories and articles, and his Masculinist Movement tract, are a matter of public record. The *Masculinist Manifesto* was startling because it was not his usual erotic fiction. It was an essay, a broadside, that upset what the *Chronicle* and *Examiner* both called "the gay community."

"Whatever that is," Ryan said. "Bars and baths and bedrooms and brunch do not a community make." He held out for something, something cohesive, with a larger sense of purpose.

Something indefinable was happening on Castro. Everything changes. In the years after the first flush of gay liberation, more than one voice was asking where do we go from here.

Ryan, more than ever, wanted that over-the-rainbow answer. Kick was the key to their future.

Kick was not gay. He was beyond gay. He was post-gay. He was a masculine man who preferred masculine men.

Kick had first said to Ryan, “The hardest thing to be in the world today is a man.”

Ryan cut from whole cloth the distinction between radical manly homosexuality and gay popular culture. Looking at Kick, he knew one thing for sure: not all gay men are sissies. He wanted young men coming out into the gay world to know they had more options than screaming effeminacy.

Ryan, the former seminarian and almost priest, played devil’s advocate. The *Manifesto* questioned gay style: why pronouns like *he* changed to *she* in gaytalk; why gay men carried their cigarette packs in their hands instead of their shirt pockets; why gay smokers gestured dramatically with their cigarettes like a bar filled with a thousand Bette Davis’s in a trash compactor; why gay clothes fit tighter than straight clothes; why gay men had their hair styled like mommy instead of getting their hair cut like daddy, all the while looking for older men, but not too much older, for godsake, to play dominant daddy in bed; and where did those gay boys learn those mincing, sibilant S sounds that betrayed them faster than wearing a sweater while walking a poodle?

Seventy percent of Castro was doing “Their Mother’s Act.” The *Manifesto* suggested that some entrepreneur could make a fortune by opening the Castro Village Academy of Movement and Speech, with beginning and advanced seminars titled “Your Father’s Act.” It would be a Butch Academy where students could dance in and walk out. But, of course, the Divine Androgynes would bitch. The queens would say, “But, my dear! Who needs it?” Probably the only takers with any sense would be dykes.

Ryan shook out a grain of salt, placed it on his tongue, and put his tongue firmly in his cheek. He aimed the outraging barbs of the *Manifesto* to catch the hearts and minds of those wondering if being terminally outrageous was their only way to be. After all, outrageous exaggeration was the Castro vernacular and the Castro style. To meet and match it, Ryan wrote the immodest proposal of the *Manifesto* with a large brush on a large page.

Reaction he wanted. Reaction he got. Not everyone caught the joke. He wanted to give manly homosexuals some space on Castro. He wanted masculinism to balance the feminism that had overly converted many gay men into fellow travelers siding with women at the expense of abandoning their own masculine gender to labels of absolute chauvinism. Masculinism threatened the sacred cows of militant feminism and radical separatist lesbianism. Some women thought he wanted masculine gay men to be like macho redneck straight men. He never pushed macho. He suggested that masculine gay men, if it was true to their nature, be like the best of masculine straight men. He never said straight was better than gay. A good man is a good man. He said only that straight and gay were different, and that masculine homosexuality was closer to the decent attitudes of straight men, who were humane, than to the Attitude of effeminate gay men who were sissies out of reaction and not choice. "The person who reacts is not free. The person who acts is truly liberated. If straights can categorize us as women, they know they can oppress us the way they oppress women."

In Chapter One, "Our Fathers, Our Selves," he sounded to some like he was siding with the enemy.

In fact, he was attempting a delicate balancing act that defied sexual gravity.

The *Manifesto* was, in many ways, a useful examination of gay conscience. Ryan never said one species of homosexuality was better than another. He simply articulated the quiet voice of manly queers wanting to come finally out of the last homosexual closet. For the rest, he hoped they all could be the best they could be according to whatever lights were right for them.

He could not divine the effeminate homosexual prejudice against masculine homosexuals.

He had his *sui generis* rationale.

If homosexuals were called to be the best, they should be the best. Much of the *Manifesto* was tongue-in-chic. It was a joke. A send-up. It was a broadside of seventies' Attitude. Ryan wanted to sharpen the cutting edge of homosexuality. "Who are we all really? What are we besides gay?" Putting on Attitude, he questioned Attitude. It figured. Kick made Ryan question everything in his life.

But not everyone who bought a copy of the *Manifesto* thought it was food for thought, much less funny.

I hardly agreed with everything Ryan wrote in the *Manifesto*; but agreement was not the point. Satire was. The *Manifesto* was Ryan in outrageous masculinist drag. Kick encouraged him. The *Manifesto* was a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against the excesses of the effeminate gay and feminist lesbian sexual revolution.

Not everyone saw the joke.

The moustached men who wrapped wimples tight around their heads, and called themselves “The Little Sisters of the Pinched Face of Jesus,” were all atwitter. At the Women’s Abuse Building on 19th Street, above Castro, lesbians planned poetry readings to expose persecution of women by, of all people, a gay man who should know better than to assert his caveman prerogative against feminism. They hated the author’s guts. Hearing-impaired lesbians, demanding sign at women’s music concerts, shook their fists at the mention of his name.

Kweenasheba sent him a dead bouquet of a dozen wilted red roses. “We’ll not be pretty maids sitting in a row.”

“This is not what I meant,” Ryan said to Solly. “Joke ’em if they can’t take a fuck.”

“The last thing any movement has,” Solly said, “is a sense of humor.” He shook his finger at Ryan. “Try and keep yours.”

Ryan, truth be known, did not exactly invent the *Manifesto*. Its street-smart guts came from the cafes, the bars, and the baths. He interviewed men. He harvested, then gave voice to, their varied opinions, jacked up with his and Kick’s, caring less than a Russian dissident how unpopular his opinions were with what politically correct gay and lesbian liberation dictated. There was more than one way to be non-heterosexual and Ryan spoke up for the strong silent minority of manly homosexuals. The *Manifesto* warned the rising homomasculinist movement to avoid the mistakes of the established feminist movement. His warning to men seemed to defensive feminists to be a criticism of women. He had intended no slight to organized women when he repeated Kick’s line, “The hardest thing to be in America today is a man.”

He had cracked that small pun long before he had thought of the *Manifesto*. The remark slipped out when Kweenie had wangled

him an invitation as a men's erotic writer to facilitate a lesbian women's erotic writing workshop. The women had laughed politely, but during the discussion they chided his erotic writing. They searched to create a more meaningful erotic literature for themselves. They challenged him to write something to socially redeem what they called his pornography. They thought to enlist him in their feminist cause.

Feminists recruit in ways homosexuals never dream of.

If Ryan refused to join forces with them, he had at least heard their message. Those well-intentioned women had ironically inspired the writing of the *Masculinist Manifesto* itself.

"You're not," Kweenie kicked him in the shins, "politically correct."

"I'm not a separatist," Ryan said. "I'm not a chauvinist."

"You're an intellectual bully the way Thom is a physical bully."

"I'm a sexual pluralist. Don't knock a manly idea and masculinist ideal whose time has come."

"You're a fascist."

"And you're a fag hag," Ryan said. "My own sister." He took her hand. He was sixteen the summer she was born. "You're too young..."

"I hate it when you say ageist things like that!"

"...to remember how things were before Stonewall."

"Don't condescend to me, Ry."

"We were all better off when all queers were outlaws," Ryan said. "Now we've all got Attitude. At the top, there's the very-A-Group of millionaire gays, the Delta Nu guys, with their *mondo exclusive* fly-ins they plan once a month strategically around the country. Kick told me. They hire bodybuilders for weekend bondage and muscle worship. When in Rome," Ryan shrugged, "hustle a gladiator and watch the empire fall. There's rich gays and poor gays and political gays and rainbow lesbians. Folsom gays think Castro gays are twits and clones. Castro gays can't stand Polk Street gays who are of no use to Pacific Heights gays except as cheap hustlers. There are designer gays born under the sign of Lacoste. I kid you not. There's even a gay cemetery in New York state. The designer caskets have little crocodiles on the lids. There's landlord gays and

tenant gays and gay Jews for Jesus. There's chubby gays and chubby chasers and gays who hate fat guys. There's even hot, hairy old gays! If Castro were a neighborhood, people would speak to one another. But no! *Hello* on Castro means 'Wanna fuck?' Even Randy Shilts says so. The fact is, you can have a wonderful time at the baths with a guy on Saturday night, and by Sunday brunch, neither of you acknowledges the other's existence. How gay can men get?"

How gay can men get?

There's the ironic thousand-dollar rainbow question.

One of Solly's street hustlers watched some drag queens' bitch fight, and commented: "How gay!"

Out of the mouths of babes.

How gay!

Ryan flashed on the straight boy's razor-sharp slam. "What's the difference," he wrote, "between straight people and gays? Straights don't stand you up for supper." He wondered why the Castro Theatre featured festivals called "Great Women of the Silver Screen." It was three years before "Great Men" hit the marquee of the Castro. He wondered why gay men loved movie mad scenes written for ageing actresses. He questioned the camp fascination with *Mildred Pierce* and *Baby Jane*. What strange gay twist caused good-looking men to dress up in outrageous drag that no tasteful woman would be caught dead in? He wondered why boys like Kweenie's twit-blond roommate, Evan-Eddie, preferred doing their Mother's Act rather than their father's.

He was positive the essence of homosexuality was not a man's wanting to be a woman. Men, who wanted to be women, might bed men, but they were something other than purely homosexual. He meant simply to undo the popular stereotype that when two men are in bed, one of them plays the woman; that when two women make love, one of them plays the man.

He wrote: "When a man and a woman are in bed, among other things they're doing, they're celebrating their sexual otherness. When two men make love, among other things they are doing, they celebrate their common masculinity in a union and bonding that only a same-sex couple can do. Neither thinks of women or of women's roles. That's a straight myth. The same goes for two women getting off together by celebrating everything between them that

is essentially female. Same-sex unitive sexuality is as important as mixed-sex procreational sexuality. Besides that, there's more. Everyone should be able to have recreational sex without personal involvement and without the purpose of conception. How outlaw can we get?"

In a City with annual coronations of emperors and empresses, he asked lesbians why they as women never ran for Empress leaving gay men to run for Emperor. Royalty never likes revolution. The question seemed like a stake driven in the heart of gay and lesbian sexual poses.

"You think," Kweenie said, "you're Tom Paine. But you're not, Blanche. You're not. I know what movie you are."

"I'm not playing our game. And don't call me Blanche."

"You think you're a romantic radical like Streisand in *The Way We Were*."

"I suppose Kick is the golden Redford."

"Ta-DA!" Kweenie spread her hands. "Be careful," she warned. "There's always a last reel."

Ryan, I think, genuinely empathized with the upward aspirations of the oppressed. The priest in him genuinely tried to respect everyone. He wanted them all to keep carefully their trips' equality. He mistrusted superficial coalitions of alienated movements that muddled one another's causes.

Ryan loved to ruffle feathers.

In San Francisco, it was never individual people seeking their individual rights who dismayed him. It was more the crazy-quilt mix of too many politically correct movements all stampeding together down Market Street to City Hall every time there was a left-field anniversary of Harvey Milk's birth, Harvey Milk's Death, Harvey Milk's circumcision, Harvey Milk's bar mitzvah, Harvey Milk's coming out, Harvey Milk's election, Harvey Milk's last brunch, Harvey Milk's last zit, Harvey Milk's last orgasm.

How many indignant parades could attach themselves to Harvey Milk without trivializing the assassinated supervisor? Every politically correct group in town dragged Harvey out as its champion. "Harvey Marches" from Castro to City Hall became a ritual act of public necrophilia. Ryan thought the marchers' signs would be more accurate if, instead of "Harvey Milk," they read, "Milk

Harvey.” Harvey, politicized in Death, was more of a media star than he had been in life. Women idolized Harvey; he was a safe man; he could not betray them and fuck them over; he was dead. Gay men pumped their pecs behind Harvey’s face silk screened on tee shirts sold in the Castro. When gay shops sell your image, you know you’re dead, you’re a saint, and you’re commercial.

Ryan would have objected to none of the hoopla if only the blind hadn’t tried to consolidate the blind under one unified banner. Finding Harvey had become as trendy as born-again politicians and convicted murderers finding Jesus. The milk train, that Tennessee Williams said doesn’t stop here anymore, was parked on a rail siding at 18th and Castro.

“Whatever happened to George Moscone?” Ryan asked. No one marched in the name of the mayor who was gunned down at the same time as Harvey Milk. Was Moscone too much of a straight white male to be revered by gay men and lesbian women?

The *Manifesto* proclaimed it was time for men to be interested in men’s masculine rights. “God knows, no one else champions men anymore. We’re out of fashion. One imbalance has replaced the other.”

He questioned the wisdom of outrageous drag queens, transpersons, El Salvadoran refugees, and feminists hitching their causes to the bandwagon of male homosexuality, which they disrespected. They could have their empress coronations, their expensive gender operations, their Sandinista banners, and their Constitutional amendment, but they couldn’t sully the purity of homosexual masculinity that the priest in him, encouraged by the bodybuilder at his side, had begun, right or wrong, to champion in words in the press, the way Kick was its model in the flesh on Castro.

Even so, he was more satirist than misogynist, but Kweenie called him an asshole when he blamed the women he dubbed “The Auntie Porn and Violence Battalion” for pouring glue into the coin slots on the street racks selling *Maneuvers* that had nothing to do with his *Masculinist Manifesto*, that had nothing to do, really, with women, violence, or pornography.

“How dare you,” Kweenie said, “write about women!”

“I don’t write about women. I write about men.”

“I’m an offended feminist,” Kweenie said.

“Don’t be redundant,” Ryan said.

“Don’t be a prick”

“Don’t be a cunt.”

“I’m a woman.”

“I’m a man.”

“I’m a feminist.”

“I’m a masculinist,” Ryan said. “Your rampant feminism makes me a masculinist. Isn’t that reactionary? I’m heading toward the new homosexuality: homomascularity!”

“Yuck!”

“Until you chauvinist sows stop bushwhacking every man in the world as a chauvinist pig, a masculinist I’ll remain, until we can all become what we should be humanists.”

Kweenie threw her autographed copy of the *Masculinist Manifesto* in her brother’s face. His inscription to her read: “From the bastard to the bitch.”

Ryan felt as hurt as Jonathan Swift would have felt if the Irish had not understood his *Modest Proposal*.

Which they didn’t.

7

During Thom’s two divorces from Sandy, Ryan more than once had taken care of his brother’s sexual needs. “Thom always comes to live with me when he can’t take Sandy and the triplets anymore. He comes to me for custodial care. She gets his head all twisted up in his underwear. He acts crazy. Not insane. Just crazy. Patsy Cline crazy. Having sex with him is the one way, really the only way I know, to get him down off the wall. For a few days after, he’s not so hyper. We don’t make love. We have sex, but we never mention it. Like it never happened. Between brothers, what’s to talk about?” Ryan hesitated. “Funny, isn’t it. Except for Thom, I don’t do mercy-fucks. Do you think my father thought I’d have to do this when he asked me to take care of Thom? Jeez!”

Thom was not the head of his family; he was the victim of it. Sandy and the triplets held him hostage. With all the leadership the Marines had drilled into him, Thom was never able to

hold his family in control. I had heard Ryan's jokes about Sandy's Annual Christmas Tree Toss. In one of their monumental fights, she had picked up the tree and thrown it, lights and ornaments and, all, across the heads of her playing children, at her husband sitting behind dark glasses and wearing stereo headphones. Three times Thom had convinced her to commit herself to a sanitarium. Three times she talked her way out. I think she was not truly mad or cruel. I think she was desperate, dim in most things, but sly in her whining way of negotiating her life with Thom. She knew if she bore his children, she could have him forever.

"I think Sandy got a little too intense," Ryan said. "She had three kids at once. Clever girl. Once is maybe all he plugged her. Thom swears he prefers sex in the dark. Maybe he means with Sandy. Maybe he lies. When I have him in my bed, I leave the lights on low. He never shuts his eyes. Not even when he cums. He stares like a killer directly into my face."

To make a long story short, let me put it this way, in sort of a flashback to the early sixties when Jack and Jackie's romantic comedy was not yet a tragedy, when there was no war, back before Monroe and Clift and Gable all made their last movie together and died, long before Kerouac and Cassady and Ginsberg in North Beach had ever heard of Grace Slick, when women wore gloves and hats and men wore suits, the summer Merman played *Gypsy* in San Francisco near the movie theater premiering *La Dolce Vita*, one of those last innocent summers before things fell apart.

At seventeen, Thom joined the Marine Corps Reserves.

"That's stupid," Ryan said.

"It's no more stupid than you going off to the seminary when you were fourteen."

"I have a vocation."

"So do I."

"To get yourself killed?"

"We're not at war."

"To kill people?"

"What people?"

"We'll think of someone. Enemies are easy to find."

"Get off my case."

“You’re only seventeen. Wait till you graduate. Maybe you’ll have more sense.”

“If I join the Reserves first, I can take basic where I want when I go regular. This way I get Pendleton instead of Lejeune. This way I don’t have to stay in the Midwest. This way I get to go to California.”

“This way you get to kill the dirty Gerries, or the dirty Com-mies, or whoever’s dirty the next time.”

Thom’s face flushed. “In basic, asshole, they’ll teach me thirteen ways to kill a man above the neck.” Thom reached out and twisted Ryan into a wrestling hold. “Thirteen ways,” Thom said, “and I’ll start with you.”

“Guess again, asshole!” Ryan reached out and grasped, barely at first with his fingers, and then with his whole hand their father’s heavy wooden ashtray stand.

“Seminarrians shouldn’t talk dirty,” Thom said. He was trying to drop Ryan to the wall-to-wall carpeting.

“When I’m with dirt, I talk dirt.” Ryan spun free. He swung the ashtray stand up into a high arc. He slammed it down onto Thom’s neck, whacking his trapezius muscle as hard as he could. Thom hit the family-room floor. “I always,” Ryan said, “fight dirty.” Thom lay sprawled out on the rug, holding his upper shoulder, boo-hooing the way teenagers cry. “You never learn, do you?” Ryan said. “Catch on, stupid! I’ve never started a fight with you; but every fight you’ve started with me, I’ve won. And I always will! So screw you, asshole. The only reason you’re joining the Marines is so you think you can come back and beat the shit out of me.” Ryan kicked Thom in the rump. “Try again, Cain, when you’re able—which you and the Marines’ll never be.”

“You’re about as funny,” Thom said, standing up and dusting himself off, “as a wicker bedpan in a diarrhea ward.”

“You’re so original I could puke.”

“You’re a phony, a fake! There’s something wrong with you,” Thom screamed. “You’re some kind of freak! Like uncle Les! You holy-holy types! You’re all freaks!”

Ryan was three years from knowing about uncle Les, but Thom knew a freak when he saw one. The month after he finished boot

camp at Pendleton, he married, much against his parents' wishes, a fifteen-year-old San Fernando Valley girl named Sandy.

"She wasn't even baptized with a saint's name," Ryan said.

"I have to marry her." Thom telephoned his parents long distance. He was almost eighteen and he needed their permission as much as he wanted their approval.

"Don't give it," Ryan said.

Ryan and Annie Laurie hovered near the receiver in Charley-Pop's big hand.

"Have to?" Charley-Pop demanded. "What do you mean have to marry her?"

"It's not what you think," Thom said. "Her father beats her. She had to quit high school. But she's got almost two years and she's real smart."

"Tell them," Ryan coached his father, "they're both too young."

"They haven't known each other long enough," Annie Laurie said.

"If you don't give me your permission so I can marry her in the Church, we'll drive to Las Vegas." Thom at an early age exhibited a distinct talent for emotional blackmail. "Besides," Thom added the kicker, putting his fiancée behind him in his dealing, "Sandy doesn't care whether we get married by a priest or not."

"Oh, my God!" Annie Laurie put her hand over the telephone receiver in her husband's hand.

"Don't give in," Ryan warned. "If they get married in a non-Catholic ceremony, it'll make it all that easier to get it annulled when it falls apart."

"But they might have children," Annie Laurie whispered. "What about children?"

"No child of mine who gets married outside the Church will ever be welcome here again," Charley-Pop said.

"Don't say that." Annie Laurie was intense. "Never say anything like *no child of mine*."

Charley-Pop put his hand over the phone. "Then we'll have to give them permission."

Ryan threw up his hands and walked away from the huddle. "I'll never be the one to say I told you so," he said. "After all, this

is 1961,” and something in him rose up, “and people can do what they want.”

The whole family took the California Zephyr to the West Coast. For the first time, Ryan was to see California.

“We might as well make a vacation out of it,” Charley-Pop said.

Ryan spent most of the trip in the observation car writing in his *Journal*. He was nineteen. He held his three-year-old sister on his lap. During the evening, with the constant roar of the train far beneath them, they lay awake together in a reclining lounge chair, watching the desert, lit only by the light of the stars and the full moon. Ryan pointed out shadows of cactus whizzing by. Margaret Mary was delighted with the scary thrills of Ryan’s imagination. That night they slept in the dome car tucked together in one reclining seat. In the morning, with his baby sister’s warm body curled into his side under his arm, Ryan watched the mountains ahead of him turn red with the sunrise behind him. A dust devil, spinning wild and harmless, pulled sand and sagebrush up into its spout. Ryan woke Margaret Mary. She looked at the little tornado curiously.

“I’m afraid,” she said.

“No, you’re not,” Ryan said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. This is how things are out West.”

At the train station in Los Angeles they all threw their arms around Thom, hugging him, stealing glances at the silent stranger standing shy and withdrawn ten feet behind him. Ryan took a hard gander. He wasn’t at all sure at first that the young girl he suspected was the bride-to-be was the real Sandy.

But she was.

“I thought a California girl named *Sandy* would look like Sandra Dee,” Ryan said. “I love her chartreuse pedal pushers.”

Thom blanched. He hated Ryan’s sharp tongue. He pivoted like a snappy new Marine and called the awkward girl hanging back from the family group. “This is my girl,” he said. He looked straight at Ryan. “This is Sandy Gully.”

Ryan could hardly keep a straight face. She was as much a washout as her name. All she needed was toilet tissue on her heel.

“I hope you’ll like her and learn to love her as much as I do,” Thom said.

Annie Laurie generously kissed Sandy on the cheek. Their father shook her hand. Margaret Mary climbed up into Ryan’s arms. “Don’t let her kiss me,” Margaret Mary whispered to Ryan. “She’s awfully ugly.”

Ryan pulled Margaret Mary’s face close into the crook of his neck. “I’d kiss you *hello*,” he said, astounded by the size of Sandy Gully’s nose coming out from between her deep-set eyes, “but my little sister has my hands full.”

“You can’t kiss girls anyway,” Sandy Gully said. “Thom told me all about you being in the seminary and all that. I think it’s, like, wonderful to have a brother-in-law who’s going to be a priest.”

In the rental car, heading for the motel, Annie Laurie asked Sandy. “You’ve such a lovely, dark complexion. What nationality are you, dear?”

“Protestant,” she said.

“We’re all in big trouble,” Ryan said.

“Shut up, Ry,” Thom said. “She’s nervous. You’re the one making her nervous.” He turned to his fiancée. “Tell him you’re just nervous.”

“I’m nervous really. Just nervous. Thom told me how smart you are and everything, and that kind of makes me nervous. You’ve got so much school and you read books and everything. I only made it into the beginning of my sophomore year. Then there was all the trouble with the pictures in the shower. I mean there was nothing wrong. I tried to explain what was going on, but I’ve never been good at explanations, so they expelled me and the boy who had the camera. Thom wants to help me study for the GED.”

Their parents exchanged glances. “You didn’t tell us Sandy was non-Catholic,” Annie Laurie said.

“I told you,” Thom said. “When I told you Sandy didn’t care whether a priest married us or not.”

“That didn’t mean she was non-Catholic,” Ryan said. “Just that she wasn’t a very good Catholic. To us, I mean.” He was learning how one thing can mean two things.

“That’s what we presumed,” Annie Laurie said. She turned a hard stare at her younger son. Thom, like their father, had nothing

to say, and Ryan knew better than to say anything. He knew he shouldn't ask questions like how many years in a row Sandy Gully had won hands down the World's Ugliest Woman Contest. The poor girl wasn't a worthy opponent. His brother was. Ryan couldn't hold back. His brother in three insistent weeks had turned their dedicated model of a Catholic family into a situation comedy. This was not the way it was supposed to be. The family that prays together stays together. Until in-laws appear on the horizon.

Their life inside that car on that freeway on their first night in California had become very Ricky and Lucy and Fred and Ethel. Ryan looked directly into his mother's face and repeated her very own words to her: "Just think. They might have children. Isn't that wonderful?" He looked down into Margaret Mary's face.

"Isn't that wonderful," he said to her. "You and I are going to have little nieces and nephews. Little itsy-bitsy, teeny-weenie, little polka-dot nieces and nephews..."

"...with," Margaret Mary blurted out, "great big noses and skinny legs."

Sandy Gully turned on Margaret Mary. "You might be an aunt before you're five years old." She pronounced *aunt* as *ant*.

"I don't want to be an ant!" Margaret Mary screamed.

"We plan to start a family right away." Sandy pulled both guns from her holster. She was not going to back down from the fray. She had ovaries.

"You're good," Ryan said. "You're real good."

"So are you," Sandy said.

"Wrong," Ryan said. "I'm better than real good."

"Sandy doesn't believe in birth control," Thom said.

"Too bad," Ryan said. "I'm beginning to. Also mercy killing."

"And I don't believe," Sandy planted her hooks in forever, "in divorce."

"But divorce believes in you," Ryan said. I'm sorry, God, he prayed, but I can't at this moment help myself I promise to confess at least ten venial sins of speaking uncharitably. Then he burst out laughing.

The joke of this marriage had begun.

Thom gave Ryan the look of Death. He had scores to settle, not the least of which was that Ryan had the audacity to be born

first. Ryan, and Thom hated himself for it, had been Thom's hero from childhood. "If your grades are as good as Ry's," their parents had promised, "we'll buy you a transistor radio too." They sincerely tried to treat both their boys the same; but their boys were not the same. Ryan was the curly headed altar boy who walked in an aura of goodness. Everyone loved Ryan. Even Thom. But Thom was the only one who suspected Ryan was a shit and maybe a fag. Falling asleep together in their big double bed, they were parochial school-boys cuddling close, their two voices whispering their night prayers in unison: "God bless mommy and daddy, nannies and grandpas, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Make us good boys and keep us healthy and safe." But Ryan always added a last line: "And make Thommy be better."

He said it for Thom's ears only because Thom was his brother and of your brother you always expect more. Thom knew from the start he'd never be good enough for Ryan. Nobody would ever be good enough for Ryan. But goodness was the only game in town. Thom hated himself for even wanting to be like Ryan. He could only try to compete with the best little boy in the whole wide world. If Ryan would be a priest, Thom would be a soldier. One son for the church, one son for the state. His high-school revenge was to smoke early, drive fast, and marry young.

"Maybe we should say the rosary on the way to the motel," Annie Laurie said.

"I hate the rosary," Margaret Mary said.

"I think we should talk," Ryan said. "Conversation's fun, isn't it?" He turned his attention to Thom. "Congratulations."

"For what?"

"Graduating from boot camp. That makes you a man, doesn't it?"

"I'm so proud of him," Sandy Gully said. "I'm going to convert to be a Catholic."

"That's nice, dear." Annie Laurie sounded relieved.

"I'm going to throw up!" Ryan said.

"Watch it!" Thom's voice imitated the authority of a drill instructor.

"I can hardly look at it!" Ryan said.

“I really mean watch it, Ry. Shut your trap or I’ll shut it for you.”

“Now boys,” Charley-Pop said.

“You and what army?”

“The United States Marine Corps.”

“I’m wetting my pants.”

“Now boys,” their father said for the benefit of Sandy Gully, “let’s not let a little friendly rivalry between brothers embarrass the ladies in the car. Let’s not spoil our vacation.”

“Especially one we hadn’t planned on.” Annie Laurie held her purse tight in her lap.

“I’ll beat the shit out of you,” Thom said.

“Thom,” their mother said, “you’ve never used profanity before.”

“Profanity becomes him,” Ryan said. “Think of it as enlarging his vocabulary. I’m committed to the sacred. He’s committed to the profane.”

“I’ll wale your shit,” Thom said.

Ryan looked Thom straight in the eye. “My shit?” he said. Then he began singing: “From the curse of Montezu-oo-ma,” and he shocked them all by putting his pure seminarian’s hand on Sandy Gully’s knee, “to the whores of Tripoli.” He stopped singing. “Isn’t the Tripoli a B-girl bar in the San Fernando Valley?”

“I’m from the Valley,” Sandy said. “I like singing like with *Hoo-tenanny* on TV.”

“That’ll be enough,” Charley-Pop ordered.

“Wait a minute,” Ryan said. “Who’s being phony here? Neither you or mom is acting normal. What is this? A road show for Thom’s benefit?”

“You’re all so much fun,” Sandy Gully said. “Just like Thom told me.”

“Thom’s a great judge of character,” Ryan said.

“And you’re so pretty,” Sandy Gully said to Margaret Mary. “Just think. You and I are going to be sister-in-laws.”

“Sisters-in-law,” Ryan corrected her.

“And you’ll be my brother-in-law,” Sandy said. She slyly pressed her thigh against Ryan’s leg.

“I’m going to be sick,” Ryan said.

“Have you ever noticed,” Sandy Gully said, tucking Margaret Mary under her pert little chin, “how really pretty little girls hardly ever grow up to be beautiful?”

Margaret Mary burst into tears. War was declared. From that day she hated the girl who was to become her brother’s wife.

“My daughter,” Annie Laurie said, “will always be lovely.”

“You,” Ryan said to Sandy Gully, “must have been gorgeous when you were hatched.” He pulled his leg away from her. “When’s your birthday? Halloween?”

Margaret Mary’s tears turned to laughter.

“I wasn’t hatched,” Sandy Gully said. She hadn’t appreciated Ryan pulling his leg away from her. “I can tell right off, Thommy, that Ry’s a real kidder.”

“The way Thom’s a real killer,” Ryan said.

“You were hatched!” Margaret Mary screamed. “You were hatched!”

“I wasn’t hatched, honey,” Sandy Gully said.

Ryan could no longer contain himself. Sandy had not yet even married his brother, and already she had pressed her thigh against his leg. If women’s temptations to impurity were so thin, Ryan could hardly understand the fuss about their sinfulness.

“Yes, you were hatched!” Margaret Mary was jumping up and down in the crowded back seat.

“I wasn’t hatched!”

“You look like,” Margaret Mary said, “the flying purple people eater!”

“Oh, my God,” Charley-Pop said, “not her too.”

“That’s my girl!” Ryan tickled Margaret Mary’s ribs till she screamed. He whispered in her ear.

“If you weren’t hatched...,” Margaret Mary repeated Ryan’s whisper. “What else?” she asked.

He whispered again.

“...why do you look like someone sat on your face?”

“If I ever talked that way in front of my parents,” Annie Laurie said.

“You better bag it, Ry,” Thom said. “And you too, Margaret Mary. Enough is enough.”

“We’re going to say the rosary.” Annie Laurie pulled her beads from her purse.

“You better double bag it.” Ryan was daring to see how far he could push the new Marine Corps grunt. “One bag for her head and one bag for yourself in case hers comes off.”

Annie Laurie screamed as Thom tried to climb from the crowded front seat to the back. She grabbed Charley-Pop’s arm. As fast as the rental car careened out of the freeway lane, it swerved back knocking Thom down into his seat. Ryan had been ready to sock his brother in the jaw.

“Everybody settle down.” Charley-Pop was furious.

“Asshole,” Thom said over his shoulder. “I know thirteen ways to kill you above the neck.”

“Aw, jeez,” Ryan said. “Like, kill me already; but, please, not the face. We’ve just arrived in Hollywood, California, and I’ve got to be ready for my close-up.”

“I don’t understand what’s between you boys,” their father said.

“In the name of the Father,” Annie Laurie said, crossing herself with the rosary beads blessed during the 1950 Holy Year by Pope Pius XXII, “and the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” She intoned the Apostles’ Creed, and they all, everyone but Sandy, who sat dumbfounded by the way their unison recitation had stopped their conversation dead, began to pray. “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord, who was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried....”

“Can you believe,” Ryan asked me, “what growing up Catholic in the fifties, early sixties was like?”

I could and I couldn’t.

“I was different then,” Ryan said. “We were all different then. Those were the last days before Jack Kennedy was shot and the world changed forever.”

Sandy’s was not the first knee, female or male, pushed into Ryan’s; but her knee was, faster than all the others, pushed away. Ryan’s sins in those days were all the sins of a tongue sharpened by the stress of enforced Catholic purity. I believed him when he told me I should call the Guinness Brothers because he had kept himself

from masturbating until he was twenty-four years old. Physically and spiritually. Ryan fought to cling to the modesty and sexual purity Monsignor Linotti taught him were absolutely necessary for a boy to become a priest.

“My sins of speaking uncharitably were venial enough,” Ryan said, “not to worry me. In those days, I lived in terror of only one sin. Impurity. All I ever wanted, because that’s all the ideal I ever heard, was to be pure. I felt pure behind the walls of Misericordia. Later, here in San Francisco, I lost it. I purposely tried to lose it. I didn’t care anymore about sexual purity. I wanted to be sexy. But when I met Kick, I realized that purity isn’t only sexual.

“Kick made me realize a grander manly purity, far more important than the narrow sexual purity the priests taught. That’s why I love him. He brought me through his body and his ideals to a purity far greater than the slender sexual purity I agonized over and tried to protect every day and every tempting night of my adolescence. Sometimes I was physically sick I was so afraid of committing a mortal sin of impurity. I was terrified of spending an eternity in the fires of hell.

“The priests made me crazy.

“You try not jerking off for twenty-four years and see if you’re not weird. I feel like filing a class-action suit against the Catholic Church for every boy who was terrorized into a seminary in the fifties.”

8

In the early days when hippies were in flower, Ryan and Teddy joined the soldiers grouping in the South of Market arena. Three years after the 1967 Summer of Love, the smell of incense and pot drifted quietly from the Haight-Ashbury, through the Castro, and down to the light industrial area of Folsom and Harrison streets, south of the Market Street Cable Car Slot. Peace, love, and granola gave way to leather, drugs, and performance-art sex.

Already seeded at the corner of 4th and Harrison, the embryonic Tool Box, the leather-bar archetype, forecast the SRO high times blowing in the wind. *LIFE* magazine, always fast at sniffing

something new and kinky, splashed the Tool Box across its pages almost exactly five years to the day before the 1969 Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village pitted angry gays who were mad as hell at the NYPD's fag-bashing helter-skelter bar raids. "The 'Gay' World Takes to the City Streets" *LIFE* warned, June 26, 1964: "A secret world grows open and bolder. Society is forced to look at it—and try to understand it."

"My dear," Solly Blue said. "An engraved invitation to every fag-got in America couldn't have caused more of a sensation. Reading *LIFE*'s expose in Iowa was like discovering a travel agent's dream brochure. Destiny called me bag and baggage. Garland should have gotten a commission. For years she'd been warbling how San Francisco lets no stranger wait outside its Golden Gate. And who in America is stranger than we?"

Not since word from Sutter's Mill told the miner '49ers there was gold in them thar hills had any proclamation started such a stampede west. Gay liberation was announced, not unsympathetically, like a social pregnancy in *LIFE*. It was born, slapped and screaming, at Stonewall. But what diamond worth its B-movie weight doesn't carry some mummy's curse? Liberation's first angry unity quickly fragmented. Gay lib, birthed as a seemingly homogenous group demanding civil rights, turned fast to factions. Put the blame on Mame, boys. Once a gay man or lesbian woman goes over the rainbow, long-closeted rage turns fast to individualized outrageousness. Stonewall's choral chant, "Out of the bars and into the streets," turned into a zillion soloists singing "I've Got to Be Me," "I Did it My Way," and everybody's favorite tune in the key of *Me*, "Fuck You, Girl."

Unity in numbers, which brought media and political strength to the group, surprised everyone with a slow reverse-English spin that bred intranecine discrimination. Suddenly it wasn't enough to be gay to get into a gay bar. Generic gay became specific gay. Dress codes were enforced. The Tool Box, all leather and Levi's and boots, nailed a pair of tennis shoes to its ceiling with a sign reading "Stamp out Sneakers." Put the blame on Brando, who, a few years earlier, unlike the straight arrow John Wayne, thrust an alternative, skewed, inner perversatility on American masculinity, pulling on a leather jacket and cap, thrusting a thousand pounds of combustion

power between his legs, creating a new off-center aggressive way to be male.

That's pop culture. A movie today; a lifestyle tomorrow.

The first men wearing the first leather in the Tool Box were in the throes of their mid-teens' sexual-identity crisis when Marlon in *The Wild One* rode across drive-in screens. Stereotyped by society as sissy boys, they could not fit into that slot anymore than they could square peg into heterosexuality. Sometimes men, forced to ride side-saddle as the token high-school queer, suddenly, defiantly, straddle saddle, coming of age, encouraged by the silver screen, seeing ways they can be, seeing the way they have to be, because in their secret hearts they already are that way, and the hell with everyone else.

San Francisco's first masculine visionary was Chuck Arnett. He arrived in the City as the lead dancer in the road company of Bye Bye Birdie, and never left. Adept at set design, Arnett adapted the movie images of *The Wild One* to the wall of the Tool Box. He painted the gigantic mural that first focused national attention in *LIFE* that something to do with a special breed of men was happening in San Francisco. He changed Brando and James Dean into archetypal black-paint silhouettes, new images of bikers and musclemen and construction workers, against which men measured themselves and their tricks. Arnett's clarion mural, spread across two *LIFE* pages, signaled across America a new image of homosexuals. Men read it, burned their sweaters, packed their bags, and headed west. That Tool Box issue of *LIFE* started the migration to San Francisco that caused both South of Market and Castro to happen. The floodgates were open.

Ryan's *Journal*:

South of Market. May 14, 1970. The Tool Box bar is jammed with men in Levi's and black leather. The music is loud rock.

There are two rooms. In the first, the bar itself runs the length of the room. Men sit on bar stools, congregate at pinball machines, mill around.

In the second room is a pool table covered with a piece of plywood. This is sort of a back room. Men crowd shoulder to shoulder. It's a gently swaying crush. You could lift

both your feet and not fall. You could pass out and not hit the floor. The air is heavy with smoke and body heat. Everyone is in some stage of having sex. The room is half lit. Someone has unscrewed one of the two naked red light bulbs. The press of men feels good against my body. So many men crammed together in so small a place.

Tony Tavarossi told me most of them haven't been in San Francisco more than a year or two. Fresh meat. This is my first night in town. Teddy says he likes the back room. I say dive back in. He does.

I walk around. At the bar a blond in full leather, muscular, tattooed, catches me by the shoulder. He says welcome to San Francisco. I say thanks. He says you're new in town. I say I hoped it didn't show. He says my name's Jack Woods; let's go home and fuck. The fast invitation didn't surprise me. What surprised me was he felt free enough to use his whole name. Something nobody does in Chicago.

A couple of years later, when the Tool Box was torn down "To Make Room For Progress," the wall with Arnett's mural stood its ground, towering above the rubble, facing the sunlight and the street, no longer concealed, upfront, thrusting those dark images of men at passers by and at the hundreds, then thousands of men who were filling up the flats, lofts, and single rooms at the old SRO hotels of Folsom and the Victorians of Castro.

After the bars came the baths. The best baths were South of Market renovations of rundown blue-collar hotels: separate rooms with the toilet and shower down the hall. The best if not the first of the early baths was the Barracks. On Folsom at Hallam Mews, the Barracks was behind and upstairs over the Red Star Saloon. The Barracks perfected sportfucking. Everyone went there, stopping in first at the Red Star for a twenty-five-cent beer, smoking a joint, kicking back to the sounds of "It's a Beautiful Day" and Creedence and Janis and the Doors. On Buddy Night at the Barracks, when two were admitted for the price of one, any man out stag made a point to pick up a trick in the Red Star, both sauntering like long-lost fuck buddies out through the door in the back wall of the Red Star that led to the Barracks.

The Barracks was a four-story maze of fantasy sex. In its long narrow corridors, men stripped down to combat boots and jock-straps. Most carried a white towel over one shoulder and a bottle of poppers tucked in their gray wool socks topped with red and green stripes. They paraded the halls and stairwells bumping into newer and newer flesh arriving in those early days. They cruised the open doors of the hundred rooms.

It was a golden time, those first post-Stonewall years with their Haight-Ashbury glow. Everyone seemed young, because everyone was young, born mostly during World War II. Drugs were for going up; there was no coming down. No one had yet overdosed or burnt out. There wasn't the cannibalistic hunger one reads about in stereotyped accounts of gay baths that always end up seeming like the scenario for *Suddenly Last Summer*. The only diseases were euphemized as social and they were few considering the shenanigans. Banners of LOVE, PEACE, JOY hung over the City. John and George and Paul and Ringo sang about me being he and him being me and us being all together.

At the Barracks, each room was a fantasy. Men lay back on sheeted bunks, arms across their pecs, teasing their own tits, surrounded by huge latex dildos of monumental cocks and gut-wrenching fists. In four-poster beds made of heavy lumber, men with chinstrap beards and crew cuts hung cradled in black leather slings, their booted feet spread high in stirrups clipped to the suspension chains, sniffing poppers, waiting for the right man propelled by the right drug to shove his fist up their exhibition assholes.

In other rooms, men, more top than bottom, straddled chairs under the acid-red glow of the naked light bulbs. They thrilled the hall cruisers with their dark threat of bondage and humiliation and real pain. They projected the right Look: their thighs strong in tight black leather chaps, their big chests hairy under tailored leather vests, ropes and chains and metal clamps spread seductively around them, waiting, turning on and turning down most of the hungry, horny men stopping at their door, waiting for the right man to come along to be tied up spreadeagled, whipped, tortured, and fucked.

The Barracks excelled at fuck-music. Over its loudspeakers, Chuck Mangione lifted everyone to the "Land of Make Believe,"

and singer Tim Buckley, who too soon died of an overdose in an El Lay elevator, wailed “Sweet Surrender.”

In other rooms, men uniformed like California Highway Patrolman leaned against the black wall smoking huge cigars, their feet booted in black leather knee-high boots, enticing many, picking and choosing and admitting one, maybe, a bearded lumberjack leaning against the doorjamb of the patrolman’s room, both men rubbing their cocks, until the patrolman nodded the lumberjack on in, the door closed, and they did the deeds a big-biceped patrolman does to a hefty woodsman in a flannel shirt and logger boots laced knee high.

Men turned over mileage in the Barracks halls the way they cruised streets as teenagers in their hot cars. They passed from room to room, from scene to scene, climbing up the carpeted stairs, then climbing down again, searching for adventure.

Under overhead lights, on a raised platform in a hallway niche, a heroically buffed exhibitionist bodybuilder posed. He stroked his penis. He rubbed his hands over his well-greased muscles. He teased the nipples of his huge pecs. He played to the kneeling, adoring crowd of men. They jerked off to his muscular build with one hand. With their other hand, like Israelites kneeling before the golden idol in *The Ten Commandments*, they reached toward him like a god. He shot his load across the rolling field of their open mouths.

In darkened toilets, men lay back in long urinal troughs, jerking off, wet by hot streams from a hundred cut and uncut cocks. In darker stalls, men, late arrivals without reserved rooms, sat squat on cold porcelain, Rodinesque, living statues waiting William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*. In the orgy rooms, men stood four deep around the central bed, and pressed up against bunks, sucking dicks and assholes, fucking butts and faces, swapping deep-tongued spit, kneeling to lick feet and thighs, rising to hard washboard abdomens, bending to bite on turgid tits, knowing whom they tongued, not knowing who in the pig pile below them sucked on their dick and balls, reaching out to fold in a new handsome hunk standing fresh and aloof and watching the action, pushing away the hands of insistent ugly trolls, cuming, shooting, collapsing in the swaying surround of tight-packed bodies, trying to inch their way back to the door of the steaming orgy room to escape to the coolness of the

halls, sidestepping the naked bodies writhing on the carpeted stairs, descending delicately over fellatio and sodomy down to the juice bar in the lobby, to catch a second wind, to smoke a joint, to check in with friends and fuckbuddies, to watch the newly arriving meat being buzzed in at the door.

“It’s better,” Ryan said, “if straight people don’t know places like this exist. If they knew what went on here, they’d be more jealous of us than they already are.”

Much of San Francisco sex in those early first days was sanctuary sex. The war was on. Students protested in the streets. Nixon was president. The baths were safe haven from the world. There was no tomorrow. There was only the night. The music never stopped and there was no piper to pay.

Ryan was ecstatic. The intensity of male Energy, he was convinced, was religious. They were men, as bonded as ancient priests, assisting in the reincarnational birth of a kind of homosexual religion that predated Christianity. There was the night and the music and the drugs and the men. It was ritual. It was sex. It was raw male bonding.

“Eons have passed,” Ryan wrote, “waiting for this specific convergence of so many old souls to worship the Old God who predates Christianity. Our spirits have been harvested from time older than time, collected here and now out of all the uncounted ages of men for this reincarnation in unison. I have no father, no brother, no son more than these men gathered here in this time, in this flesh, in this space more auspiciously than any of us realized at first. Never on this planet have so many men of such similar mind gathered together to fuck in the concelebration of pure, raw, priapic manhood. If the mythic Saint Priapus has never been canonized by the Catholic Church, then he has been made a saint in San Francisco in these halls, in the temples of our conjoined bodies, tangled in passion, slick with sweat, and glazed with seed.”

In the Barracks on those nights, dragging Teddy in tow, Ryan, always the outsider, experienced his first great sense of fraternity, of belonging, of being one of the boys. He knew then, those first years after Stonewall and the Tool Box, despite the nightly body count from Vietnam and the first mumblings of Watergate, that it was their Golden Time. He wanted to remember how it was. Life was

so fragile. Everything changed. As spontaneously as their lifestyle had combusted, he knew it could burn them down.

Stoned, on his hands and knees at 5 a.m. on the sidewalk outside the Barracks, he watched the sun rise over his car.

“Nothing this good can last forever.”

9

“Ry has a number of opinions on a wide variety of topics,” Kweenie said, “and all of them subject to change.”

Ryan’s was a wild presence. Kick was intent and enigmatic with the smiling Command Presence common to strong, silent men. At first it was hard to get a take on him. Ryan kept him all to himself. But some notes rang clear. Kick and Ryan were light and dark, sun and moon, as necessary to each other as brawn and brain. They were good for each other. Kick made a clean impact on Ryan who forgot the depressions and anxieties he had brought with him to California from his childhood, his family, his schooling, and his church.

“Kick doesn’t like anyone to be down.” Ryan was learning as fast as he could from the golden man of bodybuilding. “He says we’re all responsible for our own happiness.”

Ryan’s big secret was that he had not made himself happy. Kick was the only real and continuing joy he had known.

“They’re an improbably grand couple,” Solly said. “I hope Ry can keep up. Kick will give him a run for his money.”

Somewhere in his youth or childhood, Ryan felt he must have done something good. With Kick, he finally penetrated the A-group fraternity of handsome bodybuilders.

“They’re not gay,” Kick said. “They’re not even homosexual. They’re homomuscular.”

For a kid once on the outside of everything, Ryan had pulled off what he had always wanted to be: one of the boys. He wrote in his *Journal*:

Le bonheur, Wednesday, June 20, 1979. I am happy.
This is happiness. This happiness is high flight. I’m giddy,

raucous, uproarious. Walt Whitman would be proud of me. I laugh in bed, at dinner, outside in the sun, on mountaintops at night. I'm dizzy with the spin of happiness. The sheer vertigo of delight scares me as much as it thrills me. I have as much happiness as I can stand, and then Kick shines on me, and I am more happy. Life is a constant up, a spiraling scale of incandescent fragile joy. The higher I go, the rarer the feeling. The higher Kick and I go, the more fragile I feel. The more fragile I feel, the more trusting I become. He could hurt me. He could hurt me worse than anyone, because I have let down all my defenses against him. He requires none. My love for him, if defined, is trust. We are safe people to each other.

In the same *Journal*, dated two days later, June 22, 1979, Ryan scrawled a related fast entry:

Kick is a vacation, an adventure, a religious experience. We daily for hours in bed. He is the most personal sex I have ever experienced, and God knows, armies have marched over me. Ours is not physical calisthenics only. He is so giving as a person, as a man, that I can but try to give back to him something of what he gives so specially to me. He introduces me as "my lover Ry." More than lovers, we are best manfriends. We are adults. Our attitude takes my breath away sometimes. I feel myself shaking, quivering with joy. I expect nothing. I get everything. I find myself, for once, for once in my life, planning nothing. I find myself...what? Accommodating? No. Generous. Generous with him. Giving to him. My God, no one has ever loved me by teaching me so much, showing me so much, guiding me so non-directively at this point in my life....Ah. At this point in my life to have a man who knows more than I, in a world that all too long has known less, is true unbridled happiness. He loves me. I love him. We love each other.

Ryan radiated moonglow. He was truly in-love. Kick had given his life ultimate masculine dimension. He wanted to enjoy it world without end. Amen. The genuine passion between them was from the first a sweating, grinding sexual tumble as much as it was the nuclear fusion of two souls. They fucked on psilocybin and floated up together, two melting down into one, on a mushroom cloud. Brightness. Flash. Explosion. Firestorm. Windstorm.

“There is as much beauty,” Ryan wrote, “in a nuclear blast as there is in the birth of a whale.”

They conjured an Energy together that lifted them outside themselves. There was about them an aura of completeness. Ryan, coached by Kick, was writing better than ever. Kick, coached by Ryan, entered a series of physique contests and won them all.

“Pretty women smile at me,” Ryan confided to Kick.

Kick himself smiled. “So do good-looking men.”

I, Magnus Bishop, want to know what Energy it was they conjured. What Energy it was they tapped into. What Energy it was that I once saw in their faces and see now in all the snapshots and video cassettes I have spread out around me. I look for clues. I flip through the photographs looking for something Kirlian in the ghost images of the ecstatic Energy they said they conjured between them.

“I’m going to say it,” Kick said.

He put his big arms reassuringly around Ryan. Outwardly, his full hug was the kind of hug Teddy had used to turn Ryan into a screaming claustrophobic.

“I’m your lover,” Kick said. “You’re my lover. We’re lovers. We’ll always want other men; but you and me, Ryan, we’re the home team.”

“If you mean it,” Ryan said, “and you’re not just saying it because you know that’s what I want to hear, then say it again.”

“We’re lovers,” Kick said. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Ryan said. “You’re my best friend.”

Kick’s big arms squeezed Ryan tight into his pumped chest and tight belly. Their hips ground together. Kick leaned back and looked Ryan square in the face. “You are,” the most beautiful man in the world said to Ryan, “so beautiful to me.”

10

Charley-Pop's long illness went into countdown. Annie Laurie called Ryan. "Your dad's very sick," she said.

For twelve years, with Charley-Pop in and out of major surgery, she had kept her grown boys updated, but she never alarmed them. Margaret Mary from the age of eight had grown up with her father's illness. Thom kept in close touch from wherever he was stationed, except for his two tours of Vietnam. Ryan, before he and Teddy had moved from Chicago to San Francisco, had flown down to Peoria every third month. Mostly, the telephone linked them together.

"I think you should come," Annie Laurie said. "Bring Margaret Mary back with you."

Kick drove Ryan and Kweenie to the airport in Ryan's VW Rabbit. "Your dad will be okay," Kick said. "He's always pulled through before. He's a strong man."

"How can he keep going," Kweenie was bitter, "after all those operations?"

"He's a fighter to have lasted this long. You've got good genes." Kick said. "You come from strong stock."

"What about you?" Ryan held onto Kick's arm in the car.

"What about me?"

"You've got two weeks until the Mr. Golden Gate contest."

Kick smiled confidently. "You'll be back by then. Charley will do okay. Like all the times before. You'll see."

In the intensive care unit of Saint Francis Hospital, Ryan stood next to Charley-Pop's bed. His father looked gaunt. His face was slack. His body was thin as bone wrapped in a skin of pale yellow tissue paper. Ryan stood helpless.

Annie Laurie, her hand fingering her mother-of-pearl rosary beads, was her brave, independent self. She was so calm that Ryan wondered if, at home alone at night, kneeling up in their bed, she screamed at the crucifix hanging over the headboard and fell, crying, face down pounding her fists into the pillows. She gave no hints. She was what she was. Her children had come home to her and their father, and she was strong for them. She knew it was not easy for them to be together. She prayed to God to know why they really didn't much like each other.

Twice a day each one entered the ICU alone to stand watch over Charley-Pop for the twenty minutes allowed. Between visits, Thom sat chain-smoking Marlboros in the waiting room. Kweenie tried to reach old high school friends by phone and met them in the hospital cafeteria, hoping to get laid if they hadn't turned born-again or gay. Ryan had left Peoria for Misericordia when he was fourteen. He had lost track of his parochial school friends. He feigned interest when Annie Laurie told him that Kenny Baker had finally married Donna Hanratty after she had carried not one, but three of his children. He spent his hours writing in his *Journal*. Once a day he called Kick back home alone in the Victorian. The family hung in a limbo of waiting.

They had hope. Charley-Pop had frightened them before, weakening, falling into coma, vital signs failing, hands cold as ice, then finally rallying, coming back, going home for another six months.

His episodes terrified Ryan. "If I were my dad, I would have killed myself," he wrote in his *Journal*, "at the first onset of this illness, and if not then, at the second stage, when I saw how horrible it was going to be."

Did Charley-Pop know something? Had he chosen to suffer to submit to God's reckless will? Or was Death so fearsome that he chose instead of rational suicide, this endless, mindless suffering?

Thom, after nearly a week of flipping through hospital magazines and biting his fingernails to the quick, announced he had to leave. "I'm flying back to Bar Nada," he said. "I talked to Sandy. She's got me a lead on a job working construction."

"You're such a bastard," Kweenie said, "to believe that lying bitch. Who'd tell her about a job? She just wants you back. She doesn't trust you. She thinks you're sleeping with someone."

"She thinks," Thom said, "I'm sleeping with you." Annie Laurie was at the hospital. Her three children were home alone. The house seemed smaller to them than it had when they were kids. They sat in separate chairs on the summer porch of the big white house on Saint Louis Street.

"It's the same old story," Ryan said. "You're always the last to arrive and the first to leave."

"The doc," Thom said, "told me and mom that he could go on like this for an hour or a year."

“We all know that,” Kweenie said. “Every episode he’s had has been like that.”

“I have a wife and kids,” Thom said. “I have to live my life.”

“So do I,” Kweenie said, “but I don’t make up excuses to cover my selfishness. You’ve always hated it here. You’ve always hated us. You even hate yourself.”

There was no stopping Thom. He said good-bye to Charley-Pop and kissed Annie Laurie and headed for the airport.

Ryan was pleased. With Thom gone, he had their old room with the big bed to himself. In the darkness of the Midwest night he sprawled across his faded Roy Rogers bedspread with his cock in his hand and visions of Kick in his head. Masturbation seemed unholy with his father unconscious and his mother asleep down the hall in her room. But cuming felt like being alive.

He wrote November 1, 1979, in his *Journal*:

Some Halloween yesterday in this horror show of a hospital. I’m a pervert, not because I’m sexual, but because I’m a writer. I want to be here when he dies, not only because I am his son, but because I want to watch his face, his breathing, the twisting of his body. I want to remember the look on his face and the look on my mother’s face. I don’t want him to die, but if he has to die, I want to watch. I want to know the sights, sounds, and smell of his Death. A father’s Death is always a sneak preview of the son’s. I want to comfort him. I want to know what I will feel in those last moments watching the man whose seed I am slip away forever. I make no apology. I am what I am. I got that from Walt Whitman, not Popeye or Harvey Fierstein.

Ryan waited another four days. Charley-Pop remained unconscious but stable.

“It’s for you,” Kweenie said. She handed him the phone.

“Kick!” Ryan was surprised. “Of course, I can come.”

Kweenie looked astonished. Kick couldn’t possibly be pressuring Ryan into returning to San Francisco.

“I need you, coach,” Kick said. “You don’t have to do this, but I’m asking you this. I’ll never ask you for anything again.”

“Let me check one more time with the doctor and with my mom. I’m sure it’ll be alright. He’s gone through episodes like this before. Every time when he gets better, he always says he wants us to keep on keeping on with our lives. Mom agrees. Let me call you back.”

“You’re such a shit,” Kweenie said.

“Kick needs me.”

“Your father needs you.”

“My father’s unconscious.”

“So you’ll run off like Thom. His wife and kids need him the way Mr. Steroid needs you.”

“Kick doesn’t do steroids.”

“You’re an asshole shit.”

“Fuck you! I’m three hours away by plane,” Ryan said. “I’ve been dealing with his illness, crisis by crisis, for twelve years. If I hadn’t left when I thought I should, I’d still be living in fucking Peoria.”

“So then what does Kick need you for?” Kweenie asked. “Some of those perverse things you do together?”

“He’s entering the Mr. Golden Gate Contest this Saturday.”

“I forgot.” She was testy. “You’re his coach.”

“He can’t compete without me.”

“Oh! Really! Truly! I’m sure,” Kweenie said. “Just you remember, Ryan O’Hara, there are sins of commission and sins of omission.”

“I’ve nothing to be guilty about,” Ryan said.

“You’ll get yours.”

Annie Laurie made Ryan’s exit easy. He stayed by Charley-Pop’s bed for an hour saying things he needed to say, hoping his father could hear him, glad that he couldn’t, saying them anyway, all those things a homosexual son needs to tell a father sooner or later. “I have to go back, dad. Just for the weekend. I’ll come back on Monday. You keep fighting. You hang in there. We’re all close by.” He leaned over the bed rails and pressed his lips against his father’s forehead. Charley-Pop was so cold he felt he was kissing the bone of his skull. “I’ll be seeing you, dad.”

His mother drove him to the airport. “Your dad will be okay,” she said.

“Are you okay?” Ryan asked.

“I’m okay,” Annie Laurie said. “I have to be okay.”

“I love you, mom.”

On the following Saturday, Ryan was cheated. Kick won the Mr. Golden Gate title with his usual ease, but sometime between the morning Pre-Judging and the evening contest, when Ryan was unreachable by phone, Charley-Pop died.

“I’m sorry,” Kick said.

“He’s better off dead,” Ryan said.

“I mean I’m sorry I asked you to come back.”

Ryan, with tears misting his vision, looked at his golden man. “You can have anything you want.”

“Then I owe you,” Kick said. “For this one, I really owe you.”

11

After Charley-Pop’s Death, Ryan needed something he knew he couldn’t have. Kick would not approve. Ryan had it before Kick and he needed it again. He had a need for physical discipline learned in the classrooms and chapel of Misericordia. Monsignor Linotti had drilled into the young seminarians their need to identify with the scourged and crucified young Christ. That discipline, he explained to them, was the discipline of joy. Whatever it was, Ryan needed it with Charley-Pop dead and buried, even more than he needed it before when he had lived with Teddy.

“Are you alright?” Kick asked.

“I’m fine,” Ryan said. He deflected Kick from one truth to another. “I was so used to Charley being sick, I can’t believe he’s dead.” He was becoming expert at prevaricating, at denying himself to fit Kick’s notion of how the two of them should be bonded together in the world. Ryan took his self-denial as the discipline he needed. It would have to do. Kick’s will was his will. It was his new way of being. He told himself he didn’t need the old ways of anonymous S&M anymore.

But he was wrong.

“I have to drive to El Lay for a week,” Kick said. “Want to come along?”

Ryan saw his chance and took it. "I have some things I have to do," he said. "Christmas shopping."

"A man's got to do what a man's got to do," Kick said. "I've always admired your discipline."

"Actually, I need to be even more disciplined," Ryan said.

"Go for it," Kick said.

Ryan wondered if Kick knew what he meant. He didn't want to betray their relationship, but he needed something more strange than familiar. He could do what he had to do and still remember the home team. Kick's departure was his opportunity.

Ryan left the Victorian and drove to the Barracks on Folsom. At the side door, on Hallam Street, he waited in the Saturday-night line of men inching their way up the two steps into the lobby. The bath was crowded. The sign on the thick glass of the Check-In window read "No rooms. Lockers only." In another hour, the place would be SRO. "No rooms. No lockers." Late-comers would store their clothes for the night in marked grocery bags kept behind the counter.

Tony Tavarossi was manning the lobby window. He was a short, swarthy Italian who had worked nearly every bath and bar South of Market, but never on Castro. He had a chinstrap beard, a Dionysian mind, and a small apartment equipped for S&M play. He had at their first meeting frightened Ryan with his sexual intensity. During Ryan's first year in San Francisco, he had cruised warily around Tony, closer and closer, until contact. Tony was preferentially a bottom, a masochist, but he styled himself as a top's top, a sadist's sadist, a sensualist's sensualist guide.

"When you get tired of working guys over," he had told Ryan, "you let me take care of you." Every three months or so, before Kick, Ryan had needed Tony Tavarossi's care.

At the Check-In window, Ryan nodded *hello* over the loud music. Tony tried to speak through the round steel vent in the center of the glass separating them. Ryan pointed at his own ear and shook his head. He slipped his three bucks through the opening under the glass and signed his check-in card. Tony buzzed the inner door and Ryan walked into the Barracks.

Tony signaled one of the five guys behind the ledge. "Work the window for a second." He walked up to Ryan. They kissed each

other. Tony eyed him knowingly. “You look hungry,” Tony said. “Do you have anything to check?”

Ryan gave him his wallet.

Tony shoved it into a long narrow safety deposit drawer and locked it. He leaned over the ledge. “If a room becomes available, I’ll call your locker number over the loudspeaker.” He handed Ryan his locker key and a fresh white towel. “You really need it tonight,” Tony said. “I can tell.”

“I’m not sure what I need.”

Tony grinned like a friend with a secret. “Check out the room to the right at the top of the stairs.”

Ryan went to his locker to strip and cruise in the slow ritual of entering the bath.

Tony took a quick break and bounded up the stairs to the third floor. The door to the room was closed. Tony knocked. It opened. He went in. Five minutes later he came out and returned to the front desk. The door to the room stayed open. Three men in black leather chaps and vests sat waiting on the bed. Next to them a large suitcase lay open, displaying leather restraints, chains, and whips. A large can of Crisco sat on the floor. Votive candles burned on the window sill. In that flickering light, clad in leather, the men looked exactly like Arnett’s silhouette murals.

Near his locker, Ryan snorted a hit of MDA and sat listening to the music, smoking a joint, until the first rush hit him. He tucked his poppers into his jeans and slowly cruised each floor until he reached the top.

He did not know what he was looking for.

He did not know that the men in the room at the top of the stairs were looking for him.

He was feeling his drug cocktail. He reached the top of the stairs. The hallway of the ancient hotel looked a mile long. He leaned against the wall almost opposite the open door.

One of the men stood in the doorway. His big cock hung greasy with Crisco. He had rings through both nipples. He smiled and motioned to Ryan. “C’mere,” he said.

Curious, and turned on, Ryan walked to the man in the door. “These are my buddies,” the man said.

One of the two other men wore a leather codpiece and black leather bands around both his biceps. The third was tattooed and wore a jockstrap and leather gloves.

“We’ve got something you’d like,” the man said, “and you’ve got something we’d like.”

Ryan looked at the men, none of whom he’d kick out of bed. Then he looked up and down the busy hallway. “Why me?” he asked.

“Why not you?” the man said.

The man in the codpiece came to the door. “Besides,” he said. He reached for both Ryan’s arms. “Tonight’s your night. Tony said so.”

Their hands on his body felt good. He walked into their room. They closed the door. The three of them paced around his body touching him, putting a gloved finger into his mouth, groping his dick through his jeans, twisting his tits. Slowly, easily they laid him back on the bed and pulled off his boots and 50l’s. They dressed him in black-leather chaps with the crotch cut out. Black leather framed his naked cock, balls, and butt. His cheeks stood out, round and full, molded by the tight leather. They pulled his boots on and zipped the chaps down tight. They cinched heavy leather restraints around first one booted ankle and then the other. They tightened thick padded leather restraints around both his wrists. He stood in the middle of the room. His cock saluted at full attention. He wanted the pain that was not pain. He wanted their Energy. He wanted to give them his.

The four men contemplated each other. There was no pretense among them. There were no barriers. The stripping had been more than clothes. Ryan was naked in the want they observed and coached out of him. They were not executioners. He was not one of the *penitentes*. This was not Misericordia. There was no real guilt to be expiated, no real humiliation, no real pain in all this ritual.

Ryan, this night, was the chosen. The baths were the opposite of high school where teams picked the gay boys last.

He was honored down to the root of his hard dick.

Torture, like sacrifice, is a relative pleasure. Whatever in the corridors of the Barracks this scene might seem, it was for Ryan a warp more than Saturday night at the baths. The drugs gave Ryan that familiar old feeling.

His head clicked.

He was high, and certain these strangers knew they were, all four of them, concelebrating priests of a man-to-man ritual in the old discipline. They were shamans, more ancient than Druids, invoking priapic gods, congregating among profane men, who themselves, remembering or forgetting, it mattered not, tripped the corridors of the Barracks with motives as ancient as lust. The four were a quartet in perfect alignment. Under a hit of popper, Ryan fell down the violet-colored amyl tunnel with the black spot at the end. He was sure the spot was the moon in full eclipse viewed through a sacred passage of rune-covered stones.

The three men led him to the padded black-leather exercise bench they had moved in for the night. Together they quickly fastened his ankles and wrists to rings welded to the legs. His bare butt rose like a target. The man with the gloves stroked his ass. A heavy powerlifter's belt was laid across the small of his back and cinched under the bench. He was tied in place. They knew their moves. He knew the choreography. He thought to resist, to call a halt, but thought again about this chance to receive.

What they gave Ryan, as much bonding as bondage, as much touching as torture, sent him reeling. They gifted his head, all twisted up in his shorts since Charley-Pop died, with the tender S&M mercies that launch men into sensual out-of-body experiences much like athletes say, when pushing their bodies to the limits, their endorphins kick in, and physical limitations disappear. In the Olympics, records are this way broken and new ones made. In the baths, particularly that night for Ryan, transcendence occurred. The men worked him thoroughly, prepped him, launched him. He entered that pure floating feeling people have when they're starving. He forgot who he was, where he was in time and space. He was in a stage of rising transcendence, the baggage of personality and civilization joyously abandoned to the mystic state of saints.

He was free.

He was outside himself.

Beside himself.

One with them.

Grateful to them.

His body was quivering. They were untying him, bringing him down, laying him flat on his face on the floor, standing him up to see their whipwork, walking him to the bed, sitting in close fraternity with him, stroking him. He was with them and they were brothers, men, all together.

Accepted and full of acceptance, he was in deep relaxed peace, sensually entranced and fully aware, when the most muscular of the three men greased his fist with Crisco and, giving Ryan unutterable pleasure, worked his way effortlessly into him, into the very guts of life. The man's hand touched his heart. Literally. Ryan flew high on the beatific fullness of the ultimate act of male intimacy.

Ryan had found what he needed.

He could not deny that S&M, not the old clichés of sadism and masochism, but S&M sophisticated, redefined in his *Maneuvers* as “sensuality and mutuality,” was one of a homomasculinist man's greatest options. To ride, like a primitive young brave, the way a boy called “Pony” becomes a man called “Horse,” through sensual, esoteric, tribal rites of passage, that make overbearing reason pale against the body's intuitive resources, is to rejoice in feeling one's male body enter adult sensuality.

Coming down in the three men's arms, Ryan remembered the home team.

Kick would be proud of him, but Kick would never know. Some things were better left unsaid. The bruises and cuts would heal and Kick would ask no questions anymore than Ryan would question what business it was that took Kick once a month to El Lay. Everyone has a secret life.

The night at the Barracks reminded Ryan that long before he had met Kick, he had made himself ready, using anonymous sex to prepare his head and his body, for the moment when the sexually correct man walked through the door. Ryan was erotically ready to do anything anytime anywhere. He once wrote:

Sex and transcendent ecstasy with anonymous men is a rehearsal for the main event with the main man of one's central dreams. I feel a need to practice every nuance from kissing to fisting to become sexually expert, so that the perfect man of my fantasy, when he shows up, will find me

ready, willing and able to do whatever trip he prefers. I'll never say no to him.

How sad to find, then lose, the love of your life, because you can't do whatever is his prime pleasure. If I ever find him, and I will find him, I never want to have to say to him, no matter what it is, "I'm not into that."

Perversatility is the ultimate homomasculinist talent.

12

Solly Blue telephoned Ryan who clicked on his recording machine. He could tell by Solly's voice he was 'luded out and in the mood for one of his monologs. Ryan had only to listen.

AUDIO CASSETTE #26. Saturday Night. September 4, 1977.

Tiger's just one of my problems. My boys are ganging up on me. The one thing they learn in the joint is that a homo is an easy score. They've manipulated me, because I let them. I've violated one of my own rules: Never fall in-love with a hustler. Always remember that, Ry. Never fall in-love with a hustler. They're all so charming, but the charm is wearing off. They want money, drugs, attention, beer, sex. I can't cut them off cold the way you can tell a reasonable friend *no*. Friends just go off and pout. When I tell a kid who's done hard time *no*, he takes it real personally. He gets vicious.

Last night, Tiger's buddy Ray who made that great video last week, sat here drinking a couple quarts of beer because his parole officer doesn't see him for another two weeks. So he's drinking and smoking grass. He'll quit three or four days before he has to take his next urinalysis. Why am I in this business? I work twelve hours a day seven days a week.

Have you ever noticed there are no old pornographers. Did you ever notice that? I started out as a model when I was eighteen. By twenty I was on the other side of the

camera. By twenty-seven I had this video business going. Now it's got me going. I've been institutionalized by my own business. My business was once my pleasure. Sex with hustlers isn't even pleasurable anymore. My hand works better. And cheaper. If I'd go out and have sex with gay men and it was bad, at least I'd still have the money.

Ray was so drunk last night he got vicious. He got into acting the way ex-cons act. It's a good thing Tiger was there. You have to treat ex-cons different. Ray's a murderer. He's done time for murder. He stood there while his buddy cut the poor yuppie's throat. He didn't do it directly, but he did it. He was there, and he's got the murder all twisted around.

Listen to this. I'm not talking reason like you and I know it. I'm talking meanness. I could hardly believe it when Ray said to me. "It was shit for us when we cut that dude. I mean, look what happened to me and my buddy. Both of us locked up because of that dead asshole. The fucker deserved to die. He only had thirty dollars, and that wasn't enough for us to pay the two girls we had waiting in the parking lot, and besides he didn't want to give it up."

Can you believe anyone reasons like that? These guys will kill you for thirty bucks. Thirty bucks may not be much to you, but when they don't have thirty bucks, it's everything to them. If you understand that, you understand why there's revolution in our world.

It's no wonder I think about suicide seven days a week. I'm not depressed the way you used to be. The way I think you still are, but won't admit to, because Kick doesn't like it. Suicide just seems like a rational ending, a final taking control of our irrational lives.

How much longer can I put up with this stuff before Ray comes over with Tiger and they put their little plan together to rob and kill me? I maybe suicidal but I don't want to die.

What I mean is the fun never stops. Do you know all the things I put up with? These punks are as stupid as they are smart. Sometimes I'm more stupid than I'm smart.

Three nights ago, four of them brought this blonde Swedish girl back to my apartment. They asked to go to the guest bedroom to smoke some dope. The girl couldn't speak any English. She was maybe only fifteen or sixteen. They ran a train on her. All four of them. Tiger included. A couple of them more than once. She wasn't all that unwilling, because she never screamed; but she was fucking menstruating and couldn't even ask for napkins in English. Then I heard them talking they were going to take her out to McDonald's on Market, order her a Big Mac, and run out on her. Leave her standing right in the middle of McDonald's, without a dime, and not a word of English.

I went into the bedroom. She was sitting up in the middle of the bed. It was a mess. They dirtied my sheets. Punks. She was crying. I sent Tiger out and made him buy Kotex. With my money. Kotex. I don't even like women. I called the Swedish consulate. They couldn't do anything that evening. They asked me if I could keep her overnight. The Swedes are very liberal with their common sense. The next day a black limousine pulled up and took her away. I wish limousines would take them all away.

You know, don't you, the reason for all this introspection? I'm almost old enough to be a dirty old man—which I've always been anyway. My birthday's coming soon. Call me for my sizes. *End of tape.*

13

Ryan always pumped up his life with intensity. He thrived on the tension of living with Kick. To Solly Blue and me, life seemed risky enough. I avoid risk. But Solly, like Ryan, courted it. It was their common bond. Solly's risks were physical; Ryan's were emotional. Intensity for both was their main hard-on. Solly couldn't really enjoy sex unless some tough young hustler gripped his neck in a threatening stranglehold.

Theirs was not a strange kink. A best-selling tee shirt on Castro was silk-screened: "Beat me. Bite me. Whip me. Fuck me. Hurt me.

Make me write bad checks. Cum in my face. Tell me that you love me. Then throw me out like the scum that I am.”

Ryan, for his part, burned with a passionate intensity for experiencing as much as he could and survive. I thought he was making up for time lost in Misericordia; he always staunchly denied that. He admitted to no more than that he had moved to California because the Midwest lacks intensity.

Ironically, as a writer chronicling those wild nights, he became an agent provocateur. He had founded *Maneuvers* magazine on a shoestring. He glorified the nightlife of the wild, liberated masculine male. In some ways, *Maneuvers* was Walt Whitman on speed.

In the early notes for the *Manifesto*, Ryan wrote:

The baths teach homomasculinism. In their mazes, men cruise to find reflections of their preferences. More than one Telemachus searches for his daddy, and finds him. More than one Narcissus seeks himself and gladly, madly, drowns in all his reflections. More than one Odysseus looks from cave door to cave door for his young sailing companions. David puts his arms around his Jonathan. Walt Whitman finally sees the night that men of his prediction embrace one another with muscular arms, unembarrassed, in public places. Butch fucks Sundance. Recruits stiffen before the hard-jawed commands of their ultimate Drill Instructor. Nasty bikers kneel to suck off the greasy Wild One. Jocks wrestle with golden champions. Leathermen submit to the rope-tying midnight cowboy who smokes like the Marlboro Man and sits his sweet dingleberry pucker down smack on their faces. Tennessee Williams was right: “Sometimes there’s God so quickly,” so...suddenly...so last summer.

Homomasculinists have little, if any, Jungian Anima. On a 10 scale, homomasculinists rate a nine for almost pure Animus. Straight and bisexual and campy gay men are closer to rating what militant feminists would rate as the Perfect One of Total Anima. They are closer to the feminine principle. They are sons of the Matrix. To a masculinist they are that contradiction in terms, a feminist

male. They are drawn toward the feminine Anima as naturally as homomasculinists are drawn toward pure masculine Animus. Masculinists are sons of the Patrix.

Neither is better.

Both are different.

Gravity draws all people toward what they like.

Each is to be not only tolerated but respected.

What males feel by nature they are most like they strive out of admiration to imitate. For that reason, homomasculinists think and fantasize principally about men. For that same reason, heterosexual men can be totally straight, and yet cross-dress in private to become like the women of their dreams. Gay men tend to be gender-benders more for the love of feathers and social outrageousness than because they prefer real women. Drag queens rarely dress up as real women. Drag queens, worshiping at the Vamp-Mother Shrines of movie queens, would rather camp out with Frederick's of Hollywood than dress down with Anne Klein. For their part, gay men as a subspecies have evolved only since Stonewall. Gay boys and gay men did not exist in the days before liberation when everyone was a generic queen. Almost as objective correlative proof of like seeking like, more than sexual opposites attracting, gays prefer to ball with other gays who match their degree of Animus or Anima.

Like seeks like.

For the first time, Ryan came back to his basic conclusion.

What you're looking for is looking for you. What you're looking for is like you. So you'd best be careful, both for what you wish for, and what you allow yourself to become, as you create your own best creation: yourself. Tell me the company you keep, and I'll tell you who and what you are.

Ryan one night had stumbled onto something basic about love. Tripping on blotter acid at the Barracks, through a tangle of bodies,

he had accidentally cruised an orgy-room mirror. He was turned on by the guy before he recognized his own reflection. The next day he was embarrassed at what he thought was narcissism. Later, he figured from the surprise encounter with his own physical Look, that he really deep down must like himself. He was an accomplished masturbator. "If I don't make good love to myself," he said, "how dare I make love to someone else?"

If Ryan had stuck to masturbation, or at least settled into the uncomplicated calisthenics of California sex, and if in his private life and published writing he had never mentioned the word *love*, no one would have freaked out. Certainly, without love, he was a sportfucker-well-met having the time of his life at the baths.

"Impersonal sex?" he wrote. "I'll tell you about the necessity and beauty of impersonal sex. When you're up to your ass in interpersonal relationships and want some temporary relief from the ongoing demands, the only balance is the glory of impersonal sex. Try it."

Ryan knew his pleasure. He invented gay vocabulary by sandwiching between the polarized classifications, *dominant* top and *submissive* bottom, the more realistic middle ground of *mutualist*.

In *Maneuvers* he wrote:

Some say keys hanging on the left side of a belt signify a *top man*. Keys hanging on the right, a *bottom*. One wise observer has clarified that keys on the right do, in fact, always signify a *bottom*. Keys on the left, he insists, mean *no* more than *negotiable*. For that reason, a man should save the keys on the left until he's in a true top mood.

Mutualists are men who give as good as they get. A mutualist does not take another man's sex Energy and leave him feeling as if he'd spent the night playing dildo to a vampire. Mutualists, who are negotiable, who that night can switch both top or bottom, might best clip their keys close to their belt buckles and let the keys hang down to rest along their flies.

Mutualist ads began appearing in *Maneuvers*. Kick composed one of the earliest which was, I'm sure, the essence of all the kinds of games they played. He handed it to Ryan.

ARMSTRONG! MALE ARMS! BIG GUNS! Feel them: thick, big arms, muscle-bulked heavily from sweaty workouts; their huge girth sported in a tee shirt, or subtly concealed by shirtsleeves of well-washed flannel stretched across their mass, now stripped to reveal mounds of baseball biceps cabled with vascularity, and thick horse-shoe triceps, growing bigger before your eyes, the pump of each successive flex further expressing the disciplined power of the life force that built them. With those BIG GUNS lifted high in full frontal display of arm muscle, feel them again. Feel the density of each striation as it's gathered down into the depths of muscle armpits rich with the heavy male scent of bodybuilder muscle sweat. After a bit of smoke and a hit of popper, if you find your nose exploring the depths of those pits, if you can take that big muscular arm in one hand and your dick in the other and discover that between the stroking of the two you're cuming then we're both gonna have fun! I'm on my way to the gym now. If BIG-GUNS rap-n-jackoff make you break into a sweat you can't cool off by yourself, drop a line to me, ARMSTRONG. *c/o Maneuvers.*

"How do you like my ad?" Kick asked Ryan.

"I like it fine. I think I've answered it every night."

14

Solly Blue once dubbed the *Manifesto* as *The Gospel according to Saint Ryan*. "You want to live and die as the patron saint of faggots."

"Can't I be the Gay Pope?"

"Don't be redundant," Solly said. "The problem in any movement is that one tries to stamp out in others what one most fears

in oneself. Do you, Ryan Steven O'Hara, maybe harbor secret thoughts of becoming a mustachioed drag queen?"

"Piss off." Ryan considered the options. "I lack the talents to be a drag queen or a saint."

"What if there's no difference?" Solly asked.

"I'll just have to go fuck myself."

Ryan was, I think, as he went about writing for others, wrestling within himself about the deeper, unspoken feelings men in our society are afraid to speak about themselves, especially when they need real affection and sometimes sexual soothing that the world of women cannot give them.

Ryan wrote:

Heterosexuality is older than homosexuality but only by one couple. Heterosexual unions are mixed marriages. And all religions believe mixed marriages don't work.

He punned and played his way through concepts: what was real and what was a put-on?

The Women's Movement has insisted that men can't give women everything they need. Ah-ha! Just so! Neither can women handle all of a man's needs. What's true of the goose is true of the gander. After a year or two of procreational fucking, and a couple of kids, the husband starts going out with the guys, and the wife with the gals. That's when extramarital affairs pick up: when one or both of the couple starts needing the solace and relief of a little recreational, as opposed to procreational, sex.

Up in Sonoma County, more than one married man knew enough to pull his pickup into the discreetly shaded lane leading up to the barn set far back behind Ryan's ranch house. Ryan had a room set up in one of the old granaries off the main barn. Thom knew it was private and he kept Sandy and the triplets away.

Ryan hunted straight men in the county the way gays hunted gays on Castro. He frequently met blue-collar daddies, working construction or driving truck, who, somehow or other with him,

shit kicking in the dirt parking lot outside a county bar, let go, and let him take them to him and hold them the way they needed, the way only a man can hold another man.

They loved their wives and children, but their families looked to them to hold everything together, and times were hard with recession. Exhausted by the demands of women and children, they took to other men for the kind of comfort that through the affection of physical release enabled them to go back home relieved.

“I don’t need no other woman but my wife,” a backhoe operator told Ryan. “What she can’t give me, she can’t help. What I need, I guess I get from you.”

Don’t mistake Ryan for the Mother Teresa of Redneck Sex. “And I get what I want,” Ryan said, “from you.” Ryan had a taste for, and a way with, blue-collar men with gold wedding rings.

“Even if I have to sneak out once in awhile,” the backhoe operator said, “I figure my old lady’s better off for me being with you. Ain’t no man ever gonna break her and me up. If you was a woman, she might have something to be worried about.”

“You talk so country-western,” Ryan said. “In a good way. Like a country song.”

“Whatever...You sure as hell ain’t no woman...” The guy finger-combed his hand through his collar-length hair and grinned. “...but you’re my bitch.”

Between Sonoma County and the City, Kick tutored Ryan to an understanding of real fraternity among adult males.

“Some call it male bonding,” Kick said.

Ryan called it Homomasculine Fraternity.

Solly Blue, the wise Solomon, dubbed them “The Gentlemen.”

“I’m not so sure,” Solly said, “about the crusading journalism. At least if they’re hard on others, they’re harder on themselves. How can I object? Even if they both protest a bit too much, at least they have style. They’ve discovered an alternative to queenly elegance. We faggots are nothing if we’re not elegant. I’m cash-elegant. Ryan’s porn-elegant. Kick is muscle-elegant.”

He turned on me.

“You,” he said, “are not elegant. You’re straight. Straights are rarely elegant.” Then he made his point. “Leave it to Ryan’s—how

do you say?—quiet good taste, to start telling the whole world how they've discovered a new...butch elegance.”

Solly poured himself another in his endless glasses of Coca-Cola.

“I'm glad Ry's found someone to believe in, even if he is a hustler, and something to crusade for, even if it's mere jousting at windmills. At least I get some sleep. Kick cured Ry's insomnia by wearing him out in bed. That I know for a fact. I get fewer anguished late-night calls.”

“Whatever works,” I said, “if it works for a while, then let's hear it for the boy.”

“Personally,” Solly said, “I indulge none of Ry's impulses to make everyone stand at moral attention forever. He's being a bit of a bitch. What do I care if the Castro never cleans up its act? Ryan wants to improve gay boys. Fuck 'em. I hate gay boys. I love straight young hoods. Do I care if my muscular, tattooed teenagers can't discuss Kerouac? Does it matter that they're criminals in their hearts and that one day one of them will kill me? I'm having a great time. I'm a contradiction in terms. I'm an artist. I'm making a fortune making erotic art. Does it matter? Nothing matters.”

After reading the first draft of the *Masculinist Manifesto*, Solly, believing in nothing, said to Ryan, “Interesting. Perhaps provocative. But, no offense, a tempest in search of a teapot. What does it mean? What is the agonizing worth? Nothing is worth anything. You think things mean something. Nothing means anything. What is, means nothing. What is, is. Plain. Pure. Simple. You question things. Once a priest always a priest. But I warn you. Do not ask for whom the nothing nothings. You'll be disappointed. It nothings for no one. Not even you. You keep printing this stuff, you better leave town.”

“I think I hate you,” Ryan said to his best friend. “I think I really hate you.”

15

Late one night, at the corner of 10th and Harrison, South of Market, near the Ambush bar, Ryan watched a man in full leather

spray paint the whitewall of the abandoned Falstaff brewery with the slogan QUEERS AGAINST GAYS. Ryan clapped his hands in joy. He was right. It was true. Something new was quietly afoot South of Market. The *Manifesto* had started as a put-on, a send-up, a satire, but a weird irony, quiet and populist, was slowly turning it true in the streets and the bars and the baths.

Men were reading it, laughing at it and its slam-dunking of gay politics. A reviewer in *A Different Drum* magazine wrote:

Ryan O'Hara's *Masculinist Manifesto* is a quirky twist of insult, humor, and a grain of truth. One begins reading it not believing in masculinism; one finishes it, if not believing, at least not disbelieving that some truth relevant to us as men runs as serious subtext beneath the piquant humor. In the *Manifesto*'s every joke and jape and jibe lies a kernel of recognizable truth. It's as if O'Hara, maybe more than he knows, has assimilated by osmosis from the bars and baths and bistros something coming, but not yet fully realized, in what he would call "man-to-man homomascularity" as practiced by men who have gone beyond their initial gayness to a vision of their own maleness that must be defined in terms wider than generic homosexuality and specific gayety.

O'Hara's erotic prose in *Maneuvers* is often experimental. Sometimes succeeding. Sometimes not. At least for this reviewer. If the reader can get around his constant coining of new terms—some are chic; some are cheeky; some fall flat on their butts—then *homomascularity*, which is his key conceptual coinage, can, for queer identity's sake, work nicely to define for homosexual men a new way to be, as O'Hara would say, "beyond gay," into "post-gay."

Ironically, the minute the straight media finally feel at ease with the popular euphemism *gay*, a newer, second-wave corps of homosexual men has been rejecting the word as a trivializing label. Perhaps, for all his bumptious arguments, O'Hara's on to something. Gayness seems these days defined by bars and baths. There's more to homosexuality than that. While this reviewer finds much of the *Manifesto* a bit bizarre and very much too aggressive, I would have to

agree that gay liberation's commercialized, politicized Castroid lifestyle has forgotten what pure, radical homosexuality is essentially about: men preferring other men sexually and socially. As O'Hara says, "Gay men have lifestyles. (In fact, the word *lifestyle* has become the new euphemism for *homosexuality*.) Straight men don't have lifestyles. Straight men have lives. Homomale men have lives."

"Co-opting the old slurs against us," O'Hara writes, "some of us take perverse pride in calling ourselves *queers*, *faggots*, and homos—anything but *gay*. We are not gay. We are men. The essence of men. A homomale man and a heteromale man have more in common, in all areas, except the one of their sexual preference, than homomale men have with the new cloned species of gays."

The Market Street Gay Men's Glee Club was insulted and went flat singing their most-requested medley of "I Feel Pretty," "I Enjoy Being a Girl," and "I'm Just a Woman in Love." The Gay Men's Twirling Battalion sat themselves down in formation, smack-dab on their batons, and wrote him petulant hate mail on perfumed stationery.

"Darling," one majorette, who signed his name *Mavis*, wrote, "You're too much! Call me!!!"

Ryan had not consciously meant to outrage the already outrageous; but when people are bruised, they find hurt easily everywhere. He should have known better.

One summer night, a gaggle of dykes kicked their motorcycles up along the curb in front of Ryan's Victorian. They gunned their engines, aping Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, hooting, and throwing their empty beer cans at his front door, shouting, "Is this butch enough for you, asshole?"

Ryan peered outside and stroked his beard. "They're wearing so much studded leather they must have raided a pit-bull accessory shop."

"San Francisco," Kick said, "is full of male impersonators of both sexes."

They watched through the blinds as the women burned copies of the *Manifesto* in the street. The sweet little gay couple across the way slowly twirled their Levolors closed.

“I hope,” Kick said, “they’re having as much fun as we are.”

“I hope they paid for the copies they’re burning.”

“I doubt that.”

Ryan turned up the tape on the stereo, and Kraftwerk’s *Trans-Europe Express* drowned out the muffled noise in the street. He pulled his muscleman into him.

“You gonna give your buddy your butt?” In bed with Kick, Ryan affected a slight southern drawl. He lowered his buffed lover to the bed and lifted the trophy-winning Best Legs in California. He loved fucking Kick’s splendid glutes. “Gimme that tight dirty-blond muscle butt.”

Kick reached his hands up between his raised legs and played with Ryan’s tits.

“Oh, how you do me when you do me like you do,” Ryan said.

His cock stood erect. He pressed it between the twin scoops of Kick’s butt. This was the kind of coaching Kick liked.

“Come on, man. Give your buddy your butt.”

He drove his dick home, slow-pumping the man he loved more than anyone he had ever loved before.

16

Ryan had his hand on the pulse of Oz. He was also fighting in others a battle he was fighting in himself. He wrote:

Gays have betrayed essential masculinity by assuming at first, and then wearing too long, the reactionary mask of outrageous freaks. Gay lib’s mistake lies in emphasizing our differences from the mainstream of American masculinity, even with all its macho and feminist flaws.

Isn’t there an irony in gay activists marching to mainstream the handicapped while refusing to enter and leaven the American sexual mainstream themselves? Separatist

gay heterophobes are as dangerous to us as straight homophobes who want to isolate us in camps. Perhaps we'd gain more ground with straight men and women by demonstrating the many overlapping areas of sameness, without betraying our human right to live out the one thing, same-sex orientation, that makes us different.

Give people a chance to relate. How can straights relate to gay rage except with their own anger?

A gay bodybuilder accosted Ryan between sets in the basement gym at the Golden Gate YMCA. "You're dangerous. You want us to come on as good little fags. You're no more than a gay Uncle Tom."

"So," Ryan said, "who and what's eating you?"

The bodybuilder pointed to Kick pumping out his heavy squats. "You're perverting him."

Ryan laughed. "Kick doesn't need any help."

"He doesn't think anyone's good enough for him."

"He's right," Ryan said.

"So what does he see," the bodybuilder ran his hand over his skimpy tanktop displaying his big pecs, "in a pencil-necked geek like you?"

"He sees I'm not a gym bum," Ryan pointed toward the bodybuilder's neck, "with red boils on my shoulders from steroids."

The bodybuilder hissed a harsh, sibilant whisper. "I don't use steroids!"

"I've never met a bodybuilder yet," Ryan said, "who used steroids. It's the sport's best-kept secret."

The bodybuilder moved in close to Ryan's face. "I bet your boyfriend uses steroids."

"Nope. Never."

"That can't all be natural."

"It's totally unnatural. But not the way you think," Ryan said. "It comes from a special Energy. Kick works for his muscle. What sort of work do you do?"

"Hey," Kick said. He wiped his hairy blond arms with his white towel. "How you guys doin'?"

“Hey, man!” The bodybuilder butched up his voice. He reached out to shake Kick’s hand. Sweaty lifting glove met sweaty lifting glove. “I was wondering if you’d like to join me for brunch?”

“I’m busy,” Ryan said. “I have a deadline for *Maneuvers*.”

The bodybuilder stared daggers at Ryan. “I meant Kick,” he said.

“Not now,” Kick said.

“You mean *no*.”

“I mean *not now*. I don’t mean *not ever*. I mean *not now*.”

“If it’s *not now*,” the bodybuilder blossomed into full queen, “then it’s *never* as far as I’m concerned.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Kick said. “Come on, Ry. Let’s finish our workout.”

“Everybody on Castro knows you two are cunts.”

“Take it easy.” Kick’s voice was even.

“Why you never go out with anyone?” the bodybuilder asked.

“He goes out with me,” Ryan said.

The bodybuilder sneered. “What you got I don’t got?”

“Everything,” Kick said. “He has everything.”

“I don’t have everything,” Ryan said. “My pencil neck isn’t pumped up with steroids.”

“I’ll forget I heard that.” The bodybuilder watched them walk away. “But I won’t forget it soon.”

“Pop a few more ’roids,” Ryan said. “When you’re big as an elephant, you’ll never forget.”

“Come on,” Kick said. “I don’t like men acting like this.”

“He said stuff about you.”

“Everybody yells stuff at bodybuilders. Like we’re public property. They want to fight you. They want to fuck you. Before I walk into a restaurant, I say to myself, they don’t know I’m going to be there, but I know they’re going to be there. I have to be prepared for them to be surprised and stare and blurt out stuff.”

Ryan was pissed, but he lay down on a padded bench to finish his heavy presses. Kick stood behind his head, his crotch almost astraddle his face, to spot him. His cotton gym shorts thrust his firm basket forward through his jockstrap. He reached down his big blond arms to help Ryan lift the barbell into place. His pecs bulged

and his armpits bloomed. The smell of his warm sweat filled Ryan's lungs as he inhaled and began the set.

Sometimes life was perfect.

Other times it wasn't.

"You think," the snitty bodybuilder breezed by, "that you're some kind of sex cop? Well, you're not, Blanche. You're not."

Later in the Corvette, Ryan said, "Maybe Mr. Steroid is right. I'm bored with the *Manifesto* controversy. I should have listened to my father. He always said never to talk about sex, religion, or politics. But that seems all any of us ever talk about. We should have listened to our dads."

"What's worth having," Kick said, "is worth fighting for."

Political correctness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. One man's Uncle Tom is another man's Tom Paine.

From drag-queen transsexuals, from leather clones to cowboys, Ryan wanted everything possible for consenting adults, every kind of consenting adult, who kept their outraging kinks—but not their homosexuality—in the privacy of their own homes.

"So much," Solly said, "for the best of gay sex being public sex."

Ryan and Kick maintained privacy. They kept secret their nights of musclesex and bondage. They saved their public exhibitions appropriately for *Maneuvers* and for the stages of Kick's physique contests.

That night in his *Journal*, Ryan wrote:

Kick's presentation of muscle and manliness communicates with people; he doesn't alienate them. (Even though I do.) Straight boys and young men want to be like him. Nobody wants to be like an outrageous drag queen spinning through the Civic Center Plaza except another drag queen. What is the need so many gay men have to outrage the citizens and then wonder why the citizens fag-bash them? The public street may be theater of assault for some and theater of absurd for others, but you don't need Julian Beck and Judith Malina to tell you where theater stops and reality begins. I can't buy the notion of gays and clones and drag queens as street actors busily raising the

political consciousness of the American middle class taking Gray Line Tours through the Castro. Why should they bother? The secret of the American bourgeoisie is that they will tolerate everything as long as you don't alarm them. These boys have about as much to do with real politics as Richard Nixon. They're not patriots of the movement. They're traitors to essential manliness.

"The Castro they want," Kick said, "is like the Indians who meet the trains in Albuquerque. They want us to dress up in cute little leather hats and Lacoste shirts and have our pictures taken with the tourists."

17

It was Solly's birthday. Ryan was insistent on the phone that Solly forget his agoraphobia long enough to dine out.

"As long as you come alone," Solly said. "I can do without your sidekick. I can't bear a crowd watching me age."

"I'll take you some place decent," Ryan promised.

"Don't threaten me," Solly said. "You know I like to eat with my hands."

Solly preferred fast-food joints sleazy enough to need their own rent-a-cop. He liked places like that. Places where anything can happen. Those plastique places whose hose-down decor, vibrating in late-night fluorescence, made him realize how things can go wrong on a minute's notice.

"Tomorrow night then?" Ryan asked.

"Make it early. I don't like to be out after dark."

The next afternoon, Ryan carried a boxed cake on the 8 Market/Ferry bus down to Solly Blue's Tenderloin apartment. If Solly insisted on junk food, at least the cake could be good. Ryan bumped his way through the doors of the Saint Anne's Apartment Tower. The name was the last reminder that, before the neighborhood was dubbed "The Tenderloin," it was known as "Saint Anne's Valley." The inner lobby clung to its grandeur against all the noise and sirens and dirt and screams and traffic that since its construction in the

graceful twenties had ravaged its first-floor storefronts. The main entrance was a haven behind wrought iron. Cupid-faced fountains spit water into deep shells. Spanish tile and curling arabesque columns echoed with the sound of an FM radio playing music reserved for waiting rooms.

Solomon Bluestein was a Libra growing older. Ryan hoped the birthday cake had survived the rush-hour crush. He balanced the pink cardboard box from the Court of the Two Sisters in one hand while he pressed the elevator button to Penthouse 1603. Ryan watched the elevator descend past the small window in the door, its cage like a squadron of metal Xs. Behind the Xs, feet also descended, followed by legs, crotch, belly, shoulders, and surly face. The door split open. The manager of the building stepped out into the lobby like he owned the place. He was followed by a well-built plumber whose tools hung like sex toys around his waist. The manager scrutinized Ryan the way managers are born to sniff. Ryan scrutinized the young plumber who fended off Ryan's cruise by stroking his left hand across his eyes and down his nose to his strong chin in a display of the gold band on his ring finger. His butch modesty only made Ryan like him more.

Riding slowly up the long tall shaft of the old building, Ryan could not help but think how his life had diverged from Solly's since Kick had moved into the Victorian. At least Solly was kinder to the idea of Kick than Kick was to the idea of Solly. Kick thought any man who messed with hustlers was a sad case. He made a point of avoiding Solly. He hadn't minded when Ryan told him Solly wanted to have dinner alone. Ryan could not figure out the tension between his lover and his best friend.

The elevator lurched to a stop. Solly opened the elevator door. "You made it," he said.

Ryan was always amazed at Solly's perennially pink and cherubic face. They smiled at each other. They did not kiss. They did not hug. It was unwritten that physical touch between them rarely happened. Deep down both of them liked a certain type of man and neither of them was that type to the other. Still, friends hug; but not Solly. What can I tell you? What could he tell you? Through a glass darkly, they had long before converged: Ryan was Castro afternoons and Folsom nights. Solly was Polk Street and the Tenderloin.

They were Uptown Man and Downtown Man in search of sex with the Neanderthal Man.

“Happy birthday,” Ryan said.

“At thirty-five, I’m fourteen years past birthdays that are happy.”

“Nice mood. I brought you a cake.”

“What mood? I’m a middle-aged pornographer. I’m probably going to be evicted from my penthouse because the manager thinks the elevator was defaced by my boys. Tiger has found an honest-to-god girl to ball instead of me. I don’t have any money.” He was lying. “The beat goes on.”

“What is,” Ryan said, “is.”

Solly stared at the boxed cake. “This is one truly weird irony. Tiger traded his food stamps for some money so he could buy me a cake. He never buys me anything.” He lifted the pink pastry box from Ryan’s hands so deftly by the string he looked like an Israeli soldier about to defuse a bomb. “So now I have two cakes for one birthday I don’t even want. Can I get you a glass of Coke?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“I bought two TV dinners in case we decided not to go out.”

“You’re busted. Get your jacket.”

They walked slowly through the heat of the Tenderloin evening. Solly refused to walk farther than the corner. He stopped in front of a Hofbrau. “I want to eat here.”

“Third Reich fast food? Bunker burgers? The Eva Braun fish sandwich? If we eat here, in half an hour, we’ll be hungry for power. Whoever heard of a Jew liking German food?”

“German Jews,” Solly said.

“Oy and vay!”

“You’ll like it,” Solly said. “All fascists like it.”

“I’m no fascist.”

“Reread your Muscular Manifesto.”

They sat in a booth by the door where Solly could watch the street. The plastic Bierstube’s appeal was its location around the corner from the Saint Anne’s Apartment Tower. Solly knew, whenever he left his penthouse, everything he owned was in danger. His phone rang frequently with no one at the other end of the line. He was always on guard.

“My boys check me out to see if I’m home. If I’m home, they can borrow money. If I’m not, they can burgle me. Actually, Tiger pointed out the other day that I’m much more a part of their side. I was delivering him a lecture on criminals, and he pointed out that I am one.”

“What’s one little arrest for pornography? You’re an erotic artist whose work is misunderstood.”

The waitress took their order.

“My police record says pornographer. I am not Saint Genet nor was I meant to be, but I do understand how the world perceives and defines me. I’ve always been an outlaw. All artists by their vision are outlaws. All faggots are outlaws. But only an arrest can make you a criminal.”

“You always wanted to be bad.”

“I’m succeeding. I figure I’m in a downward spiral toward some great crime. Did you know that sixty percent of all American males are arrested at some time in their lives? That’s one of Solly Blue’s little known facts. The toughest of them all come down here to the Tenderloin. There’s probably more guns in this neighborhood than the whole rest of the City.”

Their beer arrived.

“A toast to the toughies,” Ryan said. He tried to change Solly’s mood. He talked of Bar Nada and the City Victorian. He talked of Kick. “I’ve gathered evidence of the secret signals men use to acknowledge each other.”

“Like gaydar—except straight?” Solly picked at the food steaming on his plate. “My boys recognize each other instantly. A hustler always knows another hustler. Like a fag can always spot another fag.”

“I’m not talking about like recognizing like,” Ryan said. “I’m talking about penetrating fraternities where you don’t belong.”

“You mean you,” Solly said, “and the muscle crowd. You know what movie you are? You’re *Planet of the Apes*.”

“I’m not a B movie,” Ryan said. “I’m a major motion picture. I’ve shot footage. I’m making a documentary. As a non-blond, I’ve penetrated as far into blondness as a non-blond can go. I’ve seen the way blonds look at each other on the street. Blonds acknowledge their fraternity even more subtly than bodybuilders acknowledge

theirs. As much as you've penetrated the outlaw circle of hustlers, I've been researching big blond bodybuilders. I work out with them. I'm getting bigger."

Ryan raised his arm the way Kick would have and made a muscle.

Solly laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You. You are. You only want big arms and shoulders," Solly said, "so you can carry your cross. You only workout so you'll look terrific crucified. Noble. Godlike."

"Come off it." Ryan was amused.

"Beyond Kick," Solly said, "beyond all of it, that's the single, central image hanging in the back of your head. I know you, Ryan. You have visions of redemption."

"Stop accusing me of Catholicism. It's not fair."

"You have visions of a magnificently anguished muscle god whose suffering is for you, who will come down from the cross, or down from the posing platform, rising again, just like Kick's lil-ol'-South'll-rahse agin, to be with you, resurrected along with him, saved, triumphant, ascending to high heaven held in his big strong arms."

"Right. Sure," Ryan said. "That's me all over."

"It is you all over," Solly said. "You've mixed yourself and Kick and that nice Jewish boy Jesus all up in some weird, physical, sexual..."

"Don't forget drug-ridden."

"...pseudo-spiritual idealism."

"Attack me, but not Kick," Ryan said. "What happens between us alone at night when we're conjuring together is hyper-real Energy."

"For somebody so smart..." Solly sipped his beer. "There is no savior. There is no safety. Your conjuring is garden-variety Castro lust." He sliced across his sauerbraten. "No. I stand corrected. It's not garden variety, but it is lust. High-toned lust. Blinding lust. Dangerous lust." He waved the meat on his fork. "Kick's no savior."

"You only say that because I told you we've promised always to be safe harbor to each other. Kick told me himself we're safe persons."

“There are no safe persons. There are only murderers and lovers. Serial murderers and serial lovers who are probably one and the same thing.”

“You’re too paranoid.”

“You can never be too paranoid.”

“You’ve got to trust other people.”

Solly clucked. “Don’t be naive.”

“Don’t be cynical.”

“*Cynical* keeps me alive.” Solly drank down the last of his beer. His face, under his thatch of brown-blond hair, folded into a purse of his lips which he wiped studiously with his napkin. The Look was not his usual Look. The Look did not become him.

“What’s the matter?” Ryan asked.

“You’re my friend. I don’t know whether it’s the heat or this Deutschland marching music. I’m interested, up to a point, in all the antics of your family at Bar Nada. I’m interested in how *Maneuvers* is selling. But the thing I really can’t handle any more of—and you’re not going to like this—is Kick.”

“I’d have never guessed.”

“He shapes every word that comes out of your mouth. He’s possessed you. You’re Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*.”

“That’s not true.”

“Without him drilling his muscle catechism into you, there’d be no *Masculinist Manifesto*.”

“You said you liked it.”

Solly looked heavenward. “Sometimes, Ryan, you’re such an ass.”

“You kid me about it. But you said you liked it.”

“It’s a silly document you should be ashamed of.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s as fascist as the sauerbraten you’re eating.”

“Food can’t be fascist.”

“Sex can.”

“Friends don’t talk like this.”

“Wrong,” Solly said. “This is exactly how real friends talk.”

“With friends like you, who needs enemies?”

Solly grimaced and hit a rim shot on his glass with a fork. "You're still the innocent little seminarian. Maybe we should wait to talk when you've grown up."

"Talk about what?"

"The way of the world."

"Which way is that?"

"If you have to ask, I can't tell you."

"I'm not innocent."

"You protest too much."

"About what?"

Solly hesitated, "About what it takes to be a man."

"Masculinity is the truly important issue facing homosexual males today."

"Spare me the sounds of your cowboy philosophy. Nobody knows what a real man is. Nobody's seen one in years."

"I have to work through what I have to work through."

"You're sounding more California than ever."

"What are you talking about?"

Solly pushed his plate aside. "I'm talking about Kick."

"You mean the love of my life."

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

"About what?"

"About the Great God Kick. I don't mean to be bitchy, but I've had it. I fail to see his charms. Whoever said that everyone should be blond. Who cares if you've found the greatest fuck of your life. You're not the only one in San Francisco taking nightly trips on gossamer wings. You're not the only ones taking drugs. You two didn't invent sex." Solly stared at Ryan. "I invented sex."

Ryan was amazed. This man, his closest confidant, closer for longer than Kick himself, was not understanding the muscleman or the affair or the changes of the last thirteen months.

"I think," Solly said, "you're still too starry-eyed."

"But you've said nothing before."

"I thought you two would burn out. I thought you'd come to your senses."

"I am in my senses. I'm more sensual than ever before in my life. Jesus! You make me sound like one of those people who've found Jesus!"

“Scratch a Catholic,” Solly said, “and get guilt.”

“I’m angry, not guilty.” No one had ever dared question his relationship to Kick this way. This was more than some jealous bodybuilder’s carping in the gym.

“I knew you wouldn’t like this conversation,” Solly said. “That’s why I waited till we were in a public place. I warned you not to take me out. I’ve been a long time bringing this up, and I promise I’ll never mention it again.”

Ryan called for the check “Do you want me to come back to your apartment or do you just want me to fuck off?”

“Come back. That’s all I had to say. I wanted you to know that as an expert, I can tell you for certain that Kick’s a bum. He’s a hustler.”

“Bull.”

“He’s a hustler.”

“He’s never asked for a thing.”

“He will. Hustlers always do. I’ll bet you pay for all the drugs.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’ll give gladly until finally you can give no more. You’re a check-book and he knows it.”

“I’m not one of those guys!”

“Who went to the seminary because he was afraid to go to a regular high school? You forgot America is one big high school. Gay life is everything you ever feared about high school. Only worse. You’re scared of bullies. That’s why you keep writing that gay life is dangerous. All life is dangerous.

“I’m not in high school anymore.”

“But you live and die on Castro,” Solly said. “That’s one fraternity you better beware of, because those boys’ pecking order is size, looks, and cold, hard cash. You want to play in that league? You pays your money and you takes your chances. You are right about one thing: gay boys can eat you alive. So can hustlers. I know. And you’ve got one living in your house.”

Solly reached across the table and almost touched Ryan’s forearm.

Ryan wanted to stab Solly with his fork.

“Ry,” he said, “Kick is the high school bully all us effeminate little gay boys feared would stroll out of the locker room and beat us up. They were blond, athletic, handsome. They were everything we were not. That’s why we secretly loved them. That’s what muscles and S&M are all about. Bully worship.”

“I’m out of here!”

“I’ve been afraid of bullies all my life. That’s why I love my boys so much. They’re bullies I can control. They’re bullies I can get even with. Every bully will take a tumble for cash. I make straight bullies have gay sex for money. I make them sell their precious heterosexuality for thirty bucks. That’s how cheap the price is on their straightness. That’s my revenge on all butch bullies I’ve ever known. You and I are the same.” Solly’s face was tender. “We’re both into bully worship.”

“Kick’s no bully.” Ryan lied. “We don’t have an S&M relationship.”

“Maybe not whips and chains,” Solly said, “but you’ve made him your master and he’s made you his slave.” He raised his hands in surrender. “End of sermonette.” Solly grinned. “Actually, the restaurant has proved worthwhile. It’s safer to tell people difficult things in public. They control themselves better. There’s less chance of a scene.”

“I’ll never say anything again. I thought you of all people...”

“I understand what I understand.” Solly rose up from the booth. “I liked you better when you were depressed.”

“I thought you’d like me happy.”

“I want you really happy.”

“I am happy.”

“You’re porn happy.”

“Porn happy?”

“You’ve left reality behind. You’re living one of your porn fantasies.”

Ryan deflected Solly. “Ain’t it grand? Kick is the reason I came to California.”

“You want your cake and to eat it too? Come on back. I’ve got two cakes, you know.”

Ryan placed the tip on the table. “I’m not,—he said, “starry-eyed.”

“What you’re doing,” Solly said, “is the Vulcan Mind Meld. You’re so starstruck you’re the movie *Star Trek*, and there’s no talking to you.”

They rode up the small elevator in silence. The manager of the building, angered by the obscenities scratched in the paint, had carpeted the walls with a busy green print of indestructible indoor/outdoor nylon frizz. Ryan felt claustrophobic.

“What kind of person,” he asked, “would glue carpet to the walls?”

“An old queen,” Solly said. “See what we have to look forward to?”

“No.” Ryan flatly denied his friend.

“Yes.” Solly was adamant. “You can pump iron every day; but one morning, just as sure as you woke up gay one morning, you’ll wake up as somebody’s auntie.”

“Screw your birthday blues.”

“Only if you’re lucky will you turn into somebody’s Auntie Mame.”

“I love you,” Ryan said, “when you’re crazy.”

“Then you’ll love me forever,” Solly said.

Ryan stared at his friend in the small elevator. He wondered if Solly was still a safe person. Kick had always let Ryan know that he disapproved of Solly’s sleazy lifestyle. It was odd how much his two best friends disliked each other. For years Solly had been Ryan’s steady haven. Ryan wondered if, with Kick, he had in fact become starry-eyed or if he simply had outgrown Solly Blue.

People can be chronologically correct for each other, right for a time, until time changes, and they change and grow away from each other. Teddy and he had been that way. He had no desire to leave Solly behind. He needed him almost as much as he needed Kick. He could not let either of them deny the other.

Ryan’s cake from the Court of the Two Sisters was three layers of air creamed over with three kinds of chocolate. The sugar rush hit him instantly. For more than a year he and Kick had eaten only omelets, tuna, cottage cheese, raw vegetables, chicken breasts, and black coffee sweetened with pink packs of Sweet’N Low. His system raced. Maybe Solly was no longer a safe person. Sometimes a man

has to choose one friend over another. That was a choice Solly could never win.

“Can I use your phone?” Ryan asked. “I have to call him who has no name.”

“Don’t, Ry.” Solly tried to soothe him. “You know what I mean...what I meant. Try toning him down some. Unlike you and all the Castronauts who worship him, I don’t believe he’s a god. If he were a god, I’d be thankful for the evidence of him; but divinity is more than good looks and muscles. He’s a man. He’s just a man.” Solly bit his lip. “He may not even be that.”

Ryan dialed Kick. “Hi. It’s me,” Ryan said. “Yeah....Sure. I’ll take a taxi from down here so you don’t have to drive the Vette to this part of town....Right....Of course, I’m horny....OK...18th and Castro...in half an hour.”

Outside the open penthouse windows, the City lights came on all around Saint Anne’s Apartment Tower. The rim of Twin Peaks glowed with the falling sun. Ships floated high at easy anchor in the East Bay. The very height of the penthouse gave Ryan vertigo.

Before Kick, in those long years of his depressions, he had feared the easy way Solly’s windows opened out and over nothing. He feared maybe deep down he was a flier, if not ready for the Bridge, then ready for a high dive from the window into a wet hanky in the street. But now, with Kick in his bed, he knew he loved the risky business of being in-love.

He turned to say it to Solly, but he could not speak. His new truth was something he had to keep to himself now that he could no longer share it with Solly Blue.

He couldn’t tell Kick that, more than loving him, he was in-love with him. They had exchanged promises. He had asked Kick that they never become ordinary to each other. Kick had asked him that they love each other, but never fall in-love.

Never fall in-love.

It was a strange caution, like one of those weird rules in a fairy tale where someone can have anything he wants so long as he doesn’t do the one forbidden thing.

“We love each other,” Kick had explained. And we love each other perfectly. Let’s not cheapen it like the gay boys do. They fall in-love and can’t think straight.”

“That’s what makes them gay,” Ryan had said. “That’s why they don’t understand homomasculine love.”

“Guys say they’re in-love with me all the time. I hardly know who they are. They think I’m responsible for their happiness.” Kick had shaken his head. “No way. I’m not responsible for other people’s happiness. You know that, Ry.”

“I’m perfectly in charge of my own happiness.”

“That’s why I love you,” Kick had said. “That’s why I know I don’t need to tell you never to fall in-love with me. In-love? What does *in-love* mean?”

Ryan groped toward the answer Kick sought. “Being in-love means singing somebody-done-somebody-wrong songs.”

“You said it, coach.” Kick had put his big arm around Ryan’s shoulders. “I want us to have what we have forever.” He had brushed his thick blond moustache across Ryan’s cheek. “I love you. You love me. The only way I know for us to ruin our love for each other is to fall in-love with each other. That’s indulgence. Love is not indulgence. Love is discipline.”

Solly was off fussing in the kitchen, and flossing in the bathroom.

Ryan stared out at the City around and below him. Maybe, he mused, Kick and I are too rarified in our values. In what we appreciate, celebrate, create, want. Intensity keeps us together. We are not overextended into principles that are too high. We are, rather, fully extended. We are as fully extended as Kick is fully developed. His body is the measure of our intense push toward the best of everything. In a world that settles for half measures that it reviews as excellent, truly full extension of self-into-quality poses a definite threat to a world that has adjusted downward in praise of mediocrity.

Maybe San Francisco was the wrong place for high-flying love. It once called itself “The City That Knows How.” But the City that knew how, forgot how quality was accomplished. Somewhere along the way San Franciscans, always tolerant of the eccentric, had gone too far and given away the store, the way Safeway supermarkets gave away their groceries at gunpoint when the Symbionese Liberation Army held Patty Hearst and the whole Bay Area hostage.

Old San Francisco, with its cable cars running halfway to the stars, had eroded under wave after wave of special-interest groups until there was nothing left for those who remembered old San Francisco but Dan White's gun. The City had opened itself to everyone. No stranger waited outside its door. Finally, overextended, the City began to collapse back inward on itself, beginning that symbolic day when Dan White crawled through the basement window of City Hall and held his own private election. It took him only minutes to assassinate the liberal Italian mayor and the gay Jewish supervisor from the East Coast. That morning San Francisco changed forever, the way America changed the day Kennedy was shot.

Not everyone hated what Dan White did in committing himself fully to what he believed in; but they were little noticed in the media coverage of thousands of gay men and lesbian women marching down Market Street. After that morning, San Francisco moved under the shadow of the gun that by a single bullet had made a woman its mayor.

Solly would always be his best friend, but Solly was wrong.

The world had begun with Kick.

18

Ryan felt queasy leaving Solly's apartment. The rich cake hit him with sugar blues. For a moment, in the deep Tenderloin canyons of theaters and old hotels, he felt a pang for the narrow fast streets of Manhattan. He hailed a taxi. Traffic swirled around him. The cabbie drove him from the Tenderloin, jockeying through the Market Street cars and pickups and motorcycles cruising through the unusually hot September night. They sped past the Castro Street Station and the gyrating line standing outside Alfie's disco. A few doors west, shirtless men, with red bandanas in their back pockets, hung out the upstairs windows of the Balcony bar. Someone had torn the letter C from the awning. The party continued under the sign "THE BAL ONY."

Ryan waited at 18th and Castro for at least twenty minutes. Kick's red Corvette was nowhere to be seen in the steady stream of cruising traffic. Ryan called the Victorian from a phone booth

outside the Star Pharmacy. There was no answer. Twice in the next forty minutes, he dialed again. He felt a surge of panic. Nothing unaccountable had ever happened to them before.

He stepped from the curb in front of the Elephant Walk bar to study the traffic. He calmed himself with a thought from the sixties: whenever you get separated at a demonstration or a rock concert, the best thing is to stay where you are. When he could no longer stand the tension, Ryan jumped into a taxi idling at the curb. Back at the Victorian, the Vette was gone from the garage. Kick's favorite jacket was no longer hanging inside the front door. Ryan came to the only logical conclusion about his lover's sudden disappearance.

He knew what had happened.

A woman in a new pink 1979 Cadillac Eldorado sat screaming in the middle of the Castro and Alvarado intersection. She had been edging her mammoth car out onto Castro at a corner made almost blind by the steep angle of the hill when she rammed the bullet-nosed front end of the red Corvette gunning its way up the climb in the fast lane on Castro.

The impact bounced her twice precisely between her seat and her steering wheel. All around her a thick shower of red fiberglass rained down on her windshield. She reached instinctively for her wipers, and through the falling debris she saw for the first time in her life the most beautiful blond man she had ever seen sitting in the cockpit of the car that seemed to freeze forever into this moment of terminal shatter.

The noise and the red shards of the exploding car body made her clench the wheel with both her thick bejeweled hands. She cried out and thrashed while the blond man sat motionless and cool and invulnerable waiting for the pieces to land and the tangle of auto frames to finish their incredible wrap.

The accident was almost as Solly had predicted hours earlier at his birthday supper.

"One thing I know for sure," Solly Blue had said. "Indulge me on this occasion of my birthday to be philosophical. By thirty-five a man knows in his heart of hearts that everything good that can happen to him has already happened. Then comes a time when you finally sense that everything else you have coming to you will be bad."