

REEL FOUR

Trouble in Paradise

1

What they were looking for was looking for them.

Logan Doyle arrived on cue. He emerged from the crowds at the Gay Pride Parade. He was handsome, dark, and tall. He parted his thick black hair down the middle. His trim moustache roofed a smile of white teeth. He had a strong, predatory American chin, and the build of a powerlifter with none of the gut. He had Attitude. He had the Look Ryan and Kick had often visualized in their nightly conjuring of a man masculine enough to come close to a match for Kick. At six two and two-thirty, Logan looked like the answer to Ryan's prayer to find a man, good-looking and muscular enough, to fill Kick's need for a living, breathing fantasy, the way Kick was for Ryan.

Logan was Ryan's chance to prove they were homomasculine gentlemen and not gay lovers jealous of every trick who came along. Ryan knew instantly he would never have sex with Logan. The rule was unspoken. He knew his place, because Kick liked Logan in a way different from the way he liked other athletic guys. Logan reminded Kick of the trucker who, years before, had lifted him upon his big arm out of the hot Alabama dust of his aunt and uncle's gas station and diner.

Ryan forgot Solly Blue's warning to be careful what you wish for in California, because you usually get it. He also forgot Saint Theresa who warned there are more tears shed over answered prayers than unanswered.

Are people strong enough to live with the truth?

Kick had a way of making dark thoughts flee from Ryan's head.

Six weeks after Logan showed up on Castro, Kick sent Ryan home alone to the Victorian. “Wait for me,” he said. “I have a surprise for you.”

Ryan asked no questions.

An hour later, Kick showed up with Logan. He opened Ryan’s shirt and put his fingers on his nipples. “Yes?” he asked. He nodded toward Logan.

Ryan was stunned. No one played Chopin on his tits like Kick. He sucked in breath for the word *Yes*.

“I like surprising him,” Kick said to Logan. “I like that Cheshire look he gets on his face.”

“Maybe I’ll wipe it off.” Logan winked and slow-pounded his crotch with alternating fists. “One potato. Two potato.”

How old is this guy?

Kick assured Ryan. “One thing you have to understand about Logan is he’s a kid. He’s a kidder.”

“We’re all kids,” Ryan said. His very soul grinned. The proof stood in front of him. He was, finally, one of the boys.

All three men stripped off their shirts, jeans, and boots. Both bodybuilders stood naked in front of Ryan. Kick was already hard. Logan was on the rise. Ryan was ready to cum. Kick hit an easy pose. Logan moved in and ran his big hands over Kick’s arms.

Kick grinned at Ryan. “I told you,” he said, “we can have anything we want.” He motioned for Ryan to lie down on the floor.

Both bodybuilders stood over him, flexing for each other, hands stroking muscles, pumping their dicks. The view up from between the pairs of their calves was the best camera angle in the cosmos. Ryan took hold of himself and followed the oldest posing routine in the world. Move for move. Kneeling between the two bodybuilders, one dark, one light, he realized his definitive place in the universe. In the tricky tumble that three-ways always are, someone inevitably feeling odd-man-out, Kick directed the reluctant Logan back, and again back, to Ryan. Kick wanted Ryan and Logan both to discover and get off on what he saw in them. Fat chance.

Logan regarded Ryan as a pencil-neck geek, more obstacle than competition. Ryan tolerated Logan only because Kick, ever the gentleman-lover, was trying to share with him this man he had harvested as an attractive add-on to their dual private pleasures.

Ryan knew instantly that Logan was a sexual opportunist, and probably a hustler. He looked familiar, but Ryan dismissed him as no more than a type, the recognizable type that hangs around gyms and bodybuilding contests, and cruises out at night with the express purpose of breaking up somebody's happy home. He knew Logan's competitive superfix-lust for Kick was no way like his own real love.

Ryan hardly needed to be hit with a pig bladder to remember three's a crowd. In *Cabaret*, "Twosies" may have beat "Onesies" and nothing may have beat "Threes," but Ryan, pressed like the ham in a sandwich between the two musclemen, had the distinct feeling he didn't like the movie they were caught in.

An extra was on the set.

He thought it was Logan.

Logan thought it was Ryan.

Kick, more caught up than he knew, was obviously intense on Logan.

Ryan felt like Woody Allen trying to dance with Rogers and Astaire.

Kick tried to keep balance, and Ryan, loving him all the more for his sharing, decided to relieve the tension and eased down. Stroking himself, he lay back on the floor beneath the two bodybuilders kneeling astride him. They pounded on each other's hard pecs, grappling, big hands feeling up the muscle on big arms, leaning in over Ryan, face to face, each to kiss the other. The triangulation was at least nine points short on one leg of a Perfect-10 Scale. So much for having anything he wanted! This was sex, not love. Still the view wasn't bad. Most of San Francisco would have traded places with him.

Witnessing Kick's lust for Logan's physique pleased Ryan who wanted to give Kick everything, including muscle, even if it wasn't his own aerobic pump. He winked at Kick, sort of a *hoo-ha* high sign, the kind that close buddies on the home team exchange in the presence of a stranger. Kick thought Ryan meant he liked Logan.

One goddam thing was meaning two things again. Fuck ambiguity.

Ryan had only one polite fast way out. He worked himself up to a physical ejaculation that was some light years short of a psychic orgasm. Not that it was esthetically difficult, not with the two handsome bodybuilders rocking in heat across him, not when, wrapped in a beefy tangle of arms and chests and shoulders, both musclemen came, raining white-hot seed across the flat field of Ryan's belly, clotted wet with his own halfhearted load.

The next day Ryan, sorting love from sportfucking, wrote a new chapter for the *Manifesto*. He called it "Homomasculine Fraternity."

Ryan was happy that Kick found in the flesh of Logan's body the same passion Kick had found in Ryan's words. It made no difference that their three-way had been one time only. What mattered was that Kick had shared Logan with him so he'd know firsthand what Kick saw in Logan. Kick remembered the home team.

The taste of Logan's butt lingered in Ryan's mouth.

Bittersweet.

2

"A Night in the Entropics!" Kweenie was appearing in "New Review 1980" at the Mabuhay Gardens on Broadway near Polkstrasse. "Zola! Z-O-L-A. Emile Zola. Girls will be boys and boys will be toys." She tipped the top hat crowning her Dietrich tuxedo drag. "Marlene was a man...and so was Zola. Z-O-L-A. Zola." She was triumphant returning from Hollywood after a small part January had cadged for her in Allan Carr's ill-fated *Can't Stop the Music!*

As fast as they had come together, things in San Francisco began to fall apart. Camelot had blown up in John Kennedy's face. The little expanding universe of the Castro imperceptibly reached its farthest limit and began to collapse back on itself in motion so slow no one felt gravity change or the Earth quake. The Old Man's boys grew older. Faces that looked so inviting under the red lights of bars and baths looked vampire white at high noon on Castro. The first generation of free gays was no longer the newest generation. There were new kids in town. Fresher faces showed up the old faces

the way dewy milkmaids new to the palace grounds always anger old queens in fairy tales. The first generation had an acid Look etched into their high thin cheekbones.

“Never, my dear, lean over a mirror and look at your face,” Robert Opel had said, “not even for a line of coke. Sagging is gravity’s revenge.”

Opel’s fame fused with another Robert: the fetish-face-and-flower New York society photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe. Some even thought both men were one and the same. Both artists hated the third Entity many believed existed: a man named Robert Opelthorpe.

“Beware of third Entities,” both Roberts said to Ryan.

The gallery owner Opel had showcased the photographer Mapplethorpe’s chronicle of the new Drug Look in his leather fetish shots. Dark circles under the eyes became a trademark of faces marked by drugs the way an even older generation of gays, who had grown up oppressed in the fifties, were marked in the face by the puffy dead-giveaway Look of alcoholics.

A kind of un—Civil War broke to a smoulder.

“Just because he’s gay, Mary, doesn’t mean he’s your sister.”

Or your brother.

Power trips abounded. Slaves needed masters. Emperesses needed courtiers. Women needed villains. Old queens needed fresh meat. Politicians needed voters. Hustlers needed johns. Everybody needed a lover. Only their dealers needed nobody. The gay community broke into factions.

At an A-Group Pacific Heights party, a blond, big-shouldered swimming captain, three months graduated from Stanford, sat with the elder gentle-queens sipping their aperitifs while the younger gay men rose eagerly from the table to wash the dishes, run the Hoover, and empty the ashtrays from the grand piano.

The piss-elegant host walked over to the stunning blond swimmer and said, “We have a custom here for all new boys. Part of your initiation into our little group. You, my boy, must needs help tidy up the place.”

The swimmer remained seated. “What in me makes something in you think I’m your boy?” he said. “I’m from Stanford. I don’t clean up after anybody.”

The host touched his gold-ringed pinky to his Liberace eyebrow and said something like you'll never eat lunch in this town again.

The swimmer rose up from his chair to his full six foot three and ten inches, and groped himself. "You silly old queen!"

The Hoover died like a soul being sucked into a dirtbag. A cryogenic silence froze the room.

"You...you...you..."

It was a queer kind of civil war. Males turned against males. Gay love turned to drugged sex. Sex turned to competition. You were hot or you were dead. The Castronauts didn't need straight bullies anymore. They bullied each other. Gay style fragmented. Nelly queens were out, but didn't go away. Butch behavior was in. There were a dozen ways to the new "man-style." One way or another each faction identified and segregated itself.

Ryan had pages of notes detailing a Montage of Rank: rich gays and poor gays, homomascuine men and sissies, carpenters, hair burners, and church fairies who attended Temple and Dignity with organ fairies who thought worship was a Bach recital. Everyone was rated on a Double-10 Scale. Dance? 10. Looks? 3. Total 13 out of a possible 20. Some guys, who in the "dance" department—which meant "sexual prowess"—were 10s, but who in their "Looks" were only 3, Ryan explained to me, you boffed on the sly in private because you didn't want your hot friends to know you were balling a semi-dog who was a pro *sex-artiste* in the sack. Other guys, who were a drop-dead 10 "Looks" in everybody's book, you made certain to ball in public at the baths and in the back rooms, "Because," Ryan said, "when you fuck with a 'Looks: 10' your own sex number goes up, even though you don't tell your brunch buddies at the Norse Cove that Mr. 10's dance performance was *zip*." On Castro the pecking order was maybe more sophisticated than the old high school pecking order, but it was also more deceitfully vicious, and everybody kept track of the gossip.

It was Castro versus Folsom in a Costumerie of Drag: leathers, feathers, construction, cowboy, pec-pumper jock, gender-benders, piss-elegants, imitation white trash, paramilitary, all sporting keys on the right and keys on the left, and back pocket bandanas coded in the perverse-rainbow colors of the gay rebel semaphore: red, yellow, black, brown, and purple for fisters, pissers, sadomasochists,

coprophages, and devotees of piercing of nipples and balls and cocks. Bars, flaunting discrimination, invented and enforced drag-specific dress codes. Gay style diversified, then divided, like a rampaging body cell hell-bent on acting out, with total perversity and joy, its every formerly closeted gene and desire that straight society had denounced as recessive, bestial, and sinful. Solly Blue understood. He was like a Greek chorus repeating, “What you do with your body...”

Political gay liberation had meant to mainstream everyone inclusively. Social gay style thrived on exclusivity of fetish, fun, fantasy, and a fraternity of favoritism. Certain crowds patronized certain bars and baths. Clubs formed. Chubbies met Chubby-Chasers. Uniform-fetishists founded the Pacific Drill Patrol. Country-Western types two-stepped the night away at the Devil’s Herd bar wearing cowboy clothes from Ed Wixson’s second-hand store, Worn Out West. Rollerskaters, every Tuesday night, chartered a bus from the Castro to a rink in South San Francisco where they skated in circles through streaming fumes of poppers. Loggers in plaid shirts, and the Bears, older, hairy men with beards, bellied up to the Ambush bar. Disco Queens fought their way into Alfie’s, the End Up, Trocadero Transfer, the Stud, and the I-Beam. Biker Leather roamed the Miracle Mile bars on Folsom Street from Fe-be’s to the Black-and-Blue, to Folsom Prison, to the Leatherneck, to the Arena, to the Ramrod, to the orgy-sleaze of the No Name Bar which became the Bolt which became the Brig, to the after-hours pig piles of the Covered Wagon and the Boot Camp *pissoir*, starting over again at the butch Balcony bar on Market. Sweaters and Top-Siders bent elbows at the Lion Pub; the older Suits at “Happy Hour” swam like ageing tropical fish in the huge aquarium windows of the Twin Peaks bar, perched like an open casket for viewing at the corner of Castro and Market.

The Castronauts first cruised Dick’s-on-Castro which became Toad Hall, then, evolving into clones, they hit the Pendulum, the Badlands, the Midnight Sun, the Elephant Walk, Bear Hollow, and, when desperate, the Nothing Special. Polk Street was its own special walk through purgatory on the *doo-ta-doo* wild side of cologne queens mixing with the Clearasil smell of chicken rentboys suffering from terminal acne. Hustlers of all kinds stood at the

southeast corner of Sutter and Polk under an electrical merchant's sign declaring "Any Object Made into a Lamp." The Tenderloin was rough trade and drag queens. Something for everyone.

It was a Ton of Attitude. The immigrant Manhattanite A-Group crashed San Francisco, intent on Manhattanizing "The City That Knows How." They hosted huge, super-produced bashes, draping their first three-story *Night Flight* party with Christo's Curtain, and hiring, for their second extravaganza, a full San Francisco pier for the jammed "Cecil B. deMillions" Ultimate 1970s Party, *Stars*. Attitude pressured everybody who was anybody to dance and fuck till dawn. Reaction to the Manhattanization of San Francisco's public sex style inspired Steve McEachern to redesign his Victorian basement for private fisting parties; he dubbed his exclusive, Invitation-Only *boite* "The Catacombs," and vied with the commercial baths, the Slot Hotel, the Handball Express, the Barracks, and the Hothouse for rough-and-tumble midnight athletes who were Olympic jocks long before the International Olympic Committee ever thought of highjacking the 4,000-year-old classic word, *Olympics*, to their trademarked, corporate hearts. "Fuck them," Ryan wrote. "The real Gay Olympics never happened in any sunlit stadium."

Attitude dictated who was hot and who was not, who swallowed what expensive drugs, who snorted, and who shot up at what right or wrong address. Attitude crept on little cat feet, seeping fast, like the nightly gray fog, through the streets and consciousness of the oldest hands and the newest refugees escaping from the latest Anita Bryants and Jerry Falwells. If without peccs, you were dead, without Attitude you could not succeed or survive.

It was SFO gays versus El Lay gays versus Manhattan gays. The Great Gay Triangle of three cities turned positively Bermuda. Attitude was psychic territory. With men, ultimately, it's always territory, all of them ranked, dragged up, giving Attitude, pissing on their San Francisco patch like Latino gangs fighting for their turf in the Mission. Each kind saw need to take refuge in fraternity with its own kind. If the Castro in San Francisco had a sibling city, it was Berlin with its wall.

Attitude assassinated characters, reputations, and motives with more venom than Dan White ever knew. Dishing was second only

to fucking. Only orgasm was more pleasurable than a good gay Attitude put-down. The Attitude Game was great sport, and great hurt. It would take years, and, finally, political and medical terror, before the perverse-rainbow bandana flag of intragay separatism even began to surrender to the Rainbow Flag of Gay and Lesbian unity pulling the fussing, feuding dissidents together in some semblance of community.

Males, during the Golden Time, all but abandoned politics to righteous lesbians. Ryan paid his dues among those rogue males, cruising hard mileage through the beds, bars, and baths. They all paid their dues. They were all in-laws, all sexually related, and easy to trace if the City Health Department files charted out their coital genealogy. It was a smooth coup for the women to take charge. Gay liberation politics became a network and media base for San Francisco's radical feminism to come to strength during the reign of the City's only female mayor who tried her liberal damnedest publicly not to be what she was in private—a conservative Catholic schoolgirl who had married a Jewish businessman. When he died, she became a rich society matron owning blocks of Tenderloin property. "Ultimately," Ryan said, "the womanist coup was okay. While the men fucked, someone had to mind the store."

No one thought the party would ever stop. No one was prepared for trouble in paradise.

Signs and omens were everywhere.

A string of serial murders began South of Market. The streets were dangerous. For the first time, they began to suspect that the murders were not committed by straight marauders. They began to suspect each other. The bars were themselves no longer safe haven. Murderers cruised among the customers. Young men began disappearing at closing time only to reappear dead in dumpsters in alleys behind Folsom and Harrison streets.

"The danger itself," Solly said, "is a hard-on."

A half-block behind Folsom Street, leathermen stealthily cruised Ringold Alley. Men lounging in the dark doorways stuck their stiff pricks out from the shadows into the light of the full moon. Beery from the bars. Fucking after closing time. The dirty back street: more dangerous, more sexy than the baths. Faceless sex, anonymous black-leather bodies, naked butts, faces fucked hard,

slap of leather glove on tender flesh, clamp and twist of bleeding nipples, hot red glow of cigar tip in the dark, the night cries of pain and pleasure and cuming, the hiding, the running from the police car cruising slowly down Ringold Alley past men flattened against walls, men crouching behind dumpsters, men lying flat behind a car, behind a wall. One man, the Next One, the next Chosen One, lying between the huge boots of a man fully masked by a leather hood, drinking his piss, licking his ass, following him to his van, to his ropes and gag, to the gun hidden under his seat.

A young gay man could go out cruising and end up with his “MISSING” picture on a milk carton. More than once Ryan had joined search parties dragnetting the City’s baths, playrooms, and dungeons for one of the disappeared. Most often the missing playboy turned up with a big smile on his face after forgetting to call his lover while spending a wild weekend of drugged sex tied up in some leatherman’s basement orgy room.

Ryan’s second brush with violent Death made bigger headlines than Robert Opel. “BOUND, NUDE BODIES DISCOVERED AFTER SOUTH OF MARKET PICKUPS.”

“Have you seen this morning’s *Chronicle*?” Solly Blue telephoned. “Kids, women, and gay men are every killer’s favorite victims. At least the article’s not written by Maitland Zane.”

Ryan was already upset. “I’ll call you back.” Thirty minutes earlier, tears in his coffee, he had clipped the news article with the smiling photo of his friend Tom Gloster. Murder gave Ryan the visions of an empath. Reading the newspaper’s cold facts, he shivered with feeling. He could see the ABC-TV movie between the lines. Gloster, a school comptroller, and a guy visiting from Burbank, Richard Niemeier, had both disappeared within a two-week period. Their nude bodies had been dumped in counties, one near, and one far north of Bar Nada. Both had been shot muzzle to the body. Both had been bound hand and foot. The only difference was that Gloster was wearing a black tee shirt when found thirty-three miles west of Red Bluff in Tehama County, a hundred miles from the Oregon border on Highway 36-West. Niemeier was left naked in Napa County with only a turquoise earring.

Jim Morrison echoed in Ryan’s head singing “Killer on the Road.” Ryan envisioned the long rides in bondage, the terror when

each man separately realized the game was real. He ached for Tom Gloster. He imagined all the human details the cold news article left out, all the panic and suffering before Gloster was shot five times in the head. His body was discovered twenty-four hours after he was killed, but he was slabbed away, an unidentifiable John Doe, for six days in a coroner's cold cabinet, the ultimate closet, until Niemeier was discovered by a jogger. Niemeier had been shot once in the back, once in the back of his head, and twice in the face. The counties' sheriffs put the similarities together, and came up with nothing more than the victims' identities. Both men had been last seen at the Brig bar, South of Market. The killer, Ryan intuited, was one of their own. Solly agreed. "It's no straight fag-killer. That's one more reason I never go out. You gay boys are getting way too serious."

Ryan wrote an enraged eulogy in *Maneuvers* titled "Bring Out Your Dead." Harvey Milk had achieved romantic stardom in Death, as if he were the first faggot ever to die, well, fashionably. Gay Death, before him, kept to a whisper, had always been considered, for no reason anyone could articulate, bad taste. CUAV, the Community United Against Violence, might have said that any subgroup, surviving constantly against threat of bashing and Death, goes into a dangerous sense of denial. With the serial gay Death toll rising, the whispers rose to a nervous rash of "dead" jokes. Whenever some man in the burgeoning gay population died unexpectedly, naturally, or from an overdose, or from murder, someone somewhere sometime always said, with an oily laugh, "At least he didn't have to grow old." That, of course, in a City jammed with Dorians and Peter Pans, was a fate worse than Death.

3

It was a fire out of control. Solly Blue heard the first explosion and looked up from the small light tray where his color transparencies of his latest boys were spread out for review. The front curtains glowed orange. He was not at home. He was spending the evening at a photographer's apartment studio on Hallam Street, a tiny mews of ancient wooden apartments off Folsom that catered to the leather crowd. He pulled back the curtains and saw the ball of flame rise up

the back corner of the four-story Barracks Baths. It had closed the year before and was under remodel. He opened the door and ran down to the grille of the wrought iron safety gate. Another explosion knocked him back on the terrazzo steps. He ran back into the apartment and called the fire department.

“It’s bad,” he reported.

He hadn’t realized how bad. Hallam Street, with its ancient warren of old wooden buildings, had only one entrance/exit. It was just his luck. He rarely went out. This night was an exception, and to make matters worse, he was alone. The calendar-clock read July 10, 1980, 10:37 p.m. His friend, the art photographer known only as Dane, who had invited him to his studio, was off on a quick errand to the Boot Camp bar to deliver proofs he was completing for an ad campaign.

Solly looked around the unfamiliar apartment. He had nothing of his own with him but two trays of slides to show Dane. On the walls surrounding him hung the work of a lifetime. After Robert Mapplethorpe, Dane was the most famous, and undoubtedly the most talented, of all gay erotic photographers. He had immigrated from New York, taken the Hallam Street studio, and remodeled it into a living space behind a two-room gallery. He was one of the first artists to stake out the light industrial area of South of Market, dubbing it SOMA, the way South of Houston in Manhattan had become the *avant* SOHO. What original work was not on loan or in the hands of private collectors hung on the gray felt walls or lay stored flat in huge drawers.

Solly started to take the framed black-and-white photographs down from the walls. They grew too heavy too fast in his arms. He could save more by grabbing as many negatives as he could from as many drawers as he could open. Another explosion rocked the apartment.

Solly watched the wooden casements around the front windows break into flames. The heat cracked the glass and sucked the curtains out into the fire. Smoke billowed into the apartment. Solly was not one to panic, but a wave of fear crashed across his face. There was no way out but the back door that led to a small fenced yard dead-ended against a three-story brick wall.

There was no back alley.

He carried a rolled manila envelope, stuffed with negs, under his arm and ran out the back door. People escaping the other apartments clambered over the fences, from backyard to backyard, running and climbing in frenzied slow motion through the red glow of the fire and the rain of falling ash. He hated Ryan's movie game. He hardly had time to make up his mind. He was running through a montage of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, and the "Burning of Atlanta" all rolled into one. *Oh, Rhett!*

"I'm going to die."

Solly stood a moment on the landing. He sized up the situation and climbed up to the second-floor porch. It was a chancy leap from there to the porch next door, but it would get him over the fences and then to the roof of a one story brick garage that he guessed by the number of people running toward it was the only way out. He tucked the envelope of negatives into the back of his jeans. He couldn't help if his belt creased them. Bent was better than burnt. Something was better than nothing. He stood on the rail of the porch, wished he'd been more athletic in high school, and jumped the five feet to the next porch. He collided with a man in full leather leading out a naked man wearing handcuffs. The three of them fell in a tangle on the hot boards.

"Sorry," Solly said.

"What?" The leatherman shouted over the firestorm. "What?"

Solly shook his head.

The leatherman lifted the wrists of the man in handcuffs and said, "We can't find the key."

Solly pointed toward the roof of the brick garage already crowded with men shouting to be saved, "We've got to jump for it. You go first."

The man in the handcuffs hesitated. "I can't. I won't."

"We don't have time to convince you," Solly shouted. "You jump or you die."

Straight below was a thirty-foot drop, but it was only six feet out and eight feet down to the garage roof. Two men stood on the edge facing Solly. Firelight played on their faces. They were shouting. The whole block of wooden apartments was in flames. The men on the roof, their voices lost in the roar of the fire, made motions to jump.

“They’re ready to catch us,” Solly said. “If we make it.”

Behind and above them searing heat and flames roared through the tar-paper rooftops and blew out the back windows. Glass rained down into the backyards. Outside the mews of their entrapment they could hear fire sirens. The clock in the burning kitchen behind the handcuffed man read 10:43.

“I don’t want to die in the nude!” The handcuffed man began to cry.

“I don’t want to die *period!*” Solly said. He motioned to the leatherman. “We’ll stand him up on the railing and push him.”

“No!” the naked man screamed.

They picked him up bodily and stood him on the railing. For a moment Solly had a boom-shot flash of the absurdity of hanging onto a naked man’s thighs and arms knowing he had every intention of pushing the man wavering on the railing off into the darkness below. *This is why I never leave home!* “On three,” he said, “when we push you, you jump.”

“Oh, God!” the man cried “Tell my mother I love her.”

“I don’t even know your mother,” Solly said. He nodded to the leatherman. “Okay,” he shouted, “it’s getting too hot. We’re going to burn out here. I’m gonna count to three and you jump, asshole. Jump for your mother!”

“I can’t!”

“You can! You’re a fairy! Fairies can do anything! Fairies can fly!” Solly made the count to three mercifully short. They pushed the man who, in the final moment, jumped from the railing with all the grace he could remember from one dream-week watching the high divers fly off the cliffs at Acapulco. He landed in the arms of the two men on the garage roof. One of his legs splayed out broken as other dark figures pulled him through the shadows to the other edge of the roof. Solly could see them looking down over the far edge, hoping for rescuers.

“There’s an alley there,” the leatherman said. “But I don’t see a ladder coming up.”

Down on the roof, every face, red like flat burning pies, gaped up at them with the flames licking out at their butts.

“Jump!” Solly said. “I don’t have much more time to be heroic.”

The leatherman, squealing an unearthly soprano, jumped down like a falling Wallenda into the arms of the waiting men. Solly saw the cheering mouths open in the middle of the red pie-faces, but he could not hear their cries over the roar of the flames. The heat was getting to him. He suddenly began to beat the envelope of negatives tucked into his back. The tip of the envelope had caught fire. He could not swat it out. He felt the porch begin to buckle under his feet. “Fuck it,” he said, and he climbed up on the railing, and leapt out into the glowing red darkness with the negatives flaming out of his jeans. He rocketed up and out, soaring like a roman candle, for a moment feeling weightless, without gravity, feeling a joy in life that surprised him, until gravity’s real revenge—what is, is—pulled him down, faster and faster down, into the smoke-filled darkness.

* * *

“Needless to say, I missed the roof.” Solly sat up in his bed at San Francisco General. “Under this turban, I have a concussion. But can you tell? All I remember is I jumped and then I started flying, and then the next thing I knew I was in the arms of a handsome young fireman with a black moustache and coal-dark eyes. I’ll never forget the feel of his mouth on mine. Now I know why they call it the ‘kiss of life.’ Call him up. Dial nine-one-one. I may have a relapse. I may be in-love. Actually, I’ll be out of here in a few days and I’m very philosophical. Somewhat in the manner of the immortal words of one of my favorite philosophers, Miss Peggy Lee. ‘Is that all there is to a fire?’”

4

On the second day after the fire, Ryan walked through the front door of San Francisco General Hospital. The *Chronicle* kept the story on page one. The Barracks had burned to a shell. The fire had leveled all the wooden flats around it, leaving a hundred people homeless. Rumors of charred bodies left bound in chains charged through the City. “What gays are to straights, S&M guys are to vanilla gays,” Solly had mused. “Outcasts.”

In the hospital hall, Ryan heard a familiar voice.

“Ryan O’Hara!”

“If it isn’t Jack Woods.”

“Miss Scarlett!”

Ryan ignored the barb. They hugged. Ryan felt a coldness. Not like the warmth on that night long before, his first night in San Francisco, when Jack Woods in the Tool Box had picked him up. That hug had led to an intermittent three-year affair with the muscular blond who had been his first bodybuilder.

“You’re looking good as ever,” Ryan said. He squeezed Jack’s biceps.

“You noticed.” Jack’s voice had a hard edge. People don’t like to be dropped. He was one of the many acquaintances Ryan hadn’t seen too often during his two years with Kick.

“What are you doing here?” Ryan said.

“I guess you haven’t heard. Tony Tavarossi is in intensive care.”

“I didn’t know he was sick. What happened? He wasn’t caught in the fire, was he?”

“Not the fire. No. It’s more like he’s disintegrated the last three months. He’s had a recurrence of hepatitis. He’s had shingles. He’s had amebiasis. He’s had a cough. He’s had one thing after another. Now they say he’s got pneumonia. He’s bad off. He’s on a respirator.”

“Can he have visitors?”

“He has a tracheotomy. He can’t talk.”

“Does he recognize people or what?” Ryan asked.

“I go. I see him. Maybe he wakes up. Maybe he doesn’t.”

“I’d like to see him.”

“What the fuck for?”

“There was a time when Tony and I were close.”

“Then you dumped him the way you dumped everybody.”

“I’ve been on an extended honeymoon.”

“Bull! That cheap blond has made you too big for your britches, bitch.”

“Ah,” Ryan said. “So it’s Kick.”

“I could tell you things about him,” Jack said.

“I think our conversation is over,” Ryan said.

“Eat shit and die!”

“Yes, we must lunch sometime,” Ryan said. “Have your girl call my girl.”

“We’re talking Tony here.”

“We’re talking nonsense here.” Ryan looked at his watch and glanced at the elevators.

“Hypocrite! You haven’t seen Tony in months.”

“Then I’ll see him now.”

“Sure. Make yourself feel better. He’s dying.”

“How’d you like some open-heart brain surgery,” Ryan said.

“How’d you like to step outside.” Jack Woods flexed his bulk.

“Not now.” Ryan lifted up the flat palm of his hand against Jack Woods. “Later.” He split. He turned and walked deeper down the hospital corridor, leaving the blond man, famous for his cigars and his chopped Harley, standing in hulking, sulking, black silhouette against the bright backlight of sun streaming in the glass entrance. Rising alone in the elevator up to the intensive care unit, he felt all the panic his father had caused in him.

He knew the ice-cold rooms of ICU. He knew the Look of dying, of slow Death, of gaunt bodies pumped and flushed through machines, of eyes staring blank from faces collapsed with pain, the wild thin hair of the terminal, the sexless faces of the dying, the gasping for air through dry lips, the twitching of thin arms taped to boards with needles inserted through the paper-thin skin into sunken blue veins, the silent drip of fluids, the thin white hospital gowns crawling up restless thighs exposing pockets of dead sex, all passion gone, Death’s passage begun, the suffering, the submission, the end calibrated on beeping machines that with a decision from the doctors and a lover’s signature can be turned off, the kiss good-bye, the flipping of the switch, the pulling of the plug, the count-down, the Death watch, fast sometimes, more often slow agony, the sighing of the limp body sinking down into cold white sheets, the whimpering, the crying, the sobbing, the screaming of the survivors clutching one another, trembling fingers clawing in for one last touch, feeling something so warm grow so cold so quickly in the refrigerated white air, when even Death is taken from the dead one, his Death becoming their Death, seeing them realize that one less person lies between them and their own Deaths, pulling themselves

finally together, helped by doctors and nurses, crisp angels of mercy, walking them with backward glances out the double doors to small rooms where sobs change to quiet murmurs, where life becomes Death becomes “the arrangements,” the body of the dead one wrapped and lifted even as they whisper thirty feet away, wrapped and lifted and placed on a gurney, taken by strangers down the back elevator, to the cold storage of the hospital morgue, where coal-black eyes, bruised with rupture, stare up at white acoustical ceilings that muffle noises they can no longer hear.

“Tony Tavarossi?” Ryan asked.

“Are you friend or family?” The woman’s face was pleasant. A stethoscope hung from her neck. Her hands were plunged deep into the big pockets of her jacket. Her badge read “Dr. Mary Ketterer.”

“A friend.” Ryan knew she knew what kind of friend. At least in San Francisco that didn’t matter especially at times like this. He knew in the Midwest, even through the dying, as they always had in life, homosexual men were forced to prevaricate their love. Prevarication, not lying exactly, but not exposing the truth exactly, had for ages been the code and curse of conduct laid on male lovers from the first of their experimental affairs to their last parting from the life partner they finally found they had long and truly loved.

Tony was conscious. He beamed on seeing Ryan. His thin fingers that had guided Ryan through so many nights of pleasure wrapped weakly around Ryan’s hand.

“I didn’t know,” Ryan said.

Tony shook his head. It didn’t matter.

“I’m here,” Ryan said. He had to twist himself around. He knew Tony knew exactly where he was. “Well, so, you certainly have yourself plugged in.

Tony raised his eyebrows and smiled a yeah-what-can-you-do expression. Then he pointed to his mouth, shook his head, and pointed to the tracheotomy.

“I know. You can’t talk. Finally I can get a word in edgewise.”

Tony searched with his fingers for a small pad of paper and a pencil. He could not locate it an inch away from his grasp. Ryan guided it into his hand.

“You don’t have to write.” Ryan made one-sided conversation so Tony could nod *yes* or *no*. He knew from so many hours with

his father that those who lay long sick found some strength from outside news. He knew Tony. He considered discussing the Folsom Street fire. He didn't want to upset him, but Tony had lived most of his life on Folsom. He had worked at one time or another in almost every bar and had played in every bath. He was a fixture South of Market. He had been a star.

"Have you heard any news from Folsom?" Ryan tested the waters. Tony shook his head. "The Barracks burned down three nights ago. No one was hurt. The place was empty. They were remodeling the building." He had Tony's interest; the subject was okay. "The whole place was burned out. And all the houses around it. Everybody escaped. About a hundred people have to find new apartments. I guess the arson inspectors found a lot of chains and fried leather. I always knew the Barracks was so hot, sometimes when I'd crawl out of there on all fours at sunrise, I'd think this place has to finally go up in flames. You could see the fire from all over town. Solly Blue says it was like the burning of Atlanta."

Tony smiled.

"Actually, with the way downtown is growing, I suspect they'll build some high-rise on the spot. I think this is the end of Folsom as we know it."

Tony struggled in the bed. Staring at the ceiling, he grappled with the pencil on the paper and wrote the word, "Good."

"Good?" Ryan asked. "Good?"

Tony nodded.

"Ah, I see. You've had it with Folsom?"

Tony raised his hand, cupped his thumb under his four fingers, and flat out chopped three times at his throat.

"So. You've had it up to there?"

Tony nodded *yes*.

Later, in the corridor, Ryan asked Dr. Mary Ketterer, "What's the matter with him? I mean, what's the diagnosis?"

"Your friend is a very sick man."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Right now? Pneumonia," she said. "Did he smoke much?"

"Yes. Did that cause it?"

"No."

"He used poppers. We all use poppers. Did poppers cause it?"

“I can’t say poppers caused it. I can say poppers are an insult to the lungs.”

“He’s not going to live, is he?”

“He’s going to die.”

“What caused this?”

“Diagnosis? No. Prognosis? Yes.” She shrugged sincerely. “Frankly, we don’t know what it is.”

“How long does he have?”

“That’s hard to say. To be truthful, we’ve never really experienced a patient so distressed. According to his vital signs, a week, maybe more, maybe less.”

Ryan sent Kick up to the barn at Rancho Bar Nada. “I’ve got injured and sick people here,” he explained. “Solly and Tony. Take Logan with you. Besides, you need some rest between contests. But don’t take Logan near the house and the killer triplets. I think he’ll like staying out in our barn. I’ll call Thom and tell him you’re driving up and to leave you alone.”

Ryan planned to see Tony every day, but Solly required more attention at home.

“You are a regular Florence Nightingale,” Kick said on the phone. “Make that Lawrence Nightingale.”

But Ryan had not seen Tony every day. He knew that Tony’s longtime lover, a bisexual married man, was always with him. He knew that Solly wouldn’t and couldn’t go out of his penthouse where he lay divine invalid on a couch playing Camille. It was easier to visit Solly, who only pretended to be dying, than it was to watch Tony slip away.

Ryan made all the excuses people make when they can’t face visits to the hospital. The excuses made him guilty. The guilt finally drove him to Tony’s bedside. They were alone together. Tony lay quietly, more in a trance than asleep. Ryan sensed it was the last time. He leaned in over the aluminum bed rail, his face lowering slowly over Tony’s face, feeling no heat rise from his friend’s cold body, finding surprise at the moist sweat on the dying man’s forehead when he kissed him lightly.

“I love you,” he said.

He rose up and walked backward, slowly, away from the bed, like a camera at the end of a movie dolly away from some final

freeze-frame image that recedes deeper and deeper into the dark screen, like the last shot of *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

"Listen to us in our darkness, we beseech thee, Oh, Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night."

None of them knew yet the coming peril that would stalk them all.

5

Things beyond Ryan's ken began to happen. Only later, after Tony Tavarossi died, did pieces fall together. For instance, the evening the Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall opened its doors for the first time, Kick had two tickets comped to him by January Guggenheim who had been in the City for the premiere.

"I must fly back to El Lay, darling," she said to Kick. She was all autographs and sunglasses. "I'm producing a miniseries and my director is in trouble." She handed Kick the tickets. "I haven't seen Ry," she said. She arched a very suspicious tweezed eyebrow.

Kick smiled at her.

"Ah," she said. "Got to fly!"

Kick drove her to San Francisco International in his red Corvette.

"You guys enjoy," she said.

But it wasn't Ryan who sat next to Kick in the Grand Tier of the gala opening.

It was Logan Doyle.

"I figured you were so busy with Solly and Tony and the next issue of *Maneuvers*," Kick explained. "Besides, Logan's never been to an opening."

Opening? Opening? Never been to an opening?

"Don't feed me lines like that." Ryan added the lightness Kick expected in his voice. "Or I may not be able to remain a gentleman."

"We all need some variety," Kick said. He had every reason to drag Logan Doyle out in public. Together they were a physically

striking pair of men. The kind of sexy, handsome men who make women in evening gowns hate homosexuality.

At the airport stop for PSA, Kick had pulled the Corvette to the curb. A porter opened January's door and took her ticket and bag, but she had not been in any hurry to leave.

"By the way," January had said to Kick, "I know that you and Ryan know what you're doing. The way you keep your relationship open is super, especially the way Ryan wrote me that you both take special care of the home team."

"Ryan's real special," Kick said.

"But one thing," January said. "Keep that other gorgeous hunk around."

"You like Logan, huh?"

"Remember, I have a photographer's eye for looks."

"Logan's big in that department."

"And one last thing. Can I say it?"

"You can say anything you want." Kick grinned his stunning grin.

"Ryan loves you."

"I know. I love him too."

"No. I mean Ryan is in-love with you."

"He's got that under control."

"What I mean is: Don't hurt Ryan."

"No one's ever treated me better."

"Handsome is as handsome does," January said.

"I'd never hurt Ry."

"What I mean is: Be careful with Logan."

Kick reached to touch the key in the ignition. January stroked his muscular forearm. Tender gold stubble grew soft on his tanned skin where Ryan had shaved away his thick fleece for the Mr. San Francisco contest.

"God! You're hot!" she said.

Kick smiled. "We all know what we're doing." He turned the key. The Corvette roared into life at the curb. "We're big boys."

"Quoth Kweenie," January said. "You're all big boys playing big boys' games." She leaned over, pulled Kick's hand from the steering wheel to her mouth and kissed his palm. "Thanks for the lift."

“Thanks, sailor,” Kick said. “Call me next time you’re in town.”

January laughed.

“Thanks for the advice,” Kick said. “Have a good flight.”

“*Ciao, baby, ciao.*”

When Solly heard that Kick had taken Logan to the Davies Hall premiere, he called me. He was pissed.

“Magnus,” Solly said, “there’s some things in life these boys don’t understand. Some people you take some places. Other people you take other places. If you ask me, and no one did, there’s some places you don’t take your whore. Ryan tries to make light of this entire thing. He wants that crazy sense of fraternity he’s always writing about to work in real life. Reality isn’t like his fiction where he can control his characters. He fails to see that Kick isn’t clever enough to know there’s a difference between lovers, partners, friends, roommates, fuck-buddies, and whores.”

“Kick may have a southern drawl,” I said, “but he didn’t just fall off the turnip truck.”

“Precisely,” Solly said. “He knows exactly what he’s doing.”

“And Ry doesn’t.”

“He doesn’t know what Kick is really doing. Ry doesn’t know reality like I do.”

“We’ll have to wait around and pick up the pieces.”

“Yeah,” Solly said. “Wake me up when the killing starts.”

6

Ryan and Thom were both refugees from the America of the sixties, a decade of social concern Kick seemed to have missed altogether, despite what happened at the lunch counters in Birmingham, Alabama. Kweenie, who was ten years old during the Summer of Love, never forgave fate for making her too young to come to San Francisco wearing flowers in her hair. Ryan had tuned her in, as they said back then, to incense and Super 8 movie making, playing sitar soundtracks to their homemade underground films, always starring Margaret Mary, who was starting on her way to becoming Kweenasheba.

“It’s my fault she’s turned out so crazy,” Ryan said.

Kweenie would have been the last one to blame him. Charley-Pop and Annie Laurie had their own ideas, but they trusted Ryan to give Margaret Mary, born in their forties, things they felt their own golden boy could give her. She had loved Ryan bringing home the *Sgt. Pepper* album and *Surrealistic Pillow*. “Go ask Alice.” And she was Alice by the time she was nine. She had loved her brother showering rose petals on her face while they listened to Ravi Shankar. Her view, as much as both her older brothers’, was from the sixties.

“What movie are they playing?” Kweenie asked me.

I was tired of her game. “What movie is who playing?”

“Kick and Ry. What movie?”

“*Casablanca*?”

“Not yet,” she said. “Right now, Kick is the golden, aloof Redford and Ry is the activist Streisand in *The Way We Were*.” She turned up her pert little nose. “Then there’s Thom who’s playing John Wayne in *The Green Berets*.”

I could have wished my pop culture students were as astute as Kweenie. She was right about them all. As for Ryan and Thom, Vietnam had disturbed them both the way wars always seem to pit brother against brother. Blue against Gray. One a hawk. One a dove. Ryan feared the violence he saw in Thom’s face, almost as if Thom were the angry, bestial incarnation of the gay rage Ryan had repressed—no, civilized—within himself. Catholicism had made them both miserable with the threats of eternal torture that coexist in the Church’s theology of Death and fugitive lusts. If anything more than sex and drugs and life in the fast lane conspired to destroy Ryan’s sense of self, it was the Church and its penitential discipline of self-abnegation. The intense Catholic obsessions with sex and sin had taught him the thrill, the joy, that the intensity of pure obsession adds to life.

The same was true for Thom in a way. He transferred his Catholic obsession to a lockstep militarism. Ryan transferred his Catholic obsession for worship to Kick, who, even when Ryan was not locked in passionate sex with him, was his Christ, was his Adam before the Fall, was his male Muse, was the apple of his eye, the sunshine of his

life, his roman candle of Energy and imagination. As the seminary had been Ryan's way out of Peoria, Kick was Ryan's ticket to ride.

Poor Thom. The Marines had been his way out of Peoria, but all Thom had was a worse case of depression than Ryan, a twenty-percent disability from the VA, three monsters, and the ultimate dippy doodle, Sandy Gully.

Thom drove from his monthly checkup at the Veteran's Hospital in San Francisco to the Victorian and picked Ryan up in his truck. They drove north from the City across the Golden Gate Bridge, through the Rainbow Tunnel, and up the Redwood Highway through Marin, past the X-Rated Drive-In movie ten feet inside the Sonoma County line, on past Petaluma and Cotati to the Sebastopol exit to 116 West. Thom had come into the City on the last of a series of visits to the VA.

Ryan had his suspicions.

Thom said everything was cool. Ryan wondered how many times Thom had reassured him, himself, and Sandy Gully. Everything was not cool.

Sandy had left Thom.

Thom did not know why.

But Ryan knew.

Sandy had fled under cover of darkness with all that she had left of herself, of any sense of herself, into the night more than a week before.

Sandy was an innocent. Life had confused her and she had confused her life. She had lost all sense of her own coming and going. She found everything went by too fast. She had left the Rancho when she realized that Thom had told her in no uncertain terms that she was not his wife.

"I married you!" she said.

"You're another child," he said.

She retreated to the bathroom and locked the door. She looked in the mirror. She scrubbed her face. The Mary Kay cosmetics washed down the drain. She saw lines she had not seen before. She pulled at her skin. She brushed her hair back straight from her face. She was not young anymore. Thom had taken to turning out the lights as soon as he came to bed. She had done her duty in the dark. She resented him. "He lays back and I do all the fucking

work.” Then, remembering the pleasure she still found in his body, no matter how passive to her, she smiled, dried her face, packed on the makeup, feathered her blonde hair back at the temples until the black roots showed, and announced to her face in the mirror, “Thommy, baby, you ain’t so hot neither.”

In the truck, Thom told Ryan how it had been the night Sandy left. She had packed her overnight case and a brown paper Safeway sack and had driven to Cotati. She parked on the green in front of the Meander Inn. For half an hour, she sat in the car crying. Then she walked into the Meander. Gentleman Tim, an old friend from Ryan’s first days in the county, was working the bar. The place was empty. She ignored him and walked to the bulletin board. She read two notices and pulled the third one off the wall and headed toward the pay phone. She glared at Tim. “I’ve had it,” she said. “I’ve been had and I’ve had it.”

“Tell me about it,” Tim said. He knew the story of Ryan’s brother’s family.

“Life is shit,” she said. She dialed the number from the notice and waited for an answer. She lit a Lark and held it in her smoking-fingers while she pressed the palm of her hand against her ear. Willie Nelson was singing “Mamas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys.”

The woman who answered the phone was interested. She drove over to the Meander to meet Sandy. “You can’t be too careful these days. You know?” They hit it off. She was a regular. Tim plied them with drinks and chat. The woman was younger than Sandy. She did not work. She covered her expenses in a South Santa Rosa trailer court by renting out her extra bedroom. “I hope you won’t mind,” she told Sandy, “sometimes I have men friends over. Well, not friends exactly. You know. Times being as hard as they are.”

Sandy had found a rental to share.

Three days passed before Sandy called back to the ranch. Abe answered the phone. “Abie, honey,” she said, “it’s your mom.”

“I know who you are. I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Let me talk to Bea then.”

“Tell her I don’t want to talk to her,” Bea said.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you either,” Abe said.

“You two shits,” Sie said “I’ll talk to her.” Sie took the avocado green receiver. “Hi, Mom.”

Abe turned away from his sisters. “You’re both sluts,” he said.

Looking out the speeding truck window at the hills passing by, Ryan wondered why he needed these people. Thom slowly unfolded himself. Always, they all told Ryan too much. The triplets spun out their versions separately and together. Sandy every once in a while confided her hard times locked in her bedroom because they all, even Thom, hit out at her. Thom rarely expressed anything, except when he was stoned. A couple pipefuls brought out a side of him that even he never knew existed. With every passing confidence Ryan pieced together more than he wanted to know about his brother’s family.

Straight people made him glad he was gay.

“We’re almost there,” Ryan said.

The valley looked dry and golden. In front of the ranch they saw Abe standing in the road. He was hulked over, gangly, and wet.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Thom said. He pulled his truck up to his son. “What the hell happened to you?”

Abe said nothing. He turned like he was a hundred years old and pointed at nothing in particular. Sie stood on the front deck toweling her hands dry like the Miss Cindy priss they called her. She was the image of Sandy. Every Mary Kay cosmetic that her mother had abandoned was spackled like dry-wall mud across her zits.

“When I grow up,” she said it to make them all scream at her how stupid she was, because she would do anything to get attention, and because her sins, which Ryan was sure were multiple, would not be forgiven by the mere fact that she washed up all the dishes and wiped down the stove, “all I want is to be a housewife.”

Ryan had slept around enough to know the predatory look of lust in another person’s face. Sie was hot to trot. “I know what you do,” he had once told her. “I know what you do and I know what you will do. You can fool all these other people because they hardly bother to look at you. But I look at you. God! Look at you. You’re sixteen and strictly ten-cents-a-dance.”

Sie glared at him. “You sleep with everybody.”

"I'm trashy," Ryan said, "when I want to be because I want to be. I can trash-fuck to enjoy it and then back out of it again. You're trashy all the time. And that," he pointed at her, "is a very real and basic difference."

"Abe! What the hell happened to you?" Thom repeated from the truck window.

Abe pointed toward the back hills lined with huge fir trees.

Sie shouted from the porch, "My bitch sister tried to stab my bitch brother in the leg."

"All that money you spent on charm school for those girls," Ryan said.

"I'll handle it," Thom said. He drove the truck on up into the yard.

Abe came limping in behind them. Sie moved to the edge of the porch. From behind the row of trees, Bea stepped into view. She had a long screwdriver in her hand.

"What happened?" Thom walked exasperated up the steps to the deck. "Beatrice!" He shouted at the girl hanging back under the trees. "You march your ass down here double time!"

Bea walked sullenly out from the tree shadows and began her spiteful slow drag down the hill. She refused to double-time for anyone. They all watched her ill-tempered procession. When she finally reached the deck, she said, "I didn't mean to stab him much." She was expert at dividing guilt. She grabbed Sie by the neck. "Sie poured boiling water on him."

"I did not!" Sie said. "Let go. You're always grabbing me. Are you gay? Are you, Bea?"

"Nice the way they say *hello* when you come home," Ryan said.

"Tell the whole story," Sie said. "I dare you, Bea. *B* for *bitch*!"

"It was okay until they came into the house," Abe said.

"Who came into the house?" Thom said. "No one comes into my house when I'm gone."

"It's uncle Ry's house," Bea said. She tapped the screwdriver in the palm of her hand.

"Who came into the house?" Thom repeated.

"Two guys I know from school," Abe said. "I was walking down the road."

“You were hitchhiking,” Sie said.

“I told you never to hitchhike.” Thom slapped Abe on the shoulder.

“Quit it!” Abe said. “I wasn’t hitchhiking. They made me to get in.”

“So who came into the house?” Thom demanded.

“No,” Ryan said. “Who’s on first. Abe’s on the deck. Bea’s at the door. And Sie’s in the house.”

Thom glared at Ryan. “Stop it,” he said.

“When they pulled in the driveway,” Bea said, “they both got out and followed...”

“They followed me into the house, Dad,” Abe said.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” Thom said. “I’ve taught you how to defend yourself.”

“I tried to,” Abe said.

“You did not,” Bea said.

“I did too.” He grabbed the screwdriver from Bea’s hand. “Get away from me,” he said.

“They came right on into the house,” Bea said, “and opened the refrigerator and took out a six-pack.”

Thom looked from Bea to Sie. Sie had not been too ready with details. “And you,” he said, “What about you, Sie?”

Bea stepped between Sie and her father. Bea was expert imitating her sister’s whining feminine moves. She moonwalked in place oozing a hootchy kootchy. “Sie,” she said, and she delivered the imitation as broadly as her aunt Kweenie could have done. “Sie,” she repeated, “walked right up to the guys and grabbed a beer can and said, ‘If anybody’s going to party around here, it’s gonna be me!’”

“You liar!” Sie yelled, but she knew she was caught and a guilty grin exposed her uneven teeth.

“I ought to slap you silly,” Thom said to Sie.

“Slap her, Dad,” Bea said.

“Thom,” Ryan said, “you’re too good to these monsters. They’re killers.” He turned to the three of them. “No wonder your mother left home. In normal families, the kids run away. Not the parents.”

“I think we better tell dad everything,” Abe said.

“What else is there?” Thom said.

“BB holes,” Abe said. “They shot BB holes in the windows.”

Thom looked at Ryan who shrugged. "What's a window in all of this?"

"Where'd they get the gun?" Thom asked.

"It was mine. I had it out."

"They asked where the BBs were," Sie said. "So I told them you kept them in your storage room."

"You're a real good-time girl," Ryan said. "So they loaded the gun?"

"Yeah," Abe said. He snorted his laugh up his left nostril. He had broken his nose in a fall several years before. No one had bothered to fix it. The Army doctor said they could repair it when he was older and could pick out his own nose. "They loaded it and pointed it at Sie and..."

"Go on!" Sie jumped in. "Tell the whole thing, you mother-fucker!"

"Stop," Ryan said.

"Keep talking," Thom said to Abe.

"They pointed the gun at Sie and told her to drop her panties because they wanted to see..."

Bea could not hold back. "They wanted to see her twat!"

"What happened?" Thom expected the worst.

"I only let one of them stick his finger in me," Sie said. "I didn't want to get shot."

"No Death before dishonor here," Ryan said.

"I wasn't going to take down my panties for those cocksuckers," Bea said. "I told the motherfuckers to get the fuck out of the house. I told them they wouldn't dare shoot me."

Ryan heard the rage of a young dyke rising in her voice.

"And then," Abe said, "Bea punched out the asshole with the gun and took it away from him."

"I told him I was going to shoot his balls off," Bea said. She was proud of herself.

"Jeez," Ryan said.

"You know Bea," Abe said. "She really made those suckers run."

"There's more," Bea said.

"Oh, God, no!" Ryan said in mock horror.

“There was this fight in the yard,” Bea said. “That’s when they pulled down Abe’s pants and tried to shove the hose up his ass. That’s how he got all wet.”

“What else,” Ryan asked, “do the simple folk do?” He had left the City for the county to get away from all this and here it was. The rest unfolded quickly. Ryan could see it all. Abe had chased after the older boys who had pantsed him in the yard. Two-fisted Bea was after them with the BB gun and the screwdriver.

The boys knocked Abe to the ground and pantsed him again. Bea stabbed at them. They kicked at her and tried to feel her up. She fought and clawed and bit back at them. All the while, Sie stood on the deck, waving her beer can, cheering everybody on, keeping the action hot, while her pans of water on the electric stove reached the boiling point.

Bea kicked one of the boys in the crotch. Then she turned on Abe and tried to stab his leg. “You’re no help fighting these bastards,” she screamed.

Sie threw a skillet of boiling water off the deck. Hot spray splashed through the air. The iron pan skidded hissing across the dry grass. The boys retreated into their car.

Abe jumped in with them to escape both his sisters wielding the screwdriver and the pan of boiling water.

“Crazy bitches!” The boys drove off, screeching down the road, stopping at the corner, and throwing Abe out into the ditch.

“That’s where we came in,” Ryan said. “I’m certainly glad Kick didn’t come up this weekend. What he doesn’t know can’t hurt me. If he ever saw this, he’d never let me have his baby.”

Thom marched the triplets into the house. “I’m calling your mother,” he said.

He called her, but she would not come.

7

Ryan wrote on napkins. He sat on the garden deck behind the Patio Cafe near 18th and Castro waiting for Kick. The ambience was as perfect as a television soap-opera set. *T-a-d-z-i-o*. He wrote the name in large letters. He was Dirk Bogarde in *Death in*

Venice. Kweenie might have said he was playing *Citizen Kane* writing “Rosebud.” The napkin blotted the red ink of his felt-tip pen: “No one has ever written about Tadzio’s point of view.” He hadn’t seen Kick in a week. Twice a day they were on the phone. “I’m glad,” Ryan had said, “that we’re apart these days as much as we’re together.” Being apart kept them from letting things get ordinary. Ryan had asked Kick the night of their first contest to promise that they’d never become ordinary to each other.

“Ordinary?” Kick had said. “How could we be? We’re extraordinary people.”

Geography quaked between them.

Kick was on the move, relaxing, hanging out, alternating Castro with the ranch now that the Mr. San Francisco contest was over. Ryan called Kick at the studio up at Bar Nada. Kick called him from the gym or from Logan’s flat asking Ryan to join them for supper—not like the beginning when they had asked Logan to join them.

“One thing,” Ryan had long before told Kick, “when you’re dealing with a writer, sometimes the writer has to decline what he might prefer doing. Deadlines wait for no man.”

Ryan had a new project. He had *Universal Appeal* on his mind.

He disliked his own writer’s discipline. It was a tyranny he could not escape. He much preferred his fancy of running around with Kick, sunbathing at the ranch, tooling around in the Corvette, hitting the gym, having a stoned good time. Somehow Kick always juggled life right. He had his personal motives, showing up often enough unannounced in the evenings, most often without Logan, dragging Ryan away from his manuscripts, thrilling him in the bedroom.

“You really know,” Ryan said, “how to keep a man hanging on.”

“You really know how to keep a man coming back for more,” Kick said. “I have no intention of losing you to the typewriter.”

The early evening air on the Patio Cafe deck was warm. The crowd was happy. Ryan scanned every clutch of patrons waiting to be seated. Kick was not late. Ryan was early. Next to his coffee cup sat a novel from Paperback Traffic and a folder with the final draft of

the text for his book, their photo book, *Universal Appeal*. For nearly three years, Ryan had managed to keep up with Kick and with his own writing deadlines, but *Universal Appeal* had impacted Ryan's normal schedule. Solly's concussion and Tony's Death had kept him away from his typewriter. The editors of *A Different Drum*, *In Touch*, and *Just Men* sent nervous letters inquiring where were his overdue manuscripts. His own *Maneuvers*, which he wrote cover to cover, was about to publish its first late issue.

His own professional commitments were not as important as his personal project with Kick.

Separated from Kick, Ryan let the writing of *Universal Appeal* take the place of what had been their constant time together. He hardly cared whom he pleased as long as he pleased Kick. This evening meeting at the Patio was his first night out in the month since the Folsom Street fire. Ryan was radiant. Kick would be thrilled that the manuscript was complete. No matter what he ordered from the Patio menu, Ryan knew that Kick was his dessert.

On the phone, Kick had drawled his slow drawl: "Later on, do you want to fuck? Or whu-u-a-t?"

The waiter asked Ryan if he wanted more coffee. Ryan waved him away. He was already wired with stage fright: the kind of fear actors, and lovers, have of not living up to an audience's expectations. For nearly three years, Ryan had managed to be every inch the man Kick expected. Love was a speed trip.

The maitre d' appeared on the garden porch and switched on the over-head heating units. The summer evening had turned cool. A family, escorting an ancient woman, entered and sat near Ryan, talking in soft German-Jewish voices. Their happy entrance and the taped classical music pleased Ryan. He felt cosmopolitan.

His heart leapt up. He spied Kick. His broad shoulders and grinning face filled the open French doorway with his Command Presence. Ryan smiled one of those smiles of a summer night that come so easily to the faces of lovers. Kick moseyed through the crowd. Diners stopped in midbite. Ryan heard the young woman with the German Jewish couple say, "Ausgezeichnet!" They looked, nodded among themselves, and smiled first at Kick then at her.

Kick looked at no one but Ryan. He wore a large Pendleton shirt patterned with the soft beige and blue that looks dynamite on

blonds. The sleeves were turned halfway up his forearms revealing the regrowth of the thick blond hair that matched the hair Ryan had shaved from Kick's body before the Mr. San Francisco and had saved in fetish-Baggies at home in a drawer.

"I missed you like shit." Kick sat down. "Did you miss me?"

"Miss you? Last night I turned on the oven. I lit the gas. I was either going to kill myself or bake a cake. Obviously, I baked the cake. Your favorite." Ryan raised his eyebrows three times in the butch-flirt he had learned from Tom Selleck on *Magnum P.I.* "Later tonight I figured we could have our cake and eat it too."

"Jeez," Kick said. "You look good."

"Aw, go on. You'll look better three days dead than I look now."

"You've got more muscle," Kick said.

"I've kept my workouts up," Ryan said. "Even by myself, you're always there coaching me, squeezing out one more rep."

"I knew you could make great gains." He leaned across the table. "I told you not to be afraid of steroids. You're taking only enough to do you good, not harm."

Ryan knew the bodybuilder rationale. It was the same fatalism as Solly's. What is, is. They took steroids, as if, given all in life that is disappointing and destructive, they, as elite bodybuilders, felt they themselves had a right, even an imperative, to inflict a little of life's possible damage on themselves. Besides, Solly, who had tried heroin, reassured Ryan that a round of steroids could hardly hurt him.

But something, some little voice in Ryan had made him quit. He stopped opening the bottle. He stopped shaking the 5 mg of Dianabol into his hand. He stopped popping the little blue pills into his mouth. With Kick away so much, the steroids turned his vague anxiety into a well-defined stress. His skin seemed dry. Small lines appeared around his eyes. He was feeling insecure enough without taking the Dianabol. The drug made him feel guilty.

When he was insecure and guilty, anxiety depressed him. It was a small thing, but in small things often great things are at stake. He decided not to tell Kick that he was off the stuff. He was still ready to keep their promise to take muscle as far as it would go, but he was content to let it be Kick's muscle. After all, Kick had said he

preferred communicative men to competitive men, and too many musclemen were competitive on stage and off.

One bodybuilder in the house was enough. Two were too many. Logan was proof of that. He had that competitive edge. Kick seemed not to notice it. Ryan didn't need crystal balls to realize that the only way to beat Logan Doyle was to be more supportive and communicative with Kick than competitive. He put his sharpened fangs away. Words were the only competition he could win. The *Universal Appeal* project was his way to victory.

He hated Logan not because he was with Kick but because he was an asshole. He was not unaware from Logan's sidelong glances and his pointed comments about skinny-necked geeks that Logan thought he was a wimp. In Logan's book, if you didn't have muscle, you weren't shit.

Ryan wondered if Kick knew that Logan had Attitude about Ryan that Kick couldn't see and Ryan ignored. It was all too complicated.

Maybe Kick knew Ryan's writing schedule, like his time with Solly, wasn't all that demanding. Maybe Kick knew that Ryan pretended to be busy to cover his sense of abandonment, haunting at night the empty Victorian. Maybe Kick thought Ryan had taken a boyfriend on the side to give Kick time for his affair with Logan.

Ryan was never sure what to think. He was one half of that other Famous Couple, Lou Costello trying to find out from Bud Abbott, "Who's on first?" Hadn't Kick confided during a night of intimate pillow talk: "Logan I like. You I love."

What a match! Ryan's temperament and Kick's personality. Ryan was Ryan, dark and brooding, and Kick was southern sun, free as the breeze. Kick was Ryan's main exercise. Their affair was more of a workout than pumping iron. Ryan was game. No matter how long. No matter the cost. He figured he had much to learn from Kick's coaching. His carefree southern sensuality was the strongest arm-wrestle Ryan had ever found to beat his own urban existential angst. He and Kick had never had a single crossword. He wanted to keep it that way at all costs. His relationship with Teddy had been stormy enough to be charted by the National Weather Service.

Kick leaned in across the white tablecloth and took Ryan's fingers and wrist in both his big hands.

"I love you," Ryan said.

Kick beamed him a smile. Instantly, always, no matter how short or long separated, they had a way of immediately regaining their intimacy.

"What's the book?" Kick asked.

"Nothing, actually. Agee. *A Death in the Family*." He had thought of giving it to Kick who had seemed to survive the Death of his father with hardly a mention.

"You're incorrigible. Sounds like a downer."

"I haven't read it." Ryan prevaricated. "I only bought it as a prop. You know. A single person sitting alone in a restaurant at a table for two. Strangers react differently if you carry a book. The way everyone treats me different when I'm with you."

Kick drew his warm hand casually, quickly, discreetly over Ryan's.

"Oh how you do me," Ryan said.

Kick handed Ryan a small package. "Open it."

"Here?" Ryan said. The young woman with the family next to them ate with one eye on her entree and one eye on Kick.

"At least peek," Kick said.

Ryan carefully opened the package. Folded inside, were the specially tailored brown nylon posing trunks Kick had worn in the Mr. San Francisco.

"I want," Kick said, "to give a very special man something more than my company."

Your company's all I want.

Ryan lifted the tiny box to his face and sniffed the musty sweat and olive oil. Kick's posing trunks were the next thing to his nakedness. All of that victorious night's contest came back to Ryan. Kick had posed with passion. He had displayed a grand manliness. His face had radiated a celebratory, voracious love of life. In the intense light of the posing platform, he had been more than Mr. San Francisco. He had been Ra, God of the Sun.

A photograph exists from that night. An essential photograph. Ryan, through his telephoto lens, had his eye focused precisely on Kick. Kick's eye in the photo pierces directly into Ryan's lens. They

both had clicked at precisely the same instant. Ryan had submitted the black-and-white shot, blown up poster size, to a Financial District commercial art exhibit. He had won the same first place for his intense shot as Kick had won for his muscle. Ryan had refused to sell the picture. He intended it for use on the cover of *Universal Appeal*.

"I hope you'll add my trunks to your collection of fetish items," Kick said. "Never forget you're my coach, Ry. You're my trainer. You're my main man. You're the one who keeps my machinery oiled. What you and I have is special and not like what we have with anyone else." Kick winked. "Trust me. We've both got to do what we've both got to do."

Ryan wanted to hug him, because Kick seemed to know the reassurance he needed without asking for it.

"Sometimes I get all tangled up in my underwear," Ryan said. "I trust you. I know you." He meant that he understood that they were not losing time together. Each needed some alone-time as much as they needed time with other men.

Kick was not always with Logan. "More often than not," he said, "I'm up at Bar Nada alone. Most guys think I'm just a body. They think I can make them happy. Logan's that way sometimes. I have to teach him stuff you've always known."

"Then I don't have to sue him for alienation of affection?"

"Haven't we always tested ourselves against our best and then reached for something more besides?"

Ryan leaned in across the table. "I know," he said. "I'm not losing you. I'm not losing track of you. You're losing nothing of me."

"I know what we're doing in the long and short run."

"Whatever pace happens between us is okay." Ryan, saying the lyrics from "The Love Theme" from *Superman*, spit in the wind. "When you need someone to fly to, here I am."

"I've flown to you tonight," Kick said. "I want us to be alone. I want to air and vent some of our special physical stuff tonight."

The waiter brought Kick coffee and refilled Ryan's cup. Staring at Kick, he ran it over. "I'm sorry," he said.

Kick ordered half a broiled chicken with the skin removed. Ryan ate chicken paprika, but he could hardly swallow. Kick was

perfect. What had he done to deserve such a man? Somewhere in his youth or childhood he must have done something good.

He wrote in his *Journal*:

Tears well up in me sometimes when I look at him, when I look through his surface and see the fineness inside. He has a rich interior life. Once I said to him, "You are so fine, so good, so together." And he said, "Like the company I keep." He knows I love him. He knows I am in-love with him, with his body, his head, his whole being. He is a particular man I love because he gives me so much access to the universal goodness and beauty I worship. He knows I have done the forbidden thing and have fallen in-love with him; but he knows I'll handle it properly, keep it in check, and never hurt him with it.

"So," Kick said, "what's in the folder?"

"The final draft of *Universal Appeal*. All it needs is your *imprimatur* and your signature on the model release."

"Whatever you write is okay by me," Kick said. "I release me in your life to you."

"I really think you should read it. It's bottom-line stuff. It's about you."

"It's about us. It's about this time in our lives."

"Remember this." Ryan raised a warning finger in jest. "Years from now, when they finally catch us and ask us exactly what we were up to, your story and my story may be wildly different and yet totally the same."

Kick shook his finger back. "But there won't be any villains in either version."

"How could there be?"

A mist, strange for summer, drifted down on the flowers and ferns of the Patio garden. At the next table, the old woman said she was cold. One of the men called for the check. Her family rose to leave. The young woman took one last look at Kick, then helped her mother from the chair. They made a slow procession toward the French doors when suddenly the old woman slipped and fell. Kick turned his head at the commotion. Ryan stood up. Gay men

at the nearest tables sprang to their feet to help her. She said she was alright. Her family was full of apologies.

“It must be terrible,” Ryan said, “when you’re old to know your eyesight is failing and your bones are brittle and you are vulnerable to falling.”

“It’s the old story,” Kick said, “of quality of life versus quantity of life. What is our book about if not that?”

“Just a thought,” Ryan said. “I read the other day that Lillian Gish spends forty minutes every day on her upside-down board. She says, ‘Time is a friend, but gravity is the enemy.’ Sometimes old people grow to a wisdom.”

“Ry,” Kick said “I’ve got a brain, but you’ve got a mind. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that the point of *Universal Appeal* is the taking of strength training beyond strength to achieve power. Power is the ability to apply strength. That’s basically what I’ve written. That’s what I think you’ve done with bodybuilding. I think that’s how far muscle can go. Your physical training has brought you a certain power. You’re more than a bodybuilder on Castro. You’re more than Mr. San Francisco. You’re a symbol.”

Ryan unsheathed the manuscript. He told Kick about Emerson’s theory of representative men and how a strong presentation of self could aid others in defining their own selves. “The way,” Ryan said, “you made me more me.”

Kick shook his head. “How could I not love a man who not only teaches me about the Oversoul, but plugs me into it!”

“Take your tongue out of your cheeky cheek.”

“Someday I’ll figure out how I’m me and more than me,” Kick said.

“One thing always means two things.” Ryan frowned inside, thinking about the Davies Hall fiasco, but he smiled at Kick the way lovers smile across a small table in a public restaurant, thinking more about the evening sport ahead.

Universal Appeal.

Danger lurked in their project. They had always known it. But they had agreed, that for all their keeping the secrets of their relationship a mystery on the streets of the Castro, the time had

come to represent Kick in a way more public than even his physique presentations on stage.

“Privacy,” Ryan had once warned, “is the last luxury. That’s why I never write autobiography.”

Both remembered the night when they had first conceived the book. Kick had shown Ryan pictures taken of him when he was nineteen by a photographer in Florida. Kick, in those teenage snapshots, showed all the potential he later actualized in the medium of his body.

“I’ve always had so many looks to play with,” Kick had said. “So many people think there’s something vain about looking good. I was embarrassed in my teens and twenties, because I was overwhelmed. I saw what I looked like, but I wasn’t ready on the inside to deal with the physical gifts on the outside. It was a struggle for me to go to my first gym. I knew what might happen. I thought I had potential. My dick in my hand in front of my mirror told me that. I had to get over thinking it was wrong to groom and work with gifts you’ve been given. I held back from going for it. Finally, I had to. I knew I could be as good as, even better, than guys who were making it with their bodies. I had to work out. I had to go to the gym. A lot of guys train hard because they hate their bodies. Not me. I wanted the challenge, the discipline, the Look of a man with muscle.”

He turned the pages in the photo manuscript of *Universal Appeal*, watching his images alternate with Ryan’s prose.

“Being a man is the most important thing in the world to me. I wanted to see if I could perfect manhood in myself, for myself, and if other men appreciated it, well and good. I thought maybe there were guys like you. I wanted to see what I was really made of. No one was more surprised than I was the way my body took to training.”

He handed the manuscript to Ryan.

“Look at those old snapshots. There’s no compromise in those eyes; and there’s no compromise in my eyes now.

“I never entered the physique contests until you made me psychologically ready, and I judged my body and Look backed it all up. It’s the same way with *Universal Appeal*. I don’t think it’s wrong

to cash in on my Look and your talent for words. I don't think it's wrong to present us properly."

The mist grew heavier in the Patio garden.

"We've gone public with the contests," Kick said. "So what if we make a little money going more up close and personal into this book? I could use it. You could use it. Money could free you up from writing the stuff you write that's too good for those gay rags that pay you next to nothing. You could write novels. You could write screenplays."

"You could play the hero."

"I'm sure January would take a film option on anything you write."

"Kind sir," Ryan said. "My only fear with this manuscript is that it will ruin our privacy. I want you out there, riding the public edge. Everyone on Castro wants to be a star, but you're the only one with real potential." Ryan lowered his voice to a whisper. "I'm selfish. I'm afraid if millions love you, I'll see you even less."

"No matter what happens because of this," Kick said, "I give you my solemn promise. You'll go everywhere with me. We're fellow travelers. We're a high-test blend."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Kick positively grinned over the dishes.

"I never want to walk up to you in some strange restaurant someday and have you introduce me as someone you used to know."

"I need you one hundred percent," Kick said, "and I want you more than need you. That's double-edged quality!"

That's a two-edged sword.

Ryan signaled for the check.

Kick reached for it.

"Let me," Ryan said.

He followed Kick out to the sidewalk. The mist had thickened. All around them umbrellas snapped to bloom in the rain. Kick raised his huge arms to the wet sky.

"This is not rain," he said. "It never rains in San Francisco in the summer." The rain soaked his shirt to a second skin across his shoulders, Pecs, and belly. "This is no more than a heavy fog." He hit his famous double-biceps pose. He knew it was Ryan's favorite.

“It’s never raining rain,” he held his powerful stance, “unless you let it.” He lowered his arms and pulled Ryan to him in the middle of the sidewalk for all the world to see. “I love you,” he said. “Be sure of that.”

“I am sure of it,” Ryan said.

“I want you to be up. I want you to be happy. I want you to keep on keeping on with me. Trust me. I’m having as much fun as I can possibly stand. I want that for you too.”

“Then, I guess, we’re ready to publish the book,” Ryan said.

They climbed into the cockpit of the Corvette. Kick ran his fingers through his damp hair. It was the gesture Ryan loved best. He put his hand on the nape of Kick’s neck. Kick turned full face to Ryan and squinted his sexy grin. He pulled the Corvette out from the curb into a wide U-turn in the middle of Castro and headed back to the Victorian.

Ryan, riding with Kick, never looked out the windows. He twisted almost sideways always watching every powerful movement of the man behind the wheel. Kick handled the car the way a man should drive a car. Ryan watched his perfect profile. His pecs bulged when his hairy arm reached to shift, biceps peaked working the stick, hand square on the wheel, his massive legs, rippling under Ryan’s hand through his tight jeans, working the clutch and brake, his head set high on his square neck rising out of his broad shoulders, his blue eyes steely and straight forward, a wet curl of blond hair falling down his forehead, the aquiline straightness of his nose over his luxuriantly groomed moustache, the trace of an intense smile on his lips, the jut of his chin covered with two-days’ dark-blond stubble.

Ryan’s dick hardened. “Omigod,” he said, “do I love you.”

Kick reached over and tweaked Ryan’s left nipple. Wordless, he drove them through the rain-slick streets, turned the corner and headed up the last hill to the Victorian. He pulled slowly to the curb. For a moment they sat quietly. The City lights shimmering wet below them received dimension from a pair of tennis shoes, tied together with their own long laces, hanging over the middle of the street from a utility wire running to Ryan’s house.

“I’ve always wondered why kids do that,” Ryan said.

“What?”

“Tie their gym shoes together and throw them up on the wires. You see it all over town. It must be some sort of teenage ritual.” He turned to Kick.

Kick looked straight ahead. “Speaking of rituals...”

“What?” Ryan said expectantly.

“Nothing,” Kick said. “It’s silly. But you’re the only one I can tell.”

“So tell me.”

“Logan...”

Ryan had known the sentence would start with *Logan*.

“Logan has his problems.”

“So do we all.” Ryan was intent on being the generous confidant.

“Sometimes his problems are a problem. Nothing I can’t handle. But I don’t want him to get out of control.”

“What exactly?”

“Sometimes he abuses me.”

“Abuses you! Who could abuse you? How?”

“He gets on my case. He says I’m short.”

“You’re not short. You’re perfectly proportioned.”

“He means for winning any major physique titles.”

“Bullshit.”

“I want to go for the Mr. Golden Bear next summer at the State Fair. After that for the Mr. California. I don’t need his negativity. That’s something I never get from you. You always said I could do anything.”

Ryan scored a silent two points for himself.

Kick bucked up. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’ll handle it. Logan has a lot to learn from you.” He turned toward Ryan. “I know I have a lot to thank you for.”

Ryan reached for the door handle. “So why don’t you come on in. You’re soaking wet. It’s time for us to get down to some serious stuff. Like me scratching behind your ears.”

“I wanted to,” Kick said “I really wanted us to vent some stuff tonight, some really tough stuff, but it’s late.”

Ryan’s heart dropped. “Forget the stuff,” he said ad-libbing, desperately trying to keep Kick from driving into the night. “We’ll just go to sleep.” Ryan couldn’t bear for Kick to be lonely or hurt.

“I think I should head back to the ranch,” Kick said. “I can be alone there.”

“It’s an hour’s drive,” Ryan said. “Besides, I can’t bear a half-empty mattress.”

“What can I say?”

“Sometimes the thing to say is don’t say anything at all.”

“Believe me,” Kick said, “I want to play with you. I want you to play with me. But this is as good. This is fine. This talk has been satisfaction.” He put his hand on Ryan’s thigh. “I’m not saying no. I’m saying not right now.”

Ryan so feared the translation of that line, he blurted: “I love you.”

“I love you.”

“You know,” Ryan said, “I sold my soul for you.”

“I bought it back for you.”

“Then let me pay you back tonight.”

Kick smiled and shook his head. “I love you, madman!” Kick leaned into Ryan and kissed him.

Ryan’s *Journal* entry for that night read:

His blond moustache met my black one. I turn to jelly, but I don’t fall apart. “You’re so together,” I said to him. “It’s okay for you to feel down sometimes. Okay for you to come and go.” We held onto each other in his car in the rain. “Someday,” I said, “I’m going to hug the shit out of you.”

“I sure hope so,” he said.

I handed him the manuscript of *Universal Appeal*. I got out of the car and walked to the house. He waited till I opened the door, then he started up the Corvette, saluted from the window, and pulled slowly away from the curb. I stood in the door the way I always do when he drives off, the way I learned from the movies, watching him cruise down the hill until he is out of sight, watching after him as long as I can. I came into the house and put on a video I had shot of his face and paid physical honor to him and me and to us with my cock alone in my hand.

Out of my cuming came my mantra for the evening:
“Please, know. Please, know! Please, know!” And I spoke through my tears to his videotaped face. And I meant, please know how much I adore you. You are so valuable to me. You are living proof that all I thought in life that was worthy and noble and classic and ideal is possible. I thought it would never happen, but with you it has. If it takes years of keeping on and keeping up with whatever you need to do, I’ll do it, because in relating to you, my relationship to myself becomes better and better and better.

It was a lie. Ryan, in fact, was falling apart.
He was losing his last sense of self.
If he fancied himself a victim of love, he wasn’t.
Not really.
He was a victim of entropy.
Of Nights in the Entropics.
Things fall apart.

8

Thom’s suicide was as unexpected as all suicides are.

SONOMA COUNTY SHERIFF
INVESTIGATION REPORT

Investigating Officer: Det. Sgt. Mike Flagerman
Complaint: Thomas a’Beckett O’Hara
Address: 3207 Rancho Bar Nada Road
City: Sebastopol, California
Report: Death Investigation

DETAILS OF INVESTIGATION

At approximately 0915 hours, I was informed by Sgt. Gaines that Detectives were needed at the above address to investigate the death of the above who was found hanging in the barn at the

residence above called Rancho Bar Nada. I requested that the officer on the scene, Sgt. Bill Harter, Santa Rosa Township Police, contact me telephonically. I later met with Sgt. Harter, via Police Radio and found that there were no working telephones in the residence. Det. Nicholas Darcangelo and myself responded to the location after first notifying Capt. Gil Scott of the Criminal Investigation Section.

Upon our arrival at the residence, at approximately 0935 hours, we were met by P/O S. R. Chase and Sgt. Harter. We observed the interior of the single story main residence and noted the deplorable housekeeping conditions. This condition was found to include not only the living room, dining room, and kitchen area, but the bedrooms and baths. Animal excrement was in evidence throughout the house, and much combustible material was found thrown throughout the entire residence.

Sgt. Harter and P/O Chase then took us to the barn about 100 yards from the house. Part of the barn had been remodeled into living space. Here everything was noticeably clean in contrast to the house. The quarters were dominated by weightlifting equipment of the kind found in a gym. The walls were covered with what are called physique posters. This is where we found the body of the deceased. The deceased, who had been discovered by his sixteen-year-old son, Abraham, had been positively identified as one Thomas a'Beckett O'Hara, male/white, age 36. P/O Chase advised us that the victim's wife, Sandra, and three teenage children had left the main residence and were currently in the mobile home of Ms. Bonnie Holiday. This mobile home, where the estranged Mrs. O'Hara had lived for the last two months, is located in Palm Drive Court, #11, on South Santa Rosa Avenue near the Winners Circle Bar where both Ms. Holiday and Mrs. O'Hara are employed as barmaids.

Inasmuch as Grace Life Squad personnel were still present at the scene, I informed them that the Coroner's Office would make the transportation of the body to the morgue and dismissed them from the area.

Det. Darcangelo took eight black-and-white photographs using a 35 mm camera. All but two of these photographs are close-ups and

show knots that were tied in the rope, at the ceiling cross members, and toward the rear of the victim's neck.

The victim was found suspended from a nylon rope (white with blue stripe) of an approximate size of 1/4 inch and having a length of approximately 12 feet. The position of the body was found to be as follows: Victim's buttocks were approximately 3 feet from the barn floor. The legs were extended out in front of the body at an angle of approximately 50 degrees with both feet still resting on a black leather covered weightlifting bench. His arms were limp on either side, and his head was pulled upward by the body weight against the rope.

As has previously been mentioned, the rope was knotted behind the victim's skull, and there was a dirt mark at the back of the neck approximately 4 inches below the knot. This appeared to be consistent with the rope being pulled up the back of the neck and onto the head.

Approximately 6 feet of rope trailed loose down the victim's back, off the right shoulder blade. Another 4 and 1/2 feet was observed going from the knot to the barn's cross members. The rope had been wrapped once across both cross members, and a second knot was observed at the bottom of the wooden cross members.

I examined the body and observed the following. Lividity was observed in both hands from right above the wrists and also in the lower legs and feet. The victim was wearing a Medana brand digital wristwatch on his left wrist. The watch had been programmed to display a timing watch in seconds and did not display hours, minutes, or month, as is customarily used. It would appear that the victim either inadvertently pushed the timer button on the watch or was timing his own death. A gold coin of some religious type was worn on a gold-colored chain around the victim's neck, and the chain had not been disturbed by the rope. The victim was clad in black leather military type combat boots, green fatigue pants, military belt, and was stripped from the waist up.

Although I did not notice any signs of a struggle, I did observe a fresh, bluish scar on the top of the victim's right forearm. A USMC bulldog type tattoo was observed on the left upper arm; two other tattoos were on both lower forearms.

I did not feel any evidence of rigor mortis in the wrist or finger joints. The victim's tongue was partially bloated and extended and appeared to be getting black in color. A search of the barn and the main residence was conducted, but no note was found. We did have pointed out to us by Sgt. Harter as a possible clue to motive, or state of mind, that a stereo phonograph in the barn living space was left playing on repeat, and the record on the turntable was an Eagles' album called *Hotel California*.

Following our examination and photographing of the body, and our unsuccessful search for a note, I contacted Mr. Harris Ragsdale of the Sonoma County Coroner's Office. I supplied the above information to him and requested he dispatch Redwood' Ambulance Service to transport the body. We left P/O Chase to protect the scene, and Det. Darcangelo and myself went to the Holiday mobile home to interview family members.

Upon our arrival at the Holiday mobile home, we found several neighbors had already arrived to console the widow. As stated above, Mrs. O'Hara had lived at the mobile home for two months. Three days ago she returned to live at the residence where the incident occurred. Both Det. Darcangelo and I attempted to interview Sandra O'Hara, but every attempt was met with hysterics. I began to gather information from Abraham O'Hara, age 16. I was impressed with his ability to relate information, but I am concerned about his mental state and the trauma connected with finding his father's body. His sisters, Beatrice and Siena, who form a set of triplets with Abraham, seem less affected than does Abraham, and they refused to talk with either Det. Darcangelo or myself.

Abraham explained to me that his mother and father had been arguing at approximately 0530 hours this date and that the argument had been loud enough to awaken all three children. At approximately this time, his father had stopped the argument and told everyone to go back to bed. He stated that he intended to go out to the barn and sit up and listen to the stereo, and at this time everyone did go back to bed. Abraham explained that the ranch belonged to his uncle, his father's older brother, a Ryan Steven O'Hara, who, according to Abraham's account, lives in San Francisco and is homosexual. (This would tend to explain the

bodybuilding posters.) R. S. O'Hara uses this living space in the barn only on weekends.

At approximately 0815 hours, Abraham woke up and went to the barn to work out with weights as his father and uncle had often encouraged him to. When he entered the barn, he noticed that the stereo was on so that the automatic turntable arm could play repeatedly, but no music was coming from it. His view of the rest of the room was occluded by a bookcase. When he continued farther on into the room, he found his father hanging by the neck from the overhead beams. He ran back to the main house and woke his mother. She came back to the barn with Abraham and the two daughters. When she saw the body, she screamed. She then hit the deceased repeatedly in the face in an attempt to revive him. From the way the deceased's face was beginning to bruise, she must have hit him more than thirty times. In my experience, the bruises are coincident with blows struck after death and are not evidence in themselves of foul play. When she got no reaction, she brought the children back to the main house and tried to phone for an ambulance. Our investigation showed that the telephone lines outside the main house had been ripped out, most likely by the deceased on his way to the barn. Finding she could not telephone for help, she drove the three children all the way to Santa Rosa and Ms. Holiday's mobile home. She was too hysterical to tell Ms. Holiday what had happened, so Abraham was the one to give her the details.

While Abraham was giving me this information, Sandra would interject comments that corroborated his story. All she would say about the argument was that it had to do with one of the other girls at the Winners Circle. It is safe to say then that the deceased was normal and that homosexuality was not an aggravating cause of death, despite the paraphernalia (bodybuilding pictures, gay videotapes, and homosexual pornographic writing) found in drawers and bookshelves in the barn. These materials, according to Abraham, belong to his uncle in San Francisco.

By way of background, we learned that the deceased had not worked steadily since leaving the military. He and his wife had divorced and remarried twice and had been separated on other numerous occasions. The deceased was a Vietnam-era veteran and had recently been under treatment at the VA Hospital in San

Francisco. His brother, the above-mentioned R. S. O'Hara, had permitted the deceased and his family to live rent free in the main house for the last 16 months in return for work on the property. At one point, the deceased had taken a number of his wife's sleeping pills. He was treated for a drug overdose at an unknown area hospital. According to Sgt. Harter, area sheriffs deputies had made several domestic runs to the ranch residence. Sgt. Harter was acquainted with the deceased and, on at least one occasion, had referred him to a friend for a job. He did not like his estranged wife working at the Winners Circle Bar, but she, even while estranged, was basically the source of family income which was also augmented by the deceased's homosexual brother. The deceased rarely drank or used nonprescription drugs. His use of prescribed drugs, however, seems excessive. The drugs collected, issued by the Veteran's Administration Hospital in San Francisco, include Percocet, Valium, Ativan, Darvocet, and Lithobid. This might bear further investigation, but again this is also speculation.

Based upon our investigation, we can find no evidence that would lead to any other conclusion but suicide. It is possible that the deceased had stood on the weightlifting bench and leaned back against the rope until he passed out. This would better explain his feet still being on the weightlifting bench. It does not appear that he jumped off the weightlifting bench. I believe that if the heavy iron bench could have been kicked over or could have slid from under the victim, his feet would not have remained on the weight-lifting bench.

Upon the arrival of Redwood Ambulance Service, I cut down the body in the prescribed manner, preserving both knots, leaving the rope attached to the victim, and sent it to the Coroner's Office. Det. Darcangelo and I secured the barn and the main residence at 1105 hours.

Investigation complete pending Coroner's ruling.

Signed: Det. Sgt. Mike Flagerman
lcm

9

Ryan threw Thom's Death Report on the floor. "What the hell does that tell me?" Thom was not yet in the ground. "My brother betrayed me." He harbored that thought accompanying Thom's body all the way back to Peoria. By the time the plane landed on the bone-hot runway, Thom had died of natural causes.

"Remember that." Ryan towered over Sandy and the triplets in their seats.

"Who decided that?" Sandy was indignant.

"Kweenie and I decided that," he said. "Only Annie Laurie knows what really happened."

Sandy Gully smirked. "Except for me," she said. "I'm the one who knows what really happened."

"Shut up," Ryan said. "Just shut up!"

"He killed himself because you made him think he was a fag!"

"He killed himself," Ryan said, "because you never made him feel like a man."

They deplaned in silent detente. Annie Laurie greeted them all with hugs and kisses. Holding her arm was their own priest, her brother-in-law, Ryan's uncle, the Reverend Leslie O'Hara. Father Les had held his good looks, but he was older. They all were suddenly older. From Les's smile and warm handshake, Ryan was sure his uncle remembered their summer mornings of sex in the sacristy.

"I'd like to talk," Ryan told his uncle. He wanted to ask how he could remain a priest in a Church that despised homosexuals, but the chance never came, because neither took it. What was to say? Was the priesthood no more than a good living and a better cover? Ryan guessed that Father Les was the same kind of priest he would have become himself. *We do what we must and call it by the best name possible.* Ryan could not have known then that Death's long slow march would claim the Reverend Leslie Michael O'Hara two weeks after his fifty-first birthday. He was Ryan's uncle and godfather, and when he died, Ryan said, "The men in my family don't seem to be survivors. They may be lucky." He looked distressed. "As God is my witness, I predict I'll probably live too long."

The mortuary drove Thom's body from the Peoria airport to the funeral home where he lay in an open coffin for two days. Sandy bitched he was rouged and powdered all wrong. She wanted to touch him up with Mary Kay. Ryan threatened to break her fingers. The family pasted smiles on their faces. They all stayed with Thom, standing on aching feet, greeting relatives and old friends arriving with their condolences. One, if not all of them, said, "Thank God, Charley didn't live to see his own son die."

His own son!

Ryan suddenly felt a surge of jealousy, something he really never felt around Kick—even since Logan. It was a strange mutant, green emotion. Ryan, firstborn, had always felt like Charley-Pop's real and only son. He didn't think of Thom as Charley-Pop's son. Thom was no more than Ryan's little brother, a tagalong, an afterthought. He could not bear to think that people thought of Thom and him as equals, as a pair, as Charley and Annie's two sons.

Thom had finally upstaged him.

"*De profundis*," Uncle Leslie intoned. "From the depths, we cry unto you, O Lord." He looked magnificent standing at the head of Thom's coffin. He wore the ironic white and gold vestments of hope. Ryan squinted in the bright summer sun and saw a soft-focus vision of the priest he might have become if he could have worked the accord of conscience his uncle must have found in his closeted service to the narrow tenets of his faith.

The month after good old Uncle Leslie died, Solly Blue received back in the mail the last video brochure he had sent him advertising his tough young hustlers. It was marked *deceased*.

"The Reverend Leslie O'Hara wasn't my best customer," Solly said to me and not to Ryan, "but I like doing business with the clergy. Their checks don't bounce."

The funeral was all too complex; but some things were clear. Ryan saw little need to put his arm around his mother. This wasn't *Imitation of Life*. She wasn't Susan Kohner throwing herself on the coffin. She was Annie Laurie, self-possessed, strong in her own presence. She stood by herself, sad and indestructible, glancing only once at Charley-Pop's grave next to Thom's.

Kweenie was another story. She was swathed in a plastic Myoko dress sprayed with Japanese graffiti. On the plane she had wrapped

herself in three antique shoulder-foxes and a long feathered boa. Behind her Yoko Ono shades, her eyes looked permanently bruised. She could not stop crying. Suicide, not abortion, moved her to Drama-Queen tears.

Sandy stood with the triplets directly opposite Ryan and Kweenie and Annie Laurie. She had already run up her charge cards against Thom's life insurance settlement. Abe and Bea and Sie looked for the first time in their lives as if they had stepped out of a bandbox. Sandy had rehearsed the role of military widow often enough to pull it off. If she wasn't exactly Jackie Kennedy receiving the folded flag at the end of the ceremony, at least she remembered the TV-version of national widowhood and didn't embarrass them. If she truly hated Thom's family, the feeling was mutual. Ryan hoped her appearance with them was her last.

Uncle Les wrapped the graveside ceremony. Ryan watched everyone trail down the hill after him. Annie Laurie walked Kweenie to the long stretch limos that waited for the family. Ryan turned to Charley-Pop's gravestone.

"So," he said, "what do you think now about Thom?"

He felt a presence cutting into his back. He turned. It was Sandy Gully. Her face was flushed with more than tears.

"I hate you," she said. "I hate him." She threw a single rose hard into Thom's still-open grave. "I know what you did to him. I know what you did with him. I know what you two did together. He loved you and you treated him like an animal. He said you called him nothing but a breeder. He said you called me a cow. You called my children no-neck monsters right to his face. It's all your fault. He's dead because of you. You killed him. You...You..." She searched for the word that Ryan feared she would shout for all Peoria to hear. "You...You...Intellectual!"

Ryan grabbed her arm and fiercely said, "That's homosexual! That's what you mean. That's what you hate. All you bitches hate it."

"I mean I hate you. I've hated you from the moment we met in the train station. I hate you for being what you are. I hate your whole family. I hate Kweenie. I hate Annie. I hate Charley."

Ryan slapped Sandy hard across the face. She fell backwards on her butt across the mound of dirt covered with green plastic

grass. From down at the cortege, no one seemed to notice. The grave diggers, waiting to fill in the hole, turned away and continued their smoke as if nothing had happened. They had seen everything graveside anyway.

"I'll sue you," Sandy Gully hissed.

"You don't have a leg to stand on."

"Help me up!" She eeked a small scream.

"Gladly." Ryan bent over her. He put one hand behind her neck and one behind her waist. "Play it as you lay, my dear," he said. "By now they're all watching us. You look every inch the bereaved widow throwing herself down on her husband's grave." He pulled her to her feet. "Stand up, bitch."

"You fag bastard," she said.

They stood on the edge of the grave holding each other as if they were dancing. Their separate grieving became for a brief moment one. In spite of everything. It wasn't a dislike of women that made Ryan gay. It was, beyond his sexual choice, his claustrophobic fear of the meanness of family life. He pitied men who sacrificed their very selves to be husbands and fathers and ended up, if not dead like Charley-Pop and Thom at an early age, then old and gray and outnumbered, the solitary male chauffeuring a station wagon filled with pinched widows with serious hair.

"I know you loved him," Ryan said.

"I know you loved him too," Sandy Gully said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," he said.

She pulled herself loose from Ryan and ran down the hill toward the waiting cars.

Ryan stood alone on the top of the hill at the edge of the grave. Behind him, glorious with Indian Summer, the vast expanse of the Illinois River wound lazily through green trees bordering cultivated fields. Peoria was a river town. Thom was born there. Thom was buried there. Ryan vowed he would not finish his life the same. He shook his head at the irony: it was the straight brother, not the homosexual, who had committed the cliché of suicide. Thom had finally upstaged him in the only way he knew. That was his motive. Ryan didn't need to find any suicide note. They all said it was Nam and Sandy and his kids that caused him to do it. They were right, but they weren't completely right. They didn't know everything.

They didn't know about the night Thom, loaded with Kick's primo grass, had stood up from the kitchen table in the Victorian and addressed Ryan and Kick as if he were making a formal speech.

"You two are like a couple of..." Thom was too straight to think of calling them anything else, "kings."

"Kings?" Ryan said. "Thank God, he said *kings*."

Sometimes Ryan talked in front of Thom in the third person.

"You have everything," Thom said. "You do everything."

"We go to all the right parties," Ryan said.

Kick played along. "We take all the right pills."

"See! See!" Thom had said. "That air of superiority. I can't stand it. I can't crack it. I can't quote stuff. I can't make everything a joke." He had slumped back down into the kitchen chair. "What I want to know is this. How can two brothers who start out the same end up so different? One living with the...well, uh, it's obvious...most handsome man in the world. The other well, that's obvious too..."

Mercifully Thom had left the comparison incomplete.

Ryan looked across the horizon toward downtown. He studied the gothic towers of the hospital where they had all been born and where Charley-Pop had died. Delete one father. Delete one brother. He knew he would not come back to this spot until, sometime in the far-off future, Annie Laurie died. Or he himself died. He heard the grave diggers clear their throats. He took one last look down into Thom's grave and said his last good-bye.

"So long, stupid."

10

By the time Ryan returned from the funeral to San Francisco, he knew he had been too long gone from Kick. He missed the man. If life was short, he wanted sunny California days and endless nights. He had long before given up the bleary life of baths and sex with men who could be anybody.

"But I still defend anonymous sex," he said. "When you're up to here with interpersonal relationships, there's no better balance than making love with a nameless stranger who carries no burden of history."

For almost three years, he had touched hardly anyone but Kick. Their start continued ascendant. Even with Logan fucking around, the more they had of each other the more they wanted.

The night of Ryan's return, Kick pumped out a top-notch musclex posing scene. He knew Ryan was exhausted. "You strip and lie back on the bed," Kick said. He handed Ryan the can of Crisco. "You don't have to do anything but beat your meat."

Kick grinned and opened a surprise package. He stripped and slowly suited himself up in a professional football uniform complete with pads and cleats and black grease under his eyes. He was a dream of a quarterback. He called out plays and numbers, hiking back, faking a pass. His cleats struck the wood floor. He pounded on his pads. He jumped up on the bed and took a lineman's squat over Ryan's body. The helmet framed his face. The chinstrap jutted aggressively forward. Ryan ran his hand over the helmet, the face guard, and out across the pads exaggerating Kick's big shoulders.

Ryan wanted to cum, but Kick backed off and hopped to the floor. He slowed the scene down. He shuffled around the bedroom like it was a locker room. He pulled off his helmet, stripped off his jersey, and unlaced the fly of his tight pants. He reached inside, around his jockstrap, and pulled out his cock. His powerful erection defied gravity. Half-stripped, the bodybuilder jock worked through an Attitude Fantasy, posing, flexing, spitting, pumping his dick, laying strategic pieces of his football gear on the bed around Ryan. His routine made him seem the most generous man in the world. Ryan needed generosity. He needed the Energy Kick put out in their cumming together.

He wrote in his *Journal*:

I didn't want to cum, I wanted my hard-on to last forever. I wanted my own pro quarterback to last forever. A hard dick freezes time solid in a man's hand. There is no before and no after. There is only now. The hard-on is "to be." A man's being is his becoming. He becomes the quarterback. His costume is his reality. His posing is his function. Erection is being. Orgasm is becoming. The act is what it is. In the ritual multiples of male sex bonding, we act out the search for the perfect state of being through

the perfect act of becoming ourselves through the other. I became Kick. I became as much a quarterback as he was.

The world is divided into the juicy and the nonjuicy. A man has only so many cumings in him to achieve the perfect state of becoming more himself by becoming for the length of orgasm like the man with whom he is cuming. In other men, a man finds alternatives of his self. Other ways of being. There are so many varieties of masculinity that the search for self through otherness is ongoing and never ending. This is the infinity of men, no two the same, each one ideally more perfect than the last, each one a step on the way toward realizing, toward becoming, toward being the transcendent essence of manliness that men worshiping men require.

The romance of ejaculation is the finite limit of cumings a man has in him to achieve union with the infinite. A man has only so many orgasms. When he spends them, he dies. Each cuming must transcend the last. It's not the quantity of the sex circuit—so many men, so little time—it's more the qualitative ascending spiral of circling and rising to bond with men each more perfect than the last. A man remains juicy as long as his orgasms progress toward this end.

Albertus Magnus, the teacher of Saint Thomas Aquinas, wrote, "Too much ejaculation dries out the body, because the sperm has the power of humidifying and heating. But when warmth and moisture are drawn out of the body, the system is weakened and death follows. This is why men who copulate too much, and too often, do not live long; for bodies drained of their natural humidity dry out and the dryness causes death."

Homomascularity is a calling to this progressive upgrading of the quality of orgasm. Sin is probably the settling for debit orgasms, orgasms that are not transcendent quality cumings but are only sexual spasms, spasms that do not lift the human spirit, but rather only dry the man out.

Homomascularity is a vocation as much as any call to the priesthood. Homomascularity descends from the ancient Druid priests whose ritual predates even the Old Christianity. In the seminary, ninety percent more boys left the twelve-year study for the priesthood than were finally ordained. Over those triumphant ten percent on their ordination day, the bishop intoned: "Many are called, but few are chosen." Profane gay men are men who fall short of the purity of the priestly homomascularity vocation. They turn from the essential act of worship and communion and degrade the sacred sexual exchange of Energy into no more than a numbers game, a kind of serial fucking as dangerous in its own way as serial murder.

This is why I feel a special responsibility to gay men. We were called to something noble and we allowed it to become trivial. I know the *Manifesto* is pious piffle to these day-trippers. I was once one of them. Kick changed me. He converted me. I know the *Manifesto* is read by men who understand the purity of priapic existentialism. What is, is; and what is, is the hard-on that lasts forever.

I know I've sounded elitist, but no more so than the bishop announcing that few are chosen. I fully realize that in my slamming of gay men, of those many who were called but were not chosen, that I'm actually rejecting in them what I long ago rejected in myself: too much no-count sex, too many drugs, sniffing too many poppers to turn Godzilla into God. No more than Quentin Crisp wants everyone to be an effeminate homosexual do I want everyone to be a masculine homosexual; but like Quentin, I want the boys out there in the streets to know the Way of the Bull, the Alternative of the Animus. I want them to know they don't have to do their Mother's Act, when it's their fathers who are so important. Self-actualization is the only game in town.

The day after Ryan's return from Thom's funeral, Solly called him on the phone. "Remember," he asked, "when we used to laugh at men who walked around with signboards saying 'The End Is at

Hand?” He didn’t wait for Ryan’s answer. “You’ve missed the real news while you were back in Central America. I always call the Midwest ‘Central America.’ Wait until you hear the latest.”

Ryan had heard the rumors of gay cancer, but this was the first mention of GRID. Solly read him the grim facts. Ryan thought of Tony Tavarossi dying in the ICU of San Francisco General. He thought of kissing Tony dying in the ICU of San Francisco General. He thought of Dr. Mary Ketterer saying she had never seen a patient so distressed.

He panicked.

“Don’t get your bowels in an uproar,” Solly said. “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency is not your fate. It attacks gay men. You’ve always said you’re not gay.”

Kick was philosophical. “What men I’ve had,” he said, “are bodybuilders. They’re healthy enough.”

Ryan tried to match Kick’s power of positive thinking. Kick had not seen the dying face of Tony Tavarossi. Ryan did not want Kick to see his speeding depression. He had to get control both of Thom’s suicide and the horrifying news, if it was true, of the plague that stood hungry on their threshold. Ryan left Kick in the Victorian and drove alone up to Bar Nada. He had to escape the City and he knew he certainly had to clean up the mess Thom had made of the ranch. He needed time to think about all that the media was saying about the awkwardly named Gay-Related Immune Deficiency syndrome.

“Be thankful, at least,” Solly said, “the press is no longer calling it ‘gay cancer.’”

“‘Gay-related’ sounds so ‘cause and effect.’”

“They think only our kind gets it. They’re sure our kind started it. Don’t you absolutely love the politics of medicine?”

Ryan had agonized through his childhood over polio. Every summer, during the polio season, he woke next to Thom in their bed, and both of them, every morning, immediately touched their chins to their chests and their knees to their chins. As long as they could do that, they knew they hadn’t awakened with polio, which struck like a thief in the night. Annie Laurie had been careful. During polio season, she followed all the precautions. Ryan and Thom were not allowed to swim in public pools, which were all

closed anyway. Their dental work was never done in the heat of summer. They never ate the ends of bananas even when not exposed through the skin. No one knew from what dark place polio had come. Everything was suspect. Everyone knew someone who was in an iron lung, or worse, dead from polio. Parents were in a panic for themselves and their children. They all believed anything and everything they heard about the dread disease. Every day the radio and the papers listed the number of polio cases reported in the city, the state, and the nation. The news was clear. People died.

Ryan's heart felt faint. Death, despite Kick, seeped like San Francisco fog all around him. He hid at the ranch for two weeks. He could not tell Kick how depressed the facts on the evening news made him. He was thankful he had holed up so long a time with Kick. He felt consolation that Kick had rescued him from the serial promiscuity he had so eagerly pursued upon his arrival with Teddy from the Midwest. A Channel 9 PBS live special fingered multiple sex partners as the primary cause of contagion.

Serial tricking was exposed instantly as dangerous as serial murder.

Ryan resented the plague. If a man couldn't have the sex he wanted in San Francisco, then everyone should go back home where they came from and pursue the careers they all gave up to follow their dicks around.

Every day the news little by little astounded the City. No one knew what caused GRID. No one knew how to cure it. The one grim fact of agreement was that once a man got it, he died.

On the six-o'clock news, Wendy Tokuda read the day's lead story. "GRID is now AIDS. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Doctors at San Francisco General announced today that the City's latest AIDS victim died this afternoon. The patient, whose name was not disclosed, died, the hospital spokesperson said, with more than a thousand diseases in his immune-deficient body. He was the second person to die of AIDS this week in San Francisco where more than 200 AIDS cases have been reported. Nationwide, deaths from AIDS now stand at 22."

"Not counting Tony, and how many others," Ryan said, "who checked out before anyone knew what was happening."

For half a month Ryan stayed at the ranch, cleaning up after Thom and breaking out in crying jags for fear that he might already harbor in his body whatever it was that was attacking them all. He resented cleaning up the broken glass in the main house. He resented the closets with peanut-butter sandwiches stuck to the walls and the blood on the bedroom carpet and the filth in the bathrooms and the animal shit in the living-room shag and the holes pounded in the walls and the French door to the bathroom ripped off its hinges and the torn mesh of the screens where the cats had gained entrance from their nightly prowls.

He resented Thom's dying. He resented his father's dying. No one stood between him and Death but Annie Laurie, and now the news was telling him nothing so much as that he might die before her. He was humiliated thinking that he might die of a gay disease. For one whole day, he actually felt he wouldn't mind dying of anything but a gay disease. He didn't want anybody to be able to say: "He'd be alive today if only he hadn't been gay."

Kick sensed something more was wrong than one of Ryan's famous depressions. He loved Ryan enough to drive up to Bar Nada. Alone.

"Come back to the City," Kick said. He was a knight on a white horse. "You're not writing. You're not around enough for my liking. The Victorian's empty without us both." He followed Ryan from room to room. "If it's this disease thing, you can't hide out. We're safe people. We haven't done anything. You don't have to be afraid of it. That's the worst you could do."

Ryan refused, politely, but refused all the same. "I need some more time up here," he said. "God! I love you!"

"I'll never force you to anything," Kick said. "But I want you to think about me driving you back. I'm going out to the barn and pump up a little on the weights."

"Please, don't," Ryan said.

"Why not? If I get a good pump, maybe we could play a little."

"Nobody's been out to the barn since Thom died."

"Somebody's got to go out there sooner or later. Death's nothing," Kick said. "Somebody's got to bring life back to the space."

"If anybody's got the life force," Ryan said, "you have."

Kick walked out to the barn. He had hoped Ryan would follow. After an hour, he came back. "Where were you?"

"I couldn't," Ryan said. "I promised I'd never say *no* to you, but I couldn't."

What he meant was that he was desexed by fear.

"I'm a safe person," Kick said. He moved in close to Ryan and held him in his big arms. "Let me hold you," he said. "Just hold you."

"I love you," Ryan said. "I love you so much. These are the best years of our lives. I don't want either of us to die."

"We're safe, Ryan. Listen to me. We're not going to die. I won't let you. I need you too much."

"Give me a couple of days," Ryan said, "to get hold of myself."

Ryan stood on the deck and watched Kick drive away until the red Corvette disappeared over the crest of the hill. "I will get a hold of myself," he said.

That night on television, there was a clip of Henry Fonda reading lines from William Faulkner's novel, *Sartoris*. "Ever' now and then," Henry drawled, "a feller has to walk up and spit in deestruction's face, sort of, for his own good. He has to kind of put an aidege on hisself, like he'd hold his ax to the grindstone....If a feller'll show his face to deestruction ever' now and then, deestruction'll leave 'im be twil his time come. Deestruction like to take a feller in the back."

"I'm safe," Ryan said. "Death comes like a thief in the night. As long as you expect it, you're safe. As long as I expect to die, I won't." He started to cry. "Why is there a reverse spin on everything?"

The next day, on impulse, he drove back to the City. He wanted to surprise Kick.

The surprise was on him.

Logan sat shirtless in the living room of the Victorian. "I've been staying here while you've been gone," he said.

"I told Logan you wouldn't mind," Kick said. "I'm glad you're back." He hugged Ryan.

"It's alright," Ryan said. *Why didn't you tell me?* He felt safe in Kick's embrace. "Everything's going to be alright."

"Check it out, man," Logan said, "I have to go back to like, you know, San Diego for awhile."

Thank God and Greyhound! You're gone!

Ryan and Kick were together again. Only Kick stood between Ryan and the blues. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who was sick. The news was alarming. In the weeks that followed, those who became sick died quickly. A momentary pall fell across the bars and baths. Some men stopped going out. Some stopped having sex altogether. Some suddenly found a new spark in an old lover's safe eyes. Some tried having what came to be called safe sex where partners were careful not to exchange fluids.

"How," Solly screamed, "can it possibly be sex if you don't for godsake exchange fluids!"

A sizable group simply denied the syndrome's existence.

"It's their civil right," Solly said, "to suck and fuck in dark back rooms."

"This plague," Ryan said to Solly, "has made you a sage."

"I've always been a sage," Solly said, "and a legend in my own mind."

"They're calling this a gay disease."

"They're calling it everything, because they don't know anything. As usual, they emphasize our differences from them. They've always been jealous we have more sex than them. I find it all amusing."

"Amusing? People are dying."

"Considering the crowd you used to run with, I'm sure your Rolodex reads like *The Book of the Dead*," Solly said. "I'm not changing anything. I've never fucked with faggots anyway. I much prefer my straight boys sitting on my face."

"Funny," Ryan said. "Faggots used to feel immortal."

"Except when they feel like Camille."

"How times change."

"Blame Harvey Milk. He died."

"Blame Harvey? My God, he was murdered."

"Aren't most homosexuals murdered? One way or another? Harvey made dying fashionable. At least in San Francisco. No faggot has yet written a book or a play about Mayor Moscone. How soon we forget. We only dramatize the kind of Death that interests us. Death is so romantic. Byron, Shelley, Keats. All the rock stars who die at an early age. Faggots only want one thing in life..."

“Stop it.”

“They want to die before their faces fall. Do you know what comes after Oil of Olay? Surgery of Olay. Then Embalming of Olay.”

“Maybe Kick’s right about you.”

“That would be a point in his favor.”

“He says you care too much about gay politics.”

“Me? Not me. He means you. He talks that way. I’ve noticed. By indirection. That’s how he controls you.”

“Stop sniping at him.”

“He means you care too much about gay politics. I don’t even recognize gay politics. Whatever that is. I moved to San Francisco long before gay liberation. Whatever that is. I’ve watched what’s happened to the City.”

“Guys are dying. That’s what’s happening.”

“Remind me to update my mailing list.”

“Go ahead play tough guy. You’d feel different if you ever left this penthouse.”

“I refuse to go out. It’s one of my more wonderful affectations. It’s no surprise to me that Kick hates me. I don’t trek out daily to a gym.”

“Kick doesn’t hate anyone.”

“Sorry, I forgot. Saint Kick doesn’t hate anyone. He only preens himself shirtless on Castro for the passing faggots’—excuse me, homomasculinists’—edification.” Solly laughed. “Lighten up, Ry,” he said. “I know you’re his high priest.” Solly insinuated himself. “By the way, I was wondering, where’s the other altar boy? The tall, dark, handsome, muscular one?”

“Logan’s in San Diego. Kick’s been staying up at the ranch, helping get the place back together. He’s been up there three weeks.”

“You mean he’s been missing his personal appearances on Castro?” Solly said.

“God, you’re a bitch.”

“Don’t be gay.”

“Kick is a picture of health on Castro. He’s what we need now.”

“The world hardly needs another hustling prick-tease.”

“I’ll let that go by.”

“So when did he last lay you?”

“He drove in three nights ago. We had a séance. He drove back up the next morning.”

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Solly flipped the coin. “Out-of-sight out-of-mind.” He took a long drink of Coca-Cola. “I’m feeling biblical.”

“That empty aphorism isn’t biblical.”

“This great gay plague is positively biblical. Where’s C. B. DeMille now that we need him?” Solly relentlessly tongued his cheek. Ryan fell for the game. “It’s all predicted in *Revelations*.”

“You don’t read the Bible.”

“I certainly do. Like the great W. C. Fields, I look for loopholes.”

“Asshole.”

“Are these Castro boys stupid? It’s all in the Bible. Don’t they read the Bible? Jerry Falwell reads the Bible. I’m waiting for a gay boutique to silk-screen some tee shirts with the slogan: ‘I Kissed A Kaposi’s Victim and Lived.’ Your gay boys will merchandise anything.”

“Don’t make light of this. Castro has become the set for a remake of *The Andromeda Strain*.”

“If you want to know the real politics behind the plague, I’ll tell you how faggots acquire their immune deficiencies.”

“Six people I know have died. And one good friend. I kissed him good-bye in the ICU at San Francisco General.”

“I’m touched,” Solly said, “by your cheap emotion. Disease has made you significant. I bet you boys score body counts over brunch at the Norse Cove.”

“Score?”

“About how many victims you’ve kissed goodbye. Exactly the way you’ve always kept score at Sunday brunch about how many nameless numbers you’d balled at the baths the night before.”

“Why do I listen to this?”

“Because,” Solly said, “you have all the superstition of a baptized Catholic. Because you love fire-and-brimstone scenarios. Because suffering and dying from gay cancer, or GRID, or AIDS sounds like a call to gay martyrdom. Because the vision of being tortured naked

in hell forever by Lucifer, the most beautiful of all archangels, gives you a hard-on. That's why gay men need S&M."

"Can you lay off me for all the sins of Catholicism? I'm no Catholic!"

"Deny it thrice before the cock crows."

"Where did all this bitterness come from? It's not like you."

"If you're not a Catholic, then you've only exchanged religion for politics. Didn't all our parents warn us never to discuss religion or politics? They knew sooner or later both would come down to a third subject they never discussed: sex."

"Don't scare me," Ryan said.

"I'll scare you if I think it's good for you, Ry. Do you want to know what I think is the truth?"

"I'm not sure."

"I think the Moral Majority's Final Solution is blowing germs, developed by the CIA, into the ventilating systems at the bars and baths."

"You're hysterical."

"First they tried a strain of something nasty out in Philadelphia on a bunch of old farts at a Legionnaire's Convention. That was the control group. The first stage. The media handled it okay. Don't tell me you're so naive politically to think that if there is an undesirable group in American society that certain powers-that-be wouldn't wipe them out if they could? Don't tell me that the CIA wouldn't create a chemical, viral Auschwitz. Faggots own too much property and are politically too threatening. We're the new Jews. Reagan hates us. AIDS will always be Reagan's disease."

"You have no proof."

"Precisely. There is no proof. They're committing the perfect crime. They're tricky. I mean everyone knows that Reagan's son is gay...."

That's conjecture."

"Look how they've handled him. They hired him a wife. They keep her on retainer. Everything you read about him, and how he gave up dancing with the Joffrey Ballet, only needs to have the word *homosexuality* inserted for *dance*. Oh my, yes! As in, 'From the graceful movements of his early youth, anyone looking at Ronnie Reagan could see his propensity toward...*dance!*'"

“Get me a shovel!”

“You know what this Christian country really feels about us.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You’d better believe me. Everyone believes Jews.”

“Now who’s the bigot?”

“We’re all Jews, Ry. Don’t you see? We gays have become a problem the way we Jews in Germany became a problem, but we won’t shut up, and they can’t kill us outright in camps. We’re related to too many straight people who’d object. Besides, the human rights front is too strong in this hemisphere. So they’ve instigated a medical problem to decimate homosexuals.”

“It’s a good thing you stay home. You’d create hysteria in the streets.”

“There’s always hysteria in the streets.” Solly was severe. “Let me paraphrase you to you. I may not agree with all you’ve said and written, but I remember it all.” He stood up and stood over Ryan. “What about all your radical politics? Your politically correct lesbians? Your feminists? Even your corny masculinists? You, my friend, are right up there with the lunatic fringe of sex politics that has ruined gay liberation. You will bring down the house on the rest of us little queers who just want to suck cock.” Solomon Bluestein was genuinely dismayed. “*Politically correct*. I love that knee-jerk jerk-off phrase. You want to know what’s politically correct? I’ll tell you. What’s politically correct is what the government thinks is politically expedient. That and nothing else.”

“You should move to Berkeley.”

“Ah, to be in Berserkely now that plague is here.” Solly was relentless. “Do you remember Reagan when he was governor in the sixties? When he was confronted with all the student protests at Berkeley, he said, ‘If there’s going to be a bloodbath, then it might as well begin now. Let’s get it over with.’”

“You are so amusing,” Ryan said. “So very amusing. I love it. But you’re wrong.”

“I’m wrong?”

“The plague is not a government plot. Homosexuals are all much too delicate for this planet. We have no immunity to its ills and woes.”

“You’re too New Age in an age that is not new. It’s prehistoric.”

“Bullshit.”

“You’re much too cosmic about everything.”

“That’s why I came to California,” Ryan said.

Solly despaired, pacing the room, straightening lamps and ash trays. “Actually,” Solly said, “I alone know what AIDS really is.”

“What is it?” Ryan said.

“Identity. Acquired *Identity* Deficiency Syndrome.”

Ryan pulled a bottle from his leather jacket. “Here’s two Valium.”

“Thank you. I love downers.” Solly swallowed the blue pills with a slug of Coca-Cola. “Don’t go. Not quite yet. I have a favor to ask. I want you to take something home with you. One of my boys left it here. I don’t want it around.” Solly reached into a drawer. “Too much can happen when hustlers come in and out of my pent-house night and day.”

He handed Ryan a .22.

With just so easy a gesture, a gun entered Ryan’s house.