

Reel Five

Blind Parents Raise Invisible Child

1

On 18th Street, Kweenie took over the small stage at Fanny's, a petite supper club catering to gay men with a penchant for *chanteuses*. For six weekends she had played to capacity crowds at the tables, and standing-room only at the bar. She was no longer playing somebody else. She was playing herself, well, almost herself, sounding breathily expansive as her current idol, Bette Midler.

"I've seen," she said in her low stage voice, "the ambiguity of feeling in lovers' eyes." Her long-nailed fingers fanned past her face. *Piano soft*. "I dreamed in a dream I saw a city of lovers invincible. Oh, yes, I have. Where simple men can kiss good-bye on a pier—you know about piers—and never say good-bye. Why? Because one lover is the moon and the other is the sun." She looked down at Kick and Ryan. "This next song—my little art song—is for a special pair of manfriends, and for all you lovers out there who disappear into your lover."

Her voice became hypnotic and dreamy. "You live to make your lover shine, because you really love him, because he really loves you. You look at each other and wonder who is the lover and who is the beloved."

She locked eyes with Ryan. "You wonder what your lover thinks." *Piano up. Soft intro*. "You wonder who will be the worshiper and who will be the hero, who will be the high-flying adored. I hear you ask, oh, I hear you ask at close of day, are you the new person drawn to me? Are you the gentleman I was expecting? Travelers together. You don't ask who will go and who will stay. You just keep on keeping on."

Over the soft tinkle of silver service on china plates, she sang the plaintive lyrics. "We two boys together cling. Arms around each other's necks."

She held the mike close to her bosom with one hand and gestured to Kick with the other. "One the other never leaves. The man who loves me whom I love."

She was beseeching Kick to say to Ryan those words she knew he needed to hear before it was too late.

“Never parting the parting of dear friends.” She moved to the edge of the stage. “Ascending to the atmosphere of lovers.” Her voice rose, glorious, engaging the lyric with true emotion. “Whoever you are....” She loved the ambiguity. “Whoever you are....” She was singing as much to the brother she idealized as she was singing for him to Kick, whom she loved, and for Kick to Ryan.

“...holding me now in hand, carry me...”

A heartfelt passion came into her husky voice. “...when you fly up overland and sea.” A silence washed across the room. “We two boys together cling.” Waiters stopped at their stations. Dessert spoons rested on plates. Kweenie could not hold back real tears.

“Touching you would I sleep. Not touching you would I die.”

She thought of herself, and what Ryan had made her to be. She thought of the successes Kick always said were Ryan’s too.

“Carried away eternally.”

Something deep within her feared for her brother’s very life. She saw Ryan’s hand resting on the white tablecloth. “Whoever you are holding me now in hand....” She saw Kick catch her drift. He took Ryan’s fingers into his own.

“Whoever you are holding me now in hand, carry me, in your arms tightly pressed, into the splendor of night.”

Kick became the splendor. He became a god, rising up on Kweenie’s voice, sailing over the heads at the tables, soaring up through the dissolving ceiling, flying through the opening roof toward the moonlit night, defying gravity, defying space, circling ever upward magnificently, almost asleep on the wind, with Ryan, himself light as thin air, following, rising in updraft, invisible almost, lovely as a rising wisp of cloud riding ever upward beneath the moon.

Kweenie held the house in the palm of her hand.

Noel Coward once said, and he included songs as wry as his own, “It’s extraordinary how potent cheap music can be.”

2

American masculinity makes life very difficult for two men trying to love one another. American women who have trouble with American men might gain some insight from seeing man-woman problems compounded man-to-man, particularly with Ryan and Kick. For my part in all of this, my intent is not to ridicule all desire, but to examine its effect on the human heart.

Love, you see, ambushed them.

They knew they had come to the end of something the Sunday afternoon they lay in the warm grass of the Eureka School Playground outfield. Over the rooftops the noisy roar of the Castro Street Fair wafted on the late summer breeze. Kick had come down from a two-month stay at Bar Nada. Ryan noticed immediately the change in his face. He was drawn. He looked tired.

Tired? Evita tired?

Kick's fatigue broke the brilliant display of his self-defense. His perfect body armor of muscle could not hold back his depression. Logan was wearing him down. Ryan felt sadly triumphant. Kick was experiencing from the inside out the sadness he had always told Ryan was too gay.

They lay on their bellies at right angles facing each other, their heads nearly touching. Kick pillowed his chin on his crossed arm. Ryan matched his move. The Gay Marching Band struck up "If They Could See Me Now."

Kick managed a half smile. "Boy," he said, "if they could see me now. I'm sorry, Ry. We're used to ethyl, and I'm only pumping out regular."

"I can run on regular," Ryan said.

"I can't always be the bodybuilder."

Ryan saw his chance to score one for the home team against Logan. "You don't have to always be the bodybuilder. Not with me. I long ago got around all that." This was his chance to drive home his value to Kick in more ways than in bed. "I love our fantasies, but I love the real you more." Through the chink in Kick's armor, he hoped the truth he had told him so many times would finally, really register. "You're a person, not a monument."

"I love you." Kick was floundering. "I really do."

"What's wrong?"

"Do you know what it's like to have everyone wanting to touch you, and for there to be hardly anyone you want to touch?" He touched Ryan's high forehead. "Of course you do," he said. "I see people touch you when we're out."

"Hardly because I look like you."

"Not on the outside," Kick said. Fine tears welled up in his blue eyes. Ryan had never seen Kick cry. Not even when his father died. Ryan sank his chin deeper into the lawn. He made the blades of outfield grass taller than his eye level. Kick's pain was almost too much for him to watch.

Kick had not accepted his father's sudden Death. It weighed on him almost as heavy as Charley-Pop's lingering Death on Ryan. But it was

more than his father.

The bank in Birmingham had tied up his trust fund.

And then there was Logan; some vague trouble that Ryan knew had long been brewing.

But Ryan, and this was part of the secret of his successful intimacy with men, never asked questions. He disciplined himself to a priestly patience and waited until the information, he in truth out of curiosity was dying for, was simply confessed.

“I love you.” Ryan primed the pump.

“I love you.”

“I love you, Billy Ray, more than anyone.”

Kick looked a bit shocked hearing his own real Southern Baptist name.

“Life isn’t always up,” Ryan said. “God! You know I know that. It’s okay for you to come down off the posing platform. It’s okay for you to be tired.”

“I shouldn’t have come down from Bar Nada this weekend.” He hesitated. “But sometimes things get a little out of control up there.”

“Things have always gotten out of control up there. I think there’s a curse on the place.”

“No,” Kick said. “Bar Nada is a wonderful place. It’s me, I guess.”

Ryan felt a competitive surge. He could beat Logan’s big muscles if only he could be equally somehow larger than life. He had only words, but words were his strong suit.

“I may not have eighteen-inch biceps,” he said, “but my arms are big enough to hold you.” He caught himself. He remembered his own claustrophobia from Teddy’s holding onto him. “I mean big enough to embrace you.”

“You’re the biggest man I know,” Kick said. “Honestly.”

“Honesty is all we’ve got going.” Ryan ached to tell Kick how hurt he was by his long absences. He ached to tell him how foolish he was to waste precious time on Logan. He ached to tell Kick that he was in-love with him and that it was time for Kick to respect that and not deny it. But he did not. He did not lie exactly; rather, he dissembled: that quality of saying the almost-whole truth, and nothing but the almost-whole truth, that the other party wants to hear as the whole truth.

“I wouldn’t trade this moment,” Ryan said, “for six of our usual nights, wonderful as they are. We’re beginning to touch each other.” He grasped for straws. “We’re not even stoned.”

“Maybe we should be.”

“No,” Ryan said. “We don’t need drug energy. We need our Energy. Sometimes emotional exhaustion, exactly like muscle failure at the gym when your muscles get so tired you can’t grind out another rep, is necessary. Without that final exhaustion rep, the muscles won’t grow.”

The heart won’t grow.

“But I hurt,” Kick said.

I hurt too.

Ryan felt something pass over the playground, something like the shadow of a hawk, something like the Nameless Dread he had felt all his life in his own heart, something now stalking Kick himself.

“Trust me,” Ryan said. *Logan*. “Through all this. Trust me. You always said we were safe people for each other. I won’t hurt you. Why would anybody ever hurt anyone else like that? Don’t retreat from me.” *Don’t go back to Bar Nada*. “Don’t retreat from anyone.” And he meant Logan. “Especially not ever from me. I’ll never crowd you. You know that.” He flicked an ant, lost in the blond fur on Kick’s arm, into the grass. “You and I both worship the same concept of manliness. You happen to have it incarnate in your body. That’s a hard gift. I worship that in you the way you worship it. But beyond that, leaving go of that, I know the difference. I love you, the private real you, wherever you are inside that face and body.”

“You can’t know what it’s like,” Kick said.

“I’m finding out. Someday I’m going to write a book called *The Other Side of Death in Venice*. It’ll be Tazio’s story. No one has ever considered the psychology of blonds beloved by dark men.” Ryan ran his hand through Kick’s thick blond hair.

“After all this time,” Kick asked, “am I still so blond to you?”

“Fair is fair,” Ryan said.

For all his fatigue, Kick lay splendid in the grass. His current sadness detracted little from his Look. If he was not a god come perfectly incarnate to Earth, he looked at least as if some advanced interstellar scanner had computed the ideal male form from all of Earth’s sculpture and painting and then filled out that form with shining golden protoplasm from some pleasant alien star.

“I wish this pain would pass,” Kick said. “This never happens to me.”

How can you let Logan call the shots?

“It’s happening now,” Ryan said. “Maybe it’s good it’s happening now.” *God knows I’m an expert when it comes to depression*. He never felt more like a father-confessor than at this moment lying in the grass.

Ryan later wrote:

Maybe this is one of the few honest-to-god human things I can do for him, something no one else has done: simply be, be there, be present, when these moments knock him flat. There's no denying them. People flicker through life's flashes all the time refusing to acknowledge the darkness between the frames of intense light. The darkness, too, is intense. Sometimes people make it to midlife without saying, "Okay, this is what is." They think they're never going to have to face some pretty unpretty stuff, and then, when they least expect it, some evening after supper when they're carrying out the garbage, between the third and second step from the bottom, the full dark Nameless Dread of what they've so long refused to admit existed hits them. They break down. They go to pieces. The light that shone so brightly while they were very, very, very young begins to dim as the clock ticks the dimmer down, and even the most golden see how ultimate is the darkness.

"Somehow," Kick said, "so many guys think I'm responsible for their happiness."

Ryan knew he meant Logan, but the guilty flee when no one pursues. "I'm responsible for my own happiness. We're all responsible for our own happiness."

"Exactly," Kick said. "No one needs the burden of keeping someone else happy." He meant even more than Logan; he meant half of Castro. He was a popular man. Guys imitated his Look. They tried to dress like him, to walk like him, to workout like him. They cut their hair like him. They wanted to be him. Ryan recognized the adulation other men gave Kick. He himself, at least every other day, wanted to be, if not Kick, then like Kick. All their time together had made Ryan's starving want a hunger, an endless, aching need; but he kept it under control. "And all this gossip," Kick said, "that I may be from another planet."

"How California!"

"I can't believe guys are walking around thinking that may be true."

"Where could they have gotten that?" Ryan feigned Ah-do-declare innocence. "Those clever Castronauts will believe anything."

"They better get over it," Kick said.

Ryan looked hard at Kick, the way Star Children dropped down from some other galaxy might almost recognize in each other the echoes of their disremembered home star.

“Is it true?” Ryan dared finally blurt the question directly. “Is it true? Maybe you can’t tell me. Maybe you don’t quite remember.” He was awash in a wave of vague homesickness. “You know I recognized you the moment I met you. I know you’re you. We both know you’re something else besides.” Ryan was deadly serious but he covered himself by tickling Kick in the ribs. “You must tell me. I need to know. I need to know if you’ve come from some other star to make me one of the boys?”

“Please don’t try to humor me,” Kick said. “I’m not up to teasing.”

“Me tease you?” Ryan said. He backed off to the fixed dissembling distance and pulled out the kid gloves Kick required.

Kick was who he was, and that was his attraction. He was himself. He never tried to be someone else on the street where Attitude, being something other than real self, was all the vogue.

“I sometimes wish I was ugly.” He choked. He recovered quickly. “I wouldn’t know how to live life if I was ugly. But what am I supposed to do,” Kick said, “when my Look seduces men without me even trying to seduce them?”

“Enjoy it.”

“How can I enjoy it when they say I make them unhappy because I never go with any of them?”

You’ve gone with a few. With one too many.

“I don’t know,” Ryan said. Who could have figured there was a curse on the diamond of sex appeal? “I can only wonder what it must feel like to be able to walk up to anyone and have them.”

“I don’t want anyone. I hardly want anybody.”

Ryan felt him slip a notch away.

“Too few men hold up in intimate contact.” Kick smiled. “You hold up. You don’t ask questions.”

“I have a caution,” Ryan said, pulling Kick back towards him, “about our book. I think we better put *Universal Appeal* on the back burner. At least for a while.”

“I think you’re right,” Kick said. “I’m not all that ready to go that public at the moment. I can’t function that way. I’m tired of being everybody’s good example. I don’t want it backfiring on me.”

January’s special caused enough trouble, huh? “When the time is right,” Ryan said, “we’ll do it.”

Kick rubbed the back of his hairy forearm across Ryan’s lips. “We have all the time in the world,” he said.

Three blocks away, under the ticking clock on the Hibernia Bank, a cheer welled up from the Castro Street Fair where the crowds, shoulder to

shoulder in the streets, pushed and shoved and cruised, laughing, shouting, stoned, and dancing to the music from the bandstand set up in the street near the marquee of the Castro Theatre. The party went on without them.

“I guess we’re missing all the fun,” Kick said. “I want to keep on having as much fun as we can possibly stand.”

“Are we having fun yet?” Ryan asked.

“We’ve always had fun. The best fun.”

They both sensed their relationship had clicked another notch toward something unknown.

“We don’t see each other as much,” Kick said, “but when we do, we pickup where we left off. We’re good together. The best.”

He stood up against the western sun. His shadow dropped Ryan into cool eclipse. He reached out his hand and pulled Ryan to his feet.

“The next time,” he said, “I promise not to be so down.”

Ryan hugged him.

“One other thing,” Kick said. “Logan came back from San Diego last Monday. He closed out his apartment here before he left. I knew you wouldn’t mind if I let him come up and stay with me at the ranch.”

Ryan’s heart sank. He knew he could not say what he wanted to say, so he said, “Of course, I don’t mind. You and I both know what we’re doing in the long and short run.”

“Trust me,” Kick said. “Trust me to do right by you always.”

“I love you,” Ryan said. “How could I not trust you?”

3

The late California autumn came down upon them in a fall of colors. Everywhere the talk was of AIDS. Monday morning in the offices of San Francisco the phones rang from company to company as gay men called each other to tally up who they had heard in the weekend bar gossip had come down with the plague. Private sex had become dangerous enough. Public sex had become a scandal. Disease brought more controversy. Politics entered the bedroom. Gay sex had finally scared the horses.

The baths became a civic issue. The Mayor’s office had a tiff with the director of public health. Madame Mayor wanted the baths closed, but the director was against it. The woman was pitted against the man, and the man resigned. Gay activists rallied around constitutional rights, fearing if the baths were closed that a new era of repression would next close the bars and eventually the gay press.

Auschwitz was around the corner from 18th and Castro.

The real breach in the civil war between gays was between those who favored civil rights and those hysterics who chose a medical quarantine for health. Who was right? Who was wrong? Who could say in the disfiguring face of the A-Word? The truth was, straight San Francisco grew frightened of the gays in their midst. They feared for the purity of the City blood supply in the local banks. They sounded like Nazis worrying about the purity of Aryan blood. But the gays would be nobody's Jews. They marched against bath closure in Harvey's name. The baths shut temporarily, then reopened with safe-sex guards patrolling the halls to prevent exchanges of bodily fluids. The Marx Brothers could have starred in an impossible new comedy: *A Night at the Baths*. Attendance dipped, then rose slightly, and leveled. Sex became even more than ever an ironic denial of Death. The late-night back rooms, never ready to say die, invented Safe Sex Jerk-Off Nights. Free condoms. The bars stayed busy as ever.

Kick, two days after the Castro Street Fair, had fled the Castro for Bar Nada. The City and the plague were too much for him. Every two weeks or so he drove to the Victorian to let himself go, to vent the kind of sex he could have only with Ryan.

Between times, Ryan pined away, his depression deepening, keeping himself sane by beating himself to orgasm with Kick's image before him, posing in slow motion on the video screen.

Half a loaf was better than none.

Ryan was preparing the Christmas issue of *Maneuvers* when the doorbell rang. It was late on the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving and he was expecting no one. He was doubly surprised when it turned out to be Kick standing on the doorstep of the Victorian with his suitcase in his hand.

"I've come back from the ranch," Kick said. The implication which Ryan could neither acknowledge nor question was that Kick's affair with Logan was over.

"Where will you stay?" Ryan asked. He knew the answer.

"Birmingham," Kick said. It sounded like a major threat. "Unless you let me stay here with you."

Ryan could not help but think he had won. He was like the long-suffering wife in so many Warner Brothers movies, bearing up courageously while her husband took a ridiculous header with some bimbo showgirl.

"It worked off and on for a couple of months or so," Kick said.

"Where is he now?" Funny that neither one mentioned Logan's name.

"He's still at the ranch. He has no place to go. I told him you wouldn't

mind if he stayed there till after New Year's."

Ryan had avoided the ranch since the first days after Thom's Death. He hardly wanted to spend the holidays at the scene of the suicide.

"I knew you wouldn't want to go up there now."

"It's okay," Ryan said. He would have agreed to anything to have Kick back in his bed for Christmas.

"I need to come back to hit the gym. I want to get into top shape again. There's the Mr. California contest in the spring."

"Mr. California," Ryan said. "I like the sound of that."

"I need you to help psych me up for it," Kick said.

"I need you," Ryan said. "This AIDS thing is killing me. But why should it? I'm not interested in anyone but you."

"We're not exposed," Kick said. "For the last three years, who've we had sex with? Hardly anyone."

"When you're not here, I want you. When I can't have you, I think about cruising the bars, but I don't because I don't want anyone but you and even if I did, I wouldn't, because for the first time in my life strangers scare me."

"It'll be like old times," Kick said.

He hoped that Kick's revolving relationship with Logan was over for good. He was no fool. He was determined to be gentlemanly. If Logan had been good for Kick for a while, then he deserved at least to have a place to stay until after Christmas. Besides, Ryan had long before learned never to say anything about the absent party when a couple was breaking up, because if they kissed and made up, as often happened, they'd both hate you for anything you said. So Ryan stayed silent, even though he wished Logan dead: first for taking Kick away from him so often, and then for treating Kick badly.

"My New Year's resolution is to take possession of the ranch again." Ryan made his intention clear. "He can stay there for a while."

"It's better to have someone there than to have the place stand empty," Kick said. "Besides, he has some business to finish. When that's done, he'll leave."

"What business could he possibly have?" Ryan asked.

Kick beamed a surprise. "He's been growing pot in that old greenhouse behind the barn."

Ryan was shocked. "We could all get arrested!"

"It was my idea too." Kick softened the news. "I figured we could make a little money on the side. He knows all about cultivation. I told him we'd divide the profit three ways."

“Three ways? Why three ways? I’m not involved No way!” *I hate three-ways.*

“I helped him remodel the greenhouse. He’s been tending the crop since late summer. Besides, the place is yours. You have a right to get what’s coming to you as the owner.”

“We’re all going to end up in jail.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kick said. “We got a late start in the season, so we’ll have a late harvest. But I guarantee you it will be ready right after New Year’s. He’s rigged up a high-tech grow-light system. You could use the money, right? He knows how to unload it. He has connections to sell it in San Diego. He figures a late crop will bring more because the earlier crops all had to compete with each other. There’s always scarcity after the holidays.” Kick smiled his killer smile. “It’s okay, isn’t it?”

Ryan could refuse him nothing.

4

He wrote in his *Journal*:

I wonder why I can’t say no. I wonder why I don’t say what I really want to say. I know why. I love him. I want to live for him. I want to give myself up to him in sweet, sweet surrender. I want to be everything he wants me to be. I know that’s sick in away, but, God knows, I’m bent, sick, and twisted.

The nuns wanted me to be pure.

The priests wanted me to be holy.

My father wanted me to be athletic.

My mother wanted me to be myself.

All these people knew about sin, but only my mother knew about real sin. As a girl she had learned that she had best live for her husband. Luckily, Charley-Pop was the man of her dreams. Even so, she always said she wouldn’t jump off a bridge because everyone else was, and the arch of her finely plucked eyebrow intimated that “everyone else” also included Charley-Pop. She always did as she pleased, and that pleased Charley who felt it was his husbandly right to encourage his wife. Annie Laurie was headstrong but not willful. She was independent but not mean. She was religious but not superstitious.

She thought most women were silly, dishonest things who lied and connived their way through their husband’s suit pockets

looking for spare change. She had many women friends, but she also had ideas about the way women should ideally be. Something in her style taught me early on that the worst thing anyone could do was not be themselves, and that the worst offenders of this commandment, which was my mother's commandment, were women.

The nuns, women themselves, made her seem correct. They taught me that young Catholic girls were a source of temptation to sins of sexual impurity. Maybe they were lesbian nuns. Anyway, I never really understood that, because wait as I might for it to happen, girls, Catholic or otherwise, never materialized as objects of desire.

Then, from my mother, I discovered that she found the worst kind of female trouble to be women's sin of self-denial. Naturally, I came to think of most women as examples no man should imitate.

Charley-Pop, on the other hand, reinforced the nuns and the priests. They all talked about my becoming a man, but their talk was all abstractions and mortal sins. They couldn't make it clear to me what a man was. I lacked something. Perhaps the kind of understanding that happens not in the head but in the flesh. I wanted naked men to breakthrough the doors of my dormitory at Misericordia and march me out in front of all the other boys and war-paint me purple and wrestle me around in the grass in a circle of roaring firelight and make me wear a tight loincloth.

I could not even imagine sex between people then. I knew men and women did something, but I didn't know what, and when I finally asked at eighteen what it was I knew I could never have imagined anything as bizarre as the sex in heterosexuality, and I wondered however did anyone ever think up something that disgusting? No wonder straights never want to talk about sex. No wonder gays can't shut up.

In addition, naive simp that I was, I had no idea men could have sex with other men, but I knew of a vague longing I had to be with and be like other guys. I lacked something more than factual and emotional sex education. I lacked a dramatic—even Hollywood—rite of passage to manhood.

My life might have taken a totally different turn if my father on my sixteenth birthday had, more than driving me to daily mass, given me some ritual icons of passage like a razor,

aftershave, a jockstrap, and condoms. But Catholic boys never receive such gifts.

Somehow I misunderstood all the signals from my childhood. The nuns hardly meant that I should never touch girls. The priests saw my “holiness,” born of fear of hell, to be a calling to their priesthood and I in terror followed.

Charley-Pop wanted me to be what I knew I could never be: a jock like he was. So, instead, I became the perennial buddy of jocks, the way I was a buddy to him. My mother meant for me to be me. Instead I tried to be what she wanted me to be, that is, what I thought she wanted me to be. I branched out from my family to Misericordia, always being, instead of me, what I thought the priests wanted me to be. A priest must be all things to all men.

I’m a chameleon.

That’s why I’ve been good in bed on Castro and Folsom, and especially with Kick. I’m so eager to please I’ll do anything to pleasure anybody especially when they’ve got what I want. That’s the bottom line: I’ll be anything anybody wants. I’ve traded self-realization into self-abnegation.

That’s my mortal sin.

I should have listened to what my mother really said when she told me, “Don’t become a priest for me. Do it for yourself and for God if you think that’s what God wants you to be.” All she wanted for me was the Ryan-ness of being Ryan. All she wanted was for me to be me. She would never approve of me trying to be not-me to please Kick or anyone else. She could have hung out happily with Emerson at Concord. Jeez! Why do I always understand everything intellectually but fail to understand it emotionally?

She would never object to my loving Kick because he was the same gender. “I know what goes on in the world,” she said. “I’m not dumb. I don’t care. As long as no one forces anything on me or on you.” She would have only one objection to Kick: that I have given up another chance to be to my own self true in order to keep Kick happy and coming back for more.

So what am I going to do about it? And when?

Don’t ask me. Ask my dick.

5

“Oh, Magnus,” Ryan sat with me in a Castro restaurant, “identity is like AIDS. We should have listened to our mothers. Our mothers were right. Be yourself. Don’t do what others do. Always wash your hands after you go to the bathroom. Don’t eat after other people. Don’t take rides and candy from strangers.”

“At least with the plague on,” I said, “you’ve more time to spend with me.”

“I need to talk to someone sometimes,” Ryan said. “I’ve always liked you, Magnus. I’ve made you executor of my will. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I’d mind if anything happened to you,” I said.

I truly feared for him, for Kick, for Teddy, for all of them. The news from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta was not good. Two cases of AIDS were diagnosed every day and the diagnosis was a Death sentence.

“I’m leaving everything to Kick and Kweenie and my mother and Solly, but I’m leaving you enough,” Ryan said, “to handle all my papers, writings, photographs, and videotapes.”

“You’re being overdramatic.”

“These are dramatic times.” He looked at me and raised my water glass. “This very tumbler may be infected,” he said. “Remember the tea scene in *Cabaret* when Liza told Marisa Berenson they could get VD from teacups.”

I remembered.

“I know it sounds alarmist,” Ryan said, “but what are we doing eating in a gay restaurant?”

A certain paranoia rode a pale horse down Castro. I watched things change in San Francisco. The six-o’clock news was a nightly dirge. AIDS was a surefire pull for viewers. The terrifying news was not good. AIDS was associated with four groups, three of whom were people who weren’t all that socially acceptable to the real Mr. America and his Mrs. From the start, hemophiliacs, dependent on the public blood supply, had the public sympathy. The rest were third world Haitians, intravenous drug users, and the group most widely infected—gay males.

“The worst thing to be in the world today,” Solly said, “is a gay Haitian hemophiliac junkie trying to maintain his job as a waiter.”

AIDS was a medical mugging. The disease hurt the image of gay men worse than any fag-bashing had ever hurt any gay men kicked to the sidewalk by young toughs in from the burbs of Orinda and Moraga to bag themselves some queers. The gay press called for candlelight marches from

Castro to City Hall to focus attention on the government's lack of funding for immediate AIDS research. The gay view was that Legionnaires' Disease, and the toxic shock syndrome that afflicted young middle-class girls, had both been funded immediately to find a fast cure. The news said nothing so well as the fact that AIDS was untreatable. It had no prevention. It had no cure. And the people with the money hardly seemed to care.

The initial medical opinion warned that nearly all gay men had come into contact with the immunity-suppressing virus. After fighting through to the grudging acceptance of gay liberation, which was only a dozen years old, gay men found they were suddenly social pariahs once again. Straight San Francisco treated the Castro like a leper colony as subtly as some had tacitly approved the gun in Dan White's hand. Almost overnight, fewer and fewer straights dared to come to the Castro for a chic supper and a movie at the Castro Theatre. In downtown offices, straight people gathered around Xerox machines and wondered if they could still go to lunch with the amusing gay men with whom they worked.

The uncivil tension between Pacific Heights gays and Castro gays and Folsom gays widened momentarily. Cocksuckers blamed the fuckers who blamed the piss drinkers who blamed the fist fuckers who blamed the scatmen; and everyone blamed the shooters with their needles. Finally, even while the panic—and it was real panic—rose in those first months, they all knew they had no choice but to band together to save themselves, because no one else would save them. Their history taught them that.

Not everyone who was gay had come out to their parents and family, and suddenly some of the dying had to make long-distance phone calls to announce the double punch of news that they were gay and they were going to die of AIDS.

From San Francisco and Los Angeles and New York the phone calls and letters reached out across the whole country. Parents who knew their sons were gay, and parents who suspected their sons were gay, feared for the lives of their boys. Some could talk of it and some could not, anymore than they could overtly acknowledge what they knew to be their son's sexual essence. Annie Laurie, I'm sure, was praying her rosary for Ryan and all the friends of his she had ever met, Kick included.

Kick was unmoved. He had the antidote: a sound mind in a sound body. Positive Attitude was everything. For him, bodybuilding was the key to health. He quoted to Ryan from *Sun and Steel*, the Yukio Mishima book about bodybuilding that Ryan had given him for his thirty-fourth birthday.

Mishima, complaining that men are weighted down by the same

sagging pull of gravity Ryan had long before recognized, advised that the sweating and pumping of bodybuilding flushed gray existential gravity from athletic males, much the same as Melville saw his perfect blond seaman, like Terence Stamp, in *Billy Budd*, his young muscle facing existential Death, being hanged at sunrise, take on in his firm flesh the full rose of the dawn.

After the one weekend of his depression, Kick regained his indefatigable upbeat ways. Pumping iron could defeat AIDS. He insisted he was at the new dawn of his own muscle. He refused to discuss AIDS. For him, the epidemic did not exist.

Ryan knew better. He knew that the Dread he had always feared was roaring like a fire out of control across the horizon of San Francisco rooftops. He knew that finally the Nameless Dread had a name.

But Kick would not allow him to speak it. Whatever Kick wanted, Kick got. He was the only relief Ryan could find. He embraced Kick as his refuge, his safe harbor from AIDS; but deep in his heart, deep in that part of his heart that he always kept from Kick, he secretly feared that Kick and he were clapping as hard as they could to make Tinker Bell live, and this time they might not be able to clap long and hard enough.

Their nightplay was as good as it had always been. They roamed naked together through candlelit rooms full of flowers. Kick produced endless small packets of Kryptonite.

“Okay, Superman, mix me half of what you take,” Ryan said. He trusted Kick. He never looked at the mixture he drank in the wine glass Kick handed him. Whatever Kryptonite was, it worked quickly and gently. It rose and peaked during three hours of sexplay. By the fourth hour, its rush was spent so completely by the greater rush of orgasm that even Ryan was able to drift off to sleep without his usual Valium.

“We’ve found the drug that’s right for us,” Kick said.

Nightly he mixed the cocktails and brought them to Ryan in the mirrored playroom. They conjured a new Energy transcendence on the old. Ryan worked his invocations on Kick’s hard new muscle. His training for the Mr. California was zipping along. Kick had been big before, but now he was growing larger, massive, with an even more precise symmetry than he had displayed in the Mr. San Francisco.

So close those nights were the two of them that they pushed out farther the bounds of the finite, moving from the flesh, through the worship of the extravagant muscle they both loved, to some ecstatic plane outside space and time where for a few brief shining moments they hung suspended together beyond words, blended finally and totally, the one

into the other, so that no longer were there two of them. There was only one. Two hearts, two minds, two bodies melded together into one Edenic being. They checked out from Earth on high flight to paradise. More even than before they defied gravity and rose the way lovers always rise, transcending even *le petite morte* of the body with the soaring aspirations of two souls become one.

I knew of those dangerous nights. Ryan could not but tell Solly and me. We both knew that whatever happened between them in the mirrored playroom in the basement of the Victorian checked out in both the look on Ryan's face and the undeniable change in Kick's Look.

Something even in Kick's face shifted. The man himself metamorphosed, during those autumn days at the gym and during those nights of Ryan's imaging chants, into a blond Viking warlord, heroic: huge thighs, exquisite washboard abs, thickening pecs and back and shoulders, and a pair of arms without peer. He stopped shaving his body. A golden layer of Nordic blond hair upholstered all his muscle. He was, by anyone's tally, a sight to see.

Solly mused that he thought that both Ryan and Kick, and Ryan more than Kick, were in a dangerous psychological situation. "I don't have to be a Jungian analyst to wonder how they can get that high without an air traffic controller. Freud might approve. Jung wouldn't."

I abstained. I am, after all, a critic. I can only judge something after it happens. One thing I knew for sure. Ryan, during these nights of Kick's return in the month before Christmas, was more turned on than ever, and Kick played so lovingly with him that Ryan could forgive him anything and everything that had ever happened with Logan. Ryan hardly cared that Logan was tending marijuana up at Bar Nada. Kick made him forget, at least for the hours when they worked their sexual magic, that AIDS stalked the City.

On the December anniversary of Pearl Harbor, Kick made one startling comment. "I love Logan," he said.

Finally there rang out that crystal-clear moment of truth, when a sound like the far-off peal of a bell on an ice-cold day can be heard nearly around the world.

"I love Logan." Kick said it again. "And I love you. But I love you both differently. I want you to understand that. I know you do. You always have. I need you to." Kick had thought a great deal about his situation. He hardly wanted to be torn between two lovers. "I want to come out of all this with two friends."

He loves me and he loves Logan? Ryan for an instant hated his own

body—not for the spiritual reasons the priests at Misericordia had taught him—but for a different reason. *But he wouldn't have to love him at all if I could put my head inside Logan's body.*

If Ryan had learned anything in dealing with a Southern man like Kick, it was patience. He would wait to say what he would not say now. Instead, he said, "I know you need a man to fit your fantasies the way you fit mine. I want you to have everything. Only, don't lose contact with me. What we have is too good to lose."

"I know," Kick said. "Neither of us can conjure alone as well as we can when we're together. We have special times, you and I, but there's other kinds of special times I need to have with Logan. I don't want either of you to be jealous."

"I'm not jealous." Ryan spoke what he thought was the absolute truth of a generous heart. "Really I'm not. I never have been. You can have anything you want. But I've seen him hurt you."

"Sometimes he hurts me," Kick said.

"I hope I've never hurt you." Ryan fished.

"You've never hurt me. You and he are nothing like each other, but..."

"But you more than love him. I can tell." Ryan remembered Kick's commandment to him. "You're in-love with him."

Kick looked Ryan directly in the eyes. "Yes. I'm in-love with him."

"Are you in-love with me?" Ryan knew the answer and did not fear it.

"We always said we'd never fall in-love with each other."

"Other lovers do. Why do we have to be different?" Ryan said.

"Because what we have is different from anything else in the world. We have spectacular sex. I love you for that. I love you for your head. If I fell in-love with you, it would ruin everything."

"How would it ruin anything?" Ryan asked.

"It would trivialize the grand passion we both have for muscle." Kick was a good student of a better coach. He had learned from Ryan to speak words Ryan's way. "What we have is what you're always talking about."

"What's that?"

"Something existential. It affects our very existence."

"Logan doesn't affect your existence?"

"No." Kick drawled softly. He wished Ryan no hurt. "What I have with Logan is something, well, romantic." He took Ryan's hand. "You're a necessity to me. He's a luxury."

Ryan found it strange that he liked the concept. Love was a necessity. Romance was a luxury. He was beginning to hate semantics.

"I don't love him the way I love you, but I've been in-love with him

for some time now.”

“I’ve always known it,” Ryan said. He damned January Guggenheim’s documentary. If only they hadn’t been so bold as to go public, spreading Kick’s image across ten billion cathode ray tubes, showing him up on the TV screen in Logan’s apartment in San Diego.

He knew for certain they’d never publish the words and pictures of *Universal Appeal*.

Ryan was no doubt a fool for love, but he wasn’t that much of a fool. He had known from the moment of Logan’s sudden arrival on Castro that Kick had fallen immediately in-love with him. He had hoped that Logan would wear thin. But he had not. He had hoped Logan would be a casual fling. But he was not. He knew it for certain the first time Kick had come back to him bruised by a tiff with Logan. He knew that the fights that drove Kick down from Bar Nada were lovers’ quarrels.

“You and I have always talked of our gentlemen’s agreement,” Ryan said. “I’ve always been gentlemanly with you and I always will be.”

“Don’t you see?” Kick asked. “This is my chance, your chance, our chance to live the total concept of homomasculline fraternity.”

“But you’re in-love with him,” Ryan said.

“No more than you’re in-love with me.”

“You’ve always known that?”

“From the very first night,” Kick said. “I’ve always admired the way you kept it under control. You have more self-discipline than any dedicated bodybuilder. I love your control. If there can be a purity to being in-love, you’ve got it, Ry. In that way, I want to be exactly like you.”

God damn the irony! “I always thought it was the other way around.”

“You’re the only man I know big enough to handle this. We’ve never crowded each other. Why should we start now? We can have anything we want.”

“I thought being in-love was something you had declared out-of-bounds.”

“I thought so too. At first.” Kick was all style. Good-looking people can get away with murder. He kept himself ingratiated to Ryan. “But you handle being in-love with me so well that I figured I could learn that from you too. You’re my coach, Ry. You teach me things. You seem so happy in-love with me. I wanted to feel that kind of happiness too.”

I should yell. I should scream. I should fight. “Then I want you to have it.” Ryan made up his mind to mean it.

“There’s enough of me to go around,” Kick said. “Big muscles. Big heart. Big soul.”

6

I knew only later what Ryan did not know then. Kick had moved up from oral steroids to injectable Decadurobolin. He was on the needle. He was on the juice. Ryan should have suspected that Kick's great increase in muscle growth was due less to mind control and imaging than it was to chemicals, but he wanted to believe in the power of Kick's head and heart to create naturally the new physique that was on a par with professional bodybuilders.

A man has only so much soul to fill up his flesh. If he takes steroids, his body grows so unnaturally big his natural soul cannot expand to fill it up. The soul stretches, dilutes, thins, weakens. All the former natural Force and Energy pales even as the false Frankenstein flesh grows bigger. Magnanimity, largeness of the soul, is a relative gift. A lucky man is born with enough soul to fill his body. He is gracious, kind, loving.

Steroids undo a man's natural luck. His body, in a kind of retro anorexia nervosa, outstrips his soul. His flesh thickens the way one's hands thicken after applauding a great performance; the hands still move, articulate, around the bones and sinews, but they are bigger, harder, less sensitive than before. They don't feel like the same hands. Once so thickened by steroids, the bodybuilder becomes duplicitous, like the alcoholic who is a surreptitious drinker, trying to work both ends against the middle, the way Kick worked Ryan, to pump up the soul he knows has become nervous, anxious, too small for his pumped-up flesh. His soul becomes lost in his huge new physical proportions. He falls from grace.

Once, Ryan had recognized Kick as Adam before the Fall. He could hardly recognize this new Kick who had come back to him speaking of love for Logan.

The steroids had made his body bigger. He wanted Ryan to make his soul grow to fill it. All along, Ryan thought that Kick's magnanimity had been larger than his natural body. Within that big-souled limit, he had rationalized Kick's careful use of the unnatural oral growth hormones.

Musclemania has no conscience.

Ryan would allow almost anything that could make Kick's physical being grow to match the Energy of his soul which he touched so intimately in their night-games. What he should not have allowed was Kick's body growing too massive for his soul. But Ryan did not know that Kick told only the half-truth. He masked the source of his muscle growth. He talked of harder workouts with Logan. He never mentioned the real intensified motives for his monthly trips to Dr. Steroid's castle laboratory in El Lay.

He never mentioned the tiny Deca bottles and the hypodermic syringes the doctor gave him in trade for sex. Only ugly bodybuilders pay cash for steroids.

Kick masked the truth.
Ryan dissembled.
They both lied.
They both wanted more.

Kick bent over, his butt in the air, and took the needle from Logan. Logan wanted to take muscle farther than even Kick had imaged. Logan persuaded Kick to up the dosage. Sticking Kick gave him a sense of power. Kick did not say *no*. He watched Logan shoot himself up. He was the handsome, dark, muscle-beast of Kick's own private dreams. He knew how to play "Hot Cop," and Kick liked to get arrested. They were on a fantasy trip of their own.

"Steroids are great," Logan said. "They're like injecting coke."
"The side effects of steroids," Solly said, "is Attitude."

Without Ryan's knowledge, and without his coaching, which might have saved him, Kick passed the point of no return. His body grew too big for his soul. His Energy dissipated, thinned, spread out through his new bigness. He was shot full of steroids and more ruggedly handsome than ever. He was what Ryan would later biblically call "a whitened sepulcher."

Ryan had been mistaken. He had thought Logan to be the source of Kick's depression that day of the Castro Street Fair when they had lain in the grass of the Eureka Playground. He never suspected that Kick's anxiety was a side effect of the steroids.

Ryan had truly believed in Kick's magnanimity, because he truly believed in his own. He knew his own soul, his own Energy was bigger than his long, lean body. More than one trick had told him, "When I first met you, I thought you were much smaller than you are." The truth was, Ryan's magnanimity projected a certain power. Kick had seen that their first night together. That was, in fact, the very reason Kick had taken up with Ryan. "You are the richest man I know," he had said. He meant not in property, not in money, the way a cheap hustler might have worked the angle, but richness of soul.

"The way," Solly said later, "an expensive hustler works his even more expensive angle."

Ironically, finally, when Kick's own muscle became larger than his own soul, Ryan's magnanimity became a reproach to Kick. What is reproachful becomes something to exploit. Kick went over the edge so subtly I think he hardly realized his fall. He was essentially a good man.

It was more that he knew he needed from Ryan some way to regain the very Energy he knew he was losing in himself as his soul thinned and weakened and he fell in-love with someone he knew in his heart of hearts was not evolved enough for him. He had taken a step not up, but down, the old evolutionary ladder.

Kick's legitimate pride in himself, once his soul grew thin and wasted by the systemic plague of the steroids, was replaced with a certain vanity, the sin of the thin-souled. He lost proportion. How ironic. Proportion was the very thing he had sought to achieve in bodybuilding.

"Contests," he had said, "are won on proportion of legs and arms to torso and head."

In Ryan's videos of his first physique contests, Kick had radiated a finessed proportion of body and soul and manly energy. In later videos, he showed only brute physical proportion of arms and legs and pecs and shoulders. He moved from the idealized sport of bodybuilding to the hard-core business of the muscle game. His new heavy-iron muscle Look at first masked the fact that he had lost the essential proportion of body and soul.

He had become meat.

His face, which Ryan thought had changed when he came back that night before Thanksgiving, was a dead giveaway. Among bodybuilders on steroids, there is at first a slight change in the shape of their faces. I've never seen a professional bodybuilder who didn't have more chin than seems humanly possible. Initially this change is aggressively attractive. Every man wants more chin. But then this acromegaly, this slow rearrangement of the face, after a number of years, can produce prominent, often uplifting, enlargement of the facial bone structure. Is Schwarzenegger's newly refined movie star face a plastic surgeon's reduction of his bodybuilder acromegaly? I wonder. Ryan had thought the slight change in the forward thrust of Kick's strong chin was simply another notch in the intensity of his manly Look. He had loved him for his face as much as for his muscle and his soul. Ryan had no objectivity at all. The lover never really knows the beloved.

7

On that night before Thanksgiving, neither knew that they were on a trajectory of ruin. Sometimes it is better not to know the future. What I tell here, I tell from the rearview mirror. I know now what Ryan was too innocent to know then. What is, is, Solly constantly, irritatingly, repeated.

And what was, was that Kick was about to break Ryan's heart as he himself lost the heart Ryan had first immediately loved that El Lay enchanted evening when Kick came through the door and walked, more than he walked into the room, into the fulfillment of a magnanimous image Ryan had always carried in his heart of what the perfect man should be.

"Of course I'm in-love with you," Ryan said. "And you're worth falling-in-love with. No offense to Logan, but is he worthy enough for a man like you?"

"Logan has his faults. He's learning. Maybe he'll learn some worth from me. The way I learned true worth from you."

Worthiness was not Logan's long suit. He had arrived from San Diego where he had survived dealing grass and working some not-so-vague bodybuilding scam. He had been hustling musclesex and he had worked his way through every buyer in town. He found no problem in splitting for San Francisco. When he first played his hand at the corner of 18th and Castro, he epitomized what the street was about, and he dragged Kick down into the thick of it. The two of them became showboats.

"Showgirls," Solly said. "A gay man with a lust for bodybuilders is like a straight man with a thing for Vegas showgirls."

Castro had been Ryan's stomping ground long before it became Logan's and Kick's. Solly had given up on the Castro completely, and like many men no longer went near the neighborhood. But Ryan had found at the intersection of 18th and Castro a certain vitality that, for all its faults, he wished to chronicle in his writing. He wanted to capture it. He may have knocked it, but down deep he liked it. The gay emergence was the only shell game in town. Castro, after all, was what was happening in San Francisco, the way that, years before, the Haight-Ashbury had produced the flower children, and before that, the North Beach of Kerouac and Cassady and Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti had produced the Beat Generation.

I understood Ryan's analytical genealogy. It matched mine as a pop culturist. The Castro was the latest manifestation of the libertine dream of Kerouac and Cassady who both finally gave up on the travesty that media attention had made of the Beats. Like them, and the Kesey hippies after them, Ryan saw the gay dream desaturated, gutted, by people who lost the essence of what it all meant, and went instead for the glitz, exchanging life for lifestyle, encouraged by types like January Guggenheim who had their own reasons of gain to exploit gay liberation. Nothing ruins a popular grass-roots movement more than making the cover of *TIME* magazine. Ask Leonard Matlovich. His face on that pioneering 1975 cover with the declaration, "I am a homosexual," ruined his life.

Sex, more than love, was the Castro style, but *lover* was the word most used. For every real lover, ten imposters lurked. Vampire tricks cruised the night. Anne Rice, who lived in the Castro, knew. Ryan knew. He tried to drive a stake through such love's heart.

Ryan understood the intersection. Both its joys and its dangers. He knew how to move counter to its beat. "What movie are we?" he asked Kweenie. They had stood, her first weekend in the City, when she was still Margaret Mary, at 18th and Castro. "We're *Blow-Up*."

He had warned his sister to be careful to maintain herself against the Castro beat. He had told her how David Hemmings had coached Vanessa Redgrave. "Hemmings," he had said, "takes Redgrave home and puts a jazz record on the stereo. She begins to snap her fingers to the insistent beat and she is very uncool trying to get with it. Hemmings stops her, tells her *no*, teaches her how to snap her fingers off the beat, shows her how to move to her own rhythms against the rhythms of the record. He shows her how to remain herself and still enjoy the music. He teaches her how to be cool."

Kweenie built her meteoric singing career on that advice alone.

Ryan at first maintained his own beat. It's not the drinking that makes a person an alcoholic; it's the inability to function. A man following his cock around can't be too careful. One morning he might wake up caring about nothing but sex, and call into work dead. The Castro style spit in the face of function. Something in the Castro afternoons and the Folsom nights drowned out the pure message of the siren call that had brought them all to San Francisco. The downward mobility of gay men became a street virtue on Castro where SSI checks were waved as victory flags against the straight system.

Did the quality of orgasm suffer? In the *Manifesto* Ryan theorized:

As there are women who have never cum, so are there men who have often ejaculated, who have often spasmed, but have never really cum. Perhaps a man can't truly know his own masculinity until he has transcended simple ejaculation and truly cum in his head and his heart and his body with another man. The coming together of gay liberation in San Francisco is a chance for the great rebirth of masculinity Whitman predicted. Where else can one see so many males, many highly talented, most educated to the nines, the majority of them from middle-class families who had spent a fortune on orthodontia?

The potential was staggering. He saw their mass vocation as a call to productive grace which, if applied correctly, could lead to a rebirth of the

male prerogative which had so suddenly lost out to the bitchy rantings of a toothy, ravenous feminism. It wasn't masculinist separatism he wanted. That was merely temporary antidote to separatist feminism. What he wanted for women and men was a renaissance of humanism.

His was a call for men to function in their own way. Kick became his supreme symbol of a man who creates himself, whose self then becomes metaphor of communication to others to allow them to realize that as one man can create the magnificent Entity of himself, so his example can encourage each one to create his own self in his own way.

Bodybuilding was his main metaphor for self-creation in all its infinite varieties.

Truth belied wishful thinking. Philosophy means little to men following their dicks around. Hardballing sex leaves little time for contemplation, for courting, for romance, for all the little niceties of interpersonal relationships. The more depersonalized the sex, the less reason there was for anyone developing himself as a person. Was it tongue-in-cheek when Boyd MacDonald, who published the very popular underground magazine *Straight to Hell*, wrote, "I'm not a person. I'm a piece of meat."

The Meat Mentality pervaded Castro. Most of the men on the street did nothing but cruise and fuck. It was understandable in the first flush of coming out of long-repressed closets. Ryan had lived that way for his first five or six years in the City. He had loved his life in the fast lane, but after awhile, quantity wasn't enough. He set out to find quality and he found Kick. He found a joy well beyond the fun of anonymous balling. Kick turned him around. He no longer spent all his Energy late nights in dark baths. With Kick, he hoped to make up for lost time precisely as he had hoped to make up for lost time after he had left Misericordia and gone into the world. He was glad his sexual panic was ended. He wanted to share that idea.

"What movie are we?" Ryan asked.

"*The Prodigal* with Lana Turner?" I said.

"No," he said. "The main Castro movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*."

"That's you all over," Solly said to Ryan.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because of the song," Solly said. "It should be Ryan's main theme."

"What song?" Ryan asked.

"In just seven days," Solly said, "I'll make you a man!"

"I was thinking more," Ryan said, "about *Rocky's* line that fits life on Castro. 'Madness takes its toll.'"

It had hurt Ryan to see Kick grow more and more gay. He had wanted Kick to maintain, to be as big as the heroic Hercules he had seen on the screen when he was a child. He needed Kick to remain archetypal with an aura, because an archetype fallen was no more than a stereotype.

“Actually,” Solly mused, “all archetypes are stereotypes, and vice versa.”

Ryan squeezed his eyes shut and held his ears. He clapped his hands to make Tinker Bell live. He stopped going down to Castro altogether.

Acquaintances kept him posted, more than he wanted, on Kick’s frequent street appearances with Logan through those lonely two months of Indian summer. Ryan was frightened for Kick. He thought of him as an innocent abroad. He was a southern boy swept up in a Northern California whirlwind. He did not know what Ryan knew from his years in the City. The downward mobility of homosexual men as they exit from straight middle-class values and come out into the gay lifestyle is legendary. Kick had once been a carpenter. He hadn’t touched a hammer in over a year. He and Ryan had spent many an afternoon hanging out on Castro, but they had stayed above it, on top of it. Ryan had told him about Vanessa Redgrave in *Blow-Up*.

Identity meant nothing to Kick in the company of Logan. Kick was giving up himself to become what Logan wanted. At Misericordia, Ryan had been warned against falling in, as Monsignor Linotti said, with bad companions and special friendships.

In his long absences from Ryan, Kick suffered a shift in Attitude, which he tried to conceal from Ryan whenever he returned, like a lost little boy, to Ryan’s doorstep. Ryan grew fearful for him, hearing some of the antics Logan had involved Kick in on Castro.

One Sunday afternoon on the corner, a shouting match had erupted between them. Actually, Logan had done the shouting, but Kick had not discreetly withdrawn. The story had sounded very gay to Ryan, but he dismissed it as gossip. He knew the story must be garbled. He knew that any fighting, much less a public squabble, was not Kick’s style. He knew that Kick could maintain. But he was wrong. Something he did not know had happened. Something he could not acknowledge had occurred.

He denied that the intersection of 18th and Castro was crowded with gaping witnesses.

The steroids had a deeper, aggressive side effect.

Kick had become in those two months with Logan a street-corner bodybuilder posing and prick-teasing in the thin-sliced afternoon sun in front of Donuts & Things. Vanity had overtaken his pride. He had picked

up Street Attitude. He was slouching against storefronts like the people his mother had warned him not “evah” to become.

Kick had gone Logan’s way. He had been seduced by Logan. He had become a fool for love. He had fallen in-love. He had committed the very sin he had warned Ryan never to commit. But where Ryan had fallen in-love with what once had been a noble man, Kick had fallen in-love with a gay muscle hustler and the consequences were as different as rising and falling.

Ryan should have recognized Kick’s slip from the moment he fell. He was an expert in deciphering when one thing meant two things. But Ryan saw nothing, refused to see anything, blinded as he was by love; and what he did see, he denied.

Kick with Logan was a very different man from Kick with Ryan.

In those two months, Kick threw himself into massive, split-routine workouts. He was growing. His neck disappeared into his huge shoulders. He telephoned Ryan to mail him checks to tide him over until his trust fund was busted. Gossip abounded. Kick and Logan were an item. The Castro-Folsom crowd’s society columnist, Mr. Marcus, who was the envy of the *Chronicle*’s famous Herb Caen, squibbed almost weekly about “those two outrageous muscle-hunks about town” in *The Bay Area Reporter*. Logan introduced Kick to the freebasing cocaine crowd. He and Ryan were not strangers to drugs, but this outrageously elite Double-A-Group was something else. They were good-looking. They were rich. They threw outrageous parties. They danced the night away. They were perfect for Kick. They denied AIDS existed. The usual pair of muscle hustlers, up from El Lay for Labor Day, joined their party, and boldly peddled steroids, both pills and juice, to the hundreds of gay guys pumping their pecs up at the gyms.

Rarely has a bodybuilder really ever admitted to taking steroids himself; but, when pressed, he always admits knowing someone who has.

“Steroids?” Kick said to anyone who asked. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Smile. Wink. Grin.

Fiat lux.

Dianabol became the most abused drug on Castro.

Ryan refused to hear anything about Kick’s new taste for the fast crowd of hot men. He had never been able to get Kick to go anywhere but to bed. But I believed what Kweenie and Teddy told me. Ryan would not hear that, fueled by drugs, his muscle-beast had become a party animal.

“It’s only a lark,” Ryan said.

“Thou fool,” Kweenie said. She knew all about Kick. She protected

Ryan. She kept a secret she could never tell him. It had been raining one afternoon. Ryan was at work. She had let herself into the Victorian. Kick, fresh from the gym, and stripped naked for the shower, had shouted, “Who’s there? Is that you, Ry?”

“It’s me,” she said.

Kick, pumped sweaty to the max, had made no move to cover himself. She had moved in on him, talking to him, admiring his muscle, doing Ryan’s act. She had known about the Third Runner-Up in the Miss Alabama contest. If she couldn’t have Ryan, she’d have Kick. He was a sucker for muscle flattery. It had been fast and easy. Kick gathered worship where he found it. Brother and sister were so alike it was all the same to him. Neither Kweenie or Kick had even promised never to tell Ryan. That was implicit. Had Kweenie not had the abortion, Ryan, who was the ultimate fetishist, would have kept the baby, especially if blond and only if a boy. Had he known, he would have killed them both. Not for their fucking. Not for her conceiving. But for her aborting, with money he had lent to Kick, the only thing he couldn’t have: Kick’s child.

“Let him have his fun,” Ryan said to Kweenie. “I want him to have everything he wants. He knows what he’s doing. And most of all, I know what he’s doing. This won’t last long.”

Ryan committed the last sin a person can commit against his own soul. He lied to himself.

His lie covered his anxiety.

He could not sleep, insomniac again, sleeping single in a double bed.

Kick failed to heed the plea his mother had made in the hospital corridor after the Runner-Up for Miss Alabama had thrown herself from his car. He failed to recognize that in certain, distinct ways the downtown Birmingham faggotry that his mother had despised had been carried cross country from all the little down towns of America to the great big downtown of 18th and Castro. Ryan would one day tell Kick that he had become what his mother had loathed back in Birmingham when she had asked him directly, “You’re not like those people downtown, are you?”

Kick, living high, with his paternal inheritance still frozen in Birmingham, had joined the gay, Gay, GAY ranks of all those photographers, writers, artists, and performers on Castro who never photograph because their cameras don’t work; who never write because they’ve got this, you know, block; who never paint because the light in the apartment isn’t right since the roommate made them move their bedroom to the back of the flat; who don’t perform because, well, San Francisco is not New York, New York, you know.

I knew. I spent time on Castro. I watched what Ryan no longer came down to see, and I remembered.

Kick had become a gym bum in the Castro zoo.

He rented by the hour.

Ryan knew none of this. He shut it all out. He didn't want to believe it of Kick. He never asked questions when he knew the answer; so he saved face. He kept up appearances. He was more angry at Logan than jealous. Sharing a lover with a man is one thing. Sharing him with a needle is another. He was lonesome for Kick. He wanted him back.

And come back Kick did.

Rebounding.

So often that Ryan felt like a basketball backboard.

Each time Ryan met him with open arms.

"I feel like I'm using you," Kick said.

"If you're using me," Ryan said, "you can use me till you use me up."

"How could this happen to me?" Kick said. "I'm in-love with him, but it's not working. We argue. He puts me down. He tells me I'm too short to win the Mr. California. He's jealous of my muscle. He says I'll never be big enough. He doesn't understand my kind of muscle the way you do. I know it won't last with him. I know it will last with us. I only want to enjoy him for as long as I can make it good."

"Are you still flying to Birmingham for Christmas?"

"Yes."

"Good. You two need time apart." Ryan ran his hands over Kick's huge arms. "I think we need more time together."

"I hear what you're saying," Kick said. "I know you'll understand."

"I understand anything."

"Then you'll understand how much I want to go back up to Bar Nada to see him one more time before I leave."

You fuck! Ryan was speechless.

"You've been a good sport," Kick said, "for so long."

Kick played Ryan like a tuning fork. He hit upon the identical psychology that Ryan's parents had used to raise him as an obedient son. "Kenny Baker," Annie Laurie had mentioned in her gentle offhand way, "stayed out past midnight." Ryan had learned early on that she meant that he, as well as Kenny, should not stay out past midnight. She never ordered his obedience directly.

Charley-Pop, in more ways than one, was exactly like Kick. They both shared the quiet jock heart that Ryan worshiped. But Kick was a trickster. Once he learned how to play and exploit these indirect ways of reaching

deep into the heart of Ryan's compliance, he had the control he needed to take advantage of a man who loved him more than life itself.

"This is a chance for us," Kick drummed the lesson home, "truly to show that homomasculine fraternity works." He repeated Ryan's line from the *Manifesto* as a perfect device to have his way.

Love is blind, deaf, and dumb, but still takes you in, lends you money, and eats your shit.

You can have anything you want.

"Go up to the ranch. I want you to," Ryan said. "I only ask one thing."

"Name it."

"Remember the home team." The cheer was weakening to an echo. It was his only lifeline in a sinking situation.

"I love you too much to forget."

"I'll never ask you for more than that," Ryan said.

"I promise I'll keep it short. Not like the two months this Fall."

"I don't mind being put on hold once in awhile," Ryan said. "But don't put me on hold too long."

"I won't," Kick said. "But, please, never hang up."

"Me hang up on you?"

"A man's got to do what a man's got to do."

"Then do it," Ryan said.

"I'll only be gone for the weekend. Logan sold some of the grass. I need to pick up my split of the cash to pay for my plane ticket home. I'll bring you back a lid. It's really good shit."

Kick headed for the ranch.

Ryan headed for the big depression.

8

Ryan tried to be stronger than the onslaught of Christmas on Castro. Kick had flown back to Birmingham. Logan, the weekend that Kick had spent with him at Bar Nada, insisted the deal for the grass had fallen through. There was no cash. The news caught Kick short. He borrowed his airfare from Ryan.

"I'll pay you back as soon as Logan moves the harvest."

"Forget it," Ryan said. "That's part of my Christmas gift to you."

Alone in the Victorian, Ryan grew restless. He took to the streets. It was dusk on Christmas Eve. The Castro glowed like a child's dream. Mart Crowley had been right in *The Boys in the Band*: "You know, Mary, it takes a fairy to make something pretty." No place in San Francisco was so well

decorated as the Castro. Windows at Gilded Age Antiques and Cliff's Variety and the Rugby Shop were dressed traditionally. Skating bears and bowing elves vied with the Lacoste crocodile splash of designer jock ensembles at the All American Boy store. A drapery of lights outlined the windows and roof-tops up and down the four blocks of 18th and Castro. The neighborhood merchants had chipped in to erect a fifty-foot tree on a pedestal outside the Hibernia Bank.

The fir reminded Ryan of the year before, when Mayor Dianne Feinstein, always eager to press electoral flesh, had arrived at the crack of twilight to speak briefly and light the Castro Christmas Tree while the Gay Men's Chorus sang "Adeste Fidelis." Di Fi, as the neighborhood called her, shook hands all around and worked her way through the huge crowd of men. She must have felt like the mayor of the town full of identical twins all fucking each other. A video camera crew walked backward in front of Her Honor. Their bright lights illuminated her fair skin against her dark, conservative suit and her white blouse with its big bow. She hardly deserved the El Lay critique laid on her by the piss-elegant Mr. Blackwell on whose Worst Dressed List she regularly appeared, because, Blackwell said, her sensible shoes and tailored shoulders made her look like a voting booth. Under the bright video lights, she shook hundreds of male hands.

When she arrived at Kick holding Ryan's hand in the huge crowd, she stopped dead in her tracks. Kick smiled. He was not one of the identical clones. The politics fell from Di Fi's face. She reached her hand out to Kick and on impulse, in this whole crowd of men, pulled herself to him. In the stark spotlight in the twilight outside the Midnight Sun Bar, Di Fi leaned into kiss Kick. He smiled as she moved toward his face. Instinctively, at a range of three inches, eye to eye, the two knew the scenario of their documentary encounter. Their mouths, aimed at each other, both turned at the very last instant. They bumped cheeks and Di Fi kissed air. Kick pulled back. They both smiled. She had for a moment that look in her eyes that women have when they see a man whose classic Look they can only hope to see once in a lifetime. Di Fi was no Judas in her kiss. She meant it, but her miming one on Kick's face earned her votes. A cheer rose up. The Mayor of San Francisco had kissed Mr. San Francisco. She stepped back from him to the roar of applause and catcalls. She had kissed the man most men on Castro wished to kiss.

That was Christmas past. In the year since, AIDS had changed all that. Ryan doubted if even a politician would kiss a gay man anymore.

Christmas Eve made Ryan indulgent. Christmas was the one holiday that seemed to exhibit honorably the childlike innocence of homosexuality.

The festive air of the Castro caught him up in its spell. He had no tree at home, but he could not resist the huge Hibernia tree with its six thousand lights and ornaments that came from all around the neighborhood. Some wit had hung a sequined red high heel way up on the tree. Gay Santas set up their chairs under the tree and let gay men and lesbian women sit in their laps for charity. For a buck, fairies and dykes told Santa over a handheld mike what they wanted for Christmas. The proceeds went to the AIDS support fund.

Christmas made the Castro a neighborhood reclaimed from their collective childhoods. Ryan stood on his tiptoes to see the title of a book hanging on a green ribbon from one of the strong lower branches. It was James M. Barrie. Was it innocent irony? Barrie had ventilated his own terribly British thing for young boys in *Peter Pan*. He was the author of the one book common to most gay people's childhood. At Christmas, more than any other time, the recovery and exhibition of the childlike quality that once was the essence of gayness rose flamboyant and decorative across the festooned streets of the Castro. Ryan hated the Peter Pan he had loved as a boy. Peter had never wanted to grow up. "God," Ryan said in the last-minute crush of the evening crowd, "I'm such a Scrooge."

Ryan knew he had to buy at least one gift for the even greater Scrooge, Solly Blue. He spent nearly an hour in the Obelisk boutique as the eager line of frenzied shoppers, bobbing to the disco version of "Scarlet Ribbons," bought pretties on charge cards as fast as the clerks could move them in handout of 489 Castro, wrapping the merchandise in smart gray boxes with smarter gray ribbons and elegant black ostrich feathers tucked under the bows. Straight people crowded up next to gays. They knew where to shop; and, protected by the denial of disease, they even brought their children down to tour the streets, window to window, to see the lights and the animated manikins and the candy houses and, of course, the Big Tree with the two, well, so what, gay Santas: one male and one female and both whiskered. It was all so much Christmas whimsy, and so much more traditional than that offered by the downtown merchants.

Ryan bought Solly the same clean-lined glass-cylinder oil lamp that Kick had bought for his mother. "Everybody in town," the clerk at the Obelisk said, "has at least one size of this family of lamps. It's a sleek design. A Wolfard. Tasteful. The Whitney declared it an American classic. It goes with everything. You can't go wrong buying it. Frankly, I hate them."

The perversity of perversity, Ryan thought. He carried his shopping bag out to the warm dark of the night. To his right the marquee of the

Castro Theatre was brilliant with bulbs and neon. The first of the Big MGM Four was playing. Forty-one years after its initial release, the big Christmas flicker at the Castro was *Gone with the Wind*. Customers queued up at the box office. Even on Christmas Eve, maybe especially on Christmas Eve, people sought the brilliant comfort of the light shining in the darkness from the projector, unreeling visions over their heads onto the silver screen.

Ryan turned left and walked past Donuts & Things. He imagined how Kick and Logan had lounged against its windows, the way, once, he and Kick had held court so many afternoons. The Chicana girls, who twenty-four hours a day pushed stale crullers at the gay and gullible, had locked the door. They moved about in the glaring fluorescence of the shop, scrubbing and cleaning. Ryan had never seen their door closed. *Feliz Navidad* was a serious feast.

He walked down to stand at the Corner of It All. A leftover hippie working his Christmas scam was loudly shilling mistletoe to everyone bustling corner to corner.

“A buck a bunch. Mistletoe. A buck a bunch.”

No one seemed to be buying in the neighborhood where easy kisses had turned dangerous. He missed Kick. He wanted to hate Christmas. Thom was dead. Sandy and the triplets had moved back to the Midwest. His mother was in the Bahamas. Kweenie was off to El Lay spending the holidays with January. He was alone. All he had was Solly who had invited him to his penthouse to spend Christmas with a young hustler who was to be Ryan’s Christmas gift from Solly. He made a note to remember to return Solly’s gun.

A vague anxiety hit him. He begrudged everybody everything for a minute, then chided himself again for truly being a Scrooge. He bought a sprig of mistletoe from the hippie and crossed 18th Street, past the cold facade of the Hibernia Bank, and stood alone under the tree shimmering with tiny white lights.

Where had everyone gone? Where was his father? Was he here now? Ryan felt like an invisible child raised by blind parents. He longed to feel Charley-Pop’s presence. He longed to feel united this night with Kick. It was no Christmas carol he hummed. It was the love theme from *Casablanca* that constantly swelled up inside him when he least expected it: lyrics about the same-old/same-old story, about love, about glory, about doing, about dying, wondering, “As Time Goes By,” about the future. The future. He didn’t know what that would forgoesakes be! He didn’t know on what he could rely. *Rely*. That was love’s operative word. He relied on

himself, on his self, what self he had left, and on Kick. He relied on Solly who was maybe the most reliable of them all.

No one else stopped at the late Christmas Eve hour to watch the tree. They rushed past Ryan who stood stock still in close to the tree that Kick with his carpenter's hammer had helped erect. Across the two thousand miles, Ryan sent his Energy toward Kick. He hoped against hope that they both remained manful measure for manful measure what they should be. Or at least that they could get their mutual reliance back again.

Ryan stood amid the final swirl of Christmas. He could not help entrepreneuring strange things the way that he had entrepreneured *Maneuvers*. He knew Solly who entrepreneured his boys into big business would enjoy the fantasy of Bah Humbug, UnLtd. For everyone who loved Christmas, Ryan figured there was someone who hated the franchised feast. Even if someone didn't despise the whole concept, there was always someone to whom they would rather send a Bah Humbug card. He might develop a whole line of merchandise: Bah Humbug wrapping-and-toilet paper; BAH HUMBUG spelled out fancifully in red and green foil letters stylized like the perennial SEASON'S GREETINGS that stretch like unfolded paper dolls across windows. He had visions of Bah Humbug buttons and bumper stickers, and a Bah Humbug nonprofit organization to help people resist and be stronger than Christmas, sort of a Christmas Anonymous Club whose patron saint was Ebenezer Scrooge. Ryan imagined a run on Fuck-Tiny-Tim buttons. He knew deep down he didn't mean any of it. He didn't need to add anything to make life more depressing than it was. The third-level story in the day's *Chronicle*, after all, said everything: in Texas, the day before, someone had shot the March of Dimes poster child in the face with a gun.

Ryan left the tree and walked to a pay phone. He dialed Logan at Bar Nada. "I called to wish you a Merry Christmas," he said.

What he meant was that he had called Logan to check for sure he had not flown back to Birmingham with Kick. That would have been unbearable.

He hung up and dialed again. This time, Solly.

"Christmas Eve," Ryan said, without saying *hello*, "is a last ditch attempt by the world to make us all go back to being the best little boy we all once were...and I'm not...and I can't...and I don't want to. I don't know what I want. I only know what I don't want."

At the ticket booth under the brilliant marquee of the Castro Theatre, he paid \$2.50 to see *Gone with the Wind* for the thousandth time. The feature was half over.

Later, as the clock struck midnight, Ryan knelt in front of his image of Kick posing on screen in a slow-motion display of extravagant muscle. He was crying.

9

Early Christmas morning Ryan drove his VW Rabbit to Solly's penthouse. They distracted each other from the day itself. Solly sat on his couch and reminisced about his long-dead young lover. He was bitter.

"Mickey was really rather clever to jump off the Bridge on New Year's Eve. Clever in the sense that every holiday season since, and for every Christmas to come, how can I help but remember him and the way the afternoon light was that New Year's when the police came to my door. They found his wallet on the Bridge. They asked me if I knew him. I said he'd been missing, which wasn't unusual, for a week. They told me, with all his presents still wrapped under the tree, that he had taken the Final Big Swan Dive and what did they want me to do since they hadn't yet found his body, and I never had to do anything, because they never found him.

"He disappeared. The way everybody disappears. Oscar Wilde said, 'Everyone who disappears is said to be last seen in San Francisco. It must be a delightful city. It has all the attractions of the next world.' But Mickey's never been seen again. San Francisco isn't what it was in Wilde's day. Every Christmas and New Year's, I guess, Mickey's forced me into my own little memorial service. The way things are, the daily funerals, Falwell, Reagan, I'm glad he missed the seventies and will never hear of the ugly eighties. He wouldn't have liked either very much. This may be a good year for California wine, but it will be shit for its whining fornicating."

"I thought I was depressed," Ryan said.

"This whole City is depressed," Solly said. "Do you remember Randy Faragher?"

"Of Randy and Dan Brodie? Sure. We always called them Randy and Dandy."

"They're not so dandy these days."

"What do you mean?"

"Randy's at San Francisco General."

"What?"

"He's a vegetable. He shot himself in the head."

"He'd never do that."

"We'd all do that."

“Why?”

“Because Dan was diagnosed two weeks ago with AIDS.”

“But Dan will need him to help him through,” Ryan said.

“Dandy won’t be needing anything. Randy thought maybe a small sit-down dinner party for two friends would lift Dandy’s spirits. But Dandy disappeared before supper. Randy thought he had gone to lie down. But he wasn’t in the bedroom. They made the usual jokes about playing hide-and-seek. Dan was always good for a laugh. So they searched for him. They found him dead. He drank an eight-ounce bottle of insecticide and swallowed half a can of Drano. They found him on a pile of garbage bags where he, I think in final comment, had laid himself out to die.”

“Omigod!”

“Merry Christmas,” Solly said. “Frankly, I don’t see why there aren’t more AIDS suicides. But there’s better ways than swallowing Drano. I’ve got a checklist from the Hemlock Society. Do you want me to tell you how much of what you have to take to kill yourself peacefully?”

“No!”

“Let me tell you. I, who never join anything, have joined the Hemlock Society and the Neptune Society.”

“Are they giving a gay group rate?” Ryan shuddered. “If I must die, take me to their Columbarium.”

“We’ll make less of a mess that way,” Solly said. “Drano, indeed! Come on. Let me fix you some breakfast. I have the neatest little frozen sausage patties. They’re the latest in junk food.”

“Recommended, are they, by the Hemlock Society?”

“*Au contraire*. They’re full of preservatives. Eat them and you’ll live forever. A fate worse than Death.”

Solly microwaved everything.

Ryan poked at the sausages. Grease oozed out under pressure of his fork. “I usually don’t eat things like this. Kick doesn’t...”

“Spare me,” Solly said.

“I miss him. I’m afraid I’m going to lose him. It’s more than Logan.”

“Give me a break,” Solly said. “So there’s a little trouble in paradise. How San Francisco! How Bette Davis! How gay! I thought you’d be finished with him in a week, a month, a year. Three years is twice as long as the average gay affair. Drop him. You’ll be better off. Believe me, I’m an expert on hustler sex.” Solly cocked an eyebrow. “Oh! Did I say *hustler* sex?”

“Don’t be cynical.”

“Cynical? I’m positively clairvoyant.”

“Kick’s no hustler.”

“And the pope doesn’t shit in the woods.”

“We love each other.”

“You mean you’re good sex together...when you’re on drugs. One good gram of anything can make a hundred and eighty pounds of shit look absolutely divine.”

“It’s not the drugs. We’re onto something. We’ve broken through to something more than physical.”

“You mean if that high-tech monster body got shrunken down with AIDS you’d still be interested?”

“Yes.”

“How quaint. I wouldn’t be interested in anybody with AIDS.”

“You’re slime.”

“No. I’m the devil’s advocate. As a lapsed Catholic, you should remember what that is.”

“When will you guys get off my back for being abused by Catholics in my childhood?”

“So if you’re so great together, where is he on Christmas day? Where has he been most of the fall?” Solly asked.

“I don’t own him,” Ryan said. “We both have our freedom. We have our rhythms together and separately. We both need other men for pete’s sake.”

“For Kick’s sake.”

“For variety’s sake,” Ryan said. “And I might add, for my own sake. We both like sport-balling other guys.”

“Suck cock and die.”

“That’s why I don’t do it.”

“When was the last time you were laid?”

“By Kick?”

“By anyone.”

“Three weeks ago by Kick. It’s too long to remember when I did it with anyone else.”

“He does it with anyone else.”

“We believe in homomasculine fraternity,” Ryan stated.

“Oh, God! Are you still harping on that?” Solly was more annoyed than amused. “I bet he tells you that he comes back from Logan—how would Kick say it—*Enriched!* That’s what he would say, enriched from harvesting—that favorite word of his—the juices from other men.”

“We both believe in harvesting other guys.”

“So here comes your chance. I have a knockout boy for you to harvest

this afternoon.”

“Kick tells me no matter who else we occasionally play with, there’s nothing like the home team.”

“What a line,” Solly said. “Eat your sausage. You’re such a sucker. If you believe that, how’d you like to buy the Golden Gate Bridge cheap?”

“It’s not merely our dicks. Our heads cum together.”

“What you’re talking about is what goes on in your head. What goes on in his pretty blond bubble head you’ll never know.”

“Kicks says he feels the same. He thinks the same. We’re onto something.”

“Something like a collision course,” Solly said. “He’s having his cake and eating it too. I’ve heard his line. I’ve heard thousands of hustlers talk. Hustlers are my business, remember? Good hustlers tell you precisely what you want to hear. Your muscle hustler is no more than an uptown version of my street hustlers. I’m an expert on both kinds. Drop him. Give us all a break.”

“It’s the epidemic,” Ryan said. “That’s what’s got me more upset than Kick.”

“I suppose you think if you agonize over Kick, God will spare you from the agony of AIDS.”

“We all have to suffer.”

“Catholicism has turned your brain to Brie.”

“I know it’s ridiculous. I’m embarrassed to say I can’t help myself. Sometimes I pray. Sometimes I revert to prayer.”

“Truly retrograde.”

“I can hardly believe myself. Sometimes when I’m alone I check out my legs for purple lesions. I don’t want gay cancer. Without even thinking, I find myself praying.”

“That’s how all people pray. Without thinking.”

“I say stuff like, ‘Dear God, deliver me, please. Deliver us all. Protect me. Protect all of us. Make it go away. We don’t deserve this punishment.’”

“AIDS is a disease. Not a punishment. Get that straight,” Solly said.

“Some people, you know, believe in cause and effect. I don’t care if everybody knows I’m homosexual. But I do care if I die of something, for chrissakes, gay!”

“How embarrassing.” Solly exaggerated the words. “People will think what they want. They always have. They always will.”

“Oh, God! I’ve got to find some hope in all this disease.”

“God?” Solly said. “If he exists, he’s keeping his zip code a secret to himself.” He threw Ryan a paper napkin. “Get hold of yourself.”

“I want to live.”

“Thank you, Susan Hayward.”

“This plague isn’t the end of us,” Ryan said. “This will turn out to be only an episode. We’ve got to think positive. We’ve got to be unsinkable like Molly Brown.” Ryan stopped. “Those gay boys are still going to the bars and the baths,” he said. “They deny Death. It’s so sad. They don’t believe it’s really happening.”

“Or else they do and they defy Death. Eat, drink, and be merry. Tomorrow we may die. I have no intention of not having sex with my boys.”

“We have become Poe’s imps of the perverse.” Ryan blew his nose. He quoted Poe quoting Corneille: “Weep, weep my eyes, repose in water. Half my life has placed the remaining half in the grave.” It was the first time Ryan had ever cried for San Francisco. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s Christmas and all. We’ve become Poe’s desperate revelers continuing to party down, faced with the masque of the red death.”

“Stop!” Solly said. “You went to school too long. You went to church too much. You’d have been better off ignorant. Please! Stop the allusions. You are what you are. You’re not a metaphor of something else. The *is* of you, can’t *is!*”

“I want to stop. I don’t want to think about the plague,” Ryan said.

“You mean you don’t want to think about Kick and Logan.”

“I’ll go crazy,” Ryan said. “I’ll think about it tomorrow. Who said that?”

“See? See what I mean! You’re not Scarlett O’Hara. You’re Ryan O’Hara.”

“Nothing but the Death rate has changed in San Francisco.”

“I can live with that,” Solly said. “Eat some more sausage. You’re going to need all your strength when your Christmas present arrives.”

They whiled away the morning drinking Irish coffee. By mid-afternoon, Solly was mixing Absolut Vodka and Coca-Cola. They were not drunk, but they were feeling no pain. Ryan was almost having fun. At half past three, the doorbell buzzed. Solly called down the intercom to the street door.

“Party-time,” he said to Ryan. “It’s your Christmas present.”

He buzzed the boy into the lobby. Ryan listened as the elevator groaned and lifted itself up the shaft to the penthouse. Solly waited at the open door of the apartment and welcomed the boy into the room. He was young, husky, tattooed, and blond.

He could have been Kick’s delinquent little brother.

Solly had picked the boy for that very reason. He watched the kid's Look register on Ryan's face. "There's more ways than one," Solly said, "to skin a cat. This boy is as beautiful in his own way as any man you know."

The blond hustler ambled on bowlegs toward Ryan on the couch.

"Jake," Solly said, "this is Ryan."

"Yeah, buddy," Jake said. His voice was Oklahoma. "Merry Christmas. I'm your present." He pulled out a joint. "You wanna smoke this or whu-u-a-t?"

Solly shared a toke or two. Then he left for the kitchen. "I've got a roast in the oven," he said. "The bedroom's ready when you are."

An hour later, Ryan and Jake left the bedroom, showered together, dressed, and came into the living room.

Solly looked at his watch. "Safe sex must take longer. You certainly got my money's worth."

Ryan and the hustler both grinned.

"Can he stay for dinner?" Ryan asked.

"They always stay for dinner," Solly said. "Anything Father Flanagan can do for lost boys, I can do better."

The roast came from the oven, tender with overcooking. The gravy came from a package, the potatoes from a box, the cranberries from a can. They sat at a glass table eating and watching the short December sunset.

Jake said very little. He lit another joint and passed it around the table. "It makes the food taste better," he said.

Ryan laughed. Solly made a face.

Suddenly, Jake pushed back from the table. "Can I have a raw egg?" he asked.

Solly pointed him toward the refrigerator.

"And another beer?"

"Now he wants egg in his beer," Solly said.

"Who doesn't?" Ryan said.

Jake juggled the egg and the beer. He walked to the window. He opened it and stuck his head out. "Hey!" he said, "there's a rope hanging from a post on the roof way down below. I think it's a noose."

Solly went to the window. "It's a noose alright. It's been there for years."

"Watch this." The kid held the raw egg out the window. He dropped it, counting and laughing until it splattered on the roof far below.

"Isn't this fun?" Solly said. "Almost as much fun as New Year's. You remember New Year's, don't you, Ry? Before you met Kick. When you had to have a fist up your ass at the stroke of midnight?"

“And you like to get fucked with a knife at your throat.”

“There’s no aphrodisiac like young meat and cold steel.”

Ryan nodded to the hustler. “Show Solly what you have.”

Jake pulled open his vest. “You wanna see it?” He pulled a gun from a shoulder holster. “You didn’t know I had this, huh?”

“You’re full of surprises,” Solly said.

“I knew he had it.” Ryan walked to the window. “He pulled it out in the bedroom. We played with it. When he rubs it on his cock, he gets hard. By the way, I forgot to bring your gun back.”

“I don’t need it,” Solly said. “They arm themselves these days.”

“I showed Ryan how to use it,” Jake said.

“Give it to me,” Ryan said.

Jake handed him the gun and the bullets. “Hey, man! For sure! It’s your day all the way!”

“You load it like this,” Ryan said.

“Be careful, Ry,” Solly warned. “You don’t know anything about guns.”

“I know about this gun. Jake showed me. It’s exactly like the one you gave me.”

It was a .22. He loaded it easily.

“Why not,” the hustler said, “shoot it out the window. You know, straight into the air. To celebrate.”

Ryan shrugged his shoulders and balanced the gun in his hand. He moved toward the open window. “I can get real crazy,” he said. He was bound and determined to be stronger than Christmas.

“Go for it, man.” The hustler, rubbing his own crotch, gave Ryan a grope. He was hoping for a big tip from Solly.

Ryan looked at Solly. “You ready?”

“Why not?” Solly said.

Ryan raised the gun, aimed it high up and out the penthouse window. For one moment, everything in the room froze. The three seemed to be a still-life collection of slightly demented Christmas glee. Then Ryan raised his arm higher, took a step back into the room, pointed the gun out at the City, and fired. The bullet took off and the room rocked with the sound and smell. The noise knocked them back. Louder than they had ever believed it would be.

Solly broke up laughing. Ryan blew into the mouth of the barrel. He slipped the gun into his jeans. He rubbed the hard barrel pointing down his leg. Then he pulled it slowly out and handed the gun back to the hustler who slipped it back into his shoulder holster.

Solly went to the kitchen and came back with three brandies. “I propose,” he said, “a Christmas toast.” He passed the two glasses and raised his own toward the young blond hustler. “We have to thank the fathers and mothers of the United States for continuing to turn out, at so much trouble and expense to themselves, so many beautiful sons for our continued enjoyment. To Jake!”

They drank their toast.

“Merry Christmas, Solly.” Ryan hugged his friend.

“Merry Christmas, Ry.”

Ryan held Solly out at arms’ length. “I know,” he said, “somewhere tonight, with someone else, doing what we’ve always done, the sonuvabitch is all pumped up and has a hard-on.”

“Who has a hard-on?” Jake asked.

“No one,” Solly said. “At least, no one you know.” He stared into Ryan’s eyes. “Sometimes,” he said, “the inevitable arrives faster than we expect.” He shook Ryan’s hand. “Congratulations! You’ve never called him a sonuvabitch before.”

“You know what he told me before he left for Birmingham? If he had been anybody else, I would have laughed in his face. He said, ‘A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.’”

“Then do it,” Solly said. “Maybe he was telling you indirectly what he wants you to do.”

10

Ryan sang the blues. “Blue Moon.” “Blues in the Night.” “Blue Velvet.” “I’m Mr. Blue.” “Blue Bayou.” Blue by you. Blue without you. Blue enough to kill you, Baby Blue. But deep down he knew he didn’t mean a word he sang. He was only posing. Blue doesn’t mean a thing when you’re a whiter shade of pale. Besides, he couldn’t pose anywhere near as well as Kick who was the best poser in the world.

11

San Francisco was the last-chance sanctuary of men who could live their special lives nowhere else in America. They were immigrants inventing, each in his own way, styles of masculinity that had never been lived so publicly before. The love that once had dared not speak its name suddenly would not shut up. In this way, and in this way only, these men were exactly like the women who at the same time all across the country were

asserting the New Femininity. Ironically, while the feminist movement aimed to render women upwardly mobile, gay liberation engineered, with a petulant backhand English I've never really understood, the economic, moral, and physical decline of far too many homosexual men.

For all the noble talk of gay politics and consciousness raising, gay liberation looked to be ending in the intensive care units of San Francisco's jam-packed hospitals.

"Never fear," Solly said. "Some dinosaurs always survive the crunch."

AIDS spread its incurable Kaposi's sarcoma cancer and pneumocystis across the City, across the nation, and around the world. It decimated gay men. Even as they became AIDS' chosen victims, their once-proud political victories became academic, pyrrhic. They had gained the City's voting booths and the legal protection of the outrageous baths and bars. But for all their human rights, they died daily. They kissed each other good-bye as the City's doctors switched off the machines supporting life in the bodies with which they had once so prided and preened themselves, and with which they had loved each other so much.

The City's morticians made a fortune shipping the remains of AIDS victims "back to Kansas." Kansas was where Dorothy returned from Oz. Kansas was where you came from if you were gay. It became a cliché of greeting for awestruck newcomers to the gay heart of San Francisco: "You know, Toto. I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." But Kansas comes as Kansas will, as Death will.

Solly found it ironic that the newly founded gay Atlas Savings and Loan at the corner of Market Street and Duboce had previously been a mortuary. When the vast stucco building first went up for lease, Ryan had suggested that it be turned into a gay disco called "Death Takes a Holiday." Upon seeing a *Chronicle* business section article on the affluence of gay males, Solly phoned me.

"Magnus! Have you seen the *Chronicle* this morning? We virtually have wagons trundling through the Castro with the drivers calling, 'Bring out your dead!' What an ironic mistake in bad timing. At the very moment when we need a gay mortuary, the building turns into a Savings and Loan. Give me the days when we were all sexual outlaws. We died quietly in our closets with our high-heel sneakers. The paper says we're now an economic force to be reckoned with: mortgages, IRAs, estate planning. Gone, gone with the wind, are the days and nights of serious sucking and anonymous fucking. What's happened to us? We've become, omigod, bourgeois! A fate worse than Death!"

Ryan always knew the physical joys and medical dangers of casual sex,

but he never figured that personal love was more dangerous than AIDS. During wild nights of sex in the City before Kick and before the plague, he was always on his guard. But in-love, first with Teddy, and then with Kick, he let his defenses down. Teddy's first betrayal taught him that not even in-love is everyone a safe person. The first night when he knew he loved Kick, as much as he was in-love with him, Ryan said: "You could hurt me now."

"I won't ever hurt you," Kick said. "I'm fragile myself."

"Then we're safe people," Ryan said. He spoke the declaratory, almost indirect way that he had learned from Kick's nondemanding southern drawl. Until the night Ryan dared to address Kick directly, the night Ryan drove old Dixie down, their dissembling style was to infer their need or preferences to each other.

Ryan perversely found a sexual pleasure in always deferring to Kick. *If Kick wants to top me, I'm his slave.* If Ryan went wrong in love, it was in his deference. It was unnatural to him. He himself had always shone. He had deferred to Monsignor Linotti and the other priests and priestlings at Misericordia until he could defer no more and he had left their cramped little world. He had deferred to his parents but not to his brother and sister. His aggressive strength against them destroyed Thom while it strengthened Kweenie. He had never deferred to Teddy and Teddy had gone down to an alcoholic defeat Ryan had never intended.

"The strength I thought was a virtue," Ryan said, "was no more than selfish pushiness. It is, I think, a fault in my character."

Before Kick, Ryan had always been the sun in any relationship. He had Energy. He burned bright. His style had driven Thom mad. His strength had made Teddy weak. He felt he had two strikes against him. "Three and I'm out," he said. He was determined never to overshadow Kick.

Thom's and Teddy's weakness made him angry. He could not tolerate weak men. He wanted Kick to come to his senses and be more than strong. He wanted to take Kick beyond strength training to achieve real power. *Power is the ability to apply strength.* All his coaching of the bodybuilder to a super physique was his physical way of shoring up the inner strength, the moral fiber, the large soul of the man he wanted to be perfect.

His Catholicism had taught the boy in him lessons the man he became could not forget. In moral theology class at Misericordia, he had learned that grace builds on nature: the more perfect the body, the greater the capacity for sanctifying grace.

"This means," the ancient priest, a professor of moral theology, had taught, "that you must remain healthy in order to receive grace. When

the body is sick, the normal channels of God's grace are closed. The sick can receive actual and sanctifying grace from God only by His holy dispensation. Therefore, remember, all your lives: *Mens sana in corpore nano*. Drink no more wine than at mass. Do not smoke, for it is an indulgence and indulgences are not good for the young."

Ryan sported the Look of someone who wanted to forget the mumbo-jumbo of his youth, but could not get over that old black magic. The priests had unknowingly turned him on sexually. "I can't help but think of healthy minds in healthy bodies," he said. At his worst, he was as corny as Kansas in August. "It's Kick Supreme. For once, I'm the moon. He is the sun. Not my usual role, but I think I like it."

"As long," Solly said, "as the sun can keep on shining."

"You don't need Kick's light," I said. I felt like Radio Station Magnus Bishop broadcasting small-craft warnings on the Bay. "You're bright enough to know that." I wanted to tell him that he was dissembling, that dissembling was ultimately dishonest mendacity; but at that early time there was already a madness in him, and I carried no weight against Ryan's joy in Kick's happy acceptance of his total deference.

12

That Christmas night, Ryan drove home alone, without Jake, from Solly's. *Help me make it through the night*. Kweenie had left a message on his machine. "Happy! Happy!" she said. "Catch you tomorrow." He sat alone in his dark Victorian. He gasped for air.

It was Ondine's curse.

"Gemini is an air sign," Tony Tavarossi had told him. "You're forever opening windows wanting more oxygen."

Ryan had all the doubts of a believer. "Maybe," he said, "it's more like the air is too thin on this forbidden planet."

Accidentally, that Christmas night, he made a sad discovery. He opened the refrigerator and found a brown paper sack. He wondered what it was. He thought it might spoil. He pulled open the bag. Inside were four syringes, a dozen hypodermic needles, and four small bottles of Decadurobolin. It had taken his breath away. The difference between the oral steroid he knew Kick had taken and the injectable Decadurobolin was the difference between venial and mortal sin.

All was lost.

Aren't we a pair! They had both lied. In their little night music, they were so Sondheim: one on the ground, one in midair. He had shown to Kick

a differentially false self. Kick had shared with him twenty new pounds of chemically false muscle. Was either one real to the other anymore?

He lay sprawled in the dark on the carpeted floor of his bedroom. Seduced and abandoned. Ground down into the realization that everyone is alone. Lost in their lives. In their deference. In their drugs. In their mendacity. All of them lost. Some more than others. For a while. Maybe forever. The truth weighed heavy on his chest. Squeezing his breath. Lost and alone. “Until the sham of companionship returns,” he wrote, “and you can begin again to pretend in your coupling that you’re finally making it together through the night.”

He missed Kick. He missed the idea and ideal of Kick. For the first time in three years he was admitting to a self of himself that Kick, as much as he, had been lying in his teeth. To get what they each needed for themselves both of them said what the other wanted to hear. And they called it love. Ryan knew he could no longer deny his real self. He had to talk to Kick. He had to save him from himself. They both had to save themselves from themselves. Muscle wasn’t worth the consequences of steroids. He had to really communicate with him. Kick had once asked him to move with him to a new plane of muscle. He must now tell Kick that they must move their relationship from the fantasy of muscle to the reality of health.

He had once sold his soul to get Kick. He had sold his own self to keep Kick. He hated himself for selling out what Annie Laurie had cautioned him against. He had bought into the Acquired Identity Deficiency Syndrome.

The needles and the steroids told him more than he wanted to know. Kick was selling his heart and soul for muscle gain. What had happened in his healthy soul to so endanger his healthy body? Solly had read to him in his *Physicians’ Desk Reference* about the side effects of oral and injectable steroids.

He was Kick’s accomplice. He had swallowed and snorted more drugs with Kick than with anyone else. But they never, never shot themselves up.

Maybe we’re bad for each other.

Ryan tried to balance his conscience against his lust. He did not know if he dared ruin everything between them. His hard-on struggled with his heart. Guilt is a strange country. Ryan fell into a habit of his adolescent Catholicism. He examined his conscience. He knew the difference between sins of commission and sins of omission. It was the same old fight for purity against the sexual sins of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If he loved musclesex more than he loved Kick, he would say nothing when Kick flew back from Birmingham.

Christmas was an agony. Something was happening to him.

“Ryan,” Kweenie said, “are you alright? You look feverish.”

He gave her a present and scooted her down the hall.

“Here’s my hat,” she said. “Here’s your door. Take your hands off me. What’s my hurry?”

Ryan envisioned loving Kick with a new love, a higher, purer love. He examined his human heart. He loved Kick more than muscle. He knew the solution. Kick had promised him he could have anything he wanted. Clearly, he knew he wanted one thing only: they must keep on keeping on together, more nobly, more ideally than before. They had to clean up their act. Kick might not like him speaking out, but they were lost anyway if he didn’t. Kick was the muscle. He was the talker. He made his living with words. Kick loved his words. He was resolved to the conversation he knew they must have after New Year’s.

He feared he did not dare the act. He knew he must. He had been first cause and finally accomplice of Kick’s fall. He had offered Kick a pedestal. Kick had climbed eagerly up. Ryan, kneeling in adoration at Kick’s early natural splendor, could no longer ignore the poisonous transformation he had steadfastly refused to acknowledge. Kick’s feet were turning to clay. He had muddied himself with serious steroids. He was growing too heavy to take high flight. Kick was becoming like everyone else on Castro. He was becoming ordinary against their promise never to become ordinary to each other.

Ryan, in conscience, like Streisand wanting Redford to become even more perfect, resolved, if necessary, to slap Kick awake. That Christmas here read Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” He quoted O’Connor often. She was the only Catholic novelist of the American south, and a woman at that. O’Connor had once explained her own grotesques so flat out that Ryan could not forget. She had said that to the deaf you have to shout and to the almost blind you have to write in very large letters. Ryan owed Kick, for all the extraordinary pleasure Kick had given him, at least this warning due his angel, he feared, flying too close to the edge.

Ryan shied away from the A-Group holiday parties. He could not bear to go alone, answering the same question he had been answering for months.

“Where’s Kick?”

He was no longer Ryan-Orion.

He was the left-behind half of a Famous Couple.

13

On New Year's Eve, Ryan drove alone to the rocky outcropping of Corona Heights. He pulled his VW Rabbit up to the curb below the gravel path that led to the crest of the mountain. For a long while he sat in the car with the engine running. He wondered how many people in San Francisco had sat in lonely debate behind the wheel of their parked cars wagering whether to drive to the Bridge or not. But it wasn't Death he wanted. It was Death he feared. It wasn't even Logan. Not really. Logan was Kick's bad boy. Logan was Kick's Teddy. Ryan understood all that. What he wanted was Kick himself.

We'll leave the city. We'll move to Wyoming or Colorado. Someplace clean where they've never heard of drugs or disease or dirty sex. Maybe some small town in Texas. I'll sell Bar Nada and the Victorian. We'll buy a little place—Oh, God, this is sick. I want to take him off to a cottage by the sea. I don't believe I'm even thinking this!

Ryan looked at his eyes in the rearview mirror and laughed at himself. "Oh, God!" he said. "Please, please, please." He laughed again. "Oh, Jesus! I sound like Teddy begging not to be thrown out. Does everybody pleading make the same stupid sounds? Please? Please? Please? Praying is degrading."

This New Year's Eve was very different from the end of the year before. That night Kick had driven them down Valencia Street to the Devil's Herd, a gay country-western bar with a live band. It was one of the few times they ever went out. It was the first and only time they had danced together. They had held back against the wall around the dance floor watching the gay boys in their cowboy drag two-step to "Cotton-Eyed Joe" and line dance to the foot-stomping "Elvira." The band finished its set. The jukebox took over. The crowd of dancers broke up and headed back to their beers.

Kick surprised Ryan. He dragged him onto the empty dance floor. Anne Murray was singing "I'm Happy Just to Dance with You." Kick pulled Ryan close into his crotch.

"Come here," Bama-Alabama drawled. "Let's do a real buckle polisher."

For the first time, they slow danced alone on the floor. Ryan was in heaven. Kick danced as good as he posed. Ryan ignored the jealous remarks.

What's that guy got that I haven't?"

The record stopped and Ryan stood a beat longer with his arms around Kick's big shoulders. Another record dropped, and again, Murray's

sunshine-blue voice soared over the roar of shouted conversations. She was singing “Can I Have This Dance for the Rest of My Life?”

Ryan looked deep into Kick’s blue eyes. “Can I?” he asked.

Kick pulled him closer. “Anything you want.”

Neither man led the other. The toes of Ryan’s cowboy boots met the toes of Kick’s construction boots. They stood in place, each looking deep into the other’s eyes, swaying to the music. The golden bodybuilder and the tall, dark man were a sight to see. No one dared cut in. They were together, totally into each other, aloof from all else around them. The music rose and ended.

A gay man dragged up in cowboy rodeo gear shouted, “Oh, darlin’!”

The two of them stood stock still with Ryan’s arms around Kick’s broad shoulders and Kick’s around Ryan’s waist with his palms on Ryan’s butt. They were beyond words.

The band retook the stage. The lead guitarist started the backward count to midnight. The crowd joined in. Ryan felt like a missile on count-down to launch. It was midnight and in the careening bar they stood alone and untouched. They kissed deeply.

“This will be our best year,” Kick said.

And it was, until March, when Logan Doyle hit town.

Ryan realized his knuckles were white gripping the steering wheel. He checked his eyes again in the rearview mirror. He hardly recognized himself. He had to save Kick. He felt like a priest whose vocation was to save only one soul whose redemption would be his own.

He looked out the car window at the rocky path leading to the top of the mountain. He feared he could not climb it. He was tired. The agony of waiting so many months for Kick to appear, and then comforting him against Logan’s meanness of soul had exhausted him. He knew he must confront Kick, not to compete with him, but to communicate with him. Some things a man does not have to decide. Some things he knows he must do.

In the small heated car, Ryan broke into a Death-sweat. Novels and movies and plays and songs had always been his refuge. He was a part of all that he had bought. He walked through pop culture like a safe dress rehearsal against life’s dangerous twists. *Movie dialogue*. “We’ll always have Paris.” *Song titles*. “Stop Draggin’ My Heart Around.” Feelings rushed hot through his head in search of a laugh, a smile, a song. Garland singing to Gable: “You Made Me Love You.” Judy. Judy. Judy. Chewing up the mike. The road getting rougher. Lonelier. Tougher. All because the man got away.

Ryan adored cheap sentiment. At least in the comedies and tragedies of page and stage and screen he knew how others in similar situations had felt, and survived, or did not survive, the crisis he was facing.

Out in radio land everyone knew the lyrics to “Heartbreak Hotel.”

So.

He had promised never to fall in-love with Kick.

So.

He had promised never to say no to Kick.

So.

He had long ago broken the first and was slouching toward bedlam about to break the second.

So what.

Kick had told him he could have anything he wanted; but Kick never expected him to call his hand. Maybe Kick loved his deference more than he loved him; but his deference, given in trust, now that they were in trouble, was no longer virtue. It was sin. If he rose from his knees, if he faced Kick directly, if he made them both persons, ordinary persons, he risked losing the golden, ideal bodybuilder forever.

Cinema montage. Music up. “If You Were the Only Girl in the World and I Were the Only Boy.” *Music under.*

Cut to film clip: Crawford and Davis.

Crawford: “You wouldn’t treat me like this if I weren’t in a wheelchair.”

Baby Jane: “But’cha are, Blanche. But’cha are.”

Ryan feared running the film backward. He had played the Beatles backward and heard that Paul was dead. He feared retrogression. He feared Kick’s descent from the pedestal, from the posing platform, from the bed of their high-wire act. Emerson had feared devolution. Tennessee’s Big Daddy raged against mendacity. His Blanche was afraid of falling back into the brutal primitivism of human animals even before we were hairy apes. Ryan’s nerves were ragged as a pair of claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas. He wished he had never gone to school because everything he had learned seemed to usurp his own original response to the universe—the same way Hollywood movies caused him to reference not himself but scripts, actors, and directors.

Ryan could no longer deny himself, could no longer defer to Kick, could no longer dissemble to the brute physical power of the bodybuilder, once lighter than air, whose sheer muscle mass, pumped with steroids, no longer reflected who Kick was and insistently defined what Ryan could never be: one of the boys.

Not one of those boys.

Bodybuilding had become a Deathsport of Attitude masquerading as a celebration of life's force.

Death, whatever its face, terrified Ryan.

Ryan: "If you were the only jock in the world and I were the only coach. If you were the only man in the world and I were the only boy. But'cher not, Kick. But'cher not."

But he was.

Ryan was like the man trapped in his car at the beginning of Fellini's 8½. Ryan had to escape from his overheated car where his breath was fogging the wind against the cooler night air. He climbed free of the tangle of steering wheel and brake and clutch and pushed his way out the door. A downdraft of air from the top of Corona Heights hit him. He breathed deeply fearing he had not been breathing at all. He looked up the long rocky path. He saw the pinnacle of rock crag where he planned to stand at midnight when the known dread of the last year turned into the unknown dread of the next.

Some New Year's.

He began his climb. His rubber-cleated boots hugged the packed gravel. The half-mile climb seemed longer alone. He was not climbing like a lover running in lighthearted slow motion. He was slogging up against gravity like a man struggling to make time, and cover telephoto space, on film unreeling in motion so slow he seemed he would suffocate in celluloid. He lifted one foot and then the other. He stood gasping for breath at the first level. He looked up at the second and third levels he must reach before he gained the top. The mountain's natural red rock glowed with an eerie violet light reflected from the City humming down below.

He approached the steep climb, hanging onto bushes that overhung the trail. His feet slipped. Loose gravel rolled down the hill into darkness behind him. The sweet smell of wild hemlock took his breath away. He made the second crest and then the third.

The rocky outcropping at the top looked too far away. He was losing out to gravity. He had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Yet inch by inch he made his way up the gravel trail. Every inch he gained glowed brighter and brighter from the lights of the Castro and all of San Francisco surrounding the mountain at its foot. Finally he took the uppermost crest. He stood, catching his breath, turning slowly, fully, to the City, real now only in miniature, spread out far below him. Market Street was a landing strip. The marquee of the Castro Theatre spiked up through the night.

It was a view from Golgotha.

The December night was warm and windless. A wisp of fog lay north

over the Bay like a soft blanket thrown out between him and Bar Nada. Christmas trees spaced out on rooftops around the City glowed as brightly as the huge Safeway sign that dominated Market Street. To the west, red lights blinked atop the Erector Set of Sutro Tower. Moonlight bounced off the saucer of rocks where he stood. At night, no one, not even ravenous cocksuckers beating the bushes, climbed this outcropping of ancient mountain so wild and primeval in the heart of the City.

He knew what he had come here to do.

He was wearing Kick's clothes.

He unzipped the thick leather SFPD motorcycle jacket with the black fur collar. The jacket had been Kick's gift to him the Christmas before this last one. It was not a new jacket. It had been Kick's before it was Ryan's. It was that much more dear. He hugged the jacket to him like an embrace that would last forever. He shrugged its weight off one shoulder then the other. His motion was slow and deliberate. He intended to savor each station of his stripping himself naked to the night. The jacket slid slowly down his arm till he caught its yoke in his hands behind his butt. He swung it around, kissed the collar that had so recently ridden up against the nape of Kick's strong neck, taking up the scent of his blond hair. He slowly folded the jacket open and stretched it carefully out on the smooth rock of the cliff edge where he stood.

Memories. The autumn before, he had photographed Kick, shirtless, standing perilously close to the edge of the saddleback rim thirty feet below him. Ryan had lain belly-down on the gravel making the rim the horizon. His video camera framed only the cut in the rocks with an immense expanse of blue sky behind it.

Slowly, Kick had made his way up from the other side of the cut. Ryan's angle in the video shows first Kick's blond head, radiating sunlight, rising over the rim. Then, against the blue sky, he rises slowly up, in the flat perspective of the camera, as if he is rising straight up from the rocky mountain itself against the pure blue sky. Beneath his golden head, up rise his wide shoulders and chest and arms, stripped and oiled and thick with body hair. He looks naked, magnificent. He rises farther and the cut of his faded jeans hangs aslant across his slender hips, his cock and balls filling out the basket between his massive blue thighs rising up, until full-body he stands at last, full of golden grace, booted feet planted firmly on the rock rim, resplendent against nothing but the brilliant blue California sky, a man against the horizon.

Ryan knew they could not go back to that. They must go forward. He was warm, too warm. His body was layered in clothes vested him by Kick.

He slowly unbuttoned the red-plaid flannel shirt. He moved careful as a priest. He pulled the tails of the shirt from his Levi's and peeled it from his chest and back, holding it over his nose and mouth, breathing Kick's spoor, mixed with his own, for minutes long enough to know that all his breath, and therefore his very life itself, was filtered through the gift of the beautiful shirt. He smiled into the frayed collar. With the smile came a squint that blurred the City lights. He folded the shirt into a tight roll and dropped it down onto the laid-open fur lining of the leather jacket.

His own sweat raised the clean soap smell of Kick's gray tee shirt that fit tight across his shoulders and chest and hung full and jock-baggy down his back and belly. Kick had taught him how to project, if not bulk, then a certain weighty manliness he had never known as a slender young man.

He squatted down on one haunch, boot heel up against his butt, to unlace Kick's boots. His small feet floated in the footpads worn deep where Kick's larger feet had walked so many miles. He pulled his wool-socked feet from the boots. He stood and crossed his wrists over his belly the way Kick had taught him, grasping the bottom line of the gray cotton tee shirt, stripping it up and off his chest and shoulders and neck. The collar rode tight up around his head, tugged at his ears, back-brushed his hair as he pulled the shirt off toward the glowing sky. He tossed the shirt carefully to the pile of clothes that were now his clothes.

The night air touched his skin directly. He was stripping down to receive all the Energy reflected up toward him from the City, out toward him from the American continent itself, down to him from whatever outer space there was behind the light canopy of night sky.

He unbuckled his belt and popped the buttons open on his jeans. Uncinched, the Levi's rode with slow gravity from the small of his back, over the rise of his butt, down his hips, opening the cracks and privacies of his body's biggest arch to the warm damp of the craggy rocks. His jeans fell slowly to denim piles over his socks. He stepped easily out. One sock came off with the left leg. He stood one sock off and one sock on, dinkle-dinkle dumpling, his mother's son, so long as one sock remained; his father's son, so long as he was his mother's. He was Kick's boy. The socks were Kick's socks. The socks were Ryan's socks. The socks were their socks.

Ryan stood naked, above San Francisco, his feet planted on the rough gravel of Corona Heights. The night wrapped around him. Nothing but volition held him to the Earth. He was more sad than he had ever been in his life. He was more happy. He stood in the shimmering City darkness. Fireworks, heralding the New Year, exploded intermittently over the rooftops. Was real darkness in the night? Were ancient spirits in the rocks?

Was this the place of close encounters?

Far below, a light breeze swept the City from the Golden Gate, rippling through the lighted flag waving atop the Fairmont Hotel, dividing around the cold black monolith of the Bank of America, threading the needle point of the Transamerica Pyramid, blowing across the Tenderloin, down Market Street, past the white light of the Ferry Building, across China Basin and Potrero, around San Francisco General Hospital, out past Candlestick Park toward San Francisco International and the low strip of the Dumbarton Bridge. Ships off in the East Bay, night ships at anchor, floated quietly on the sheer face of the hidden current. All the noises of the City mixed to a low roar broken only by the syncopated poppings of Chinese fireworks shot off in the night. Across the tight miniature-grid of the dark City, cars, steel units of power and light, cruised the night streets. Closer, below him, cars and bikes edged bumper to bumper down Castro. Revelers, crowding the sidewalks, stood, too far away to be heard, in pools of light outside the open-faced bars. Strangers in the night.

The City's massive Energy rose in updraft around Ryan's naked body. He was stripped and open to it all. How we all end up, he thought, matters less than how we all are now. How we die matters less than how we live. Everything froze beneath him. He recognized the feeling. It was happening. He had to make it happen. This time alone. Without Kick. He had to conjure to save them. He saw a Face in the fog. It was his Face. It was Kick's Face. It was their Face. It was the Face of the Energy they conjured between them. Ryan became the Face, became himself, became the other, became them both, became them all, hanging suspended out of time, spiraling above time and place, flying against all gravity, turning back clocks, speeding forward, zooming, in himself, outside himself, directing his Energy out, collecting his Energy back into himself, fortifying himself for what he must do, taking himself in hand, making love to himself, beating off his hidden rhythms, loathing himself, loving himself, in himself, outside himself, feeling his body, leaving his body, soaring, standing naked on the mountain, erect, pumping, staring hard at Kick's Face in the fog, his Face in the fog, masturbating in wild pulses, saying, saying, over and over, saying, "I want...I need...I need it...I need it," hypno-chanting, "I need...I need...to know...what it is...to be...fully...human!" His body shook at the singsong words wrenched from deep inside him. The Face loomed larger over him. It was himself. It was the boychild he had tried to kill. It was the man he really was. It was the person he would become. It was himself. It was not Kick. It was himself. Gray. Shrouded. The past, and the future-becoming, both mysterious. Seeing Kick kneeling before him.

Some Dance to Remember

349

Seeing himself faced with all possibilities, murderously dangerous, visions rising, converging, surreal, mystical, himself naked under his priest's vestments intoning high mass in a dark cathedral, sexy, himself moaning in a sling at the Slot with a fist up his ass, gaudy, himself singing "Muscle Blues" on *The Tonight Show*, flexing his own beautiful body, holding a cordless mike, oiled and pumped, naked but for Kick's brown nylon posing briefs, tight, transparent around his bulging cock and balls, hard-on, bathed in a tight dramatic spot, the Johnny Carson congregation sitting in a church, a silent priest praying for the dead and dying, bumping, grinding slowly through his posing routine, showing them true suffering, exhibiting real pain, the Face of the tortured and crucified, in living color, on network TV, singing "Stars Fell on Alabama," his own man, cuming, shooting, his cock convulsing in his hand, spewing sperm, white, hot, gelatinous across Kick's face, across his blond moustache, into his open mouth, never-ending orgasm, cum shooting up his own belly, down his own legs, across the rock, over the cliff edge, a voice, his voice, Kick's voice, their voice, roaring into the roar of the night, into the roar of the City, below the wild outcropping where he stood, high, alone, naked, afraid of loss, lost, mad with fear, howling into the exploding New Year's night.

14

"What'd you do last night for New Year's?" Solly Blue asked.

"I went crazy," Ryan said.

"Temporary insanity, I hope."

"I don't know yet," Ryan said. "Insanity isn't temporary until it actually goes away."

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