

Silver-Screen Blues 1980

B-Movie on Castro Street

“**L**over Trouble,” O’Riley said. “Just like Bette Davis.” O’Riley was Luke’s best friend. Luke ignored him. Luke couldn’t even remember where he had slept the night before. Whose bed had he kicked back the sheets from that morning? He was on the run. This was the chase sequence from a B-movie. Suicide wasn’t the answer. Homicide was. Why should he kill himself when he could kill his lover? No court in San Francisco would convict him for killing the handsome, two-timing sonuvabitch.

But, he told O’Riley, murder-suicide was too gay. His lover had become too gay. Everything in San Francisco had become too gay. Castro was a cast of thousands trapped on the backlot of a weird movie studio that kept shooting the same film loop over and over. Luke resisted the casting. Everybody was looking like everybody else. Originality was so rare you could get stud fees for it.

In the mirror opposite the table where Luke and O’Riley sat, Luke studied what was left of his face. He was looking closing-time-tired at eight o’clock at night. Rub on the Noxema. What comes after Oil of Olay? Surgery of Olay. Lover trouble puts lines in your face. Especially when you love the guy with your heart as much your dick. What the fuck had they done to themselves anyway? Faggots are supposed to be their own best creation.

His lover Chuck had said to him, “Our relationship is noble and manly and good.” Chuck had looked directly in close-up into Luke’s face the way Luke now looked directly into his own eyes in the mirror. Then Chuck had said, “Trust me.”

That had been Luke’s first mistake.

He sat in the bay of his friend O'Riley's front room. The third-floor apartment faced the huge neon marquee of the Castro Theatre directly across the street. The rosy light glowed so warm and bright that O'Riley rarely turned on a lamp until the marquee went dark after the start of the last feature.

"*Trust*," O'Riley prodded. "You drifted off on *trust*."

"Betrayal." Luke toyed with nasty word associations the way he played with the antique silver spoon next to his empty coffee mug. "I should never have trusted any man living in San Francisco."

Sounds of bumper-to-bumper cars, pickups, and bikes rose with a mix of bar-music from the street below.

"San Francisco isn't a city," Luke said. "It's a hunting ground. First you have to be good-looking. Second you have to be hot. Third you have to be kinky. That's the Castro Breaks."

O'Riley was the Mary Worth of listeners. His Mr. Coffee gurgled on his spit-waxed sideboard bought downstairs at The Gilded Age. A Warhol print of Marilyn hung in a chrome frame on the soft mauve wall. "You trusted the wrong guy," he said.

Luke twisted the spoon once used by stars in the studio commissary before the MGM auction. He was intent. Intense. "Do you know what it's like to look into eyes like Chuck's and see yourself reflected in each deep blue pupil? A lover's eyes are a doublefuck."

"I thought you disliked the term *lovers*," O'Riley said.

"We both hate the label."

"But you are lovers."

"No." Luke was definite. He set the spoon down precisely on the wooden table. "No." He hesitated. "Yes. Okay, lovers. Jeez. Is that the only way to express it? Why not best friends, partners, fuckbuddies? Anything but *lovers*! *Lovers* is weighted with expectations."

"You're sounding like lovers."

"We're friends. Friends expect honesty, trust, a little affection."

"You get a lot of sex out of him." O'Riley needled. "A lot!"

"I love him but we're not 'in love' with each other. He says he loves me."

"I don't care what you call it! Lover trouble is so Hollywood."

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

There's more desperate movie queens on Castro..."

"I'll kill the iron-pumping sonuvabitch! With my bare hands! I haven't pumped my own tits up on those fucking Nautilus machines for two years for nothing!" Luke heaved heavily as he spoke, his pumped-up pecs rising and falling.

Luke's lover Chuck was a bodybuilder. Tall, dark, handsome. A looker. A real show-stopper. In the first days of their relationship, Luke had adjusted fast to the fact that his new friend was everybody's type. "I hardly have any friends." Chuck had confided. "They all want to be fans." He had said it with no vanity. And Luke loved him for it. He had seen cars at 18th and Castro rear-end each other. He had seen guys fall up the steps at Paperback Traffic. He had watched the crowd in the Norse Cove grow quiet as he and Chuck walked in to order jack-omelettes with a side of cottage cheese. Luke had never heard of omelettes. He couldn't remember anybody back in the Midwest eating omelettes for brunch. Straight people ate eggs for breakfast.

"Nobody knows the cause of homosexuality," Luke said to O'Riley. "I think it's caused by omelettes and brunch."

O'Riley poured the coffee into the mugs. Perfectly. Like a scene from one of those old Warner Brothers seven-hanky weepers. "Your problem," O'Riley said, "is that you never really moved to San Francisco. You moved to Castro." Then, acknowledging the keys hanging on Luke's belt, left side, he added, "Excuse me. And to Folsom." He stirred his coffee with the spoon Luke had tossed aside. "Do those keys mean something or are they just junk jewelry?"

"Funny. But not very." Luke took a hit of the steaming coffee.

"*Left* means...*Top*?" O'Riley drew out the sentence for sarcastic effect.

"*Left* means *negotiable*."

"How gay!"

"You got it. Gay! Chuck came from a dirt farm in Oklahoma. He had a great career in Kansas City as an attorney. His very attraction was that he was an unspoiled authentic male. No pretensions. His straightforward preference for men never spilled over into fag behavior." Luke warmed to the thought of those first days when Chuck had visited San Francisco. "Before he moved

here, he used to describe Castro as the place where you could, unfortunately, see men doing to themselves things you hoped you'd never see men do to themselves. He used to insist that homosexuals don't have to be gay."

O'Riley hid his chuckle behind his coffee mug muttering something about protesting a bit too something or other. "I know," he said. "I hear all these reactionary types saying they prefer to be called queers, faggots, cocksuckers."

"Sounds to me like they're into what those sleazy *Drummer* ads call VA."

"Excuse me. I was a nun in my last existence. What's VA?" O'Riley asked.

"VA. Verbal Abuse. A sexual humiliation trip."

"Oh. You mean like the Governor of Nevada calling us *queers* when he doesn't want to rent state property for the Gay Rodeo?"

"Chuck coined the term *homomasculine*. He says manhood is more than sex. He says homosexuality focuses too much on the genitals. He says homomasculine men shouldn't ape heterosexual coupling. He says we should live in an open fraternity."

"Your Mr. America sounds like the Oracle of Delphi. Only piled higher."

"Some guys are lucky," Luke said. "Natural stars. As smart as they are good-looking. Good genes. Good grooming."

"Good drugs," O'Riley countered. "Some guys pump up their bubbletits with steroids. Just like your little Chuckie—I've seen him pop those little blue pills. This season they're the in-drug on Castro. With enough steroids, cottage-cheese omelettes, and workouts at the gym, a guy can pump himself up like a bloated dog in the noonday sun. Don't you try and tell me that all of Chuck's unnaturally natural beauty is genetic and athletic."

"You're sounding envious." Luke spread a small smile on wry.

"I've looked in your refrigerator. I can read. I saw the package of anabolic steroids. Nandolone Decanoate. And the needles. How long has he been shooting himself up? Since before he won those physique contests, I'll bet."

"So what?" Luke resisted out of habit any attacks on Chuck.

"I guess," O'Riley said, "there's a little bit of Faust in all of us."

"In San Francisco you don't deal with people, you deal with

the drugs they're on. What's the difference if it's coke, Quaaludes, or steroids?"

"Every faggot wants to be Judy-Judy-Judy. Uppers in the morning. Downers at night and fucked senseless by rough trade till dawn."

"Shut your mouth! Judy was a good woman." Luke was firm.

"You want tea and sympathy?"

"I'm here for nothing more than to watch the rosy glow of the Castro Theatre marquee be kind to your face. If wrinkles hurt, you'd be screaming."

"How'd you like a mouth full of bloody Chicklets? Some fags deserve bashing." O'Riley enjoyed tripping Luke's circuits.

"How can you stand living right on Castro? Your address is a cliché." Luke said. "Your zip code is as much a sign of your sexual deviancy as all this designer crap you bought on sale at Work Wonders. Shit! Work Wonders! That ought to be the name of a gym." Luke was pissed. "Designer apartments. Designer muscles."

"So what's wrong with gay guys pumping a little natural muscle on their bodies? Even if half of them ride their Nautilus machines sidesaddle. Makes them look like healthy cadets from some military academy. I live on Castro because I figure with so many All-American boys on the hoof, there must be a prep school somewhere in the neighborhood. How else can you account for it? Just like a college town. The Norse Cove is the dining room of the city's largest Animal House."

"You're a bitch."

"You're a bastard."

"Do you have the strange feeling we're doing the Hepburn-Finney dialogue from the final scene of *Two for the Road*?" To O'Riley, life was a movie to be edited in the living of it. In this at least, he was in total accord with Luke—and the Castro Street millions.

Luke couldn't let the conversation stray too far from Chuck. "I have the strange feeling I've been seduced and abandoned by my fuckbuddy partner who has betrayed homomasculine fraternity and has gone gay, Gay, GAY!"

"Would a guy with muscles do that?"

"When he moved here directly into my apartment, he was

pure, unspoiled, a golden god...”

“And now he’s a muscleclone whose only visible means of support is the window ledge on the front of Donuts and Things.

“You have a way with words,” Luke said. “I’m not sure I like it.”

“Come off it. I’ve watched that little group of tittypumpers you and he hang out with leaning in the sun for fucking hours in front of those jelly-filled donuts. Don’t you get tired drinking all that coffee from those yellow wax cups? And why are you the only one who keeps your shirt on? You may not have all the muscle, but they certainly treat you like one of the boys.”

“Fuck you.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted to be? One of the boys?” O’Riley unscrewed an imaginary pill bottle. “Have a steroid. Take two. They’re small. Try a handful. Be one of the boys! Stand in front of that fucking donut shop and watch your livers turn to green pudding and drain out onto the sidewalk. One of a dozen side-effects. No wonder Chuckie’s favorite movie *is High Anxiety*.”

“He says he likes it because it’s so unusual to see a group of Jewish actors having fun.”

“I told you he’s a fascist. Homomasculine fraternity, my ass! He’s a sexual fascist! He even wears that muscle-cut teeshirt that says ‘Only The Strong Shall Survive.’”

“Don’t get politically correct on me. I’ll throw up.” Luke rubbed his stomach.

“Those little muscle pumpers won’t fuck with anybody who isn’t better built, or who isn’t better looking and hot or who doesn’t work out at the same gym. Maybe that’s what your Arnold Chauvinegger calls fraternity. That’s not brotherly. That’s sexual fascism. I’m down on what’s happened to my neighborhood.”

“I’m sorry we all helped it happen. Mecca became a ghetto. The ghetto stratified. Lots of guys are leaving the City.”

“I don’t know what those muscle freaks see in you. Either you’ve got the biggest dick in San Francisco, or Chuck’s the biggest bottom in town.” O’Riley grinned. “I know you do love to use your whips and chains and tit clamps.” He mock-rubbed his tongue around his lips. “How big *is* your dick?”

“Twelve inches.”

“Only if I let you fuck me twice.” O’Riley grinned.

“We’ve never fucked.”

“We never will fuck. That’s why we’ll always be good friends. That’s why you’ll still be sitting at my table drinking my coffee ten years from now. Long after Chuckie’s dead and gone from steroid rot. But I suppose you’ll still be at home alone, stoned, running all those videotapes you shot of him posing in body-beautiful contests and of him jerking off his big cock in your bedroom.”

“He *is* hung. Not all bodybuilders are compensating.”

“Spare me. You know I’ve never been susceptible to his charms.”

“I don’t care about how he looks or how he’s hung or how great he’s built or how good we are together in bed. He can get old and sick and skinny and impotent...”

“With steroids, he will.”

“...I’ll still love him.”

“Hum me ‘Hearts and Flowers.’” O’Riley made a small violin: forefinger over thumb.

“Hey! I need somebody. So why not the best somebody?”

“Everybody needs somebody...or settles for somebody.”

“I think, I mean, I thought...”

“Funny how verb tenses changes when an affair is breaking up.”

“I think I need him. I know I want him. Not exclusively. Not all the time. We have threeways. We both fuck on the side.”

“So what exactly is the problem?” O’Riley wanted a bull’s eye.

“He’s spoiling himself, turning gay, prick-teasing guys who honestly like him when he has no intention of following through and fucking with them.”

“That’s turning *very* gay.” O’Riley was no fool. His sex life was a knockout. He got exactly what he wanted from young street hustlers he rented by the hour from the Tenderloin and off Market Street. “I have little patience for anybody who isn’t getting what he wants. And even less for somebody who is getting maybe what he deserves.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I know you’ve taken steroids too.”

“For four fucking weeks, big deal! The anxiety they cause

made me stop.”

“Why were you so stupid to take them?” O’Riley’s disgust was not feigned.

“I wanted to keep up. I wanted to be able to keep on keeping on with him.”

“So where do you get off thinking you’re so much purer than him?”

“Fuck off. I’m not. Everything I say about him is just as revealing about me. Whose life is it anyway? Mine. Besides, it takes two,” Luke said.

“Really? I always think of Castro somehow as half of Noah’s Ark. You know: one of every kind!”

“Maybe it’s not him. Maybe it’s just my life we’re talking about. Maybe I’ve stayed too long at the fair.” Luke’s thoughts sometimes ran like Streisand lyrics about somebody done somebody wrong.

“Aren’t we all just playing the lead in our own little movies.” O’Riley liked to score points. “Chuck’s only a supporting character, after all. Not your co-star.” He absently fingered several snapshots of his street boys lying on some books stacked neatly at the edge of the table. They were basically heterosexuals. With their own brand of bullshit. They stayed straight even when they laid their ass on the line for a john. They made plain and simple distinctions. Nothing complicated. O’Riley, at thirty-two, had long before lost his taste for Byzantine gayboy games.

“I need somebody kind of special.” Luke said. “Chuck has some body, but maybe he no longer has his soul. Maybe he sold it for all that physical beauty. Steroids screw up the personality. Maybe his own good looks have betrayed his soul the way I feel he’s betrayed the one main thing I gave him in love. The only thing one man can ultimately really honor another with: trust.”

“You expect me to believe that you love that stereotype for more than his face? He may not be my type but I know what a heartbreaker he is on the street.”

Sometimes Luke felt like he was Dirk Bogarde pining on the beach over Tadzio in the last reel of *Death in Venice*. “Listen. I had to work around the fact he was supergorgeous in order to get at his real self.”

“Just like he had to work around the fact that you’re not supergorgeous to get at your real soul,” O’Riley said.

“I tell him the truth. Nobody else ever tells him the truth. They tell him what they think he wants to hear on the outside chance that they’ll get in his pants. Chuck has the most-kissed ass on Castro.”

“He loves you for your mind. Right? You may not look more than average but you’ve got a great personality. Right?”

“I thought it could work both ways,” Luke said.

“Chuckie likes big strong 18-inch arms.” O’Riley could rub in salt with the best.

“He’ll never find bigger arms than mine to embrace him.”

“So he’s built like a brick shithouse and you’ve got that wonderful skinny euphemism: a swimmer’s body. What do you two do in bed anyway? Everybody at the Norse Cove is taking bets.”

“I know. Him into muscles. Me into leather.” Luke grinned.

“How do you two put it together? Exactly? For two years all I’ve gotten from you is vague generalities about long hot nights of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. I know you’re both animals.”

“We do what Oscar winners do when they get home from the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion—we fuck. With the physique trophies in the bed. Or at least that’s what we did the night he won his first contest.”

“Cute.” O’Riley rolled his eyes.

“He calls me ‘Coach.’”

“I’m beginning to sense who’s on top.”

“Can you imagine what it’s like to lay a first-place bodybuilder the night he’s won four trophies? Can you imagine what it’s like to lift up a pair of legs that have just won Best Legs in California and fuck his ass?”

“I think I can imagine it.” O’Riley said and hit his coffee deliberately. “That’s the problem. That’s why you’ve got Lover Trouble. That’s why you can’t sleep. That’s why he’s out prick teasing without putting out on his big macho come-hither look.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You’re running around with a muscle-ninny who can’t believe—and won’t admit—he likes a brainy, sex-talkative type like you who knows how to play his head like a banjo...and fuck

his ass!”

“He keeps whispering to me late at night that next to jerking off, I’m the best sex he’s ever had,” Luke said.

“So to you he’ll admit it. But his build and his face require a certain cool attitude. I’ll bet he can’t admit he’s a queer cocksucker.”

“He’d never say those words.”

“That’s the trouble with that whole twisted little group of bodybuilders who pose at being carpenters and painters and construction workers. They can’t stand the fact, the *fact*, man, that they’re gay. Not homomasculine. Not homomuscular. Not homodiddlyshit.” O’Riley looked hard into Luke’s face.

“I think they have a harder time than the rest of us.”

“Don’t cry for me, San Francisco.” O’Riley pushed his chair back in disgust.

“Seriously. Deep down they think *straight is* better.” Luke was making an earnest plea for them. “They see their bodies, their clothes, their work so close to being straight that they’re crazed to pass for straight. They even talk about ‘passing.’” Luke had sort of bought the bodybuilder script.

“Like a butch bunch of good niggers!” O’Riley shot back. “Shit! Give me a good honest clone or queen any day. And still they need honest, gay, faggot queers like you to worship them, adore them, keep them. Muscles are just another fetish. Right behind dirty jockstraps and cigars.”

“I like big guys. I like muscle. I like the jock look,” Luke insisted.

“Bodybuilders are a crock. They’re all hustlers. Economic, emotional, you name it. They need transfusions of energy. They have to replace all the energy they put out in the gym.” O’Riley sucked air through his teeth. “Hustlers. I know from hustlers. My life is young street trash. Believe me. Chuck is a hustler.”

“No,” Luke said almost too emphatically. “That’s not true. He hates hustlers. He wrote an anonymous letter to *Iron Man* magazine exposing his feelings about the muscle-hustling scene. Guys do their posing routines straddling various doctors’ chests. The doctor jerks off. They collect their modeling fees in oral and injectable steroids. Chuck refused to do that. He hates muscle-hustlers.”

“Did he share your rent for the last two years?”

Luke hesitated a moment too long.

“See. He’s *not* a hustler *only* if you play semantics. And, God, how you two like to play semantics. Call him a mercenary. That’s a fashionable word these days. El Salvador, Angola, all that *Soldier of Fortune* magazine crap.”

“Don’t,” Luke said.

“Why not? You need some truth. Is this a war movie? Are we all supposed to be nice to bodybuilders because their gym class leaves at dawn?”

“Shut up,” Luke said.

“Castro may be the Western Front but unlike you we won’t all be quiet. Not when a select little fascist group starts hustling, cannibalizing, exploiting, vampirizing the rest of us just because they’ve got big pecs and biceps. Bodies may be what a lot of guys think man-to-man sex is all about. But any guy who’s been around the block knows it’s more than just standup sex in a backroom. And I don’t see anything wrong with that either. Sometimes when you’re fed up and worn out with interpersonal relationships, nothing feels better than an honest impersonal sex encounter. Frankly, that’s what you need. Some no-obligation, no-expectation fun-for-the-moment sex.”

“Ain’t you just the Oracle of Delphi yourself?”

“I know what works for me. Period. Right now you don’t know what works for you. That’s all I’m saying. Have a tenth-rate nervous breakdown over the sonuvabitch if you must. Movie-queens love mad scenes. Enter innocent as Juliet. Exit mad as Ophelia.”

“I love him.”

“Isn’t that from *West Side Story*?” O’Riley was a thesaurus of lyrics.

“What?”

“I love him. I’m his...” O’Riley sang. Off-key.

“Yeah. I suppose. ‘And everything he is. I am too.’”

“Don’t you just wish!” O Riley laughed.

“Cunt!”

“So what are you going to do while Mr. Gorgeous prickteases his way through the Castro letting only the favored ones feel up

his baseball-sized biceps?”

“I told him he can have anything he wants.” Luke said.

“That’s what I always tell my hustlers too.”

“I mean it.”

“We always mean it—until after we cum.” O’Riley leaned in close to the table.

“So what am I going to do? Commit suicide or commit murder?”

“Just wait. Wait it out. Wait till he finds that he’s never going to find a jerk or a john who loves him more than you do. More, by the way, than he deserves. And hope while you’re waiting that the steroids don’t kill him with cancer before he realizes what he’s got in you.”

“And what should I do while I wait?”

“Beat off. Sleep around. Become a masochist. I don’t know.” O’Riley drained the last of his coffee. “Maybe just be there when he comes crashing down.” He stopped. “He will come crashing down, this high-flying adored of yours. We all come crashing down. You, me, him, Evita. Sooner or later we all regret our high-wire acts, swinging nights from the chandeliers, without a net.” O’Riley reached across the table and held Luke’s hand. “Don’t spin your wheels too long. Don’t waste your energy. Remember *Carousel* when Shirley Jones sang, ‘What’s the use of wondrin’ if the ending will be sad.’”

“I’m not wondering. I’ve tried to be the gentleman he always wanted us both to be. I’m not masochistic enough, maybe not at all, certainly not enough to do this self-effacing bit. I’ve got a lot of anger. A lot of anger. A whole lot of anger I don’t know what to do with. We’ve never even had a fight. We’ve never in two years yelled at each other. Now I have all this anger,” Luke said.

“Then one afternoon when he’s out preening in the sun with the boys,” O’Riley began, “you head on in to the Star Pharmacy and buy a couple bottles of something really scuzzy like *Jade East* cologne and walk up to him and slosh it all over him. If he’s gotten as gay as you say, and truly as tacky in public as I’ve seen, with all those other voluptuous muscle showgirls, he’ll love it.”

Luke grinned at the scenario. “He’s so proud of his big biceps,” he said. “I’d rather take out a contract and have both his

arms broken. Make him into the Venus de Milo of Castro. I'd like to see what his vanity-pump looks like after six weeks in a pair of casts!"

"I love these anti-masculine *Nine-to-Five* fantasies," O'Riley said. "Just like Fonda and Tomlin and Parton ganging up on a defenseless man."

"He told me he feels so empty. He told me how much he really dislikes all those other muscle guys. He says they don't have the symmetry, the face, the look. He plays up to them because he likes the way they all play up to him."

"Mutual ass-kissers. Real vanity. Narcissus drowning in steroids."

"I hate him. I love him. I want to sleep with him tonight," Luke said. "Omigod. Passion. I have such passion."

"This is a small town. Word travels fast. I've heard he owes money."

"There's more gossip than truth on Castro. Everybody owes money to somebody. These are hard times."

"I suppose it's not hustling when you just borrow," O'Riley said softly.

"Don't be cynical about him. Please. Don't believe all the street talk. Chuck's not evil. He's not a hustler. In his heart, he's a gentle man. It's just..." Luke's voice trailed off.

"Just what?"

"Just that moving to the City has turned his head a little."

"And he's turned a few heads."

"So why's he punishing me?" Luke hurt way deep down. More than he ever thought he could hurt. "Because I told him the truth?"

"Kings used to kill the messenger who brought them the truth."

"He asked me. He honest-to-God asked me why he was so unhappy here in San Francisco. I made a mistake. I told him what I thought. That maybe even he can't have everything he wants the way he wants. Everything he owns is at my house. His clothes. His trophies. How can a man so strong be so fragile? He's on the run. It's like he won't..."

"...can't..."

“...face me.” Luke was stymied. “Why’s he so embarrassed? Why is he making me feel so embarrassed?”

“Because you are a famous couple. Visible. Because you know about him. He never suspected anyone would ever get to know him the way you penetrated his defenses.” O’Riley spoke deliberately. “You know the private truth. He’s paranoid that your information will become ammunition.”

“I told him I was a safe person. I told him for two years that he could hide out in me whenever he wanted.” Luke raised his eyes to the soft glow of the ceiling. “I’d never hurt him. Not anymore than you hurt a hysterical person when you slap him.” His lower face pulled taut. Lines formed. He held back on the cry being pinched out by the hurt. “Omigod. I love him.”

“For two years, he took, right? He took. You gave.”

“He gave too. Some things. But now he’s hiding. He won’t let me give. Not anything.”

“That’s a reverse hustle. That’s a sting!”

Luke had not intended any of this to go this way. He had not known exactly when his life had turned into a grade-B movie. He had read somewhere that in an hour of film you actually watch twenty-seven minutes of total darkness. Your eye chooses to watch the light of the fast-illuminated single frames flashing one after the other through the projector and onto the screen. If the film slows down, like in old-time movies, the screen seems to flicker. Luke was afraid. He was beginning to see life that way. He was beginning to see the darkness between the frames. There was really no such thing as a moving picture. Just a barrage of fast stills. The film could slow down. He could see the darkness. The celluloid could break.

“I have nothing to say about human sexual relationships.” O’Riley said.

“Except,” Luke could feel the flicker, “they don’t work.”

“Of course not. They’re illusions. They pretend to work. Relationships are at best a truce.” O’Riley pushed himself back from the table. The glow of the Castro marquee haloed his strawberry-blond hair. “My father told me that for forty years he woke up in the morning and looked my mother straight in the eye everyday and said in a very calm voice: ‘Now don’t start anything

and there won't be anything.”

“That’s cynical.”

“That’s finite truth. It sums up the whole big deal of human relationships. He just wanted a truce.”

“I hate it all.” Luke couldn’t finish his coffee. It would keep him awake, and he didn’t know where he would sleep that night.

Across Castro, an usher in a brown leather jacket was up on a ladder changing the theater marquee. His hands shifted the last letters of a Woody Allen title around to spell out *Casablanca*.

“Did you see the Allen film?” O’Riley asked.

“Chuck says he’s too New York, too Jewish, too bleak. He doesn’t like him.”

“No wonder. Allen’s good at relationships. Real good—at dissecting them.”

Luke couldn’t face going back to the apartment to find Chuck gone again. He knew he was going to have to throw him out. Everybody in town wanted Chuck in the sack and he was going to throw him out. It would be a new experience for Chuck, but it gave Luke small satisfaction. He’d be left alone in his apartment, like someone sitting by the side of the road at the scene of an accident.

“At the beginning we’re all charming.” O’Riley said. “At the end, we’re all assholes. Allen has this girl accusing him, ‘But you’re not like we were at the beginning. You were so charming.’ And Allen says, ‘I was just doing my mating thing. I was using up all my energies. I couldn’t keep doing this. I’d go crazy!’”

“So that’s what people do?”

“At the beginning, the movie we’re living is no different from the movies we watch. At the beginning, you think you’re both so intelligent, so full of life the first few days, weeks, months. Then reality creeps in. You start accusing each other of leaving jockstraps on the floor and dishes in the sink. You call each other idiots. You leave angry notes about who owes exactly what on the phone bill.”

If Chuck was gone all night again, Luke figured, why should he sleep alone, just on the outside chance he’d come home. He’d be better off heading down to the Brig to find someone negotiable to cuddle with.

“Maybe I’ll join the exodus from San Francisco. Move north to Sonoma County. Get back to what I came out for. Unspoiled men. I think the dream here in Mecca is over.”

He said sort-of goodnight to O’Riley and walked down the three flights and out onto Castro. The usher across the street was standing on the sidewalk studying the lettering on the marquee. He was wiping his nose in a red handkerchief he stuffed back into his right pocket.

Luke figured maybe he’d go take in *Casablanca* the next night. “Here’s looking at you, kid.” And all that bitter sweet farewell stuff.

He walked uphill toward Market Street, away from 18th.

A young guy leaning against the Bank of America said, “Joints?”

Luke wasn’t at all sure of what he’d think about tomorrow when today would be yesterday.



Mickey Squires

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