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Twisted Straight: A Memoir

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

TWISTED STRAIGHT:

A MEMOIR

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Nicholas Garnett

2011

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Nicholas Garnett, and entitled Twisted Straight: A Memoir, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Asher Milbauer

Lynne Barrett

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 24, 2011

The thesis of Nicholas Garnett is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Kevin O'Shea
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2011

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

TWISTED STRAIGHT:

A MEMOIR

by

Nicholas Garnett

Florida International University, 2011

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

TWISTED STRAIGHT is a 103,000 word memoir, which chronicles the author's ten-year relationship to the ebullient, witty, but destructive woman he married, and their subsequent immersion in gay culture, specifically the circuit-party scene.

TWISTED STRAIGHT is set in the heyday of the gay circuit scene, and the 90s, the decade in which it became hip to be gay. It is a unique perspective on a sub-culture off limits to most heterosexual men. Just as importantly, the story describes a man's search for himself, for a real connection with his electrifying but emotionally damaged wife, for a break from his past, and for meaning in a life buried deep beneath a lifestyle.

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I. Foreword

Imagine a series of events that combine the tribal mysticism of Stonehenge, the spectacle of gladiator night at the Coliseum, the debauchery of a sex tour of Bangkok, the constancy and connectedness of a family reunion, the pulverizing magic of a Gene Krupa drum solo, the endurance of twenty-four hours at Le Mans, the joyous celebration of VJ Day, the rush (and some of the risk) of cliff diving in Acapulco, and the transformative power of a Lakota Sioux sweat lodge. This is the circuit. Or, at least it was. Or, at least, it was to me.

If some of the metaphors I used in describing the circuit appear to be contradictory, that's because they are. Since their inception in the 80s, circuit parties have raised millions of dollars for various HIV/AIDS medical research and social support organizations. The circuit has helped save lives and provide comfort and dignity to those who could not be saved. The circuit has also, if not condoned, then at the very least provided a setting to perpetuate a disease, the ravages of which it was created to ameliorate. That qualifies as some A-1, top shelf, mamma-jamma irony—at least in does in my book, which you're about to read.

Though this story is based on real (and, occasionally, surreal) events, some of the characters in the story are composites. I've also changed certain details—including names and occupations—in an effort to protect reputation, career, and conscience.

There was, however, no attempt—and no need—to tweak up the story; anyone who has lived this life knows that the very last thing it needs is embellishment of any kind.

II. Twisted Straight

Woof

1999

My wife, Rachael, a dozen or so gay men and I stand by Ramon's poolside Jacuzzi in Fire Island and watch Jason bang away at Mandy. Again. It's sex, but it's not particularly sexy—more *Animal Planet* than *Spice Channel*. Mandy has braced herself against the edge of the blue fiberglass tub, her ropy black hair spilling down in front of her except for the thick band Jason has gathered in both fists. His triceps bulge as he has at her from behind. With each thrust, a swell of water cascades over the lip of the tub to the deck below. The sound of water slapping wood blends with their staccato rasps and bovine grunts to form an oddly syncopated rhythm.

It's a pretty slick groove, actually—somewhere between *bossa nova* and Barry White.

The faces on the men gathered around the couple are rapt. Who can blame them? This is at least as good as any porn movie *and* it's the real thing *and* it involves a hot straight man with huge muscles and tattoos.

I turn to Rachael and she gives me a different take—annoyance. She sighs and walks by me in a huff, slides open the screen door leading to the living room and slaps it closed behind her. A sinking feeling pierces the haze of my high, a constriction, like the aperture on a camera lens.

Jason and Mandy show no signs of letting up, so I head inside to find Rachael, though I'm not anxious to hear her make the logically convoluted case that the couple we've been having public sex with is now behaving inappropriately by having public sex with each other.

I turn the corner into one of the guestrooms and there is Rachael sitting on the bed with the Porn Boys whom we've nicknamed Chipper and Tweaked, featured acts in a series of gay videos. She's sucking white smoke from the end of a small, glass water pipe. The sight gives me pause. Privately, Rachael has been deriding the Porn Boys for smoking crystal, an activity which

she maintains hits too close to the utterly un-fabulous image of smoking crack. I'm not so sure I get the distinction.

Rachael sees me, lowers the pipe a few inches and shrugs her shoulders. "In for a dime—"

"Hurry up," says Chipper. He's naked, save for a thick, chrome cock ring.

"Waste not—want more," says Tweaked.

Except for the muffled moans coming outside from the hot tub, the hiss from the small butane lighter he holds under the pipe is the only sound in the room.

A thin flow of smoke streams into Rachael's mouth.

Tweaked says, "Hold it in." Rachael puffs up her cheeks and shifts her eyes from one of them to the other, waiting. "Now," he says. She exhales and there's a small plume, like a breath on the first frosty morning of fall.

Rachael hands Chipper the pipe and stares up at the ceiling. "Huh."

"*Huh?* That's all you've got to say?" I ask.

Chipper twists the pipe in my direction. "You want?"

"Yes he does," says Rachael.

"I do?"

"If this is the highway to hell, darling, I'm not riding it alone."

I try to think of an excellent reason not to. A good reason won't be good enough, not here—especially not here. I sit on the edge of the bed and watch Tweaked snap on the lighter and maneuver the pale blue flame under what remains of the dollop of crystal. It melts and is transformed from powder into a wispy white haze.

"Draw," he says. "Not too hard."

I touch my lips to the tip of the warm glass, inhale, and watch the smoke disappear until it emerges again as a frail, white wisp. There's only the slightest chemical aftertaste. A wave suffuses me, euphoric, but much more. There's clarity—perfect, doubt-obliterating clarity.

“Well?” asks Rachael.

“Well?” ask the Porn Boys.

I am sated. Strong and composed. Outside, Mandy voice swirls up several registers, signaling her orgasm.

The beast within is set free. I look up to the ceiling and smile. “Woof,” I say.

It Takes a Woman

How, one might legitimately ask, did a married hetero male end up on Fire Island in the company of a couple of gay porn stars toking on a pipe full of crystal meth and making wolf noises? It's kind of a long story. First off, I should get something out of the way. Conventional wisdom once held that boys who like boys were the product of outside forces such as the lack of a father figure or the influence of imperious and domineering women. The folks who came up with the theory should have checked with me first. If *that* kind of childhood could make you gay, I'd have sashayed to my junior high school prom clad in a Balenciaga gown, evening gloves, and heels.

So, while the girls in my life didn't make me like the boys in *that* way, they certainly led me to them. You see, in my world, the women have controlled the chess moves, beginning with my grandmother, the grand master. Anna, a once-beautiful woman with brilliant, emerald-green eyes, had turned the head of many of the men in Athens, including my grandfather, a slender, genteel bank manager, educated in Vienna and fluent in three languages. After World War II, he was hired by the U.S. State Department's Voice of America, a fledgling government agency with the mission to broadcast the truth and the light of democracy to the unenlightened masses of the world.

In 1948, my grandmother and their three children, including my then fourteen-year-old mother, Persephone, boarded a cruise ship for America. They left a life of old-world comfort which included maids, piano lessons, and French tutors, to join my grandfather in Mt. Rainier, Maryland, a non-descript, middle-class neighborhood just outside of Washington, D.C., one commensurate with his government salary. My grandmother, the product of a spoiled upbringing courtesy of a doting father, never forgave her husband for ripping her from her beloved Athens and plunging her into America whose social egalitarianism and nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic

she viewed as boorish and beneath her. She spent the rest of her years, all forty of them, getting even by employing an effective combination of utter helplessness and absolute intimidation.

The strategy included self-imposed segregation and isolation, including the inability to communicate in English (except for the most rudimentary words and phrases which she managed to butcher), never working, learning how to drive a car or write a check. My grandmother was unable to watch a movie in English unless my grandfather was there to provide her with simultaneous translation. In America, the country she badmouthed from morning to night, she kept herself as helpless as a newborn. Within our family, however, my grandmother's rule was absolute, her ruthlessness a match for that of any banana republic dictator.

That's not to say she didn't have her lighter side, like the one portrayed in those old propaganda newsreels showing the merciless strongman on a good day, yucking it up with his underlings, petting a dog, or pinching the cheek of a child. My grandmother could be gregarious and funny, especially in social situations in which she was the center of attention. She was a good story teller, often recounting her brother's exploits during the war as part of the resistance, the charms of pre-war Athens, or Greek mythology. A repository of folksy old-wives tales, quirky expressions, superstitions and myths, my grandmother had the ability to deliver a quip with the timing of a stand-up comedienne. She could carry a tune, croon the popular love ballads from her youth or break into a traditional folk dance around the coffee table. On holidays, or when the mood struck her, she would create authentic and delicious multi-course feasts, complete with heaping platters of lamb, *moussaka*, *pasticcio*, *spanakopita*, trays of *baklava*, and, my grandfather's favorite, *galactobourico*, a creamy, philo-dough concoction which tastes much better than it sounds.

Then, without provocation, or at least none that could be accurately predicted, she would employ her weapon of choice—a vicious, black rage which she unleashed with unvarying results—the derailment and disruption of any semblance of normal family life. My grandmother's anger was slash and burn, a full-frontal assault, during which she would work her

way relentlessly through everyone and everything that deserved to be sent to hell. It was a list which included, but was not limited to:

- the Turks
- the Jews
- black people
- Americans (except for Jerry Lewis who made her laugh and Kirk Douglas who made her swoon, both, oddly enough, Jews)
- any President after John Kennedy (or, for that matter, before)
- my grandfather's side of the family
- the military junta which ruled Greece from 1967-1974
- Henry Kissinger (whose adherence to *realpolitik* led to U.S. support of the aforementioned)
- The CIA (Ibid)
- Israel (see, the Jews)
- Armenians (just because)
- American food (she might have had a point here)
- American music
- Come to think of it, most things or people whose origins were not Greek.

She'd often punctuate her curses with the Greek gesture of derision, the palm-out swat of the hand, the *muja*, which she enjoyed using on unsuspecting Americans who, thinking she was saying hello, would often wave back to her.

As for homosexuals, or, as she referred to them in Greek, *Pusties* (pronounced *Poo-sties*), they were pathetic degenerates. Their attempts at self-awareness and pride were just another example of a bankrupt and permissive society.

Though my grandmother's hate list was long, it was also peripheral. The hub of her anger was invariably and tightly wound around a family member who was guilty of some slight or lack of deference. Once my grandmother's fury was unleashed, resistance was futile. Challenging her upped the ante, and she was always holding more chips. If my grandmother had been a prize fighter she'd have had it all—the relentless jab, the ferocious left hook, and the wind to go fifteen rounds. No one could out yell, out curse, or outlast her. Argue with her and she'd bury you in a torrent of profanity and the glare of her demonic eyes which reminded me of the creepy gypsy woman from the *Wolfman* movies. Slap her (as I saw my grandfather do only once after she'd had at him for two days straight) and she'd come at you with her fists or whatever she could get a hold of (in this instance, a bowl of meatballs).

Like a besieged army, all we could do is hunker down and wait her out. In the whole world, there were three things my grandmother loved unwaveringly, sparing them her vitriol: Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis, best known for his soundtrack to *Zorba the Greek*; my grandparent's elderly, diminutive, devoted, and submissive black housekeeper Rosa; and her first grandchild, me.

Though my grandfather was the most frequent recipient of my grandmother's wrath, none of her children were spared, especially my mother. Perhaps my mother's beauty reminded my grandmother of the fact that she was no longer beautiful. Perhaps it was the fact that she was the first born and my grandfather's favorite. Whatever the reason, my mother's relationship with her mother was, at its best, one of barely contained mutual disdain.

As adolescents, my mother and her siblings had begged my grandfather to do the right thing—by which they meant leave his wife. Motivated by some combination of love, guilt, obligation and masochism, my grandfather refused. In response, his children voted with their feet

and their identities. Aunt Mary changed her name to Mardi (she thought it hipper) and learned to play the drums. She married the first of five husbands, a gentle-natured saxophone player, and moved to Greenwich Village to live like a bohemian. My uncle was drafted into the Army, moved to California, married a Swedish girl and began chasing women.

My mother, Persephone, whose nickname in Greek, “Phony,” had unfortunate connotations in English, changed her name to Yvonne and chose a local escape route in the form of a good-looking, not terribly bright Italian cab driver named George Bono, whom she married, never loved, and who would not become my father.

In August of 1957, my mother and grandmother boarded a cruise ship bound for Greece, a vacation that, given the volatile nature of their relationship, seems preposterously ill-advised. Now, on my dresser, I have a framed copy of a picture taken on that cruise. It shows my mother and grandmother seated next to each other at a long table strewn with post-dinner detritus—half filled water glasses, bread plates, and empty bottles of wine. My mother, poised and feline, is turned toward the camera, a cigarette dangling from her manicured fingers, her wrist barely resting on the arm of her chair. Her smile is small and sly. Over her shoulder looms my grandmother, her body thrust awkwardly towards the camera as if she fears being left out of the frame. Her black cat-eye glasses with their dark lenses obscure her no-doubt portentous eyes, heavy red lipstick coats her taut lips. She’s not smiling.

Following an Atlantic crossing marked by incessant quarrelling, my mother and grandmother arrived in Athens and did their best not to cross paths. That summer, my mother had a brief, torrid affair with a handsome, poor, happy-go-lucky Athenian musician named Illias. He impregnated her, but he wouldn’t become my father either.

At the end of the summer, my mother arrived back in America pregnant. George Bono may not have been very smart, but he managed to put things together. There was drama, divorce and scandal. The decision was made that I would live with my grandparents until my mother’s

life became a suitable one in which to raise a child. For the next four years I lived with a *ya-ya* I called Ma-Ma and was visited by a mother I called Yvonne.

It's possible I represented my grandmother's last chance to make amends for the way she had treated her own children, but there's no doubt I also served as the bludgeon she used to punish and control my mother. The ratio of one to the other is a calculation best left to a psychiatrist. I can attest that my grandmother showered me with attention, treated me as the golden child, gave me anything I wanted, all the while never passing up an opportunity to remind my mother of every single thing she did for me. I was swathed in an all-consuming and oppressive love in which I felt both nurtured and menaced—well aware that her adoration would be withdrawn if I ever crossed her. I made it my business never to do so.

My mother's relationship to me became tinged with an element of guilt on her part for how I was conceived and for giving me up to my grandmother. As for my relationship with my grandmother, my mother viewed it as a necessary evil, one she was unwilling to challenge or subvert. Instead, she chose, consciously or not, to lash back at my grandmother with the one weapon at her disposal: her choice in men.

When I was four years old, my mother married a funny, wise-cracking, beer drinking aspiring singer and writer, fresh out of the army, who had fled his small Pennsylvania mining town and his strict Seventh-Day-Adventist upbringing. In the process, he also changed his name—from Carmin to the more show-biz-viable Vance. My grandparents didn't approve of him, but at least my mother was married.

When I was four, I went to live with my mother and Vance in their small one-bedroom apartment on Colorado Avenue in Washington, D.C. My mother was a legal secretary. In between his singing gigs, writing, and waiting for the big break, Vance managed a movie theater; delivered Charlie Chips pretzels and potato chips (I preferred the pretzels); drank too much with his buddies; taught me to appreciate jazz, Hemingway, Groucho, and Bogart; loved me like a son and became my father.

We moved a lot. Sometimes there was a reason: to Englewood, New Jersey, so my father could be closer to professional opportunities and gigs in New York City (that lasted six months); to Miami, where he landed a gig on a cruise ship (a year). Sometimes, it seemed that we moved just to move. Or, as a mover once told us, “You gotta’ keep moving until you find the right place.”

I grew up influenced by my father’s taste in movies and music—strongly skewed toward the books, films and jazz of the 40s and 50s. Vance could quote entire passages from *Double Indemnity* and *Casablanca* by heart; he had an encyclopedic knowledge of American popular song, one which his friends used to put to the test with a game. They’d throw out a word or phrase and he’d come up with a song which contained it. I never saw him stumped. Early on, I came to appreciate the grit and the wit of film noir, particularly the strength yet vulnerability embodied by Bogart and the swagger of my mother’s idol, Frank Sinatra, whom she had revered since she was a teenage girl. To me, these characters seemed more like distant relatives than inaccessible icons. The back stories and the lore of the celebrities from that era were told so often around the house and integrated so thoroughly into our discourse that, like most legends and myths, they became a way for me to frame and understand the world. Life was a plot—a story—with heroes and villains and a preordained set of events. The problem with that world view was that it was essentially passive. Even Bogart had to stick to the script.

By the time I was twelve, my father’s fatal flaw, his drinking, had gotten the best of his marriage and he and my mother divorced (it was a failing, with the help of AA, he would overcome—for 28 years and counting). My mother and I settled in Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., where she dated a series of men—nice enough, but notably lacking in their ability to earn a living.

Now that my mother was single again my grandparents felt justified about intervening in our lives, presumably on my behalf. Their methods were not subtle. When one of my mother’s boyfriends moved in with us, my grandparents showed up at our door. My grandmother burst in,

cursing in Greek, slapping and kicking the guy around the apartment, calling him a bum. The police came. He left.

In response, my mother kicked things up a notch. She began to date black men. For a while, my mother kept her latest phase a secret from my grandparents. When she got serious with one of them, however, it was left to me to break the news. I tried the angle that he was light-skinned, possibly a mulatto, thinking that might help soften my grandmother's reaction. It didn't.

Since I was the only one in the family spared my grandmother's rage, I was often dispatched to act as a palliative, or more accurately, a commando dropped behind enemy lines. For example, here I am, fourteen years old—a 140-pound tranquilizer sporting a shag haircut, tawny-colored-square-toe Frye boots and a touch of acne—knocking at my grandparent's front door:

It opens a few inches. One bloodshot grey-green eye and a narrow swatch of her pale blue nightgown show through the crack.

"Why are you here so early?" she asks in Greek.

My grandmother's question is both a trap and a test, designed to reveal two things: what do I know and will I resist her. She knows damn well why I'm here. My grandfather has been hired by the State Department to be an interpreter for a bunch of Greek officials visiting on a two week study mission. The particulars of his assignment don't matter. The point is that she'll be left alone.

"I came over to check on you." Warm and conciliatory—every once in a while that will cut the legs out from under her.

She grunts, opens the door and lets me in. The place is in shambles. She's torn open my grandfather's suitcase and scattered everything around.

Before I can react, she says, "What kind of monster abandons his wife?"

So much for warm and conciliatory. There's no point in arguing, though. Faced with the truth or logic, her rage will turn on something—or someone—else.

“No wonder his children are all shit. No wonder they’ve never amounted to anything. Do you know I lived like a princess in Greece? A princess! He brought me from the shadow of the Acropolis to this cursed place because he thinks he knows better.” Her eyes are wild, bearing down on me. “He thinks he can trap me in this apartment? He and his good-for-nothing children can all go straight to hell.”

It could be worse. No mention yet of faggots, blacks, or Jews.

She steps back and throws one hand into the air, making the muja. “There. I curse them all, even that so-called mother of yours, that one that goes with the blacks and Jews—low class scum—and those, those faggots.” Her face contorts in disgust. “I wouldn’t let those people eat the shit off my shoes.”

(I have to break here and admit that I’m not doing her tirade complete justice. Certain elements of language just doesn’t translate very well, especially age-old ethnic curses delivered in Greek by a embittered woman hopped up on rancor and self-righteousness. Anyway . . .)

This is a pretty bad one—not as bad as the time she pulled out all the photo albums and cut herself out of the pictures, not as bad as when she stood on the edge of the balcony threatening to jump—but pretty bad.

She paces back and forth, her head thrust forward. “What do they expect me to do when they treat me, me,” she pounds her chest with her fist, “a lady, like a child. When they won’t listen to me. What do they expect me to do?”

Here’s an idea, I think: How about we start with you shutting the fuck up for five minutes? Ever since I was a kid I’ve played this game. I stay cool and composed as I imagine all the things I’d never dare say to her. It’s satisfying in a cowardly and futile sort of way.

Then, perhaps sensing that this time she’s not getting to me, she throws me a change-up. She takes a step back and looks down at the floor. In a very quiet voice, she says, “You are the only one, Nicky, there’s no one else but you. Ever since you were a baby and I rocked you to

sleep, you've been my angel." The anger in her voice is gone, replaced by something else, something which feels real.

She looks into my eyes, steps forward, and brings her soft, warm hands to either side of my head and kisses one of my eyes, then the other. Her smell, the timbre of her voice—high, but not shrill—they're so familiar, among the first things I can remember.

"There's no one else I love, my Nicky, that's why I've done everything for you. Only you." There's a singsong quality to the way she's speaking and now I recognize it. It's the voice she used to put me to sleep. "That's why I've protected you. You are why I live. It's you and me. When I'm gone, when you've lost me, you'll know that no one has loved you like me. No one ever will."

She's holds my head and rocks it back and forth the way she did when I was little.

"I cannot lose you. It's always been you and me. If you leave me I will die. You know this?"

I do know this. Her words resonate through me. They are stronger than anger, stronger than fear, than pain, or hunger, or sex. And now I understand the power we have over each other. This sad, scared, empty, old lady and I are joined in a way no one else can ever understand. We fit somehow, like dark pieces at the edge of a jigsaw puzzle. Our connection, as twisted as it is, is as deep as it gets.

We're silent for a moment, just rocking.

"Rot in hell!" she yells. She turns from me and spins in circles. "All of them."

The moment has passed. This is where I lock down—slam the doors shut like those waterproof hatches on a submarine, spin the handles clockwise until they're snug, back away, and let her fire the depth charges—for as long as it takes.

It was a complicated relationship.

I emerged from adolescence imbued with the attributes of both the spoiled and the abused child: I lacked resiliency and initiative yet had a strong sense of entitlement. I was self-

conscious, unconfident, easily discouraged, reticent, and immensely fearful of confrontation. Though I got decent grades, I drifted, disengaged, through high school and college. I had few close friends. I drank some and did drugs—smoked pot, dropped acid, tried cocaine—but no more than anyone else seemed to be doing at the time. Well, okay, maybe a little more.

When I was 17, I lost my virginity to a pretty, blonde, volatile sixteen-year-old named Kathy. Kathy's father had died when she was young and she had grown up wild and promiscuous. I kept my lack of sexual experience a secret from her, fearing she would reject me. She didn't. We stayed together for three years, had sex frequently and became increasingly careless regarding contraception. One afternoon, I sat in a Planned Parenthood clinic, wracked by shame, as a nurse demonstrated how to slide a condom onto an object I would later come to know as a dildo, while somewhere in the back, Kathy had an abortion. My subsequent liaisons with women were infrequent, but serious and long term.

When it came to relationships, my tendency was to mate rather than date.

During my freshman year in college, an acquaintance parked his drum set in the basement of the house I shared with three other guys. One day, I put Led Zeppelin on the stereo and took a seat behind the kit. Turns out I had a decent ear for song structure and rhythm, attributable, no doubt, to my father's musical influence. Soon enough, I developed into a competent (as opposed to gifted) drummer, playing in a competent (and equally ungifted) variety band. Motif was comprised of working professionals for whom the band provided their one creative outlet. The bass player had a PhD in mathematics, the saxophone player was a lobbyist and the keyboard player was a federal parole officer. What we lacked in musical virtuosity we made up for in the attributes that really matter for variety bands: showing up on time and the ability to correctly pronounce the names of the wedding party. Still, I connected with the physicality of drumming, the tremendous primal release, which cleared my mind of everything but the beat.

At just about the same time, another college buddy, a body builder, encouraged me to begin training with him. I had been a skinny kid, self conscious about my physique. Much to my surprise, my body responded quickly to the regimen. I like the changes and stuck with it. Within six months I was bench pressing nearly 300 pounds and had transformed myself into something of a brute. Girls noticed. So did the boys.

My first prolonged exposure to gay men occurred during high school and college, when I worked part-time in the dining hall at the campus of the George Meany Labor Study Center, under the supervision of its flamboyant, mercurial food service director, Billy Dennis. It was the late-seventies, with gay culture in its unabashed, pre-AIDS heyday. Mr. Dennis hired only young, cute, straight guys to work in the dining hall and it was there that I and the rest of “his boys,” as he referred to us, learned to manage his combination of paternal benevolence, despotism, and explosive tirades.

This was a game I knew how to play. Very quickly, I became one of Billy Dennis’ favorites. For my birthday one year, he took me and the other boys to D.C.’s notorious leather bar, the Eagle. It was set deep amidst the ruins of a city which would not recover fully from the ravages of the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King for another twenty years. Inside the complex, we walked around, timid but amazed, stopping to gawk at the counter displaying an assortment of sex paraphernalia whose purpose we could only imagine. Tawdry as it was, I found that, far from being put off by the scene, I enjoyed all the attention we received from the staff and patrons who were shocked and titillated at the sight of a bunch of straight boys corralled in a leather bar.

I graduated college in 1981 with a degree in Political Science and History and no notion of what to do with myself. It didn’t help that I had hit the job market in the midst of the deepest economic recession in decades. I took the first job I could get, working for a construction industry trade association, where I would stay for a few years, then move on to another, then

another, gradually increasing my salary and responsibilities. I'd coasted into a career which, like my life up until now, had neither engaged nor inspired me.

It was about this time that my mother, disillusioned by her romantic relationships with men who'd brought nothing to the table except their appetites, began to surround herself with a winning combination—the kind of men she could count on and continue to drive my grandmother to distraction. Beginning with her beloved hairdresser and roommate, Larry, these men flocked to her, drawn by her looks, her sense of irony, her penchant for the dramatic, her vulnerability and her accepting nature. My mother soon presided over a cabal of queens. There was Joe the interior designer, Jean-Claude the secretary, Cary the schoolteacher, Ian the dog groomer and on and on.

In them, my mother had finally found the qualities she'd always sought in a man: loyalty, humor, devotion, generosity, and a love of Billie Holliday. It wasn't unusual for me to visit her and find her surrounded by them all, watching *The Women* or listening to the soundtrack from *West Side Story*. This was the first time I'd witness the affirmation, bordering on exultation, gay men could shower on certain women. My mother, who'd grown with little in the way of unconditional affection, now had all she could handle. I'd never see her happier.

My mother's days of settling were over. From now on, any man who wanted to be with her would be required not only to tolerate, but to embrace, her gaggle of gay men—literally. She transformed her next husband, Michael, from a near-homophobe who referred to homosexuals as “fruits” into a man willing to dress in a Santa outfit and have men sit on his lap to proclaim their Christmas wishes, some of which included him.

It is difficult for me now to accurately conjure up my attitudes towards her friends at the time. I know I enjoyed their company, especially their humor, which was often dipped in a simmering pot of caustic sarcasm. There was also the matter of my special, even exalted, status among them. I was aware that as a young, weight-lifting straight man, I was attractive to them.

At the same time, as Yvonne's son, I was also off limits. This standing gave me the power and the ability to insert myself into the group without having to be part of it.

Then, with the festivities in full swing, death came to the door like an apocalyptic party crasher. First to go was Jean-Claude, followed by Pascal, then so many I couldn't keep up. Some flew off to Paris for experimental treatments and never returned. Some moved back in with their families, transforming their basements into hospices. Within a few years, my mother had lost nearly all of them. Her heart and her soul were, if not irrevocably broken, then certainly gravely wounded.

Meanwhile, my grandmother's age, chronic asthma, and weak heart finally did what no one else could—subdue her. In comparison to her life, her death was uncharacteristically free of drama. One evening in 1987, on her way to dinner with my grandfather, she slumped over in the seat of their car. By the time they reached the hospital, she was dead. My aunt and uncle flew in for the funeral. Having distanced themselves from my grandmother both emotionally and geographically, they had learned to forgive and forget. They cried inconsolably. On the other hand, my mother—who hadn't—didn't.

The effect of my grandmother's passing on the men in her life contained a few twists and no small measure of irony. My uncle gathered up all his unpleasant memories involving my grandmother and swept them away, choosing instead to recall an eccentric, yet essentially warm and loving mother. My grandfather, finally free of the woman who had tormented and belittled him for much of his life, was never able to fill the void created by her loss. Irreparably shattered, he would die a few years later a miserable and lonely man.

As for me, I knew I had lost someone who loved me in a way I'd never be loved again, a realization which caused me both great sadness and tremendous relief. Without me knowing it, my grandmother had also set me up. As the primary female figure in my life, she had imbedded within me a template against which I would measure other women. I was a first-generation

Greek-Manchurian Candidate, programmed to respond to a specific set of stimuli—in this case a women who could offer up equal measures of nurture and annihilation.

As for gender roles, they were about as clear to me, as the song says, a foggy day in London town. I had a sense of what it meant to be a woman. Women were like my grandmother—a bundle of contradictions designed to ensnare and manipulate: powerful yet needy, protective yet threatening. I was much less certain about what men were or what they should do. After all, I'd never met my biological father, the man I considered my father hadn't exactly been the model of stability and my grandfather's role in life had always been to accommodate his wife and absorb the punishment she inflicted upon him.

Here I was, quite a package: a weight-lifting, drum playing under-achiever, the product of a summer fling, having grown up with a grandmother who combined the guile and willfulness of Eva Peron with the destructive capacity of a category-five hurricane, no strong father figure, and a fag-hag mother.

I realize I haven't fully explained the question I posed earlier regarding the specific causes that would lead me all the way to Fire Island and back. Hey, I said it was a long story. Which gets us to here. I knew I was coasting, that something needed to happen. I felt poised for something, but what? Life had taken on a *noirish* hue. You know the story: Our protagonist, brooding, adrift and disillusioned, sits alone in some saloon, wondering what, if anything, is next. The door swings open and—yeah, you guessed it—in walks a dame.

Of All the Gin Joints

1991

I stand at the long, stainless steel bar at Perry's, a popular D.C. bar and restaurant, trying to get the attention of the young, lanky bartender who has spent the last several minutes making me feel invisible.

It started out as another Friday evening alone, bouncing between vapid sitcoms and a novel by Elmore Leonard. I like his style—unadorned and gritty, but his characters have smarts—and souls. I'd been engrossed in the plot which was typical Leonard: betrayal and revenge, luck and daring. I read what should have been a standard description of a minor character, an ex-con working as a waiter, regarding himself in the mirror. His uniform—white coat over a white shirt with black tie and black pants—reminds him of a middle-aged busboy who has either passed up or screwed up every opportunity that's come his way and knows his life is spiraling down. That passage got to me. I read it again. Then again. Each time, I saw the face of the guy in the white coat a little more clearly.

The bartender, much more interested in chatting up the boozed-up blonde at the far end of the bar than serving me, finally glances my way and ambles over. Hell, I've been standing here so long I've almost forgotten what I wanted to drink. I decide on a screwdriver and am about to order when I feel small, feminine hands on my shoulders. I spin around and look down upon a face that's got a touch of Ava Gardner. Even a touch of Ava Gardner will stop you in your tracks. Just ask Sinatra—a guy who could have had any woman in the world—took one look at Gardner and started acting like a love-struck teenager. Women who look like this don't normally

come up and put their hands on me, so I figure I must know her. I draw a blank, though, and just stand there, staring.

She says, “You remember me, right? The one you left for the one-legged Asian transvestite?”

The voice I remember: low and a little husky. Rachael is a vestige from my corporate past, one of the few pleasant ones.

The bartender stands there looking uncomfortable.

“I’m just fooling about the Asian,” Rachael says to him. She reaches up and hugs me. “She was Mexican.” Now he looks confused. “*Kid-ding*,” she says again, deliberately, as if talking to a child. She looks at me and rolls her eyes. “I wonder if the kitchen is serving sense of humor tonight.”

“If they aren’t, I’m sure you can whip some up. How long has it been?”

“Three, maybe four years. Since just before I left for LA.”

Right. I’d met her years earlier when I was producing special events and she was director of sales for the Mayflower Hotel. I’d been her client. Unlike some of the other hotel reps that came to call on me, there hadn’t been any heat between us. But I don’t remember her like this, either.

“You look great,” I say. “Have you lost weight or something?”

“I won’t even pretend I don’t love it when someone asks me that.”

“What are you doing here? I thought you moved out west for some big job. Currency trading, right?”

“Yeah, for training.” She motions over her shoulder to a table full of chatty youngsters. “Now I train the trainers.”

The bartender clears his throat. Rachael orders another round of cocktails, plus a screwdriver for me, and hands the bartender her credit card.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say.

Rachael ignores me. “Listen, are you hungry? I’m about done here and I’m starving.”

“I’m always hungry. You sure it’s okay to split?”

“One more night of shop talk and I’m going postal. Have your drink, give me a few minutes and think of a place to go.”

I hang out at the bar, sip my cocktail and watch her work the table like a master politician. The guys have their ties loosened and their shirt sleeves rolled partway up their forearms in a display of carefully studied and contrived informality. A couple of the girls turn to look at me, then whisper something to each other. Office gossip—I don’t miss that. In fact, there’s isn’t much I miss about that whole scene. Still, looking around the table at all those young faces, there’s something to be said about a sense that your world is expanding—the upward part of upwardly mobile.

Rachael and I walk across the street to Red Sea, my favorite Ethiopian restaurant. We score the best table, a cozy and private deuce in the bay window overlooking Eighteenth Street.

“This neighborhood sure has changed,” Rachael says.

I follow her gaze out the window onto the busy street: Cars and cabs at a standstill, people walking by, chatting and grinning, purposeful—the weekend finally here. I live not three blocks away, but have often felt like a stranger in my own world. Until, now, that is—sitting here with an attractive woman.

I shrug. “Gentrified. It’s still a little scary, though.”

“Why’s that?” she asks.

“Beware the yuppie scum.”

“Oh. Right.” She sighs. “I like the buzz, though. It’s young. Makes me feel young.”

“That’s a pretty jaded attitude for someone still in their twenties.”

“Not as of last year.”

The waitress comes and I order the sample platter.

“Have you ever had Ethiopian?” I scoop up a small mound of spiced lentils with the flat,

spongy *Injera* bread. Rachael does the same to the lamb stew. “It can take a little getting used to.”

“First time. Most of my eating out is business dinners. We try to save our hands for more practical matters.”

“Such as?”

“Back stabbing.” A piece of stewed lamb slips out of Rachael’s *Injera*, glances off the table and onto her lap. She dabs her napkin in her water glass and uses it to blot her skirt.

“Sorry. That looks expensive.”

“It’s nothing,” she says, still rubbing. “Another day, another trip to the dry cleaners.”

Over the rest of dinner and a couple bottles of wine the conversation never lags. She cracks jokes, I parry, and we both laugh. She has this way of making me feel like the most important guy in the world—or at least at the table. That may be a technique she’s honed during years of sales, but wherever it comes from, I’m drinking in the attention nearly as fast as the Sauvignon Blanc.

“So, how do you like your job?” I ask.

She shrugs. “It’s good. Mostly it’s good. Currency trading is *way* different than the hotel business, which is full of pretty people who skate by serving the real corporate players.”

“Of which you are one.”

“Supposedly.” Rachael pulls out a cigarette from her purse and points it at me. “I remember you don’t smoke, but do you mind?”

“Nope.”

She lights up, takes a long drag and exhales through the corner of her mouth. I’m struck by how different she is from the women I’ve been with. All sharp angles. Right down to the smoking. No one I know smokes. Not since my mother, who finally kicked her two-pack-a-day habit, and my grandmother, who used to occasionally lift one of those absurdly expensive Dunhills out of a ridiculous silver case and not inhale. It works for Rachael, though—gives her a

Lauren Bacall quality, a sophistication beyond her years. After all, Bacall went toe-to-toe (among other body parts) with Bogart when she was all of nineteen.

“The point is,” I say, “you made it.”

Rachael’s goes pensive. “Sure. I worked hard to get this job, but sometimes I feel like a fraud. I sit at my desk and I can’t believe they hired me to manage all these people, most of whom are better educated and smarter than I’ll ever be.” She stares past me and shakes her head.

I’m surprised, and relieved, to hear her admit self doubt. I say, “Don’t we all feel like frauds most of the time? I bet if your boss was honest, he’d admit it.”

“Yeah, well in his case, he’d be right.” She takes another drag. “Listen, enough about me. What the hell are you up to? Still working for non-profits?”

I’ve been hoping against hope my work situation wouldn’t come up, but here it is. I feel pretty safe with her, though. Or maybe it’s the wine buzz.

“No, that was a couple of jobs ago. I’ve found I have this great talent for melting down under stress.”

“Stress? In corporate America? I’m shocked, *shocked*.”

“A woman who can quote *Casablanca*?” I place both hands on my chest. “Be still my heart.” She blinks and doesn’t say anything. “Wait—you *were* quoting *Casablanca*, weren’t you?”

She licks her lips. “After that reaction, you think I’d admit it if I weren’t? Anyway, I’ve turned the melt down into a way of life. But I tend to mask it with a mixture of tirades and ass kissing.”

I hit her with a good line. “Tirades and ass kissing—great name for a law firm.”

She smiles. “Brownnose, Tirade, and Asskiss, specializing in employment law. I think they’re one of our clients.”

A counterpuncher, too. She’s good—very good.

Rachael flicks her ashes into a tiny glass ashtray. “So, really, what are you up to now?”

Still in the band? You play what again? The bass?"

"The drums. Yeah, making brides happy all over the D.C. metropolitan area."

"I didn't ask about your love life. Not yet, anyway. So, you're a full-time musician. An artist. I'm impressed."

"I have to do all sorts of very unimpressive stuff to get by." I hope she won't press me for specifics. I'm feeling safe, but not quite ready to admit delivering roses dressed in a tuxedo, which would feel like putting my head on a chopping block, handing her the axe and hoping for the best.

She says, "Like I don't? You think I want to hang out with those self-absorbed kids? You're smart. You're attractive. You could do anything you wanted."

I reply without thinking. "I'll take your word for it. Everything I've tried so far has given me the shakes. I keep telling myself there has to be more to life. So far, I remain unconvinced."

Rachael dips her chin and raises her eyebrows. "Sister Mary Sunshine, sounds like you need a vacation—from yourself." I look down at my food. "Maybe you haven't found the right fit."

"Maybe. I took one of those tests in a magazine, you know, the kind that matches your personality type with your career?"

"And?"

"I should be a priest. But it's not in the cards."

"Why?"

"I don't do well with authority figures."

Rachael throws her head back and laughs. "Okay, Father Nick. Now—to the love life. Seeing anyone?"

I'm happy to move on. "No. The great serial monogamist is on forced hiatus. Last woman I saw had the outrageous notion that a thirty-two-year old guy should have some idea of

what to do with his life.”

“My,” she says, “you take self-deprecation to a whole new level.”

“I try.”

“So, how is it being single?”

“It has its moments. Unfortunately, some of them include loneliness, boredom, and abstinence.”

She shakes her head. “I wouldn’t want to be out there alone. So, what do you do with yourself? You can skip the obvious.”

“Thanks. Let’s see: the gym, read, movies. Occasionally, I take myself out for a drink. Like tonight. At least until you intervened.” I scoop up the last of the potatoes and peas.

“Sorry to butt in.” My mouth is full, so I give her a dismissive wave. Rachael watches me for a moment. The smoke from her cigarette forms white, wispy curlicues. “Sounds like you need a benefactor.”

“Become a kept man?” I shrug. “Suppose it depends on who’s doing the keeping.”

“Oh, I know plenty who’d be willing. But you’d have to be somewhat, ah, flexible.”

“In what way?”

“Most of my friends are gay men.”

“No kidding? Same as my mother.” Rachael even looks like her. They both have those impossibly dark eyes.

“Your mother is a gay man? No wonder I like you. And you?”

“Limber,” I say. “But not flexible.”

“Really?” She cocks her head. “So many of the men I know are discovering their feminine side. Every time I meet a good looking man who’s not dating, my gaydar starts making a funny beeping noise.”

“You should get that looked into. No, it’s not in the cards for me. Girls are too—too,” I struggle to find the right word, one that combines intense attraction with abject terror.

“Yummy?” she says.

“Not quite what I was going for. That’ll do, though.”

“No arguments here. I’ve had my share.”

“Of what?”

“Yummy girls.”

Her worldliness quotient just went off the scale. Now, I picture her dressed in a tuxedo like Garbo, with a handsome man in one arm and a beautiful woman in the other.

She says, “So there you are: an actual living breathing, single good looking straight man. I thought a meteor wiped you all out.”

“Are you calling me a dinosaur?”

“Oh *please*.” Rachael crushes her cigarette in the ashtray. “If you turn out to be as nice as you seem, you’ll officially enter the ‘too good to be true’ category. And if you don’t stop with the modesty, I’ll know you’re one of those shy, nice serial killers and start wondering whose head you have stored in your freezer.”

The waiter passes by. Rachael catches his eye and motions for the check.

“Speaking of straight men,” I say, “how’s um . . .”

“David.”

“David. Sorry, I’m terrible with names. How is he?”

“Good. Things don’t change much with David. He’s the most stable guy I know. Same job, same hobbies—same David.”

Is that admiration or boredom in her voice? I check her finger for a ring.

“You guys married?”

“Nope. Probably get around to it someday.” Either she’s avoiding the topic or it doesn’t hold her interest. The waiter brings the bill. “Here’s something we haven’t discussed.” She slides her credit card to the waiter who takes it away.

“What’s that?”

“Recreational drug use. For it or against it?”

“Interesting dinner conversation. Do you often bring this up with clients?”

“You’re hardly a client. Besides, you’re a musician.”

“Fair enough. That depends. What, specifically?”

“Cocaine, specifically.”

“It’s been a while.”

“Well, David and I just got some. It’s still early. Want to come over to the house?”

“First you pick up dinner and now you offer me cocaine? I thought the eighties were over.”

“Gone but not forgotten. I still have a closet full of suits with giant shoulder pads to prove it.”

“Well, hell yes. Besides, I’d like to finally meet him.”

“David? No, he’s on a study mission to Israel with a bunch of scientists from the National Institute of Health.”

The evening has just taken a turn. But to where? I slug down the rest of my wine. What the hell. What am I waiting for—a *better* offer?

We walk to a nearby parking lot and wait for Rachael’s car to be brought out. A slate-grey Jaguar XJ6 comes up the ramp. Beginning with the little Triumph convertible I drove in college, I’ve had a thing for British cars. The angle of the ramp gives me a perfect view of the license plate: PNS NV.

“You drive my dream car and name it penis envy?” I ask.

“You get it. You’d be surprised how many people don’t.”

The attendant pulls up, puts the car in neutral, sets the brake, and opens the door for Rachael, the same as he’s done a hundred times this day. But there’s something in his manner—the way he nearly leaps out of the car and stops to hold the door open. It’s more chauffer than

parking attendant. I suspect this is behavior reserved for beautiful Jaguar-driving women. It's certainly not the indifferent treatment I get on the rare occasions I garage park my eight-year-old Renault Alliance. Rachael tips him and he beams.

“Wait,” she says. “Why don't you drive?”

“Me? Sure, why not?” I feign nonchalance. Rachael and I walk around the front of the car. As we pass, she gives me a little smile verging on a smirk. For the first time in a long time, all my nerve endings fire off.

The parking attendant backs away from the car and looks down at his feet. I square my shoulders as I pass him and slide into the driver's seat. He makes no effort to help me close the door, so I reach over and pull it shut, almost slamming it.

I take a deep breath and slowly pull out of the garage, then make a right onto Sixteenth Street, the business district giving way to stately brownstones. We make small talk. Someone observing us stopped at a red light would note a stylish couple in a stylish car headed uptown following drinks and dinner at some stylish restaurant, no doubt headed uptown to their equally stylish home. The thought gives rise in me to the overwhelming feeling of impersonating someone, of playing a role in someone else's story, the details of which have yet to be revealed—even to him.

We continue north on Sixteenth, then, with Rachael directing me, head west onto Military Road and cross Rock Creek Park into Chevy Chase, the high side of town. “Next left and it's the second house on the right,” she says.

I pull up in front of a white, two-story bungalow, cut the engine and put the car in park. “Nice ride.” I hand Rachael the keys. “Nice digs, too. How long have you guys lived here?”

“Almost seven years.”

I've never lived anywhere for seven years, not even as a kid—especially not as a kid. We get out of the car and head up the walkway. It's a real house, solid looking, not like those Mac-Mansions they've slapped up out in the suburbs.

As we reach the walk leading to the front porch, there's muffled barking. I didn't figure her for a dog person.

We clomp up the wooden steps leading to the broad, grey painted porch and the barking becomes more insistent.

"*All right* my girls." She fumbles with her keys.

I hold the screen door open for her as she unlocks the front door. Two tan snouts wedge between it and the frame, swinging it out towards us. There's a blur of wagging tails, ears, teeth, and dank breath. The dogs, medium-sized lab mixes, burst past us barking, spinning, and panting. The larger, brown one jumps up and plants its paws squarely on my chest.

"OFF, Dusty! That's *not* OK," says Rachael. He drops back to all fours, looking ashamed, not making eye contact.

"It's fine." I drop to one knee.

Dusty licks my left eye, then my nose. It's been a long time since I've been around dogs and I've forgotten the exuberance and the noise and the chaos. The other dog, pale-coated and slender, shoves Dusty aside and nudges my face and arm with her head. I reach over and scratch behind their ears.

"You're good with dogs," says Rachael. "They love you."

"It's mutual."

"Right answer. You may enter."

I straighten and try to brush the dog hair off my pants and sweater.

"Don't bother," she says. "There's plenty more where that came from."

I take a few steps into the living room. To my right, there's a big stone fireplace and a mantle full of framed photos. The room smells faintly of wood smoke from the half-burned log lying across the andirons. There's a long, gray, overstuffed sofa against one wall faced by two matching black-leather club chairs. A large, fake-fleece dog bed lies on the floor between the two chairs. I take a few more steps, onto an expensive-looking red-toned Oriental rug. This is

nothing like my little place, furnished mostly with stuff from neighborhood thrift shops and flea markets. This is the home of grownups.

Rachael drops her purse on the glass-topped coffee table, walks over to a chrome floor lamp and clicks it on.

“Very nice.” I shove my hands in my pockets. My confidence is gone, replaced by enormous relief that I haven’t stood outside this front door wearing a tuxedo and holding a box of roses.

I walk over to the mantle. There are several photos of Rachael and a handsome, but noticeably older man—David I presume. There they are, in front of the pyramids in Egypt, another on a beach, several in the country with the dogs. I pause at a silver frame with a photo of Rachael alone, wearing a red tank top and shorts. She’s as I remember her, with shorter hair and softer, more rounded features.

“Where was this one taken?”

She looks over my shoulder. “Oh. Madrid, about five years ago.”

“It’s a good picture.”

“I was fat. Would you like something to drink?”

“No you weren’t and yes I would.”

“We’re not big drinkers. Vodka and something?”

“Vodka and something would be fine.”

I follow Rachael through the dining room, past a large, black lacquer table surrounded by eight matching lacquer chairs and into the kitchen. The dogs are at her heels. She pauses just inside the kitchen and snaps on the light. It’s the size of my whole apartment. To my right is the sink and stove. The faucet isn’t turned off all the way or else it leaks. A small but steady stream of water flows down onto dirty dishes stacked in the white porcelain double sink. There’s a small, square, wooden dinette table with scrolled legs, the top of which is obscured by piles of newspapers and mail.

Rachael walks across the kitchen. The dogs are transfixed. I see why. On the floor next to the dinette table are three large stainless steel bowls. One is half full of water, the other two empty. Rachael takes off her suit jacket, drapes it over one of the chairs and turns to face the dogs.

“Okay girls, I know. You want your *D*? Your *iner-da*?”

She bends down to pick up the bowls. Her skirt rises up high on her thighs.

“*Iner-da*?” I say, looking at her legs. “Your dogs speak pig Latin?”

Rachael moves over to the sink with the two empty bowls. I drag my eyes up to her face. Did she catch me staring?

“It’s a dog thing. You make up code names for words like ‘dinner’ and ‘walk’ so they don’t drive you crazy every time you use them.” Rachael puts the bowls down on the counter next to the sink. “Then, they decipher the code names, so you finally give up and start using the code names for the real words.”

“Wow,” I say, “That’s complicated. I thought they were dumb animals.”

“Dogs are brilliant. It’s people who can be dumb. Mind fixing us cocktails? The vodka’s in the freezer. I’ve got to feed them or they’ll blow a gasket.”

I’m glad to have something to do, rather than stand around with my hands in my pocket. It’s times like these I wish I smoked. “Sure thing.” I go to the fridge, open the freezer door and remove a half-full bottle of top-shelf vodka and a tray of ice.

Rachael bends down and opens the double cabinets under the sink. “Glasses are in the cabinet there,” she says. She nods to a spot just above her. As I reach up to get the glasses, she sees me glance at the sink full of dishes. “Since David’s been away, I haven’t been so great in the housekeeping department.”

Give me an hour and I’d have this place spotless, even fix that leaky faucet. I give her a “don’t be silly” smile, open the fridge and find a bottle of OJ next to a carton of eggs and nearly-empty jar of pickles. I’d stock up on some groceries, too.

From underneath the sink, Rachael slides out a big plastic storage tub. It lands on the floor with a thud. The dogs start an excited jig, their toenails clacking on the linoleum, shoving each other and jockeying for position.

“Hang on there, girls.” She snaps open the lid. Half buried in the dog food is a stainless steel ice scoop. Rachael uses it to fill up their bowls.

I pour a couple of strong screwdrivers, take a long swig off one and watch Rachael walk the food-laden bowls over to the other side of the kitchen like a waitress in a diner. She places them down on the floor and backs away fast. The dogs flash past her and dive in as if they’re late for a pie eating contest.

Rachael walks to me, takes her cocktail from my hand and sips it. “There.” She sounds relieved. “My chores are done. It’s playtime.”

There’s something in the way she said “playtime.” I feel the cocktail working on me now. I’m back to buzzed.

Rachel points above the fridge. “Do me a favor. Bring that tray down.”

I see the edge of an ornate silver serving platter on top of the fridge. I grab the handle and slide it towards me.

“Gently,” she says.

I lift the tray off the fridge. As it reaches eye level I see why she’s concerned. There’s a sandwich bag full of cocaine; a small, round, coke-encrusted mirror; a couple of striped straws, the kind from a fast-food joint, cut at an angle; and a rusty razor blade.

I whistle. “I know I’m stating the obvious, but my, that’s a lot of cocaine.”

“Came just before David left.”

“Uh, where do you want this, lady?” I say, impersonating a piano mover.

Rachael doesn’t answer. She takes my cocktail off the counter and walks out of the kitchen towards the living room. I follow her. She sets the cocktails down on the coffee table and taps the glass top with her fingertips. “Right here will do. Just watch the dogs’ tails. They

can clear a table faster than any busboy.”

I set the tray down, drop onto the couch next to Rachael and watch her scoop some coke onto the mirror using one of the straws. With the razor blade, she cuts it into four fat lines. In anticipation, the saliva builds in my mouth.

Rachael hands me the mirror and a straw. “It’s pretty good.”

I snort a line and pinch my nostrils closed. Rachael does a whole line, half in each nostril. She leans back into the sofa, the mirror in her lap.

“That’s better,” says Rachael.

Sure is. My alcohol buzz is gone. My fingertips are tingling the way they do when I’m either excited or scared.

“Hey,” she says, “I’ve got an idea. Want to play a game?”

“Game?”

“Yeah. Trivial Pursuit? Scrabble? Whatever.”

Could she have come up with a less seductive suggestion? Maybe I’ve read this all wrong. Maybe Rachel invites single men over all the time while her boyfriend is away to snort cocaine and play board games. Wait—there was that big seduction scene in the *Thomas Crown Affair*: Faye Dunaway and Steve McQueen face off across a chess board. Her hand strokes the king. He fingers the queen. She works him to check mate, then they go at each other. Maybe I should just roll the dice and see where they land.

“Sure,” I say. “Why not?”

“I’ll be back.” She hands me the mirror. “You take this. Help yourself.”

Rachael starts for the stairs, giving me another unobstructed view of her. The dogs have finished eating and they come into the living room, sated and calm. They plop down on the rug in front of me, panting and wagging their tails. This sort of thing never happens, not to me. The evening has taken a turn, all right—straight down Nefarious Lane. I look down at the mirror, the reflection of my face distorted and partially obscured by a dusting of white powder. She did say

to help myself. I put the mirror on the arm of the sofa and do the other line up my left nostril.

For the first time in a long time, I'm not lonely, or bored, or scared. I feel good. In fact, I feel very good. I look up into the mirror above the mantle and flex my chest muscles. I make fun of the guys who do this kind of macho posturing at the gym all the time. Now, here I am doing the very same thing in the living room of some woman I barely know.

Rachael comes back down the stairs. *Oh my*. She's wearing a pair of short cut-off jeans and a black tee shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She's barefoot. Ms. corporate big-wig Rachael has morphed into Daisy-Dukes-of-Hazard Rachael. She's carrying a Trivial Pursuit box under one arm and something white in the other.

"Look at you in your little shorts." I figure commenting on what she's wearing will give me the excuse to look her over a little longer.

"I couldn't stay in those clothes one more minute. And neither should you." She tosses me something. "Here. That sweater looks warm."

I catch it. It's a well-worn, white, ribbed tank top. Must be David's. The phone rings again. It occurs to me she has received more calls in the half hour I've been here than I get in a whole month. "You need a switchboard operator."

Rachael rolls her eyes. "Friends checking in for the weekend. Most of the time I tune it out." Rachael sets the box on the coffee table, sits on the sofa and cuts herself more cocaine.

I consider going into the kitchen to change out of my sweater, but as I watch her do another line, I reconsider. After all, she just offered me her boyfriend's undergarment. I pull off my sweater, toss it on one of the armchairs and give the tank top a quick snap to unfold it. It smells faintly of bleach. Rachael looks up.

"Damn, Nick. Do you live at the gym?"

I like the fact she's noticed. I pull the tank top over my head, but not too quickly. Rachael takes a sip from her cocktail. I feel her eyes on me as I walk across the room and sit next to her on the sofa.

“So, big guy,” she says, “are you ready for some Trivial Pursuit?”

Is that what you call what’s going on here?

“Absolutely,” I say. “But would it be okay if I administered myself another performance-enhancing boost?”

She hands me the mirror. “I’m not sure you’ll play any better, but I bet you’ll play faster.”

I do my line. Rachael opens the box and sets up the game. She stops. “Wait—it’s Friday night.”

“So?”

Rachael walks over next to the fireplace and opens a built-in cabinet, exposing stereo components. She kneels down and starts pushing buttons. “Friday night is flashback weekend on MAJIC 102. This is how I get my disco fix.”

Like most guys who grew up in the seventies on Santana, Led Zeppelin, and Black Sabbath, I found the whole disco phenomenon loathsome. Now that disco has faded to a nostalgic musical footnote, however, I’ve softened my stance.

“I don’t know shit about music,” Rachael says. The speakers blare a heavy four/four beat and a dated synthesizer intro. “But I can name any disco song in two seconds flat.” She stands up and backs away from the stereo. “David calls me a disco savant.”

“So? What’s this, then?”

“This, darling, is my beloved Sylvester, may he rest in peace. “Do You Wanna’ Funk.” It’s disco 101. Don’t you dare tell me you’ve never heard it.”

I lie. “It’s been a while.”

Rachael spins and twists in a stylized dance. “When I lived at home, my friend Randall and I would sneak out to The Pier. They’d play this two, three times a night. Did you ever go to there?”

“Yeah, back in college. My buddies and I thought we were so cutting edge going to a

gay dance club. Truth is, we were just chasing all the hot college girls from Jersey.”

“You straight guys ruined that place. Turned it into a frat house. Speaking of Frat House, ever go there?” She’s still dancing.

“No. It looked hard core, like a bunker.”

“For good reason. Windows in gay clubs just give drunken Marines a target for their Molotov cocktails. Anyway, those were the days.” Rachael spins a little circle and sits back down on the sofa.

We play the game. Maybe it’s the coke and vodka, maybe it’s the company, but I find myself enjoying it. On the topical stuff, we’re about even. I do better on the geography and history; Rachael has the edge on the arts. We’re blasting through the cocaine at a staggering rate, but Rachael doesn’t seem to care, so why should I?

Rachael is stumped by: *In which country did the Battle of the Bulge begin?*

“Another one of the many gaps in my education.” She’s making light of it, but I sense some exasperation.

“It’s Belgium.” I shake the dice cupped in my sweaty palms. “Where did you go to college?”

Rachael looks down at the board. “My higher education consisted of one year at a fashion school in Miami in 1980. I lost interest in the curriculum, but found I excelled at dating drug dealers and partying with gay men. I came back to D.C., got a job at the front desk of the Jefferson Hotel and that was that.”

“I’d say you’ve done okay for yourself.”

“I’m not proud of not finishing college.” She won’t look at me. “In fact, I usually avoid the topic like a root canal.”

And I was worried about coming clean about delivering roses. It’s when she lets down her guard that I find her most attractive.

There’s an awkward silence. Rachael is not a foot away from me on the sofa, staring

down at the game board. Now is the moment. If inviting me here while David's away, shoving coke up my nose and dressing like your best friend's hot older sister isn't encouragement, then what is?

For once, *don't think; just do.*

I reach over, put my hand behind her neck and kiss her, not too hard or too long. I let go and observe her reaction. She's motionless, staring at me wide eyed. Her eyes shift ever so slightly, as though she can't decide on which part of my face to focus.

"Whoa," she says.

"Whoa? Whoa, as in *what the fuck are you doing*, or whoa, *I didn't expect that*, or whoa, *that felt really good?*"

"Uh, yes."

I don't know whether to bolt for the door or kiss her again. I don't have to decide. Rachael slides over and sits on my lap, facing me, her thighs squeezing the sides of my hips. She grabs my hair, pulls my head back, and kisses me hard. I bring my hands up around her waist and pull her closer. My hands work up and down her back, over her breasts, then down to her thighs. She breaks away and studies me again.

"I don't do this, you know."

Right now I couldn't care less, but I want to give her an out if she needs it.

"I can go," I say.

Rachael pauses a second. "You're not going anywhere, mister."

She slams her mouth against mine and we're at it again. I try to lift up her shirt but Rachael finds my right hand with her left and squeezes it. She's up and off of me, yanking me from the sofa.

"What's happening?" I say.

"That's an excellent question, but for now the best I can do is tell you that I'm taking you to the bedroom. Come on." She tugs my arm.

We walk hand in hand towards the staircase, not looking at each other. I don't know what she's thinking, but I'm trying to stay focused on the moment and not worry about the fact that Rachael might as well be married, that I'm high as a kite, that I'm very likely in way over my head. The dogs lurch up and follow us to the stairs. We should have just done it on the sofa. The change of venue is giving me too much time to think.

At the base of the stairs, Rachael stops suddenly and says "Wait."

This is it. She's come to her senses and is about to boot my ass out the door. I'm relieved, ready to go back to being invisible. I let go of her hand.

"The coke."

"Uh, sure." I walk over to the coffee table, gather everything on the mirror and head back to the stairs. Rachael and the dogs are on the first step, looking back over their shoulders at me. They look like I feel—plenty excited and a little scared.

The four of us start up the wooden stairs, making a terrific racket. The steps groan, the dogs pant, their nails clatter against the wood. The little family turns in for the night. Problem is, of course, this isn't *my* little family.

As we near the top of the steps, I think about the loser busboy in the Elmore Leonard story. Wonder how things turn out for that guy?

The In Crowd

As we ascended those creaky stairs and entered Rachael's bedroom, I was also about to enter a whole new world.

The next morning, a Saturday, was a spectacular example of mid-October splendor in D.C., with sparkling sunshine and trees ablaze in hues of ochre and orange. We would spend that entire day inside, lying in bed with Rachael's head in the crook of my arm.

She laid it all out: she loved David, but, at forty-eight, he was close to twenty years older than she, and the difference in age was beginning to show. She had her life before her, while David was ready to settle down and in. Sex was less frequent, and their relationship felt more like a friendship. I listened quietly and nodded supportively, the implications of what she was saying creeping through me like indigo ink dripped into water.

That day, I had planned a bike ride through Rock Creek Park. That and other solo activities would be postponed—for a decade.

For the next ten days, we spent every minute of our free time together. Over long dinners and walks through her neighborhood accompanied by the dogs, the bond between us began to set like quick-dry cement. She seemed interested, genuinely interested—in me. We could talk about anything. There were few subjects she couldn't discuss intelligently and those she approached with a voracious inquisitiveness. I could make her laugh, hard and often, sometimes to the point of tears, her arm on my shoulder to support her as she let out a staccato, breathless hack. The humor cut both ways. She was quick and silly and razor sharp. Her dialogue peppered with profanity and chock full of the kind of raunchy sarcasm I associated with men—or Catskills comedians. She claimed it came from her association with gay men and from her father's side of

the family, the Jewish one.

After a few days, I got up the nerve to bring her to my place, which, to my relief she found adorable and shockingly neat. We walked hand in hand around my neighborhood, Rachael commenting on its youthful vibe as we ducked in and out of the boutiques, her telling me she hadn't felt so young in years.

I was falling for her. I'd been in love before. But meeting Rachael had, immediately, made all my previous romances appear juvenile and silly—small-time ingénues compared to Rachael's leading-lady presence. I began to believe Rachael and I could actually be together, to imagine myself in her world—and to covet it. This wasn't just a romance. It was the gateway to another life, one defined by possibilities rather than limits. Everything about Rachael's life seemed big to me: the job, the house, even the car. It hadn't always been that way for her. Her father, a statistician, had been able to provide only a modest, middle-class upbringing for his four daughters. Rachael had, by force of will, achieved a lifestyle that seemed, even a few days before, unimaginable. I'd grown up in an atmosphere of shifting sand: moving from place to place, trying to stay half a step ahead from the bill collectors. Stability, security, achievement—these were abstract concepts, bestowed upon a fortunate few. For Rachael, they were the minimum requirements of life. When Rachael spoke of her future, and then ours, it was as though I had suddenly been given the opportunity to jump out of my sad little novella and into a multi-volume epic.

It was sometime around day seven that Rachael made a decision—a monumental and tremendously risky one, given what Rachael had achieved and how hard she had worked to achieve it. She would leave David.

That evening, we sat on the sofa in the book-lined den.

“Think about this, girl,” I said, “Think about this hard. You're talking about almost ten years with him. All this life, all this stuff.” I motioned around the room. “You're not going to regret it?”

I glanced over at her, slid my hand behind her neck and kneaded it. She leaned back, shot me that beaming smile, pulled my hand from behind her head and kissed my palm. “I’ll never look this good, or feel this good again. You’re young. You’re smart and you’re kind. Together, we can do whatever the hell we want. This is my time—our time.”

“I’m not exactly the catch of the century. Or the month, for that matter.”

“Stop.” She placed two fingers over my lips. “You’re just a little lost. You’ll find your way. You’ll see. I’ll help you.”

I drew her to me. She was willing to risk everything. For me. I saw her decision as a tremendous affirmation. At the time, I thought that it was Rachael with everything to lose. I never saw the obligation, the covenant, into which I was about to enter. Nor did I consider what might be the consequences of breaking it.

Three days later, David returned from his business trip. Rachael met him at Dulles Airport, intending to wait and break the news to him at home. Instead, she burst into tears and confessed everything, right there inside the terminal. David was shocked, then furious. The next day, he changed all the locks and Rachael moved in with me.

What followed were several weeks of emotional whack-a-mole. There were Rachael’s mercurial swings in mood—from elation over a new romance to despair over the loss of David, her girls, and the comfortable life they had constructed, including the realization that the legal agreement she had signed with David when they had purchased their house meant she forfeited all her investment and equity. Lucky for both of us that I had graduated with honors from the advanced school of volatility management. Instinctively, I knew when to sweep in and be supportive and when to disappear.

That’s not to say we were either insular or reclusive. On the contrary, Rachael wasted no time in forging ahead with her new life and integrating me into it. First off, my rose delivery days were over. Rachael told me I should take my time and figure out what I really wanted to do.

To her friends, however, Rachael's decision to leave David had been a shock and no small scandal. Given the circumstances of the break up, their sentiments and sympathies were skewed solidly in his direction. It didn't help matters that David was now referring to me only as the "disco boy" who'd stolen his woman.

Rachael approached the challenge of having her friends accept me by putting her extensive marketing and public relations experience to work. There were excursions to high-end clothiers, outfitting me with a new wardrobe, picking out things I could never afford—tailor-made suits, blazers, shirts that showed off my build, pants that draped just so—shopping sprees I hadn't experienced since the days my grandmother had lavished me with pre-school buying binges. Then, it was off to a ch-chi salon in Georgetown owned by a couple of Rachael's friends, where I was coiffed, manicured and given my first facial. Perhaps it was the association with my grandmother—not to mention the story of Pygmalion—which kept me feeling pampered, even entitled, rather than degraded by the makeover.

Like a product with a tainted reputation, I was retooled and rolled out to a skeptical public. Phase one involved a series of intimate meals in expensive restaurants where I could meet her inner circle, followed by a succession of appearances at cocktail and dinner parties.

Fortunately, I had my experiences with Billie Dennis and the entourage my mother cultivated after she and my father split to draw from. But that got me only so far. Like Rachael, my mother's gay friends were loyal and utterly devoted to her. But while my mother's clan was outrageous, warm, and witty, they were also fey and flighty. They perpetuated, even reinforced, the effeminate sissy-boy-gay stereotype.

Rachael's friends were a collection of doctors, attorneys, consultants, business owners—a thick slice of D.C.'s A-list gay men. Outwardly at least, these were confident, secure men, reveling in their success and flaunting it with cool cars, beautiful clothes, and impeccably decorated homes. Over cocktails and cocaine, there was talk of Human Rights Coalition fundraisers, the cost of kitchen renovations, vacations to Tuscany and second homes in Rehoboth.

At first, Rachael took the lead, but it wasn't long until I was beating her to the punch with the funny quip or the well-timed compliment. The reviews came in and they were favorable. Soon enough, her friends were telling Rachael how charming they thought I was, easy on the eyes, too.

As a kid, every time my grandmother referred to me as the "*sensitive*" boy I cringed. Sensitive, I thought, was simply a euphemism for weak. But here were people who appreciated, even rewarded the attribute. I felt as though I'd spent my whole life standing on the wrong side of the velvet rope and had at last gotten the nod from the doorman.

About a month after we began seeing each other, just a few days before Thanksgiving, Rachael decided that we would take the vacation to Miami she and David had planned. "Why waste the tickets?" she asked.

Why indeed? Here was a chance for us to be alone, to catch our breath, away from the stress, the scene and the show.

Or so I thought.

Boy Beach

“Two things,” Rachael says. “First, we figure out where the boys go on Friday night and then we nail down a connection for X.” She’s in the passenger seat of the rental car I’m driving, paging through her address book, focused and on the hunt.

“And how do you propose we go about this?” I ask.

“Don’t know yet.” She taps her index finger against her lips. “But about ten years ago I saw a bale of cocaine float down the Miami River, so unless things have really changed, we shouldn’t have *too* much trouble.”

Over the last few days, she has extolled the virtues of Miami Beach, the gay club scene, the beautiful people, and ecstasy, which she hasn’t tried since the mid-eighties “when it was still legal. They used it in therapy sessions to break down emotional barriers.”

“Really? And how’d that work out for you?” Already, I’d learned that if you set Rachael up with a slow one right over the plate, she’d smack it out of the park as hard as any man.

“I found that a combination of X and poppers broke down enough barriers to almost get me in some serious trouble with a well-endowed queen in the bathroom at the Pier,” she said, referring to the now-defunct D.C. dance club.

“Tell me it’s not like acid.” I hadn’t done LSD in a long, long time, since that night in college I’d watched the walls of my bedroom melt.

“God no. It’s one thing to do acid when you’re eighteen and a blank canvas. We’ve accumulated way too many demons now to mess with acid. At least I have. No, it’s more like a mental milk bath.”

We cross Biscayne Bay on the MacArthur Causeway, passing the grand old mansions on Star and Hibiscus Islands on our left and the cruise ship docks on our right. Twenty years ago,

I'd sailed out of here with my father, the lounge singer and cruise director on the *Flavia*, on her five-day tours to the Bahamas. I had the run of the ship and explored every inch of it, like Eloise at the Plaza Hotel. The experience had also been special for my father—too special. The combination of lengthy absences from home, his drinking, and the plentiful distractions courtesy of the female passengers had put an end to his marriage to my mother. Ever since, I'd associated Miami with fun—and excess.

There's hardly a cloud in the sky. I turn off the air conditioner, open my window and let in the thick ocean-tinged air.

"Ah, Miami" says Rachael. She drops the address book to her lap, takes an elastic band off her wrist and ties her hair off into a pony tail. "Can't you just smell the decadence?"

"Thought that was the ocean."

Rachael glances out the window. "I doubt it." She goes back to rifling through the little black book.

The causeway exits onto Fifth Street. Rachael glances up and says, "Take Alton Road north. We'll miss the traffic on Collins."

I hang a right on Seventieth Street and cut over to Collins and the Shelborne hotel. The façade of the Shelborne is grand, classic Miami Modern. Inside, it's a different story. The hotel has the architecture going for it, what Rachael calls great bones—an enormous lobby, yards of white terrazzo floors and high ceilings—but the renovation has been done on the cheap. The lobby furniture is Holiday Inn, the hallway carpet is stained. Our room has a generic, motel feel, reinforced by the sea-foam-green bedspread dotted with little sea horses swimming every which way. Everything smells of disinfectant.

Rachael isn't saying anything but she's not happy. Between dissatisfied grunts and sighs, she unpacks. I go to the balcony door, pull back the heavy peach-colored curtains and the off-white sheers, slide it open, and step out. The general manager, Sabrina, whom Rachael knows from her days in the hotel business, was supposed to get us an ocean view. Instead, our room

faces directly into the next building. I lean out as far as I can over the balcony rail and make out a tiny aqua sliver of ocean.

“There’s no place to *put* anything,” Rachael says from the bathroom. She joins me on the balcony and looks over my shoulder. “I knew I should have found a hotel on my own.”

There’s a knock on the door and I answer it. It’s a bellman holding a platter of fruit. He sets the black plastic tray wrapped in clear plastic on the table next to the balcony, takes an envelope from his pocket and hands it to Rachael. She tips him and he leaves. Rachael removes a card from the envelope and reads it out loud. “Glad you’re here. Renovations are running behind, but check out the view! Have yourselves a great time. Sabrina.” Rachel sighs and tosses the card back onto the tray.

As usual, I’m hungry, so I pull the plastic wrap off the platter and grab a strawberry. The underside of it is covered in fluffy white mold.

“Okay, that’s unacceptable,” says Rachel. She heads to the bedside phone and snatches it up. “Room service? This is room 904.” The ball of her foot bounces on the floor rat-tat-tat, insistent, like a woodpecker. She clears her voice. “You just delivered an amenity from Sabrina Ruiz, the General Manager. Yes. Well, my amenity is moldy. *Amenity*. It means *gift*. The *fruit platter* has mold on it. Thank you.” She jams the phone on the cradle crookedly, then slams it again.

This may not be the Ritz, but I’m not going to forget that a couple of months ago I was delivering roses in a tuxedo. And now I’m with a beautiful women, in Miami Beach no less, on a warm day in November and that’s fine by me, obstructed ocean view and all. I know how to get things back on track. Rachael’s ability to self-correct is one of her most appealing qualities. I stop unpacking. “Your amenity is moldy? Shouldn’t you keep that to yourself?”

Rachael lets loose an enormous smile. “I guess that should really be between me and my gynecologist.” She slaps the palms of her hands onto her thighs and shakes her head. “I am such a pretentious bitch.”

“A pretentious bitch with a moldy amenity.” I walk over to the bed, push her back and pin her shoulders to the mattress. The little sea foam-green colored seahorses in the bedspread seem to swim in and out of her ears.

“Moldy Amenity. That might just be the perfect drag name for me,” she says. “Or you.”

“Can we get out of here and start having fun?”

“I just want everything to be right.”

“We’re here. Together. It’s a beautiful day. What could be more right than that?”

She raises her head and kisses me. “You’re too good for me.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Rachael winks. “Come on. Let’s go to boy beach.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see.”

Rachael has snapped out of her mood. On the walk down Collins to Ocean Drive, she regales me with a story about her most recent visit to South Beach, a business trip a few months ago, during which she and Sabrina had gone club hopping and Sabrina had ended up dancing topless on the bar. This part of the story gets my attention. Rachael stops, mid-sentence.

“Please go on.” I say.

“Later for that.” Rachael puts her hands on my shoulders and turns me around. “Look.”

We stand at the edge of the beach and for as far as I can see in both directions bright umbrellas line the pale sand, set under multicolored kites which hover above, trembling in the steady ocean breeze. Strung along the length of Ocean Drive is a row of pastel-colored hotels, gleaming in the shimmering sun. It’s spectacular, like a movie set, right down to the fantastic lifeguard stands painted in vivid colors and sprouting odd, jutting angles.

“Fantasy land,” I say.

“Ain’t seen nothing yet.”

We continue down the beach to Twelfth Street. Two large rainbow flags set on tall poles snap in the breeze. They're obvious but unnecessary territorial boundary markers. Everyone is very much on display, preening, their bathing suits adjusted just so, their eyes busy scanning and assessing as they sip cocktails from straws. Boom boxes belt out bass-heavy four-four beats. Men bounce from group to group—buff, beautiful frogs on a lily pond made of sand. The purposeful flirting reminds me of the college mixers I'd gone to with my frat friends, minus the belching, stale beer and puking in the back seat of my car.

“The boy beach.” I say.

Rachael nods. “Pay attention to the eyebrows.” We dump our beach bags on two empty lounge chairs next to a purple and mint colored life guard stand. “From the eyes up, most straight guys look like they had a lobotomy. Gay boys' eyebrows flutter like butterfly wings.”

We pay the attendant for the lounge chairs, ask him for an umbrella, and get ourselves settled. She's back to that address book again. “How about a dip?” I ask.

“Maybe later.”

I frown. She presses the book closed, but marks the place with her thumbs. “I promise, honey. As soon as I get a hold of some folks.”

“Try *D* for drug dealers.” Rachael ignores me. “*M* for Miami drug dealers?” Still nothing. “Well, how about we lose that bathing suit top, then?” That gets her attention. “You look terrific,” I say. She's been coming with me to the gym and it shows.

She shakes her head. “There's a time and a place and this is neither.”

“Suit yourself.” I sigh, and back off, drop my khaki shorts on the lounge chair and walk to the edge of the ocean, pausing a moment to let the water wash over my feet. To my left, standing in waist-deep water, two men—one short, dark, and muscular, the other thinner and pale—are pressed against each other, their hands running up and down each other's backs and arms. They turn and stare. I shift my gaze away from them and down to my feet. The red Versace bathing suit we bought yesterday feels smaller than ever.

This isn't the first time I've been given the once-over by gay men, but it is the first time it's happened standing smack in the middle of a gay beach in a revealing bathing suit the color of a matador's cape. I glance up again towards the two men. They're still staring.

Angling away from them, I wade out to chest-deep water and immerse myself. It's perfect: turquoise blue, clear, and just cool enough to be refreshing. I relax, glad to be off display. I float around on my back for a while, letting my mind go blank. A propeller plane drones by dragging a banner advertising a brand of vodka I've never tried. This is more like it. In the worst case—a couple days of fun in the sun, away from D.C.'s bleak November drizzle. It's nap time. I swim parallel to the shore, scanning the beach for our spot. A few strokes later, I spot Rachael sitting under our umbrella, drink in hand, surrounded by four guys fanned out around her, three on their knees, one standing.

As soon as I emerge from the water, Rachael spots me, points, and, in a tone used by game show hosts to announce the grand prize winner, yells, "and here he is!" Heads swivel towards me. I register white, white teeth and deep, deep tans.

I stop, wince—catch myself—straighten my back, smile, and keep walking. So much for nap time—it's show time.

The nearest guy says, "Well I see what you mean, girl, he's adorable."

I hope the sun masks my blush.

"Honey, meet Patrick, Robert, Michael and Ramon," says Rachael, working her way around the semi-circle of men with a nod of her head. I reach to shake their hands and the three seated guys give me what must they must imagine is the straight-man hand shake: a little too firm, and herky-jerky. As I greet them, I realize their names have shot through my head like a high-velocity bullet. It doesn't help that most of the men she's introduced me are named Patrick, Robert, or Michael. When I get to Ramon, he ignores my outstretched hand and, before I can react, kisses me full on the lips. It's matter of fact—confident, not flirtatious. I make an extra effort to connect the name with the man.

Ramon is my height and very tan. He has dark eyes and a square, heavy jaw, capped by close-cropped, peroxide-white hair. He's wide in the shoulders, thick through the chest, with narrow hips and slender legs. The one attribute I can't help notice—no one could—is barely contained by his Speedo-style bathing suit. *Try not to stare at the guy's package, idiot.* Ramon stands above Rachael, arms crossed, legs spread, shifting his weight from side to side. I glance down at the front of my own bathing suit. At least my arms are bigger than his.

“So, we're all going to The Warsaw tonight,” says Rachael.

“Great,” I say and nod. I don't have the slightest idea what The Warsaw is.

“What time does everyone go?” Rachael asks Ramon. She's trying to avoid staring at his crotch which hovers less than a foot above her. For the woman whose license plate proclaims her penis envy, this must be pure torment.

“Honey, the party starts when you two get there,” says Ramon.

“Right answer,” says Rachael.

“Oh,” Rachael says to me, “by the way, everything's taken care of.” She opens her right hand to show me three purple pills.

“Well, well.” I take a step closer to get a better look. “You work fast. I wasn't in the water fifteen minutes.”

“Darlin',” says Patrick, or Robert or Michael, “she had those party favors lined up five minutes after we met her. Your lady is *determined*.”

The ecstasy tablets are no bigger than baby aspirin. Something is stamped on them. I hold Rachael's hand to steady it. “What's that little circle?”

“Smiley faces,” says one of the guys. “They're the bomb.”

“They're so tiny,” I say.

“Small can be good,” Ramon says.

Rachael crosses her arms, dips her head and says, “That's easy to say when you've got a dick the size of a baby's arm.” Everyone erupts in laughter, including, to my surprise, Ramon.

As the laughing dies down, one of the guys says, “Don’t worry, man, they’ll kick your ass.”

“Listen to you,” says another. “Dude,” he drawls, like a stoned-out surfer, “they’ll kick your ass, man,” mocking his friend. “What is *that* about, Patrick?”

“He’s trying to make the straight man comfortable by impersonating Sean Penn in *Rock and Roll High School*,” says another.

“Around here, that’ll get you arrested,” Ramon says.

“Or felched.” says Rachael. Everyone exchanges awe-struck looks.

“I cannot *believe* she just said felched,” says Patrick.

“Or knows what it means,” says the other.

Everyone is oozing a relaxed and casual connection—native speakers in a language I studied a couple of years back in high school. I laugh, like I’m in on the joke.

“Or likes it so much,” I add.

More laughter.

“Oh *honey*,” says Rachael, giving Patrick a dismissive wave. “You haven’t heard the half of it.”

“Well, says the Sean Penn impersonator to me, “If *that’s* not the half of it, you’d better strap it on, buddy.”

“Around here, I do the strapping on,” says Rachael, which elicits another round of shrieks.

“Listen,” Ramon says, “we’re going to the Palace for some lunch. The food’s terrible, but the scene is fabulous. Please come.”

“Thank you, sweetie, but we just got here and we want to catch some sun,” Rachael says. She turns to me. “Right?”

I nod, relieved. Staying on like this is exhausting. Still, I’m a little disappointed. Although I don’t get all of it, I’m enjoying the repartee—a hopped up, sexed-up, sun-splashed

version of the Algonquin roundtable. “But we’ll see you tonight, right?”

“Of course, darling, just be there by midnight or you’ll end up waiting in line.

Remember, this is White Party weekend,” Ramon says.

“Oh no,” Rachael says, wagging her finger, “We don’t *do* lines.”

I blurt, “White Party?”

Everyone snickers. I blush again.

Ramon says to Rachael, “Now we believe you when you say he’s straight. *In spite* of that bathing suit.” I resist the urge to cover myself with both hands. “The White Party is the most *fabulous* party on the circuit.” I don’t know what the circuit is either, but this time I keep my mouth shut. “The main party is at Vizcaya mansion. Lovely little soiree under the stars on Biscayne Bay, everyone dressed in white. Too elegant for words, really.”

“Sounds cool,” I say.

“What would we wear?” asks Rachael.

“Less the better,” says Sean Penn.

“Sounds like we should be there, right?” says Rachael.

“Oh, you *should* be there, darling, but not until Sunday,” says Ramon.

“Sunday?” says Rachael. “We leave on Sunday.”

“Look at it this way,” says one of the other guys, “you just saved yourself two hundred and fifty dollars.”

“For a cocktail party?” I say.

“I wouldn’t care how much it costs,” Rachael says.

“It’s pretty, to be sure, but trust me, the *real* party starts tonight. You’ll be exactly where you want to be at The Warsaw,” Ramon says.

How could a place named after a city in Poland be better more *fabulous* than this White Party? Somehow, the explanation seems to satisfy Rachael.

“Okay, my darlings,” she says. She receives air kisses from Ramon and the other three

who've lined up to say goodbye as though they've just had an audience with the Queen. "We *will* see you all later." This time, instead of awkward handshakes, I receive chaste and friendly smacks on the lips from the three men and one distinctly un-awkward smooch from Ramon. Given the setting, I decide to grin and bear it.

I watch them pick their way through the lounge chairs, umbrellas, and thumping boom boxes.

"Nicely done," I say to Rachael.

"Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you."

"For what?"

"For handling the indoctrination so well, kisses and all."

"Feels like I've passed the initiation and now I can use the secret handshake. Kisses I can handle. Not so sure about felching though, even if I knew what it meant."

"Especially if you knew."

"Anyway, they're nice guys. Especially that Ramon. How do you know him?"

"He's a doctor. Heads up the St. Bartholemew's AIDS clinic in New York. David knows him through NIH."

I'm glad I hadn't know the David-Ramon connection when I'd met him; I'd have been even more self-conscious. "Really," I say, "so we just bought drugs from Ramon, the prominent and extremely well-hung medical doctor?"

"Also known as 'the cha-cha doctor of Chelsea.' And if these are even remotely as impressive as Ramon's reputation—and that cock—we're all set." With that, she drops the tablets into the change purse of her wallet.

"So when do we take them?"

"About an hour before we want to start loving the world."

"Got to say," I flop down face first onto the lounge chair. "I'm kinda' loving this world already."

Girl Power

As I lay face down on the lounge chair that day, I had to wonder—exactly what was it that made women so great, anyway?

The men I was meeting seemed to have it all. These weren't the sissy boys of my youth and adolescence. If anything, they were hyper-masculine, pounding weights, slugging supplements, slamming steroids. No one in their right mind would take on some of the guys hanging out on the beach that day, plenty of whom looked as though they could break me in half with one hand as they sipped their Margarita in the other.

Sure, some had the “looks like Tarzan, talks like Jane” syndrome, but those boys paid a big price for being fey. According to Rachael, sissies and bottoms forfeited the most desirable, masculine, A-list boys. The gay personals were full of ads stipulating “only straight-acting tops need respond”.

“So, if everyone gives, and no one receives” I asked her, “how does anyone have sex?”

“Everyone *says* they're a top. The truth is, there are two categories of gay men: five percent tops, and ninety five percent wannabe-lying bottoms.”

Be that as it may, it seemed that gay culture had come roaring out of the closet and right into society's face, literally. Everyone was kissing on the lips when they met or said goodbye, even in public—making out and holding hands, too—daring somebody to make something of it. Of course, the same behavior that went over in Miami Beach, San Francisco, or New York City would very likely get one's ass kicked on any night of the week in Macon, but there was no denying that contemporary gay culture had, ironically, by adopting many of the characteristics of its macho oppressors, created an attractive, seductive lifestyle.

Just how seductive? Rachael was amazed at just how un-adventurous I'd been, sexually speaking.

“Come on. You’ve never had a locker room grope session, never jacked-off with a boy, kissed a boy, fantasized about a boy—not once?”

She was surprised, even disappointed at my answer. To Rachael, who preferred men, but appreciated women, my hard-wired hetero orientation seemed, well—queer. Maybe she had a point. I pictured myself with Ramon. No denying, the man was attractive. Strong. Hung. We embrace. We kiss. Could there be a spark? A hint of hard-on? Sigh.

Now I was the disappointed one. The gay men I was meeting seemed to be having a great fucking time, literally. The Greeks, the Romans—they didn’t let gender get in the way. What if heterosexuality was just an artificial social construct, imposed by a homophobic power structure?

I shifted around on the lounge chair, feeling oppressed and empowered. There, not twenty feet away from me standing in knee-deep water, was a lovely, bare-breasted blonde, tossing her naked child into the air. I noticed the gentle arc of her back as she held the child above her; the tendrils of a tattoo creeping over the top of her bathing suit bottom; the way her shoulders drew back and tensed; the ripple of her thigh muscles; the rivulets of water dripping down her neck, over her breasts. I sprouted a slight, but undeniable erection.

Damn.

The Cuntessa

I wake up to everything dark and hushed, the whir of car traffic blending with the sound of the ocean from somewhere beyond the hotel room's open balcony door. Rachael is sound asleep, her head on my chest.

I glance at the clock by the bed. "It's ten."

"Ten what?" she mumbles, not opening her eyes.

"Come on. Let's get this party started." I roll away from her and slide a pillow under her head. Rachael hugs it, turns onto her stomach and groans.

"I'm sleepy."

"Sleepy, my ass. You made me promise to get you up. This was your idea, remember?"

"Pour me some sugar."

I walk over to her makeup bag, find the baggie with the cocaine and clear a space on the glass-topped bedside table. Using her credit card, I arranged the coke into two fat lines, roll up the bill, lean over and snort one. Rachael tosses off the covers, raises herself up to her elbows, and rubs her nose with her fist.

"Come on, party girl." I pinch my nostrils and place the rolled up bill next to her pillow. "I'm getting in the shower." She looks lovely in the ghostly pale light filtering through the sheer curtains. I lean over and sweep the tips of my fingers down from her neck, between her breasts, and across her belly. I stand, turn, and head toward the bathroom.

"Hey," she says. Her voice is soft and low. "Come here."

I know that tone and what it means. Rachael sits up on the edge of the bed and motions me to her. When I'm within arm's reach, she guides me into her mouth.

Rachael told me that she was well into her twenties before she'd had her first orgasm. She claimed that was a result of a series of casual, unfulfilling encounters with men who had used

her, then dumped her. I suspected another reason. Letting go wasn't Rachael's strong suit. But, according to her, I was changing all that. With me, a partner she loved and trusted, she could relax and begin to let down her guard. She was generous, but also needy, requiring plenty of time and attention to satisfy her. Not this time. Perhaps it's the setting or the jacked-up sexual energy from the beach. Our sex is sharp and purposeful. I bear down on her until her body rocks and spasms, then goes still.

An hour later, we stand in our underwear as I watch Rachael stack outfit combinations across the length of the king-sized bed. "Okay, Lewis and Clark. Do you really need all this?" I wave my hand over the piles of clothes. "We're here for what, three days?"

She regards the clothes like a chess champion contemplating her next move. "You'd be surprised. This is Miami. I can't even wear my glasses. Women aren't caught dead going out clubbing with glasses." I follow her into the bathroom where she begins to arrange her makeup into neat rows across the top of the toilet. "That studious, hipster look might fly up North, but down here every night is glamour night. By the way," she looks at my reflection in the bathroom mirror as she snaps the top off a tube of lipstick, "what are *you* wearing?"

"I'll show you." I step into the room, put on my white polo shirt, blue jeans, black Reeboks and reappear.

Rachael stifles a laugh. "Sweetie, after all the hot stuff we bought for you? Let's rethink your outfit. You want to blend, right?"

"Do I?"

"A straight guy walking into a gay nightclub dressed like that? Might as well hang a sign on you that says 'Eviscerate Me.'"

I don't feel like changing, but I sure don't want to be pegged as some yokel, either. "So what, then?" I pull off my shirt. Using the lipstick as a pointer, she works her way around my body. "Yes, lose the shirt. And those sneakers. The jeans are fine; your ass looks good in them."

I turn around and look at myself in the mirror. “Got to admit, I never really thought that much about my ass.”

“Trust me, women and fags, we’re obsessed with asses—ours and everyone else’s. Wear your black boots and, let’s see, the sleeveless black shirt from that place on Washington Avenue. You know. The one that shows off your chest.”

The prospect of wearing that ensemble to a gay dance club makes me cringe. “You sure it’s not too—too?”

“Too what? Too sexy? Honey, you’re beautiful and I want everyone to see how beautiful you are.”

“Patronized *and* objectified?”

“Get used to it.”

“Seriously, though. We’re talking about a night club, here and you’re acting like it’s a debutante ball.”

“From what I’ve heard, that might be a better analogy than you think. Don’t worry, she says, “just stick close to me and prepare to have your mind blown.”

I tap on the frame of the bathroom door. “Okay by me. As long as it stops with my mind.”

I tighten the laces on my army-style boots, put on the tank top, and walk over to her in the bathroom where she is bent over, blow drying her hair.

“Oh, you look fabulous,” she yells over the whirl of the motor. “I could never get David to dress like that. Not that it mattered much in those rinky-dink bars in Rehoboth. Spin around.”

I do. “How’s my ass?”

Rachael gives me a thumb up.

“So,” I say, “if you won’t tell me what felching is, can you at least enlighten me regarding circuit parties?”

“Felching, my dear, is sucking the come out of someone’s ass. Happy?”

I screw up my face. “Happy it’s not being done to me. Thrilled, actually.” I shake my head as if to clear it. “I’m afraid to ask, but—circuit parties?”

“AIDS fundraisers. At least that’s how they started. Now they’re like a Grateful Dead tour for gay men.”

“Been to many?”

“Nope. I could never get David to go.” She clicks off the blow dryer. “Now, help me decide what *I’m* going to wear.”

It’s fun watching her try on various outfit combinations, each one a little bit hotter and more revealing than the last—fun, that is, until I look over at the clock. “Rachael, do you know it’s midnight? Ramon told us not to come later than midnight or we’d get stuck in a line.”

“Three more minutes. I promise.”

Two costume changes and twenty minutes later, she is satisfied. So am I. She has selected skin-tight patent leather jeans, matching patent leather combat boots, and a white vinyl halter top. She wears her shoulder-length dark hair pulled back in a tight pony tail. Rachael has a remarkable ability to transform herself from pretty to stunning by accentuating her best features: lips, cheekbones, and her enormous brown eyes. Combined with her even and brilliant white teeth, the result is startling—classic, glamorous beauty. The kind that had me comparing her to Ava Gardner that first night. I stand behind her in the bathroom and watch her apply a couple of precisely-placed dabs of blush.

“How did you learn to do that?”

“The makeup? She snaps the compact closed. “I started looking at fashion magazines and trying to copy the models. About the same time I began sneaking out of the house with Randall to go to gay bars.”

“One thing I don’t understand,” I say. “What does a fifteen year old girl get out of going to gay bars?”

“She *gets* out of her fucked up house, the one with the father that rages and hits her all the

time, the one with the clueless mother that ignores it all, and she *gets* all the attention any girl could ever want from the most attractive men in the world.”

“Attractive men who have no any interest in sleeping with you.”

“You’d be surprised. Boys will be boys. Though I’ll admit, for a long time I had to make do with dildos and women. Unfortunately, there aren’t that many straight men like you out there. Not ones who actually like women.”

“Straight men don’t like women? Since when?”

“I said *liking*, not fucking. Most of the straight guys I know wouldn’t have anything to do with women if it weren’t for the sex. That’s why I gravitate to the fags. No agenda. I got enough of that from other so-called men.

“Agenda?”

“You know—use women and then throw them away.”

“Jesus. Who were you hanging out with? James Bond?”

“At least with him you knew what you were getting with him. One guy I slept with told me the next morning I’d be pretty if I’d lose some weight.”

“Ouch.”

“And with my father it was always a guessing game. Quiet and calm one day. Next thing you know he’s coming up the stairs with a belt in his hand.” She flips her hair back away from her face. “I’m done with those kinds of men. Nobody treats me that way anymore. Ever.”

“Was David like that?”

She smiles. “David was kind and cool. But he’d lived a lot of his life. Done everything he’d wanted to do. I’m not there yet. Not even close. “Anyway,” she leans over and tugs my earlobe. “I don’t have to worry about this stuff anymore. Now I have you.”

Yes she does. Hearing her denigrate most other men makes me feel special. It’s as though I’ve been plucked out of a sea of degenerate assholes and crowned prince charming, with all attendant rights and responsibilities.

She finishes with the makeup, turns to me and stands with her palms turned out. “Well?”

I back out of the bathroom to look her over. “You know, if the whole currency trading thing doesn’t pan out you can always fall back on modeling. Of course, you’d have to grow a foot taller.”

“Fuck modeling.” She smacks her lips together to smooth the lipstick. “If I was a foot taller, I might just rule the world.”

“Now, can we get out of here?” I ask.

“Yes, yes, *yes*. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re the one who’s anxious to go cha-cha with the boys.”

“Just want to see what all the fuss is about.” Actually, it’s more than just curiosity. I don’t know what’s coming, but all of this buildup by Rachael, the interaction with the guys on the beach; it feels as though it’s leading to something. Rachael I take the cash out of my wallet, wrap it around my driver’s license and credit card, and slip them in the right front pocket of my jeans. “Done.” I take a step towards the door.

“Hold on, sweetie. Do you have pockets?”

“Pockets? Of course I have pockets. For what?”

What follows next is a process very much like loading down a pack mule. I end up with her contact lens case, a lighter, the room key, some makeup, her license, more cash, a pill bottle, and chewing gum.

“Wait! My cigarettes.” She tries to slide the full pack down my front pocket. It jams halfway down.

“Hey, come on.” I grab her wrist. “I already look like a paratrooper.”

She smiles. “Paratroopers are hot. Just ask anybody at the club tonight.” She forces the cigarettes past the lighter and down to the bottom of my pocket.

“Down the hatch.” Rachael opens the mini bar, removes a cold Perrier and hands me the bottle and one of the tablets.

“You sure I’m going to like this?”

“If you don’t, you can take it up with one of my people.”

“Here’s looking at *you*, kid.” I chase the pill down with a slug of the water.

“I don’t think Bogey drank Perrier in *Casablanca*.” Rachael takes the bottle from my hand and swallows her pill. “Or ever, for that matter.”

“And I don’t think Ingrid Bergman ever wore patent-leather pants to Rick’s Café.” I turn Rachael around towards the door. “Or had the faintest idea what felching meant.” I give her a sharp slap on the ass.

The sound cracks like a pistol shot.

#

“Anything?” Rachael asks me. Again.

Anything? Well, let’s see: There’s pummeling music, green lasers knifing through grey smoke, air as thick as axle grease, charged energy—manic, primal, sexual energy so strong it buzzes through me like an electrical current. We’re halfway up the staircase to the VIP lounge of The Warsaw Ballroom, surrounded by hundreds of sweaty, shirtless men, a smattering of women, and a few striking drag queens. I can’t single out any obvious effects from the ecstasy. With the exception of a headache which I attribute to the loud music, blinding lights, heat and Rachael’s impatience, I feel as normal as any polar bear in the Kalahari.

“Don’t think so,” I say.

“Damn. Neither do I.” She scans the room.

A bar runs along the entire left-hand side of the club, which, given the immense crowd jammed into it, might feel claustrophobic if not for the thirty-foot ceilings. The remnants of the deco-era ballroom the Warsaw used to be survive in the fluted marble columns that divide the space and the enormous gilt-rimmed mirrors above the bar. Other than those features, however,

there's not much to connect the place with its past. People dance on anything and everything that will support their weight—shoulder-high black boxes, on top of the bar, across a stage, on massive speakers. It's frenzy, like standing on a rock in mid stream watching white water rush by.

Ramon, who had gone off to find the group we'd met earlier on the beach, returns with the Sean Penn impersonator.

Sean Penn comes over and puts his arm around me. He's soaked with sweat. "Having fun, hot stuff?" He rubs the muscles across my shoulders and down my lower back.

I stiffen, but his smile is joyous, not lecherous. "Just got here. What have you guys been up to?"

He motions to the dance floor with his head. "Shaking our booties clean off." He drops his head to my shoulder.

"We're not really feeling much." Rachael says to Ramon.

"You did both of them?" Ramon asks me.

"Yep."

"How long ago?"

"The second one? A few minutes."

"How much do you weigh?"

"About 180." I laugh. "What's next, a prostate exam?"

Sean Penn bursts out laughing. "You don't know what you're missing."

Ramon checks his watch. "Trust me. Give it another few minutes."

I can wait another few minutes, but I'm not so sure about Rachael. I place my palm on Rachael's forehead. "What's the prognosis here, Doctor? Thirty years old, five foot two, one-hundred-five pounds."

Sean Penn's eyes widen. "*You* took two?"

"No, not yet." Rachael taps her index finger against her lips. "But I'm thinking about it."

He moves over, bear hugs Rachael and kisses her forehead. “You are *so* beautiful.” He looks at me. “She is *so* beautiful.”

“In the worst case, I have alternatives,” says Ramon

“Such as?”

“K and Tina.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Ketamine. It’s a disassociative. An anesthetic. Cuts off outside stimuli to the brain. Makes you loopy. Very trippy with the X.”

“Very trippy,” Sean Penn says.

“And Tina?” I ask.

“Crystal,” Rachael says. “Never done it. Heard it keeps you up for days.”

“That’s what Klonopin is for,” Ramon says.

“Keeps you horny for day is more like it.” Sean Penn strokes Rachael’s hair and says to me. “She’s fun, but you watch out for her.”

Rachael gives him a disapproving look.

He throws a hand over his mouth, embarrassed, and then puts both hands on Rachael’s shoulders. “Not you, darling—the meth.” He clutches the top of his head with both hands and walks to Ramon. “Save me from myself. Please.”

Rachael points to Sean Penn. “I’ll take two of whatever he’s having.”

“You can do all that stuff at once?” I say to Ramon.

“Look around.” He has a point. “Beats the alternative.”

“Which is?”

Ramon shrugs. “A lot of these boys are sick.”

All I can see is muscle and virility.

“They sure don’t look sick to me.”

Ramon gives me a look that tells me he knows better.

“I’ve seen more than a few of them at St. Bartholomew’s. It’s pretty common. Get on disability and head to Miami Beach. Find a cheap place to live.” He motions to Sean Penn, who stands out of earshot with his hands on Rachael’s waist, bouncing up and down with the music. “And party. Until you can’t.”

I give Sean Penn a second look. He’s slender and lean—perfectly healthy looking. My only experience with AIDS had been with my mother’s friends who’d succumbed quickly. I’d visited her friend Jean-Claude, shriveled wheezing, in the hospital near the end.

Rachael leans towards us. “You ready?”

Ramon nods.

“Ready?” I say, louder than I intended. I tug on Rachael’s hand to get her attention.

“Ready for what?”

She looks puzzled. “To go in.”

“Go in where?” I say. “There’s nowhere to go.”

Rachael says, “Sweetie, we did not go through all this effort to just stand here and watch people have fun. Follow us.”

Everywhere, men are kissing and groping each other. *Going in* means being sandwiched between hundreds of shirtless, horny gay guys. From somewhere deep inside, off goes a hetero alarm I didn’t even know I had, complete with warning buzzers and flashing lights. Ramon finds Rachael’s hand and takes a step down.

“Wait!” I say, trying not to sound panicked.

Ramon stops and looks back at me, eyebrows raised.

“In case we get separated, where do we meet?”

“Don’t you worry, honey,” says Sean Penn. He puts his hands on my hips and turns me to face down the steps. “You start feeling lost, you just hang on to papa.”

He slips past me, grasps my hand, I take Rachael’s, and our fragile little train threads its way down the steps and through the crowd. There is the press of hot, slick bodies. I try to make

myself a smaller target by hunching my shoulders forward and tucking in behind Sean Penn, but it does little good. The crowd is too dense and Sean too slim to provide much cover. I'm disoriented by the music, the crush of flesh and the flashing lights. Some of these men are huge and some are hairy and many are both. The stubble of backs rakes against mine. What *is* that smell—vaguely familiar—antiseptic and chemical, like a doctor's office?

"Poppers," Rachael yells to me over her shoulder.

Poppers. Of course. I hadn't smelled them since college when the girl I was dancing with at the Pier stuck a bottle under my nose and brought me to my knees.

Somehow, we find the rest of the group from the beach, wide eyed and dripping sweat. When they see us, they react like excited puppies, yelling and jumping up and down. We exchange hugs. The heat is infernal.

Rachael leans over and yells in my ear, "Off with that shirt."

Just behind Rachael, one man licks the sweat off another's chest. I shake my head no. She tugs at my sleeve. I grab her wrist and squeeze it. "The shirt was supposed to help me blend, remember?"

"It served its purpose. Like the first stage of a rocket launch. Time to jettison."

I shake my head. "This rocket ain't ready for stage two."

Rachael opens her mouth to say something, but, at that moment, the music fades and across the back of the stage spotlights play across a banner that reads: "Trailer Park Trio."

Now what?

Over the PA, a voice blares, "Okay, boys and girls, let's give a big cracked-out Warsaw Ballroom welcome to our favorite messes, The Trailer Park Trio." The crowd whoops. "First up, Miss Bessie." Bessie is skinny and shriveled, dressed like a plantation-era maid with a giant pillow stuffed in the back of her housedress.

"Next, let's hear it for the o-so-hearty Miss Hanna-Burger-Helper." The crowd groans at the sight of her—250 pounds easy, crammed into a five-foot frame, her lumpy thighs scraping

together through her white pantyhose as she shuffles along in pink, fuzzy slippers.

“And now, making a special White Party appearance, just in from her Double-Wide world tour—the incomparable one, The *Cun-tes-sa*,” he elongates the name as if he’s announcing the champion of a professional wrestling match. I see why. The Cuntessa is well over six feet tall, with the shoulders and build of a power lifter, wearing a shiny green evening gown, open toed sandals, a two-foot high red bee-hive hairdo, and a smear of red lipstick. Her putty-colored make-up runs down to her massive neck in thick channels of sweat.

Ramon leans over and says, “In for a treat. I hired her for my clinic’s Christmas party.”

I try to imagine the kind of Christmas party that would feature someone named The Cuntessa. I can’t.

There’s a familiar tinkling piano introduction. I shake my head. “The Lady is a Tramp.” Sinatra? Here? The Trailer-Park Trio grab cordless mics off stands and sit down, legs crossed, on cheap lawn chairs, the kind with thin plastic straps that carve divots into the back of your legs.

The Cuntessa takes the first line, “*She gets too hungry for dinner at eight . . .*” then Bessie, then Hanna. The spotlights track from one to the other. Not bad, especially the way they all stay in character, slouching, chewing gum, rocking their crossed legs. Even my father would have to tip his hat. Before he got sober, he might have invited them home for one of those post-gig jam sessions that used to keep me awake all night.

They hit the chorus— “*She likes the free, fresh, wind in her hair . . .*” Nice. The trumpet section and drums build to the second verse. A tingle runs up my back and across my scalp. The bass player hits deep, solid, walking quarter notes. Makes me wish my drum kit was set up on that riser. The trio stands and gathers close together, center stage. Now they’re swinging hard, shoulder to shoulder, snapping their fingers. I wonder what the Rat Pack would have made of these three. I picture Frank, Sammy, and Dino at the bar, in drag, toasting The Cuntessa, the new Chairman of the Bored.

“ . . . and she won’t dish the dirt with the rest of the broads . . .” They point to each other.

The crowd is with them now, clapping to the drummer's backbeat, headed to the slamming big finish. I'm spellbound by the juxtaposition of this music, so familiar, wedged into this strange new world. Then, I realize it's not so much juxtaposition as a confluence—the worlds melding into something new. I throw a fist in the air as they nail the ending. The crowd yells and applauds. The trio takes a theatrical bow and then gives everyone the finger.

Lights come down and the low thump of the dance music returns. For the first time since we arrived, I'm really enjoying myself. I turn to Rachael and scream, "That was frickin' great!"

Something has happened to her. Rachael's eyelids have drooped to half-mast, as if she's just woken up and might drift off again at any moment. Her pupils are dilated, shifting her mahogany eyes to solid ebony. I touch the side of her face. It's warm and dewy. She grins, but it's small, crooked, and goofy—not the big splashy smile I'm used to. She tugs at the bottom of my shirt. I look left and right. *What the hell.* I tilt my torso forward and she slides it over my head. I tuck the shirt in the waistband of my jeans, like everyone else. As soon as I do, a large hand attached to a hairy forearm reaches over my shoulder and pauses at the top of my chest. I could easily pull away, but I don't. The hand continues down my chest and gives my nipple a firm tweak, then vanishes as quickly as it appeared.

Rachael places her tiny, warm hands on my stomach. *Something* is happening. Something—more than Rachael's reassuring smile, more than Sinatra-singing drag queens—made it okay for that hairy gay man to grope me. Between Rachael's hands, deep inside my belly grows a warm, electric ball, a blend of euphoria and jitters, like the butterflies that accompany the anticipation of sex with an excellent lover. The glow spreads through my legs and up to my neck. Sweat runs down my chest and forehead. In spite of the heat, an icy wave passes through me as goose bumps spring up along my arms. I swallow. My throat is scratchy and a little constricted, like the first signs of a cold. I'm very thirsty. I grab the bottle of water I've stashed in my back pocket and take a long, slow drink. It spreads through my extremities, cleansing and pure. I hand the water to Rachael and as she drinks, I realize that the music which earlier had seemed so

ruthless and synthetic has become primal—delicious. I can taste it, as savory and succulent as roasted meat. The bass line shudders up from the floor into my gut and synchronizes with my heartbeat. Lights blaze, burst, and shift with the music. The heat soothes me, as if I'm suspended in tepid salt water.

I smile and catch Rachael's knowing, conspiratorial grin. She is so beautiful, so unguarded. Warm, glowing waves pass between us. She rubs the sides of my waist, kisses me on the lips and then leans her head on my chest. I drop my chin to rest it on the top of her head and relax, letting the warmth wash over me, feeling her flow into me. Someone leans a broad, muscular back against mine. I press back as it melts against me. We move in small, rhythmic and synchronous circles. Immense, relentless swells of euphoria pulse through me, flooding my brain, my body—everywhere we experience extreme pleasure.

It all makes sense, as if I'd been gazing into a shattered mirror which has suddenly been reassembled. The room and everything in it has been transformed into a throbbing organism, surging with life, comprised of heat and music and muscle and sex and smoke and sweat. It envelops me and protects me. All it asks in return is that we give ourselves to the music. Within its gentle grasp, everyone loves and is loved. No one is abandoned, no one is punished; no one is left behind. And I am part of it. For the first time in my life, I am fully and completely part of it.

Rachael turns to me, wide eyed. "Anything?"

Is she kidding? I bring my mouth to her ear and scream. "*Everything.*"

A Change Is Gonna' Come

My idea of a dance club had been formed in the 70s when I'd briefly dated a girl who ate, slept, and breathed disco. She dragged me out a few times to D.C.'s wannabe-versions of Studio 54 and I tried to fit in. My most vivid memories of that era include swarthy Middle-Eastern guys in loud rayon shirts, promising but never delivering cocaine to leggy blondes.

Nothing in my past could have properly prepared me for that night at the Warsaw Ballroom. And nothing in the real world, the one we stepped back into when we returned to D.C., could quite measure up. Of course it couldn't. The circuit was imagined, created and designed by masters of illusion and theatre—gay men living under the specter of AIDS. On one level, what they created was pure, unadulterated escape. No one on the floor of the Warsaw Ballroom that night cared one damn bit about illness or death or the consequences of either. If anything, the antipodal forces of the macabre and the joyous created a force greater than its parts—not to mention one hell of a party.

I'd been swept away that night, not only by the sheer intensity of the experience and the way it melded me to Rachael, but by the way I interpreted that intensity as profound, life-changing meaningfulness. I'd never felt so alive. I wouldn't go so far as to term as a spiritual encounter. I am about the least spiritual person I know. In my defense, I came by that lack of spirituality honestly. My mother had an Icon depicting the Virgin Mary at her bedside table and kissed it every morning. But I never heard her speak of God. My father had grown up in a Seventh Day Adventist home, attended a Seventh Day Adventist high school and was primed to enter the seminary before he eschewed the church and departed on a most secular life. My grandparents occasionally dragged me to Easter mass at St. Sofia's Greek Orthodox Church on Massachusetts Avenue, the one time a year they attended. All I remember of it are the candle lights glowing underneath the immense stained glass windows, the incantations performed in

ancient Greek and the pungent haze of the incense. Come to think of it, not all that different from a Saturday night in New York at the Limelight, a nightclub in Chelsea housed in the former site of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion. In the late 80s and early 90s, Limelight was ground zero for the Club Kid movement, the manifestation of disaffected youth who danced, did drugs and dressed in outfits that would have made Disney illustrators and Broadway costume designers keel over in envy. As nightclubs go, Limelight was a pretty good mash up of the holy and the profane. By the time I experienced Limelight in the late 90s, the place had two entrances and two dance spaces—one gay, one straight.

I believe my digression proves my point—spirituality isn't my strong suit.

Out the dance floor of the Warsaw Ballroom, though, I'd mainlined *something* and whatever the hell it was, I wanted more of it. Looking back, I'd call it pure, tribal, animal force—a male force. I was one of the boys, dancing half naked, buried in the music. That the boys were gay was irrelevant. I fit. Their interest and flirtations, far more direct than I had experienced from any woman, only heightened the experience. The fact that I wasn't attracted to them sexually freed me, and, for once, made me feel powerful. Here was a world in which my attributes, both physical and emotional, held value.

And then, as if to seal the deal, there were a series of events which swept us along in a rainbow-colored tidal surge. First was the AIDS quilt, which visited Washington, D.C. in October of 1992. It was a massive, awesome sight: a series of hand-made quilts, one for each dead friend or family member, patched together on the Mall to form a fifteen acre memorial. The event brought hundreds of thousands of gay people from all over the world to Washington. For several days, it was as though I was living in a never-before-aired segment of *The Twilight Zone* in which a straight man wakes to find that the entire world has turned homosexual. They were everywhere: packing the streets, the hotels lobbies, the restaurants, the banks and movie theaters. There were parades and marches and speeches condemning the Bush administration for its inaction regarding the AIDS epidemic and international press coverage, some of which

condemned those who were doing the condemning. But there was hope, too. Hope that the next presidential election would bring in a new era—our era. And Rachael and I would be part of it. We attended cocktail parties hosted by our friends and attended by people from everywhere, many of whom were feeling proud and hopeful for the first time in their lives.

Then, Clinton won and Rachael and I attended one of the inaugural parties, where we dressed in expensive clothes to sip cheap Chablis and watched our new President play the saxophone and dance with his wife, who was proclaimed by a lesbian comedienne we met later to be the first First Lady in history that she would like to fuck.

In April of 1993, there was a huge gay-rights march on Washington. We watched a parade down Constitution Avenue comprised of marching bands, floats, and topless lesbians. We danced at the Old Post Office, which was converted into a gigantic patriotic disco, complete with an enormous American flag, streamers and go-go boys and girls.

Now was the time—to change everything.

We began with our living arrangements. Rachael had walked away from most of the possessions she had accumulated with David. “New life—new stuff,” she said. Even so, accommodating the two of us in my four-hundred square foot condo was the equivalent of going through life while having to sit on an over-packed suitcase in order to latch it closed.

For its size, my place had abundant closet space, but even after going through all my clothes, ruthlessly purging and consolidating, every spare inch was crammed with her blouses, skirts, suits, jackets, hats, boots, shoes, jewelry, and her special passion—purses. Rachael had purses in every conceivable shape and color, each a little leather time capsule with a story to tell. There was a series of six small suede bags she found in Cairo, all, save for color—identical; a large, grey calfskin number with a tortoise shell handle she had made for her in Spain “for peanuts;” a formal patent leather clutch from Barney’s; a Vuitton, which David had given her for her birthday, still in its box, never used; and dozens of knock-off bags she bought on Canal Street each time she visited New York.

One afternoon, as if revealing precious antiquities, she removed each purse, carefully parting the delicate wrapping paper surrounding to give me the lowdown. “Look at this.” She held a small black leather purse with a gold strap. “A knockoff. Up in New York, they can spot one coming a mile away. But down here? Feel that.” She pressed the bag onto my lap. “Go ahead, feel it.” I did. It was soft.

“That’s soft,” I said.

“That’s Chanel. That’s a thousand dollar bag, easy. Do you know what I paid for it?”

I shook my head.

“Sixty dollars.” She enunciated each syllable. “*Six-ty dol-lars!* Did you feel it? Did you feel the leather?”

“Yes, it’s—soft.”

“Oh, never mind.” She snatched the bag away from me.

When we were done putting everything away I was tempted to tip-toe out; the place looked as though the slightest jostle might cause it to burst, spraying the room with deadly knock-off shrapnel. Something had to give, and soon.

I put my place on the market and it sold. Within a few months of her moving in, we’d found a pastel-colored Dutch Colonial row house over in Mt. Pleasant, an up-and-coming neighborhood just behind the National Zoo, and put down a deposit. It had a full basement large enough to accommodate my drums *and* a home gym, five bedrooms, two fireplaces, a laundry room, a bricked patio, formal dining room and a kitchen with so many cabinets we would designate one just for pot lids.

As if that weren’t enough, Rachael was considering a career change, too. Something she said she’d thought about for years, something combining her two great passions—dogs and glamour. Animals, dogs in particular, touched Rachael’s soft spot. She had no maternal instinct; children make her uncomfortable. Hand her a baby to hold and she’d freeze, as if presented with

a ticking bomb. A dog, however, even the mangiest stray, transformed her into a cooing, baby-talking softie.

“Think about it. Daycare for dogs. There’s nothing like it in D.C., not yet, anyway,” she said. “The Ritz for pets. They have them in LA and New York, it’s just a matter of time before someone does it here. I’m telling you, it’s the next big thing.”

We’d gone as far as to scope out locations and had found a good one, a defunct plumbing supply business with a large outdoor lot, across town on Capitol Hill. Rachael was beside herself. “You can help me run it. Think about it—our own business. I even have the name: Big Bark. It’s perfect, right?” I had to admit, it was. I’d never imagined myself a business owner. Nick the entrepreneur—I liked the sound of it.

Next, came a visit to the pound. When Rachael first suggested getting a dog I’d been supportive. “I think it’s a great idea,” I said. “But shouldn’t we wait until we’re settled in at the new place? It feels like we’ve got enough on our plate right now.”

“I miss my girls so much,” Rachael said. Her eyes welled with tears. “So *much*. Can’t we just go to the pound and look?”

Her crocodile tears reminded me of one of her purses, but I’d always been a sucker for a crying woman.

We came back from the animal shelter with a wizened brown thing, an amalgamation of shepherd and collie and who knows what, cobbled together like a canine version of Mr. Potato Head, distinguished by gentle eyes and ears the size of badminton racquets.

Rachael had spotted him, sitting forlorn and miserable in a cage dominated by several squirmy, much younger pups.

“Dog or fruit bat?” I wondered aloud.

“What did you expect, the ‘Best in Show’ from Westminster Kennel Club?”

Rachael asked for him to be brought outside. When she knelt down to greet him, he tentatively placed one paw then the other on her shoulders, looked her square in the eyes, licked her nose and sealed the deal.

His name was Morgan. I called him The Wart.

I don't recall who first brought up the prospect of getting married. For all I know, it was The Wart. I recall that there was no formal proposal. Instead, we treated the event as just another in a series of changes to be planned and implemented. The wedding would take place in January of 1993, the guest list would be small, the venue exclusive. Her parents, whom I had not yet met, would not be invited. As a concession to me, my mother and her husband—both of whom she regarded with the same wary and suspicion with which she regarded her own parents—would.

As for the rest? Well, it would—as everything else seemed to be doing—fall into place.

Toasted

Five dollars for a lamb chop the size of my thumb? I should take a stand. Until now I've been passive regarding our wedding arrangements. In fact, I've barely participated in them at all. Any misgivings have been dismissed by Rachael's persuasive and relentless logic.

"*The Plaza*," I said. "I thought we were supposed to be saving money for the business."

Rachael wagged her ring finger at me. "Stop worrying. Number one, we should consider ourselves lucky I don't give a damn about diamonds. For what we would have spent on a ring, we can practically pay for the whole wedding. Number two, Sabrina works at the Plaza now. She'll take good care of us. She owes me one for that room in Miami Beach, remember? Number three, having it in New York is a way to keep the guest list short *and* avoid inviting my family. Besides, how fabulous is having your wedding at The Plaza?"

Sitting here in the ornate, Rococo-decorated room in which our wedding will occur tomorrow afternoon I have to admit, The Plaza is pretty fabulous, and so is Sabrina, Rachael's friend and the former manager of the Shelborne in Miami Beach. She'd grown up in Argentina and was now putting her extensive Argentinean contacts and her astounding good looks to use, bringing tons of business to the hotel from South America. Well, hell, maybe Rachael was right. Who wouldn't want to get married at The Plaza? The only time I ever stepped foot in the place was years ago when I met a friend in the lounge for a couple of ridiculously overpriced cocktails.

Once I bought into having our wedding in such a swanky place, the other arrangements flowed easily, like expensive champagne: \$1200 for my Hugo Boss suit, another grand for her empire-waist, black-and-white vintage baby doll dress, \$1000 for flowers, \$250 a night for our suite (deeply discounted, Sabrina assured us), \$400 to the Cantor to do the ceremony (thank goodness my grandmother wasn't alive to see me married by a Cantor). Quickly, the concept of cost and budget became subsumed by the desire to make it all perfect.

So why am I hung up on the price of the lamb chops?

Seated around an immensely long and gleaming banquet table, Rachael and I are going over final menu selections for the reception with the young, prematurely prim catering manager. Once again, I've forgotten her name.

"You've selected such a lovely menu," she says. We've just gone page by page through the banquet event order sheets which describe in painstaking detail every aspect of the wedding.

"You think so?" says Rachael. "Do you think there's enough of everything?"

"Oh, for twenty people, you'll be just fine. Of course, if you're not comfortable, we can always bump it up a bit." She sifts backwards through the photocopied pages to the one listing our menu selections.

Rachael does the same with her copy. I slide my chair over to get a better look. My eyes work down the right hand side of the sheet, the one with the prices.

"Let's see," says the woman, reading,

"Large Crudite Platter (\$200),

Bacon-Wrapped Mushrooms (two dozen @ \$36/dozen),

Satay Chicken (two dozen @ \$48/dozen),

Lamb Chops (two dozen @ \$5/per piece)."

I pretend to clear my throat. "These prices are all plus, plus, right?" From my days of coordinating special events I know that plus, plus, means plus tax, *plus* gratuity to the base price.

"The prices? Yes, that's right," she says.

I have a feeling my question has thrown her—that few if any of her clients consider, much less mention, "price." She hesitates a second, then adds, "Sabrina worked with our department to get you some consideration on the pricing."

Consideration, I think. Well, let's *consider* that five dollars plus tax and gratuity comes to about six dollars and fifty cents per chop. Why should I care at this point whether we spent

another \$150 on this wedding? I glance over at Rachael to see if she's registering any discomfort. If she is, she's not showing it. She's hunched over the papers, intent, but not worried.

"Gee," I say, shifting in my chair, "you know, I could down about ten of those lamb chops by myself and not break a sweat." The catering manager manages a small, tittering laugh. Rachael shifts her attention from the forms, looks at me, and blinks—twice—calculating.

"You know, you're right," she says, "this *is* crazy."

I smile, relieved to have her on my side.

"We'd better order another dozen, just to be safe," she says.

Rachael and the catering manager veer off to other arrangements, something about the placement of the flowers, and I ease back further in my chair, relaxing my shoulders. I put my fingers on the shiny surface of the table and start drumming a *bossa nova* rhythm. Rachael and the catering manager keep on talking, but glance at me. I stop and try to wipe my fingerprints from the table, smearing them instead. My eyes drift around the room, past the absurd red-velvet wallpaper and come to rest on the perfect white-marble breasts of a statue of Venus, who appears to be looking over the catering manager's right shoulder. *Whatcha' think Ms. de Milo, is six-fifty too much to pay for a lamb chop the size of your nipple?* I know what she'd say, "I'm not much on finger food, but really, darling, if you're going to worry about excess, don't get married at the Plaza. Ivanna Trump decorated this place. What do you expect, understatement?"

"That's it," says Rachael. She slips her copies of the event forms into her briefcase.

"Yes, I believe we have everything covered," says the catering manager. She taps her papers on the table to straighten them like a local news anchor. "You're going to have a lovely wedding. Don't worry about a thing."

"I'm a converted Jew," says Rachael, "It's what we do." The catering manager looks away and titters again. "But I agree, it'll be lovely."

The catering manager glances at her watch and excuses herself. Rachael snaps her briefcase shut, rests it on the table and turns towards me. It's quiet, except for the faint tinkling of a piano from the lounge in the lobby playing "My Funny Valentine."

"Well, what do you think?" asks Rachael.

"I think that catering manager, what's her name?"

"Ca-tha-rine," says Rachael slowly. "Her name is Catharine"

"I think Catharine doesn't quite know what to make of you."

A laser-like ray of late afternoon sun angles through the enormous window behind us, strikes the crystal chandelier hanging in the center of the room and sprays tiny, fractured rainbows everywhere. We look around and then at each other. Rachael slides over to me and rests her head on my shoulder. I thread her long, dark hair through my fingers.

"And you," she says. "What do *you* make of me?"

I kiss the top of her head. Her hair smells of lemons. "I think I'm about to make an honest woman out of you."

"Best of luck. No, really." Rachael cocks her head. "We're getting married."

"Right."

"Tomorrow."

"Right."

"Here. At the Plaza."

A year ago, none of this—the romance, the wedding, our friends—would have seemed possible. I sigh. "Right."

Rachael sits bolt upright in her chair. "So you're getting married tomorrow and you have *nothing* to say about it—nothing to say about me?"

I smile. Rachael's hair is slightly disheveled from me playing with it. In a moment she'll fix it, but right now it's untamed—a perfect counterpoint to her expertly-applied makeup, burgundy cashmere sweater, and black wool pants. The chaos just beneath the control—scary

when it's unleashed, but so familiar, so seductive. My love for her surges through me. Not in the frothy, excited way I'd been in love before. I feel a part of her. I can't imagine myself without her. This, I imagine, is what real love, the adult kind, must be.

I place my hand under her chin and look her in the eyes.

"I don't quite know what to make of you, Rachael." She tries to speak but I squeeze her chin gently between my thumb and index finger, "But I do know that you are the most remarkable person I've ever met. You're mesmerizing. I love you."

She tears up. I let go of her chin and she dabs at her eyes with the tips of her fingers.

"Oh, Nick." She leans over and kisses me. "You know how high maintenance I am."

"Right."

"You know what a cunt I can be."

"Right."

"You know I adore you and that there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

I nod. "Been meaning to ask you about that."

"About what?"

"About all this. About me."

"What are you talking about?"

I shift myself around to face her. "My world before you was small and now it's huge."

"So?"

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm big enough for it."

Rachael's eyes grow wide just before she laughs. "You? You're kidding, right?"

I shrug.

Rachael slides over onto my lap. "There aren't ten men in the whole world like you. I'm not good at math, but even I know those aren't great odds." She kisses me on the forehead. "Ask anyone—they'll tell you how lucky I am." She tugs my ear. "Got it?"

I nod. "Got it."

“Good. That’s full disclosure, I suppose. It’s official: you’ve got me now, straight guy.”

Rachael leans over, pulls a black comb out of her purse and begins to fix her hair.

#

Sabrina, Rachael and I are crammed into a bathroom stall in the women’s room of Au Bar, *the* mid-town club of the moment. Sabrina administers a bump of cocaine to Rachael from a silver spoon she has just dipped in a heaping-full bag. The coke and the wedding party’s cover charge are Sabrina’s wedding gift to us. Very generous. I spin the gold band (the one we bought a couple of days ago from the store in the diamond district, owned by “my people,” as Rachael referred to them) on my left ring finger, round and around.

“Thank you sir, may I have another?” Rachael says.

“Hey,” I say, leaning over to get a bump from Sabrina, “keep it down. We’re a little obvious in here, aren’t we?”

“It’s okay,” says Sabrina, “there’s more coke being done in these bathrooms than back in the day at Studio 54.”

“Speaking of Studio 54,” says Rachael, “I saw a guy out there who looks exactly like Mick Jagger.”

“Nobody looks like Mick Jagger,” I say.

“That’s because it *was* Mick Jagger,” says Sabrina.

As I bend down to snort, I can’t help but notice Sabrina’s remarkable breasts about to spill out of her tight black cocktail dress. She’s just returned from a trip to Brazil and is, as usual, tanned, rested, and gorgeous. I pinch my nostrils and wrench my gaze from Sabrina, staring instead at the ceiling and chiding myself for such thoughts on my wedding day. Sabrina drops the baggie into her tiny, black, sequined evening bag.

“Thank you so much, honey,” says Rachael to Sabrina, giving her an air kiss. “I’m not used to having everything so—handled, I suppose is the right word—for me. Reminds me of when we used to run the clubs. The good old days.”

“This is the one day you’re not allowed to worry about a thing,” says Sabrina. “Besides, you could argue that *these* are the good old days.

“Good point,” says Rachel, sniffing hard.

Between the adrenaline buzz from the wedding ceremony and now the coke, Rachael is as stoked as a pot bellied stove on a February night in Vermont. She’s even had a couple of cocktails, very unusual for a woman who prefers a rush, not a blur, from her mind-altering substances.

“That really was a beautiful ceremony,” Sabrina says. “You looked stunning, both of you.”

Rachael is wearing her empire-waist, black-and-white vintage baby doll dress and I’m still wearing the Boss suit with the gold and black Channel vest I borrowed from Ramon.

“Thanks, but I wonder what your staff thought of us: Nick’s fag-hag mom, his friend Gary and ten queens,” Rachael says.

“They must have *loved* the way everyone brought their cocktails in with them to the ceremony,” I say.

“And the way Christian took over from the pianist and started playing show tunes,” Rachael says.

“And the way everyone kept running to the bathroom every five minutes,” Sabrina says.

“And the way they carried the bride over their heads in that chair down the corridor and through the lobby,” I say.

“Lord, I hope you still have a job,” says Rachael.

“Believe me,” says Sabrina, “I’ve brought that place enough business in the last few months to justify at least one unconventional wedding. And speaking of unconventional, Nick,

your mother is something. I thought only Rachael could attract that much attention from gay men.”

“Really,” says Rachael, “she was working the room like Liza Minnelli. I think you really did marry your mother.”

“There are a few key differences.” I lean over and kiss her cheek. “My mother is sound asleep back at the hotel and you are here snorting cocaine in a bathroom stall on your wedding night.”

“It sounds so romantic when *you* say it.” Rachael kisses me on the lips, coating them with her bright red lipstick. I smack my lips and wince at the waxy sweet taste. “Wait darling, we can’t let you out of here looking like that like that.” She tears off a couple of squares of toilet paper and begins to wipe my lips with them. “My beautiful husband wears Jungle Red,” she says as she dabs, “Just like Rosslyn Russell in *The Women*. I’m so proud I could just scream.”

“Please don’t,” I say. I hear a group of women leave the bathroom. “Ladies,” I take the toilet paper from Rachael and toss it in the toilet, “shall we?”

We check each other’s noses for residue and traipse out single file into the club.

“I’ll find you,” says Sabrina, and she heads across the dance floor towards the bar.

“Let’s find Randall,” says Rachael, pointing off in the opposite direction.

I agree—reluctantly. Randall is short, smart and supremely confident. Unlike most over gay men who are shearing, plucking and waxing themselves like Vogue models, Randall sports thick, mutton chop sideburns. The chef and owner of a popular Dupont Circle restaurant and lounge, he’s not only Rachael’s oldest friend, but also her first sex partner—this despite the fact that his distinct preference for men was always a poorly-kept secret. When Randall was sixteen, his wealthy, orthodox Jewish parents discovered his proclivity, kicked him out of the house and disowned him.

Rachael took Randall’s misfortune as an opportunity to escape her own dysfunctional

household, dominated by a raging father who spared his four daughters neither the wrath nor the rod. Rachael and Randall rented an apartment and lived together for a while until she had gone away to school. They'd run the bars and, considering their tender age, lived a fast life. There I'd been at sixteen, thinking I was an outlaw, stealing cigars from the drug store and smoking them in the stairwell of our apartment building while Rachael and Randall were out partying like rock stars.

Randall's resistance to me wasn't overt—quite. The rest of Rachael's friends (including Randall's genteel, tawny-haired boyfriend, Wes, who supplemented his income as an interior designer by dealing) were warm and welcoming. Randall was unfailingly polite, but nothing more. Though his rebukes chilled rather than seared, they stung none the less. My attempts at humor were received with a patronizing chuckle—my attempts to engage, an emotional stiff arm. When I mentioned Randall's attitude towards me to Rachael, she told me not to take it personally. Randall served up sarcasm as readily as the entrees at his restaurant. Give it some time, she said. He'd come around.

While we've been powdering our noses, someone, probably Wes, has rearranged the club's plush, red leather lounge furniture into a tasteful grouping, complete with side tables and votive candles. He and Randall sit on one of the sofas, sipping cocktails, looking relaxed and at home. "Wes," Rachael yells above the music, "love what you've done with the place."

Wes nods, acknowledging the compliment. "The way they had it made no sense, no sense at all," he says in his soft drawl. He brushes a strand of his blonde hair from his eyes.

Randall stands and removes his hound's-tooth patterned Prada jacket and carefully folds it over one of the armchairs. "We were going to tell the management that we didn't like the *feng shui*, but we were afraid they might think we were criticizing one of their specialty drinks."

"Or the Asian girl working the coat check room," says Wes.

I flop down on the far end of Randall's sofa and say, "Where the hell *is* everyone?"

“Really,” says Rachael who’s standing in front of me, nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot, like she’s waiting for someone to fire the starting pistol. “You’ve created the perfect little nest here and everyone’s flown your coop.”

“They’ve formed small exploratory parties in search of other gay men,” says Randall. “If they haven’t returned in another fifteen minutes, we’re supposed to light off a flare to guide them back.”

“Jesus,” I say glancing around, “I just hope their quest for nookie doesn’t get them in trouble.”

“He said ‘nookie,’” Wes says to Rachael. “I haven’t heard that word since high school. Doesn’t that mean pussy?”

“You’ll really have to ask him,” says Rachael.

“Yes,” I say, “I suppose it does, technically, mean pussy. But I was using it in a broader sense of the term.”

“If nookie means pussy,” says Randall, “then, even in the *broadest* sense, I haven’t even seen any nookie since I was sixteen.”

“Seventeen,” says Rachael. “I was there, remember?”

“I’d prefer not to.” Randall sighs. “Anyway, I wouldn’t worry about anyone,” he says pointing to the dance floor, “the nookie has been coming to them all night.”

Several feet away from us, Ramon, who, earlier in our suite had shown us how to construct a hash pipe from a beer can, is engaged in some very dirty dancing with two thirty-something girls in miniskirts. One of them is unbuttoning Ramon’s dress shirt from behind and sliding her hands up and down his chest. The other has his tie wrapped around her neck. Ramon is working her from behind as if he’s riding a pony.

“Well,” says Rachael, “If I didn’t know better—“

“I’d say there’s a Latin queen reliving his youth,” says Randall.

“His youth—not mine,” I say, not taking my eyes off the girls.

Sabrina appears, carrying a bottle of champagne, followed by a bartender with two more bottles and several glasses. As she passes Ramon, she pauses a moment, shows Ramon the champagne and motions over towards where we're sitting. The girls throw Sabrina a couple of obvious and dirty looks. The bartender sets the champagne and glasses on the coffee table in front of me.

"Sabrina!" says Rachael. "Dom Perignon? That's crazy."

"Oh shut up," says Sabrina. She tips the waiter. "Just help me find everyone so we can have a toast while it's still cold."

"Okay," says Rachael, "It's time to round up the ducklings. Come on." She grabs Sabrina's arm. "Reconnaissance mission." Rachael turns to me and says, "My darling, don't let anyone leave."

I give her a military salute and they disappear into the crowd. I wonder who's going to give the toast. The notion of selecting a best man had seemed too traditional and, with so many men to choose from, too difficult. Just then, my friend Gary appears. His shirt is sweat soaked, one tail tucked in, the other flapping down. He half runs, half staggers forward and lands next to me on the sofa with a thud. Gary is short, sharp, Jewish, and perpetually rumped. I've known him since we were fourteen years old.

"What the hell have you been doing?" I say.

"Trying to keep up with your friends," says Gary, still out of breath. He leans forward, grabs several cocktail napkins from a stack next to the champagne, and wipes his forehead.

Gary spins one of the champagne bottles to examine the label. "Dom. Nice." He leans back. "Sure do know how to throw a party, my friend. Cocktails and cocaine at the Plaza and now this. Gay dudes showering me with women."

"Since when do you need help?" When we were younger, Gary was trim and athletic, but he's anchored to a desk now, an ad exec in Minneapolis, and starting to get a bit paunchy and

lose his hair. Though he's not conventionally handsome, Gary is confident, smart and funny. I've never know him to have trouble with women.

"Trust me, man, this is different. I'm over there dancing with Christian and the one that looks like General Custer."

"Eric."

"Right, when these hot girls—I mean the kind who usually look right *through* me—circle us like sharks. Christian starts dancing with the tall one and then he passes her off to me. Before I know it, I'm doing the humpty-hump." Gary launches himself off the sofa, grinding his hips and thrusting his pelvis. "Should have seen her, man. She's fantastic looking, grabbing my ass, telling me how cute I am, how she just loves gay men."

A couple dancing a few feet away from us notice Gary's solo bump and grind. I pat the sofa. "I get the picture, Gary." Gary looks disappointed, but he breaks off and drops back down.

"So, where is she?" I say.

"Looking for some other gay man to fondle." He tosses the sweaty cocktail napkins back onto the table.

"Broke the news that you were straight, huh?"

Gary presses himself back into the sofa. "What, and kill the magic? Besides, I never got that far. Your wife and Sabrina told us to come back for the toast." It's the first time anyone has referred to Rachael as my wife. That'll take some getting used to. "This chick took one look at them and disappeared like the wicked witch in a rainstorm. One second I have my face buried in her tits, next second I'm grasping for air."

"Gasping for air is more like it. So, you're having fun?"

"Hell yes. Fantastic time. Everyone's been great, Nick—really."

I'm relieved. Gary is worldly, but I was worried about how he'd react to the rest of the entourage.

He looks over at me. "And so?"

“And so, what?”

“How does it feel?”

“You mean getting married?”

“No, jerk-off, I mean wearing a Hugo Boss suit.”

It’s a reasonable question to ask someone on their wedding day, but I’m thrown by it. I’ve known Gary more than half my life and we’ve never had this kind of grown-up conversation. I suppose that’s a guy thing—a straight guy thing.

“Hey,” I say, “remember the time in Junior High you and I double dated with those two girls Sasha and, and—“

“Inez.”

“Right. And we were making out with them in Sasha’s basement and her parents come home, so we sneak out the back door.”

“Then we realize we’ve missed the last bus to get home, and we end up sleeping in her back yard. Yeah. So?”

“Remember how we felt the next day?” I ask.

“Dude, are you telling me that on your wedding day you feel like you spent the night sleeping crammed between a bush and a chain link fence? If so, I hate to break it to you, but a lot of people say it’s all downhill from here.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m excited as hell. All I’m saying is now that it’s real, it’s a little scary too.”

“Hey, if you weren’t a little scared, I’d worry. Besides, I’m all for real, as long as it’s real good. Mind if I ask you something before I get back to partying my ass off?”

“Go right ahead, Lieutenant Colombo. I have nothing to hide.”

“That’s what they all say.” Gary looks around to make sure no one can hear him. “Do you guys have *any* straight friends?”

“Well, sure. I mean there’s you and Sabrina and, um, well, did I mention you and—Sabrina?”

“So what’s that about? Don’t get me wrong, they’re all great, but they’re all—”

“Gay,” I say. Gary drops his chin, waiting for me to respond.

No one has come out and asked me. On this subject, I am not ambivalent.

“These guys have treated me like brothers from day one. Best friends anyone could hope for.”

He throws up his hands. “No argument here. They almost got me laid.”

“Enough about me,” I say. “I’ve got a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“So, how do I seem to you?”

Gary laughs. “Good. You seem happy.”

“And what do you think of Rachael?”

“She’s great. Beautiful. Smart.” He pauses a second.

“And?”

Gary smiles but doesn’t say anything.

“Motherfucker, if you had any misgivings, you might have raised them before I got married.” I’m smiling, but there’s a nervous edge to my voice which surprises me.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Calm down. She’s fantastic. I think you’re lucky to have her. But you’re in for a pretty wild ride. She’s mighty powerful, man. Remember, just like the real Custer, sometimes you got to take a stand.”

“Nice analogy. I have my ways of handling her. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. Besides, it’s you that needs to believe that, not me.”

Rachael, Sabrina, Eric, and Christian come off the dance floor. “Now, that *is* enough about you,” says Gary. “Do you think anyone might be so kind as to provide me with more cocaine?”

“Cocaine, huh? I thought you were a *ganja* man. Don’t you still own a bong?”

“Yes, and I’ll go right back to my beloved weed as soon as I get home, but at the moment, I’m loving the nose candy.”

“I could point you to about six people.” I look around. “But the most convenient one would be Sabrina.”

“Did I just hear you say Sabrina is convenient?”

“Don’t you have a perfectly lovely girlfriend at home?”

“Allow me my fantasy. Last time I saw someone that hot, a magazine was in my left hand and my johnson was in my right.”

“Hate to break it to you, but her taste runs to tall, wealthy men who treat her like shit.”

“Well, I’m short, poor and nice. Sounds like a mismatch made in heaven.”

Rachael, looking pleased with herself, returns with Ramon, her arm hooked in his.

Gary lunges towards Sabrina. I make a half-hearted attempt to grab him and miss. The hell with it. Gary’s never lacked *chutzpah* and it’s served him well. Besides, Sabrina can take care of herself.

Christian and Eric sit down on either side of me. They look distinctly un-Au Bar— more East Village than Midtown. They’re neither. In fact, they live not two blocks away from us in Washington. Christian is tall, with wide handsome features and a ready smile. The owner of a chain of cosmetic stores, he’s at peace with himself and the world, but locked in constant and mortal combat with his hair. He bounces from one outrageous hairdo to the next, a practice which drives his lover Eric, a soft-spoken veterinarian with a strong, swashbuckling resemblance to a leading man, to distraction.

Christian gives a big sigh and pushes this thick, black tangle of hair to one side of his face. “Howyadoinnicky,” he says. When he’s high, Christian speaks in a rush and tends to run words and thoughts together.

I look them over. “Question is, how are *you* two doing?”

Christian looks down his shirt at his chest. “Those bitches. Almost pulled off my shirt, my nipple ring, *and* my hair. Forgot how dangerous women can be.”

“About that hair,” I say. “What the hell? Is that a wig?”

“No,” says Eric, slow and measured, as always. “A wig would be too conventional. What Christian has graced us with for this auspicious occasion is referred to as a fall.”

“A fall,” I say. “Fantastic. My mom wore one of those in the sixties.”

“I mean this in the nicest possible way,” says Christian, “but as fabulous as you’re mom is, she never looked this fierce in a fall. Speaking of fierce falls, should have seen this one almost fall on his ass dancing with those girls.” Christian jumps up and starts doing the limbo. “Eric looked like he was dancing with a bag of wet garbage. Did I mention I can still get my knees behind my ears?”

Eric rolls his eyes. “One more in a series of proud moments.”

Christian straightens and spins to face Eric. “Don’t you start with me. Nicky, did you know that Eric is so old he was actually *at* the battle of Little Big Horn. Indians gave him a name: He Who Sits on Fists. And it stuck.”

“The name,” I say, “or the fist?”

Before Christian can answer, Eric says, “I thought Little Big Horn was your Indian name.”

Oh-oh. When Christian is jazzed, the best strategy is to relinquish the limelight, not challenge him for it.

Christian pauses a moment for dramatic effect. “Ohhhh, well, look now, Eric made a funny. Nicky, the love of my life and world-renown veterinarian Eric Rupowski just made a funny. I know the effort that took.” Christian reaches past me and pats Eric on the head. “You rest, darling. Between dancing with those women and now making a joke? My God! I need you fresh, my love, for later. Remember, you promised to express my anal glands.”

Eric looks at me and shakes his head forlornly. This is why we call him Saint Eric, for putting up with Christian when he's like this, which is most of the time.

Christian sits on my lap and puts his arm around my neck. I groan.

"Shut up," he says, "I'm a perfect size eight off the rack. And, don't you dare pretend to be embarrassed, Nicky. I know you want it so bad you can almost taste it."

I grunt and shift my weight under him. "Oh, I can almost taste it, but I think it's that cheese ring I had earlier."

"Bitch." He leans closer. "How's my favorite gay man holding up?"

I rest my head on his shoulder. "I'm touched. You've made me an honorable gay man?"

"Let's get some things straight. First, I'll do all the touching around here. Second, there are no honorable gay men. And third, I was referring to Rachael."

"She's okay, I think. We've hardly had a chance to talk to each other all night."

Eric leans over. "Just keep it that way and you've got a chance at a successful marriage."

Christian bellows into my ear, "Two jokes in one night!" I wince and lean away.

He puts his arm on my shoulder. "So, Nicky, how are *you* doing on this day of days?"

"Everyone keeps asking me how I'm doing. I guess I should've come up with a good answer by now."

"No need to rush into anything. You've got the rest of your life to think about it."

"Honestly, all my life," I say, "I've wanted this. A family, where everyone looks out for one other. A part of a whole."

"What a lovely thing to say," says Eric. He kisses my cheek.

"I'm going to use enormous restraint and let that 'part of a hole' comment go," says Christian. "Just answer me this: Does any of this mean you're going to fuck us tonight?"

"Oh, shut up," says Eric. "Pay no attention to the clown in the man suit."

Christian waves Eric off. "Listen, I can be as sentimental as the next guy—unless the next guy is Eric. Just know that we love you and that if there's anything you need—" Christian's

voice breaks. Then he catches himself. “Just come to my room later and we’ll discuss it.”

Christian squeezes my shoulder, kisses me on the forehead and springs up off the sofa. “Twenty minutes without a cocktail or a bump!” he yells to no one in particular. “This cannot be.”

I reach over and grab his pant leg. “I think we’re doing a toast soon, so if you don’t want to risk the wrath of Rachael—“

“I’ll be right back, I promise. I just have to get the alcohol content in my blood up to a safe level.” He skips away.

Rachael watches Christian leave, walks over, sits down next to me and puts my hand on her knee. “Where is he off to?” She motions in Christian’s direction.

“He’ll be right back. So, did Gary make his wishes clear to Sabrina?”

“Quite.”

“He has visions of her dancing in his head.”

“Who doesn’t? Do you think everyone is having a good time?” She looks worried.

“Relax. It’s all good.”

“It is pretty fabulous, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is. So, wife, I’ll ask you a variation on the question everyone’s been asking me: are *you* having a good time?” I put my hand over hers and softly squeeze her knee.

“Ahhh,” she lets out a big breath and lifts my hand off her knee. “You know how ticklish I am there. Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Good.” I kiss her on the cheek. “You might ease up some on the coke. You don’t have to do a bump every time someone offers you one.”

She smiles. “You knew my motto, darling, when you married me.” She holds a finger up. “More is more.” She rests her head on my shoulder. “Besides, I did turn down a bump earlier.”

“Good for you,” I say, surprised.

“It was 1986 and I had a sinus infection. Now, about this toast.”

“I was wondering about that myself. Who shall we ask to give it?”

“I asked Randall. Is that all right?”

I think of Gary’s warning about Custer. “Considering you already asked him, it’ll have to be.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s just with the wedding and everything, I’m kind of a mess.” Rachael grabs a cocktail napkin and dabs her eyes. “I’ve known him so long, you know, since we were in high school running around the bars like idiots. I was there when he learned he was positive.” She frowns and looks hurt. “I’m so sorry, Nicky, I should have asked you.”

I soften. This is the Plaza, after all, not Little Big Horn. I kiss her. “It doesn’t matter. I guess Randall’s the perfect one to do it.”

“We were roommates.”

“Honey, you don’t need to explain.” I squeeze her against me.

“He’s been there for me, Nicky.” She’s on the verge of sobbing.

“You’re preaching to the choir. He’s your best friend. That’s all you have to say.”

Rachael bends her head down and I watch a single tear drop fall. “You’re so good. Sometimes, I’m sure I don’t deserve you.” I wrap one arm around her shoulder and kiss her on the top of her head. I look past her to everyone, looking mushy, like they’re watching a baby in a cradle.

“So,” I say, “what did you say to Ramon’s girls to get rid of them so fast?”

Rachael snickers. “I told them they were dancing with the Latin Liberace and that they had a better chance of fucking *me*. Seemed to work.” She straightens, snuffles, looks over at Randall and nods. “How about that toast?”

Sabrina and Eric uncork the Dom and fill all the champagne flutes on the coffee table. Christian comes back from the bar with a Cape Cod in his right hand, takes a look at the champagne and downs it in one gulp. Ramon hands around the champagne glasses.

“So,” says Rachael holding the flute by its stem, “I suppose I should apologize for interrupting your little courtship dance.”

With his slicked back hair and dark eyes, Ramon could easily pass as a matador or a flamenco dancer. “Don’t be *essilly*,” he says. Ramon was born in Spain but his English is perfect. Only when he drinks does he have a slight hint of an accent. “I should thank you for *essaving* me from having to make awkward excuses to those girls for dancing like that without a hard on.”

“Anytime,” says Rachael. “I hate to see one of my ducklings fall and break their little beak.”

“Madame,” says Ramon with mock formality, “I appreciate the concern but I can assure you, my beak is not little.”

“We can all see that,” says Rachael. “Where in the world did you get pants that fit like that?”

“Banana Republic.”

“Aha,” she says. “That explains the banana. Very nice. By the way, do they make them for men?”

Ramon starts to say something, but Randall stands up and holds his champagne flute at arm’s length. “All you queens—and Nick and Gary. Gather around.”

We form a semicircle. Wes directs me and Rachael to stand in the center. I put my arm around Rachael’s waist.

Randall waits until he has everyone’s attention and begins. “I’ve been thinking all night about how to describe this event in my diary. I’ve decided that the word ‘wedding’ is too banal and doesn’t do it justice, now does it?” Everyone shakes their head, agreeing. “Other words describe it more accurately: cotillion, bachanal, coronation.”

“Miracle,” yells Christian and everyone laughs.

Randall smiles. “Yes, but not as miraculous as it would be for you to let me finish this toast without interrupting.”

Christian holds up his flute, bows slightly and says “You may continue.”

“As I was saying,” says Randall, “those words rang more true, but still felt inadequate. So, I’ve decided that there are certain events for which there simply aren’t words. Just as there are certain people who defy description.” Randall looks at Rachael. “Fifteen year ago, I met a girl who worked with me at a crummy little clothing store in Wheaton, Maryland which is, for those of you who are lucky enough never to have experienced it, the land of narrow horizons and low expectations. Rachael and I found a bond in the misery of being forced to grow up in such a place. From the day I met her, I knew that Rachael would never give in to Wheaton, that its gas stations and strip malls and provincial attitudes would never trap her. Every day, she’d come in with the latest issue of *Vogue* or the *Times* and we’d talk about a glittering world where people accomplished things and lived important, meaningful lives. I’ve never doubted Rachael’s ability to do whatever she sets her mind to, and the fact that we’re here tonight makes my point as well as it can be made.”

He clears his throat. “To Nick, whom I’ve know for a much shorter time, I can only say: you’ve got your hands full. But, in you I think Rachael’s found what we’re all looking for in a man: kindness, compassion, really broad shoulders and good hair.” Everyone laughs. “My hope is that Nick will be, as I am, constantly amazed at Rachael’s loyalty, her intellect, her passion and her ability to accessorize. Thank you, Rachael, for your love and friendship, and most of all, thank you for giving me an excuse to wear my new Prada suit.” Rachael is crying and laughing. I squeeze her closer to me. “So,” says Randall, raising his glass high above his head. “To this lovely couple and may their love be like this toast—endless.”

Everyone downs their champagne and lets out a big cheer. Rachael walks over to Randall, whispers something in his ear and they hug. One by one, people come over to congratulate me. For the first time ever, Gary hugs me. Suddenly, I feel exhausted, my body

heavy, as if someone replaced my blood with lead pellets. I walk over to the sofa and fall back into it, resting the back of my head between my intertwined fingers. I take a deep breath and allow myself to relax. It has been quite a day.

Randall, who's talking to Ramon and Wes, glances over, excuses himself, and sits down next to me.

"You okay?" he says, putting his arm around me.

"Yeah, just taking it all in," I say. "That was a great toast. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I meant all of it. There's just one thing I want to say to you."

Finally, the thaw I've been waiting for.

"What's that?"

"You make her happy."

"Thanks. That's good to hear."

He squeezes my shoulder. "It takes a lot to make her happy. It'll take a lot more to keep her that way."

"Meaning what?"

Randall sighs. "Sometimes, a customer will come into my restaurant and I can tell right away they think they're slumming. Don't ask me how I know, but I can sniff it out. Like they've left New York society for some big government appointment and they've allowed their secretary choose where she wants to go for her birthday and here they are. Such good sports. I used to pay special attention to those types. You know, give them the best server, make sure I stopped by the table to say hello. And then I realized that no matter what I did, no matter how good the food was, it would never be quite good enough."

"So, you're saying that Rachael is slumming in my restaurant?"

"I'm saying you're way out of your league."

I'm used to Randall's sarcasm, so I laugh. "That's a given. Now tell me something I don't know."

He doesn't smile. Randall pats my shoulder, draws back his arm, stands and walks off, leaving me alone on the sofa, my grin fading to something else.

Bon Voyage

Randall's comment at the wedding reception had rocked me—puzzled me, too. Was it simply a put down? A warning? Both? More importantly, was he right about me being out of my league? I thought about telling Rachael, but decided against it. The last thing I wanted to be was the kid who runs in from recess to tell on the bully. Besides, Rachael's reaction would almost certainly be to laugh it off.

It was high time I learned not to crumble under pressure, a tendency that had been my undoing in practically every job I'd ever had. For once, I would react to criticism not by buying in, but by overcoming. This time, I'd tap into a little righteous indignation. Who was Randall to pronounce me inferior? Randall, whose boyfriend was a drug dealer and who had earned his nickname, Bitter Spice.

Somehow, somehow, I would show Randall that I was good enough. In the process, maybe I'd prove it to myself. As the wedding reception wound down and people began to head for home the next day, these thoughts occupied my mind.

Perhaps in response to Randall, I found myself gravitating to Christian, whose constant good humor and affirmative attitude I could count on to buck me up. Christian was the most can-do person I'd ever met, not to mention the most optimistic. And he liked me in a sort of brotherly way in which I, having no brother, had never experienced before. Christian wasn't satisfied with the success of his cosmetics business. He had to have his hand in at least two or three ventures at the same time. The latest was a travel agency specializing in cruises. It was Christian who came up with the idea of booking all of us on the cruise, the perfect honeymoon.

The decision to go took a bit of rationalizing. Soon enough, Rachael would give her notice at work so that both of us could devote all our energy to getting Big Bark off the ground.

Even assuming the best, money and free time were going to be in short supply for quite a while.

Why not treat ourselves? Next thing we knew, we were blowing kisses from the lido deck.

Overboard

The Able Seamen Caribbean cruise is comprised of nearly 2600 gay men, a few lesbians and one hetero couple—me and Rachael—who stand with Christian, Eric, Wes and Randall in their stateroom, gathered around the big-screen TV listening to the daily recap of activities and upcoming events brought to us by the ship’s cruise director, Marina Moore—Miss Marina as she refers to herself—who, with her heavy jaw, big gold hoop earrings, and bleach-blond hair, looks suspiciously like a drag queen.

“Do you think this little ensemble is something she’s reserved for this cruise?” asks Wes.

“For her sake, let’s hope so,” says Christian.

“If you’re going to unveil a look that combines Arnold Schwarzenegger and Carol Channing, by all means do it here,” I say.

“I wish she’d get to the point,” Rachael says, talking directly to the TV.

The ever-cheerful Miss Marina has just announced the winners of today’s drag bingo contest, news that would not normally hold our attention. Tonight, however, we’re listening for confirmation of a certain rumor that has been careening around the ship like a one-winged seagull.

“And now Miss Marina needs to discuss the remarkable events that occurred earlier today.”

“Finally,” says Randall.

“Case closed,” I say. “Only drag queens and royalty refer to themselves in the third person.”

“That sure ain’t royalty,” says Christian.

“*Shhhhh*,” says Rachael.

Miss Marina clears her throat, puts on a pair of black cat-eye reading glasses and looks down, reading a prepared statement. “As many of you have already heard, the ship was visited today by several representatives of the Drug Enforcement Agency. On behalf of Scandinavian Cruise Lines and your Able Seamen organizers, I want to assure you that we were as surprised as you were by this unprecedented inspection.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” says Randall.

“I’m sorry to report that the random search of several cabins resulted in the seizure of certain illegal substances and the detention of some passengers. We are very sorry for this inconvenience.”

“Getting busted on vacation is rather inconvenient.” says Wes.

“But we must emphasize that neither Norwegian Cruise Lines nor Able Seamen condones the possession or use of any illegal substances on board the ship.”

“Really?” says Rachael. “Not even at the all-night dance parties you keep promoting?”

“Poor thing,” says Wes. “She looks like one of those hostages who claim everything is going just hunky-dory, when you know damn well they’re getting beaten with bamboo poles and eating rats for breakfast.”

Miss Marina removes her glasses, blinks, and looks directly into the camera. “We can tell you that the local DEA authorities have contacted their counterparts in Barbados and that it’s very possible we will be paid another visit tomorrow. So, if any of you have anything in your cabins you wouldn’t like a policeman to find, Miss Marina strongly suggests you dispose of it before we dock tomorrow morning at seven. Have a lovely evening, everyone. And don’t forget about tonight’s fabulous white party on the main deck, with our special guest deejay, Julian Marsh.”

Randall turns off the TV. “Well, there you are.”

Wes says, “You know, if Able Seamen wants there to be another Caribbean cruise, they’d better think about planting a mole at the DEA. These boys are *not* going to be spending their hard earned money just to spend a week watching their backs.”

“Not to mention their backpacks,” Randall says. We direct our attention to Wes’ off-white canvas bag set on the sofa.

“How about we hide it somewhere on the ship?” Eric asks.

“And risk someone walking off with more than \$40,000 of product?” says Wes. “I don’t think so.”

Someone knocks on the cabin door. I’m closest, so I walk over and open it. It’s Ramon. He’s already dressed for the party: shirtless, wearing long, silky-white workout pants and white sandals. In his right hand, he holds a commercial-sized tin of black pepper.

“Guess you’ve all heard by now,” he says.

Randall says, “Indeed.”

“Isn’t it an outrage?” He enters the cabin and closes the door. “The whole ship’s in a frenzy. There are people out there hiding drugs in life rafts, in seat cushions, air conditioning ducts—everywhere. It’s quite a display of ingenuity, actually.”

“Ramon?” Rachael says.

“Yes?”

“Why are you walking around the ship carrying a pound of ground black pepper?”

Ramon looks down at the tin as though he’s seeing it for the first time. “Oh, this—well—this is the main reason I came.”

Ramon is Harvard educated and must be very good at what he does, but there are times I wonder how he gets through the day. He’d returned from shopping in San Juan late this afternoon and gone straight to his room and taken a disco nap. If it hadn’t been for Rachael calling to check on him, he’d probably still be sleeping, blissfully unaware. God looks out for drunks, drug dealers, and absent-minded psychiatrists.

Ramon says, "I borrowed it from the kitchen. It's supposed to throw off the dogs. A light dusting on the carpet and it overwhelms their noses." He sprinkles a little on the floor to demonstrate. "Crude, but effective."

"I'm game," says Wes. "But I still need to figure out how to hide the powders and then there's the issue of what to do with a couple of hundred hits of X."

"Well, you can try my solution." Ramon pulls a Swiss army knife from the pocket of his pants. "I cut a small slit in my mattress and dropped it in. The dogs can't smell the tablets, so you don't have to worry about that. And they're not going to go around ripping up mattresses without a reason."

Thirty minutes later, Wes and Randall's stateroom is a hive. Christian and Eric have gone back to their room to hide their stash. The rest of us have broken up into small work details and are well on the way to setting up an impenetrable, DEA-proof barrier around his cache. Randall and Wes have commandeered the ship's stationary from our cabins and are implementing Wes' idea of burying baggies of crystal and K in pepper-filled envelopes, sealing them, and stashing them behind the light fixtures which, using Ramon's Swiss Army knife, they've unscrewed from the bathroom wall.

Rachael has the tin of pepper and is working her way across the room, spreading a fine layer across the floor. Ramon and I have hauled the bed mattress over to the sofa where we are sitting with it between us, working several zip-lock bags full of ecstasy through a small cut he's made in its side.

"That's a lovely incision you've made there, doctor," I say, holding the two sides of the fabric open so he can wedge in another bag.

"Got to admit, I'm pretty rusty. I haven't had to do anything like this since anatomy class in medical school."

Rachael walks by, wafting black pepper.

"Hey, lady. Go easy on that stuff. We want to throw the dog off, not season it."

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m making this up as I go along,” she says. “This situation doesn’t come up too often at work.”

“Now, whatever you do,” says Randall to Wes, “don’t lose those screws. All we need is to have the damn lights fall off the wall with the cops in our room.”

“Okay, darling,” says Wes, “just calm down and hand me another envelope.”

“You know,” says Randall, “I don’t know why we’re going to all this trouble. We might as well just flush it or throw it overboard. Do you think anyone’s is actually going to take a chance on buying anything with the goddamn DEA sniffing around?”

“I certainly hope you are wrong about that,” says Wes. “If we don’t sell most of it, I’m going to have some serious cash flow issues with some people who don’t take kindly to cash flow issues.”

“That’s wonderful news, Wes. Just wonderful,” says Randall.

“Now boys,” says Rachael, “let’s not get testy.”

“Testy? Why get testy?” says Randall. “We come on a lovely Caribbean cruise only to risk getting arrested on felony drug charges, and now we can look forward to getting our knees broken by some *goombah* loan sharks when we get home.”

“They are not *goombahs*,” says Wes.

“Oh, excuse me,” says Randall, “I didn’t mean to insult them. You’ll have to tell me how to address them properly when they come to beat us to death with hammers.”

I have to admit, I find it tremendously satisfying to see Randall so irked. I glance over at Christian and he gives me a wink. I’d confided to Christian about Randall’s comments to me at the wedding reception. His response had been just what I wanted it to be. “Don’t you pay the slightest attention to Bitter Spice. I saw him in the bathroom of the Eagle one time with his pants around his ankles, begging—not asking, mind you, but *begging*—some leather daddy for some head. Now *that’s* being out of your league.”

“I’m done,” says Ramon, shoving in the last bag.

“Isn’t this going to be a bit lumpy?” Rachael presses her hand on various parts of the mattress.

“Not once I’m done with it,” says Ramon. “Help me, Nick.” Ramon and I get on either ends of the mattress and give it a few shakes. “There,” he says. “Perfect.”

Fifteen minutes later and we’re done. Using Rachael’s travel sewing kit, Ramon has expertly sutured up the mattress, we’ve made the bed and Wes and Randall have replaced the light fixtures in the bathroom. We all stand in the parlor, feeling proud of ourselves.

“Nicely done,” says Ramon, looking around.

“Bring on the DEA,” I say.

“Let’s not press our luck,” says Randall.

Wes says, “Like my auntie Belle used to say, ‘Our chores are done, now it’s time for fun.’”

Rachael looks at Wes and shakes her head. “You had an auntie Belle? Where did you grow up? Tara?”

Someone knocks at the door. Randall walks over and opens it. It’s the tall, blonde purser who’s dressed in full nautical whites, complete with epaulets. The word is out on him. He’s been up every night so far, dancing and showing a little too much interest, especially for a straight married guy. Makes me wonder what they say about me.

Christian puts his arm on the purser’s shoulder and draws him into the room, “Looky who’s here.”

“Well,” says Randall, looking back at us knowingly, “ready to white party with the boys? *Again.*”

The purser smiles. “Sure am. Are you all headed up?”

“Sure are,” says Randall, brightly.

“That’s great,” he says. “Listen, I thought you all should know. I found out that we’re off the hook.”

“Off the hook?” says Randall.

“With the authorities. There’s some technicality, something about crossing back out into international waters. Anyway, I heard it directly from the captain a couple of hours ago, so it must be true.”

No one speaks.

“Well, like I said, I just thought you should know before you went to, you know, a bunch of trouble,” he says. He shifts his head a little, looking around the room. “Do I smell pepper?”

“You heard a couple of hours ago,” says Rachael.

“Sure did,” says the purser.

“Would have been nice—“

“Thank you very much,” says Wes. “We really do appreciate it.”

“Oh, you’re very welcome,” says the purser. “So I’ll see you all at the party?”

“We’ll be right up,” says Wes.

“Great. See you there,” he says.

Randall closes the door behind him.

“Does anyone else get the impression that boy was fishing for some unauthorized illegal substances,” says Wes.

“Among other things,” says Christian.

“That closeted dimwit,” says Rachael. “Just for that, you and Wes should get him good and high and tag team him. I’ll take some pictures and we can have a little slide show at the Captain’s dinner. Let Miss Marina talk about *that* tomorrow.”

“Remind me never to cross you,” says Eric.

“I suppose we should be thankful he told us at all,” says Wes.

“Come on,” says Rachael, “He knows what’s going on here. He finds out this afternoon that we’re not going to get searched and he waits until now to tell you? What was he doing, polishing his buttons?”

“Now what?” I say. “Pull everything out?”

“Why bother,” says Wes. “I doubt most people have heard the news.”

“Besides,” says Rachael, “consider the source. For all we know, he’s a NARC.”

“He doesn’t strike me as cagy enough to operate an undercover operation,” I say.

“Don’t be so trusting, Nick,” Rachael says. “You just never know.”

“And you always do,” I say.

“Hey, that’s enough, you two,” says Randall. “You just got married, remember? You’ve got the rest of your lives to get on each other’s nerves. Here’s an idea. Let’s all go to the party and actually have some fun. Or perhaps you’d all like to stay down here and snort some more black pepper.”

The last thing I feel like doing is fishing all those bags of ecstasy out of that damn mattress. “Having fun sounds like a plan to me,” I say.

There is another knock at the door.

“Now what?” says Randall.

Randall opens it and there, lined up down the hallway, are half a dozen guys dressed in white shorts and tank tops.

“Hi,” says the first in line, a too-tanned muscle boy with huge arms covered head to toe in silver body sparkle. “We heard the news and came by to say hello. I brought some people.”

“Wes looks past the boy to the others in the hall, throws us a look over his shoulder, and says, “Well *hello*. Please come in and visit for a while.”

Rachael and I exchange glances. “Nick and I are going to change for the party,” she says. “We’ll see you there.” We squeeze past the queue and head down the hall, passing more boys streaming past us towards Wes and Randall’s cabin.

From behind us, I hear Wes say, “I’ll pour some cocktails and in the meantime, I just *know* some of you gorgeous men are handy with a screwdriver.”

“I guess Wes’ distribution and cash flow problems are solved,” says Rachael.

“More importantly,” I say, “so are his Randall problems.”

Rachael looks at me. “Do I behave like Randall?” We reach the elevator and I press the down button. “Do I? Do I fly off the handle and get mean like that?” I don’t know what to say. “I do, don’t I? Well if I do act that way to you, I’m giving you permission to bitch slap me. Right here, right now.”

I smile and kiss Rachael on the cheek. “A bitch slap’s a little harsh. How about a love tap now and then, just to keep you in line.” I slide my mouth over to hers. They’re soft and warm, but there’s something else. I run my tongue over my lips and swallow—a hint of black pepper.

In-laws and Outlaws

Not long after our return from the Able Seamen cruise, Rachael and I pulled the trigger—she left her job, we signed a lease for Big Bark, and began to fix it up. Long abandoned, the space needed everything. That didn't matter to Rachael; she was finally living her dream. So was I. Big Bark may have been Rachael's show, but I was just as eager and motivated as she, not only to succeed, but to prove Randall's pronouncement about me wrong.

We worked twelve, sometimes fourteen hour days, cleaning, painting (periwinkle blue, according to Rachael, the "it" color), ordering merchandise, shelving, crates, displays, designing the logo, getting the necessary permits. One morning we were so worn out we could hardly move. We had to finish painting the bathroom before the plumbers showed up the next day.

Rachael produced a little baggie of white powder and tossed it on the desk.

"More coke?" I said.

"No. High-test. Here," she said, scooping out a tiny bit. "A gift from Wes."

Not so long ago, I wouldn't have even known what crystal meth was, much less considered doing it. But crystal, formerly known as crank (a moniker derived from biker gangs propensity for stashing it in the crank cases of their Harleys), which had lay dormant in drug land for a few decades, was making her comeback, especially in the gay community. Two bumps and you were good to go—and go and go. More bang for your buck, you might say. How else were you supposed to get through a circuit party weekend, which often meant going flat out for three or four days on just a few hours of sleep? How else could you (as some of our friends were doing) head up to New York on a Friday, check into the West Side Club, rent a room, stash your clothes in a locker and have at it with half of Chelsea until Monday morning?

Call her what you will: Tina, mother's little helper, Chrissie, ice, the girl—in times of need, she was a miracle. We blasted right through the painting, hardly needed to sleep, had to

remind ourselves to eat. That little baggie and blue pen cap became an essential tool in getting the business off the ground. When Christian found out, he warned us about the temptation to do crystal to get through the day, how it was a slippery slope and a trap. Rachael wasn't worried. She'd been able to manage her cocaine use for years. We made a rule—no crystal at work—then frequently broke it. Eventually, she would help to break us.

Six weeks of flat out effort and Big Bark was ready. We'd done most of the work ourselves or on a shoestring, but still, it had tied up almost every dime.

Reluctantly, Rachael decided to approach her father for a loan to give us some operating capital. Besides, she said, it was time I met the in-laws. Over a long lunch at our house, I did.

Her father, a retired statistician, was thin, intense and bore a distinct resemblance to Marty Feldman, courtesy of bulging eyes, one of which wandered. Despite an abysmal medical history that included several heart attacks and cancer—conditions, according to Rachael, which were directly attributable to a lifetime of unbridled rage—his mind was razor sharp. Her mother was docile, earnest and, in her mid-seventies, still beautiful, with the pale, smooth, translucent and unblemished skin of a young woman.

With her father, Rachael was solicitous but guarded—with her mother, abrupt and dismissive. With me, her parents were unfailingly polite and, in spite of the way Rachael had portrayed them, surprisingly warm. Perhaps it was the fact that they had four daughters and saw me as a welcome jolt of familial testosterone. It was difficult for me to image these people as the union of a monstrous tyrant and a self-centered martyr. I took to them immediately, a turn of events which seemed to irk Rachael, as though by warming to her parents I was undermining and disrupting the continuity of her carefully-constructive family narrative. Strangely enough, by liking my in-laws I had somehow betrayed my wife.

After lunch, the four of us sat in the parlor as Rachael went over the spreadsheet projections for the business. Her father asked plenty of questions. Her mother sipped coffee.

A couple of days later, her father got back to Rachael with his verdict. He had serious doubts about the viability of the business. He would lend us the money, but only under certain strict conditions.

Rachael was furious. She'd always made her own way, never asked him for a thing, and now, instead of trusting her, or—"god forbid"—being supportive, he was throwing up tons of obstacles. This was it. She was writing them off, "Cutting them out of my life like a cancer." I sat quietly as she stormed around the house screaming and sobbing.

Now, the pressure was really on. We had to have positive cash flow within six months or both we and Big Bark would be knee deep in dog shit. We considered several marketing strategies and settled on one featuring two powerful motivators: snobbery and shame.

In order to play up on the exclusivity of the service, we developed an application process, including a comprehensive, five-page questionnaire each owner had to complete before their dog would be accepted to Big Bark.

Rachael contacted every local media outlet and pitched the angle. They loved it: "Pampered Pooches Put on Airs at New DC Pet Hotel," read one headline. News crews stacked up outside to do live remotes. We ran an ad in the local papers featuring a black and white photo of The Wart, his eyes pleading, his ears arrayed like satellite dishes. Underneath, it read, "Guilty about leaving me home all day?"

We opened big. Customers included workaholic attorneys, lobbyists, ladies who lunch, tourists—you name it—all willing to spend serious money on their dogs. Perhaps we were smart, but we were also lucky. The economy surged, people started moving back into the city, the housing and stock market boomed and Big Bark was a home run.

The first several weeks we were in business remain a blur. We had no staff and plenty of customers, many of whom began using us immediately for overnight boarding, a big boost to our bottom line, but a service we hadn't planned on providing. We moved a small fold-out couch

into the office and slept there, often surrounded by a dozen or more snoring dogs. The Wart, thinking he was back at the pound, grew despondent.

Our friends contributed to the effort, often in ways which, to this day, move me. The first Christmas Eve after we opened Big Bark, Rachael and I were stuck boarding the dogs for the holidays. We were paid an unexpected visit by a group of Santas—Christian, Eric, Wes, and Randall—who had prepared a complete roast turkey feast. After dinner, we lounged on dog beds around the office and watched the Charlie Brown Christmas special, the story line, if not enhanced, then certainly altered by bumps of Wes' Ketamine.

Very quickly, Rachael and I fell into roles which were governed somewhat by our skills, but more so our temperaments. I was better with the new clients, with whom Rachael could be direct to a fault. So, I did most of the customer intakes, sitting down with the clients in the office to answer questions and fill in the customer profile, while their dog was out in the exercise area being assessed by Rachael. Some new customers were concerned about how their dog would do in such an environment. Quite often, though, once I broke the news that there were certain prerequisites to admission (dogs had to be nonaggressive and able to socialize in a pack)—resulting in the realization that Hubert, the German shorthaired pointer, for which they had paid a king's ransom and was fed only ground sirloin and diced organic carrots—wasn't *guaranteed* admittance to Big Bark, they became as competitive and deceptive as any parent trying to score a slot in the best magnet school. More than once, a dog which the owner had just sworn was as good natured as Scooby-Doo would break out into a snarling impersonation of White Fang. I was subject to more excuses for bad behavior than the parole commission at the federal penitentiary. I complimented and soothed and joked with the customers, behavior which paid off (literally) monthly in the form of checks for services rendered that often exceeded the lease payment on a Range Rover.

If I was good with the paying customers, then Rachael was even better with the four-legged ones. She was a born pack leader, gentle and playful, but also firm when the situation

called for it. Whether she was dealing with a two-hundred pound Mastiff or a four-pound Maltese, the relationship was the same—mutual respect and more-than-occasional mutual adoration. When it came to playing with the dogs I quickly became bored, but she never seemed to tire of it. I can still picture Rachael out in the exercise yard, tromping around with a Frisbee or a tennis ball, followed closely by a pack of twenty dogs of every conceivable shape and size. It's hard to say who was happier.

Three months later, business was surging, so we hired a manager. Anna was a fifty-something, no-nonsense Swiss divorcee who looked like nurse Ratched from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but had a better bedside manner. For years, she'd managed her ex-husband's veterinary clinic. Customers loved her and so did we. We fixed up the small, two-story house on the Big Bark property, most recently the home of squatters and crack addicts. Anna moved in as Big Bark's resident manager.

It should have come as no surprise to me that the rapid and grand success of Big Bark would give Rachael equally grand ideas. If Big Bark could garner enough press coverage and a strong enough reputation, we might be able to expand the company regionally, even nationally. These were boom times, the height of the stock market and dot-com bubble. Forward thinking companies such as AOL had established huge corporate headquarters, campuses really, all around D.C. In a time when just about everyone who wanted a job had one, companies were falling all over themselves to keep their employees happy by offering new benefits: child care, fitness facilities, dry cleaning. Why not doggie daycare?

The door had been kicked wide open. Everything was possible, it seemed.

Family Matters

Not long after we opened Big Bark, my mother paid us a congratulatory visit, her first to our house. Now, if for no other reason than their propensity for the company of gay men, one might expect that my mother and Rachael would have been close. They weren't. My mother felt Rachael was cold and distant; Rachael felt my mother was needy and intrusive. They both had a point. Rachael, who had done everything she could to distance herself from her family, saw little value in mine. Convinced that, given the opportunity, my family would insinuate itself into our lives and threaten the world that she was building for us, Rachael met my mother's attempts to connect with her with an emotional stiff-arm. My mother, who had been close with the other women in my life, couldn't understand why Rachael couldn't behave like a proper member of the family.

The problem was that sometimes our family didn't behave so properly. Following a brief vacation to the Southwest coast of Florida, my mother, in a hasty, ill-advised and poorly thought out plan, decided to pack up and move herself, her husband, Michael, and my ninety-year-old grandfather, who was experiencing the early stages of dementia, from Washington, D.C., a city she had loved and lived in for forty years, to Clearwater, Florida. She lasted less than a year. Just after Rachael and I moved into the new house I got a call from my mother. She was miserable. The move had been a fiasco. Clearwater was a goddamn provincial wasteland. She missed D.C. Would it be okay if she and Michael and my grandfather stayed with us? It was, she assured me, just for a few weeks, until she found another place. Rachael wouldn't hear of it. Once we let them in, she said, we'll never get rid of them. And so began a familiar vantage point for me: high up on a tight rope, trying to walk that thin line. I told my mother that it was probably better for everyone concerned if she found another place to stay. She did and claimed she understood, but I knew she didn't.

On her visit to our house, my mother brought along her closest friend, Larry. I have a feeling Larry was meant to serve as both a buffer and an offering. Larry was a hair dresser, about Rachael's height with a physique to match his pencil-thin mustache. He seemed to make a special effort to choose words that accentuated his lisp and his remarkable ability to stretch sibilants.

Larry arrived with a spray of white roses in one arm, my mother in the other. They wandered from one room to the next, amazed and overwhelmed by the size of the house, easily four times the size of anywhere my mother and I ever lived. Standing in our dining room, Larry was overcome. "It's all so beautiful. Sssstunning. Th-implicitly ssssstunning," he said, dabbing his eyes with a tissue. With much greater flourish and formality than even I, the former tuxedo-clad flower delivery man, could ever muster, he presented Rachael the roses. I stood there, moved, but also relieved that none of our butched-up boys were around to witness the scene. Rachael was gracious and welcoming, if not warm.

After they left, Rachael stood there, holding her roses and leaning with her back against the door.

"Okay, that's done," she said, then sighed with relief.

"Come on," I said. "It wasn't so bad."

"No, it wasn't. In fact, it was quite enjoyable. Which is the same way you're going to feel when you meet David."

My stomach lurched. For months, Rachael had been pressing me to meet her ex. She insisted that David's anger over her dumping him had dissipated to the point he'd admitted to Rachael that, romantically, it had been over between them long ago. He'd moved on, even begun dating again. No hard feelings. In fact, in a gesture of generosity that even she found surprising, David paid Rachael back some of the money she'd invested in their house. I had resisted meeting him. First off, no matter how I wanted to spin it, there was a simple fact: I had stolen the guy's woman—while they were living together—in the home they owned—while he was away on a business trip. Hell, guys had been knifed and left in an alley to bleed to death for less. In fact, in

certain cultures being knifed and left to bleed in an alley for what I had done would be considered an act of restraint.

My expression must have conveyed my thoughts.

“Come on, Nick. He was as much a part of my life as any family member. More, actually.”

I glanced down at the bunch of roses, so large they nearly obscured her. There was no getting out of it. I pinched the bridge of my nose with my fingers and tried to ward off what felt like a spike being driven through my head.

“Okay. I’ll meet Mr. Tit-For-Tat. I’ll meet Mr. Quid Pro Quo.”

Rachael leaned over and tugged one of my earlobes. “Excellent. You’ll love him. You’ll see.” She shot by me wafting the aroma of roses, already headed to the phone. “And by the way, just call him David.”

Rachael set it up. One evening about a week later, David would drop by for a drink. When the day came, I was a bit of a wreck. I recall at least two (probably more) costume changes, spiraling down in formality from meet the in-laws, to business casual Friday, to company picnic, to swing by the grocery store, and to what I finally settled on—take out the trash: torn jeans and a grey flannel tee-shirt, the same thing I always wore around the house. I mean, *really*. Did I think that I was going to impress the guy one way or the other based on my sartorial choices?

The doorbell rang, Rachael answered and there he was, looking pretty much as he had in the photos I’d seen of him on the mantle place in their living room: handsome, with a broad, open smile, a nearly shaved head and, much to my relief, dressed casually in jeans and a polo shirt.

I expected our meeting would be cordial, but I’d also prepared myself for the possibility of some jousting and verbal sword crossing. But when David crossed the vestibule, ignored my outstretched hand and hugged me (hugged me!) my anxiety took a hike. He was warm and funny

and we hit it off immediately. In fact, there wasn't a moment of awkwardness between us, to the point that when Rachael announced she was tired and headed up to bed, David and I waved her off like a couple of adolescents pretending to be sorry that their mother had to run off. Of course, the cocktails and lines of coke—his—didn't hurt, either.

"I've got to tell you something." I freshened up his drink with some vodka and handed it to him. "Now that I meet you, I just don't get it."

He took a swallow. "Get what?"

"Why the hell she ever left you."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should."

David leaned back in the sofa and crossed his legs. "Oh hell, neither one of us wanted to admit it, but things had gotten pretty stale. It was for the best. You know how I know that?"

I shook my head.

"I've never seen her happier. If she had been this happy with me, I'd have fought you for her." He swirled his drink around in the glass. "Part of it was our ages. I heard about that time you had in Miami Beach. Sounded pretty amazing. I guess she thought I was too old for that kind of stuff. Not that she ever asked me."

"And if she had?"

He shrugged. "Guess we'll never know."

David's mention of our experience at White Party gave me an idea. Hobnobbing with the boys was a minimum prerequisite for any sort of relationship with Rachael. According to Rachael, David had a homo-friendly history that pre-dated her, including coaching an all-girl soft ball team. And, unlike me, David had dabbled with men at least once when she, David, and two friends had spent a drunken, coked-out evening fumbling around, groping each other on the sofa and rolling across the living room floor. Drugs certainly weren't an issue either, obviously. David had grown up in the sixties. He was probably getting high when I was still sipping Hi-C.

“Hey, listen. Were headed up to New York in a few weeks with the boys for this big-ass, S&M, circuit thing—the Black Party. Why don’t you come?”

David drew pursed his lips skeptically. “Come on, you don’t want me in tow.”

“In tow, my ass. Think about it—the two straight dudes on the down low. I’m telling you, what happened to me down in Miami? It was something special, man. Who knows, might stir up some stray hot girls decked out in leather. It would be fantastic.”

He thought for a moment, set his cocktail down on a coaster, then leaned forward and snorted a line of coke.

“Come on,” I said. “What do you say? *Old man.*”

David pinched his nostrils and smiled. “Can’t say I’m not curious.”

“Then it’s yes?”

He winked at me. “Okay, you’re on. *Disco boy.*”

Punch Drunk

Randall may not be physically imposing; however, clad in a gladiator skirt, a shirt resembling a chain link fence and a ton of attitude, he is a force to be reckoned with. The mettle of his metal is about to be tested, though. Rachael, Randall, David, Wes and I, festooned in leather harnesses and other Black-Party paraphernalia, stand in a tight circle in the lobby of the Drake Hotel in New York City discussing the fact that Randall's leather coat and back pack are locked in Ramon's room.

"Do you really need it?" asks Rachael.

"Well, let's see," says Randall. He wraps his arms around his torso, rattling his shirt, "there's my room key, wallet, tickets to the party, a change of clothes, and all my drugs. I'd say that's a yes, wouldn't you?"

"Why don't we just go find Ramon at the party and get the keys?" David asks.

"Oh sure, just go and pick him out of the other 6,000 queens in leather harnesses," says Randall.

We stand in silence for a minute, no one making eye contact. Well *now* who's out of their league, Randall, not to mention up the creek without their backpack?

Randall breaks the silence. "I am *getting* in that room."

Rachael says, "I worked in hotels for fifteen years. There's no way security is going to let you in someone else's room, especially without any identification and looking like some sort of sissy Spartacus."

Everyone laughs—except Randall. The glint in his eye matches his costume. He sniffs, turns, and marches across the lobby towards the elevators with a quick, determined gait, his gladiator skirt swishing left and right.

"I'll go," Rachael says.

“Don’t bother,” Wes says. “You just said so yourself. It’s not going to happen.”

“Either way, this is only going to take a few minutes,” she says, handing Wes her coat and backing away from us. “Are you coming, Nick?” Her tone says she expects me to.

I look at David and Wes, shrug my shoulders, and follow along.

“What should I do?” asks David.

I point to Wes. “Stick with him. And stay as far away from us as possible.”

Randall has already caught an elevator to the eleventh floor, so Rachael and I squeeze into the next one just as the door closes. Along for the ride are three Japanese tourists who pretend not to notice our matching leather pants and harnesses. They exit on seven, turn the corner and burst out laughing.

The elevator door opens and there’s Randall on the hallway house phone. I hear him say, “Yes, room 1103. That’s great, thank you.” He hangs up. “Security is on its way with a key.”

The elevator door opens and a tall black man emerges. I look him over and assemble a dossier: Once athletic, now gone to seed; slight limp from a football injury; a shapeless navy-blue blazer weighed down on one side by a walkie-talkie; big wad of keys hanging from his belt that clink together with each step.

His face remains blank and unreadable—all business. I’m sure a security guard in a big city hotel has seen plenty, but I’d give anything to hear this guy, sitting at the dinner table with his wife, buttering a biscuit: “So, I’m walking down the hall towards these white folks, trying’ to figure out which one’s the doctor. There’s this dark haired chick wearing a leather bra and boots like I wore in the army—I mean the boots, not the bra—a Tarzan-looking dude, and this little bitty guy wearing a skirt with leather straps and chicken wire wrapped around his chest. I thought, man, if one of you is a doctor, I ain’t never getting sick—ever.”

“Locked out?” he says. His walkie-talkie hisses and sputters.

“Yes I am,” says Randall, “and thanks for getting here so quickly.”

“Uh-huh,” says the guard. He pulls a key-card from his front pocket.

Good, he's in a hurry.

"Just need to see some ID, Dr. Flores."

"I'm not Dr. Flores," says Randall.

The guard lets the key slip back into his pocket.

Twenty minutes later, the five of us are in a cab headed for Roseland Ballroom.

"So, I tell the guard," Randall says, "'here's is the situation. I spent several hundred dollars getting here, on this costume, on my hotel room, on tickets to the party, and I *have* to get in that room.'"

"Here's the best part," I say, the ecstasy beginning to seep through me.

"Mine too." says Randall. "I look him in the eyes and say, 'Look, we can do this the *easy* way or the *hard* way. The easy way involves you getting a portion of the five hundred dollars that's in my wallet on the other side of that door.'"

"You bribed the security guard," says David.

"It wasn't a bribe, really," says Randall, "just a dose of reality. I told him 'We can either stand here or argue, or you can just *open* that door and let me get my knapsack and make a quick hundred dollars.'"

"And?" asks David.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Nothing like some attitude and a c-note to get you what want," says Wes.

"Some attitude, a c-note, *and* a gladiator skirt," says Rachael.

Something is up at Roseland Ballroom. As we get out of our cab, two leather-laden men rush over to commandeer it. Several more stand on the curb outside the entrance trying to flag down taxis. It's only one-thirty. If anything, we're early.

"Girls," says the taller one as he slides in the back seat, "don't even bother."

“What’s up?” asks Wes.

“We were in the coat check line for an hour,” he replies, crossing his arms in frustration.

“Didn’t move ten feet.”

“How come?” asked David.

“Fuck if I know.” he says, “What I do know is my high came, my high went, and I’m going home.”

The cab pulls away.

“Now what?” says Rachael, who has a deep-seated abhorrence of crowds, partially attributable to her height, but also, I suspect, the affront to her need to be, at all times, on top of things.

Randall says, “After all the trouble, money, and drama I’ve been through, I am going to this goddamn party.”

“I hear that,” says David, “I don’t know about anybody else, but I’m high. Failure is not an option,” quoting a line from *Apollo 13*.

“Amen brother,” I say, looking at Rachael. “Let’s get ready to *rumble!*” David is the only one who laughs. Leaning in towards him, I whisper, “Not big on the World Wrestling Federation references, I guess.”

“All right, you two,” says Rachael, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the entrance, “that’ll be quite enough male bonding. Let’s get in there before you get us straight-bashed.”

We get past the box office, where we retrieve David’s “will call” ticket without incident. Then we turn the corner and walk into the lobby. Dozens of men are removing street clothes, pulling outfits from an assortment of back packs and duffle bags, strapping leather contraptions to themselves and others.

“What the hell?” I say.

“I guess not everyone is comfortable leaving their house in assless chaps,” says Rachael.

The bad news is that all this commotion is happening outside the coat check room. The entrance to the room itself is jammed solid with people. We stop and stare at the backs of several hundred men who are leaning and pushing forward. The coat check stations are nowhere in sight.

“I cannot go in there,” says Rachael, to no one in particular.

David says, “All we have are our coats. Why don’t we just take them with us and stash them somewhere.”

Randall says, “There are like 8,000 people dressed pretty much the same way upstairs in this huge, dark, cavernous space. If you let go of somebody’s hand there’s a good chance you won’t see them again for hours, or never.”

David winces. “Sounds like fun.”

Rachael says, “After a couple of bumps, I won’t be able to find my ass with both hands.”

“You can leave that to me,” I say.

“So what do you suggest?” says David, sounding annoyed.

“I’m not suggesting. I know what I’m going to do,” says Randall. “I’m going to find out who’s in charge here.”

I let out a sputtering laugh. Wes rolls his eyes. Rachael cracks a smile. Randall’s show of *chutzpah* with the security guard at the hotel had been impressive. If it had been me instead of him, I’d have skipped the party and been back in my room right now watching pay-per-view porn. However, no one is going to whip this fiasco into shape simply by force of will, even one as formidable as Randall’s.

“Wait here,” says Randall, spotting a guy wearing a headset and black tee shirt with a big white STAFF printed on the back.

“This time he’s on his own,” says Rachael to Wes.

Wes nods.

Randall buttonholes the haggard and put-upon staff member. I can’t hear them, but by the looks of Randall’s wild gesturing and aggressive body language, it’s a one sided conversation.

I sigh and shake my head.

“This night’s headed nowhere fast,” I say to myself. My eyes drift past Randall and the unfortunate staffer to rest on someone squatting next to them, working very intently at cramming things into an over-sized fanny pack. I grab Rachael and David and pull them toward Ramon who’s pressing hard on the top of the pack, struggling to zip the last few inches closed.

“Any chance you can squeeze in five more coats?” asks Rachael. She leans forward and rests both hands on the top of Ramon’s shoulders.

An exasperated-looking Ramon spins around on his heels. “Boys and girls, it is *not* pretty in there. Three coat check windows and about 500 queens. I thought I was going to have to set up a triage station.”

“So how did you get rid of your coat?” asked David.

“Didn’t wear one,” says Ramon, standing up. Around his neck he wears a black leather dog collar, studded with chrome spikes. A leather strap runs down the center of his chest and attaches to a black leather pouch which, more or less, envelops his package.

David puts a hand on Ramon’s shoulder and slowly spins him around 180 degrees. The pouch narrows to a thong and emerges from his nether region as another strap which runs up the center of his back, finally joining onto the back of the dog collar. By comparison, my criss-crossed leather harness and black leather jeans seem like formal wear. Ramon bends down to tighten the tops of his black leather knee-high lace up boots. Three men standing behind him stop unpacking a large olive-green rucksack and stare, their eyebrows thrust sky high.

“Well,” says David, “at least your feet are well protected. Really, where did you put your jacket?”

“Didn’t wear one, thank goodness,” says Ramon, slinging his fanny pack over his shoulder like a bandolier.

“You got in a cab dressed like that?” asks David, incredulous. We’d had a tough enough time convincing him to wear a black tank top and Rachael had insisted he buy a pair of black

boots to replace the white Nike cross-trainers he'd intended to wear.

"I have a wind-breaker," says Ramon.

Rachael looks down between Ramon's legs. "You certainly do."

"Where's Randall?" asked Ramon.

Rachael purses her lips and points to him, standing a few feet away, deep into the beleaguered staff member's business.

"You know my honey," says Wes. "Ironing out some of the kinks."

Randall breaks off his harangue and comes over. "Well, I got nowhere. Looks like we're just going to have to go for it. Hello, Ramon."

I say, "Not *we*. Me Tarzan, you Spartacus. You take Rachael and we'll find you."

"No, no, no," says Rachael. "We should all stick together."

"She's right," says Ramon. He bends down and twists the cap off of a glass vial filled with white powder.

"Is that crystal, by any chance?" Rachael asks.

"Want some?" he replies, pointing the vial at her.

We take a quick look around, and squatting down in a circle like Comanchees, pass it around peace-pipe style. It's bad form to snort up someone's drugs, but knowing Ramon, there is plenty more where this came from.

"Wow," says David, rubbing his nose as he stands up, "that helps."

"If it was good enough for the Third Reich," I say, "I guess it's good enough for us."

Everyone stares at me.

"The Nazis," I say. "They used to give it to the troops before battle."

"It's poor form to bring up the Nazis around a claustrophobic Jew who's about to be crammed into a crowded room," says Rachael.

"Listen, if I can talk my way into Ramon's hotel room I think we can manage to get our coats checked," says Randall.

“My room?” says Ramon.

“I’ll explain later,” say Rachael. “Let’s get this over with.” She hooks a finger under Ramon’s collar and tugs him along.

We form a little Rugby scrum with Ramon and Randall in front, David, Wes and me behind, and Rachael between us, then jam ourselves into the room and stick close to the wall, making pretty good progress. Ramon provides the physical persuasion, Randall the verbal, and Rachael, the visual. Even the most annoyed and stubborn men make an effort to let us pass when they get a load of tiny, wide-eyed Rachael.

We’re about two-thirds of the way there when things jam up and no amount of cajoling or sympathy helps. We become trapped in the human confluence of the people trying to get out and those pushing to get in. Hundreds of people shift and lean. A panicky energy, stoked by sauna-like heat and humidity, takes over. People begin to shout.

“Okay, this is officially not fun,” shouts David.

Another wave, the strongest yet, shoves my left shoulder hard against the wall.

I look down at Rachael as her eyes swell with fear.

“I need to get out of here right now,” she says, and begins to cry.

The depth and sincerity of her fear triggers something new in me—the urge to protect her.

I take Rachael by the shoulders, put her between me and the wall, and force my back into the crowd, creating a small pocket of space. For her sake, I try not to register the physical strain, but I’m performing the physical equivalent of a push up with dozens of people stacked on my back. The crowd surges again. I push back with all my might, grateful for that hit of crystal, but my arms begin to tremble. Now, I’m the one panicking at the prospect of crushing Rachael against the wall. I bring my right leg up beside her, plant my foot against the wall, and press back as hard as I can. Someone behind me groans.

On my left, Randall, his face flushed, says “Got-to-go-back.”

There's only one way out. I yell, "Give me your coats."

Randall says, "What, are you kidding? We have to get out of here."

"We are," I say. To my surprise, my voice is action-hero confident. "If you want to get out of here give me all your coats."

I tuck everyone's coats under my left arm, bend my right arm at the elbow and yell, "Push. Hard."

We lurch forward. Someone in front of me shouts, "What the fuck?"

"Again," I yell. "Push." And this is how we grind our way the last twenty feet or so to the far wall, Rachael's head pressed between my shoulder blades.

Finally, the coat check window is only a few feet to my right. Through the window I can see the attendants, desultory and disinterested as fast food employees, take coats and bags from the frenzied crowd and exchange them for claim tickets. I inch towards the window while Ramon, Wes, Randall, and David form a protective semi-circle around Rachael. I pass the coats over the head of a shorter man to the attendant who hands me the claim tickets. Above the window there's a sign:

CUSTOMERS WITH LOST CLAIM CHECKS MUST WAIT UNTIL ALL COATS HAVE
BEEN CLAIMED – NO EXCEPTIONS.

Jesus, I think, squeezing the little squares of paper hard between my thumb and index finger, drop these tickets and we'll be here until next spring.

Next to me, two guys hand a big canvas duffle bag across the counter to the attendant. I hadn't noticed them before. Any other time and in any other setting, they'd be impossible to miss. They're built like iceboxes; shaved heads and sinewy jaws set atop neck-less torsos. Cyborgs, I call them—a sub-species created by the over-use of steroids. They may look like freaks, but I see salvation in those chiseled backs. They turn, shoulder to shoulder, and, like a

cow-catchers mounted on the front of an old steam locomotives, begin to move people out of the way. I squeeze in behind them and as they power past us, the rest of our group tucks in. They slice and batter their way forward. People yell, people scream, but people move. In less than a minute, we plow through the last of the crowd and emerge into the foyer, breathing hard and sweating harder. I feel exhausted, but triumphant.

I turn and give David the high-five. With my hand still cocked in the air, I turn to do the same to Randall but he's bent over, hands on his knees, out of breath.

"You all right, baby?" Wes asks.

Randall shakes his head. "I need to sit."

Wes and I walk Randall over and set him down in the corner.

The cyborgs stand a few steps behind me, hands on their hips like victorious gladiators, sweat dripping down their bare chests. "Your friend needs some fluids," says one, in a heavy New York accent.

"Here," says the other. He reaches behind his partner, into a small, leather back pack and produces a bottle. He hands it to David. "Pediasure. Jacks up the electrolytes."

David takes a long drink and rests the back of his head against the wall.

Wes and Rachael kneel down on either side of Randall and take his hands in theirs.

He takes a deep breath and nods. "Better. Much better." He hands the bottle back.

"Thank you." Then he turns to me, and, finally, without a trace of sarcasm, says, "And you."

I nod.

"My pleasure," says the nearest cyborg. Then to his partner, "Next time you bitch about that last set of bench press, I'm gonna' remind you of this."

We all laugh as Rachael lets go of David's hand, reaches over and takes mine.

"I just want to know what time you guys are leaving so we can meet you back here to get our coats," says Randall who's standing up, looking less flushed.

"Never fucking mind, they can keep mine," says Rachael.

“Keep your coat?” I say to David. “Apparently, her recent brush with death has brought on an epiphany.”

“I need a drink,” says David.

“And a bump,” says Rachael.

The cyborgs laugh. The nearest one says, “*Ciao* babies. Enjoy the party.”

Hand in hand, they turn and disappear up the stairs leading to the dance floor.

“Cute couple,” says David.

#

It’s obvious that someone has royally fucked up the logistics of this party, though we’re so grateful to have survived the coatroom ordeal none of us much cares. The wait at the bars is eternal, but we stand patiently to buy our little bottles of water at \$6 pop. We leave with water bottles crammed into every available pocket, harness, and strap. The lines to get in the bathrooms are endless. Men who can’t or won’t wait are urinating in empty water bottles. For the few women at the party, it’s going to be a long night. Luckily, the dehydration from our efforts in the coat check room combined with the ecstasy, has temporarily slammed the door shut on our bladders.

We’re finally *here*—on the dance floor, cocooned in the crowd, high and happy, locked into the music. Deejay David Knapp is hitting it just right with a thick and thunderous groove. It has been a long, tough slog, but here’s the payoff. We’ve formed a joyous little circle, which shrinks and expands depending on who happens to come by and join in. Just now, it’s a very tall man from LA who has both long arms draped around Rachael, two brawny lesbians attached to each other at the collar by a dog leash who keep staring at us and a couple of hairy bear types, with beards like mountain men. I put my hand on David’s shoulder and he turns towards me. His eyes are at quarter-mast.

“So whatdya’ think,” I say.

David purses his lips and nods his head. “I thought you guys were nuts. But I gotta’

say,” he points right and left with his index fingers, “this part doesn’t suck.”

“Those women,” I say, trying not to return their stare, “they won’t stop looking at us.”

David glances over. “Yikes. See the shoulders on them? When they were done with us, they’d be nothing left. I get that all the time from the dykes on my softball team. Never been propositioned so often in my life.”

“Really? How do you feel about that.”

“Are you kidding? At my age I’ll take all the attention I can get from whoever wants to give it to me.”

A magnificent wave of ecstasy-borne delight surges through me. “Curious about something.”

“Huh?”

“Do you miss her?” The directness of my question surprises even me. It’s an odd place to have this kind of conversation, but suddenly I’m bursting with inquisitiveness and the need to connect. This ecstasy stuff must have worked wonders in therapy.

“Rachael?” David cocks his head and looks past me for a moment, thinking.

“Sometimes. When I see you two together. There’s nobody else like her, is there? She makes you feel like the world’s an inside joke and only you and she get it. That part I miss.” He shakes his head from side to side. “But then there’s the rest.”

“The rest?”

“The part that’s so dark and scared.” David clamps his hands together. “Sucks the life right out of life.”

“We talking about the same Rachael?”

“You don’t see it? Did you get a look at her back in that coat check room? She good at covering it, but that can be one terrified woman. I don’t know where it comes from, but she’s scared most of the time. That’s why she tries to keep such a tight hold on everything. That’s why she has to have money and security. One let up and she sees the whole thing crashing down.”

I'd seen vulnerability in Rachael—in her job, after she left David. In fact, I found that vulnerability one of her most appealing traits. But I hadn't considered that she may have framed her entire life around one organizing principle—that life was a house of cards.

“All the drugs and the extremes,” David says. “Like all this? That's how she lets go without really having to let go.”

That would explain her preference for amphetamines to alcohol, pot or any other drug that blurred rather than sharpened reality.

“*Controlled* substances,” I say.

“Bingo.”

I look over at Rachael, having an animated conversation with the tall guy from LA. She's laughing and happy. Maybe I've allowed her turn a corner.

As if reading my mind, David says, “But like I say, you've helped in that department. Maybe she just needed someone more—I don't know—nice.”

Nicer than David? I'm seized by the image of David, brought back by Rachael to the counter of the men's return department, hidden deep in the bowels of Nordstrom's or Barney's or Bloomingdale's (there must be such a thing).

“This one doesn't really work for me anymore,” says Rachael to the clerk.

“I'm so sorry,” she says. “What seems to be the problem?”

Rachael turns and regards David. “I don't know. He's starting to wear out. I need something younger and—nicer.”

The clerk smiles broadly. “I completely understand. I think we have just what you're looking for. She leaves for a moment, then reappears leading me along by my ear. “This is our latest model. Young, docile, lost, eager to please, and, I must say—awfully nice.” She turns and looks me up and down. “They're literally flying out the door.”

“I'll take him,” says Rachael. “No need to wrap. I'll just wear him out.”

The clerk smiles. “Oh, I'm sure you will.”

Their conspiring laugh jars me back to reality.

“So,” I ask, “how are these girls you’ve been seeing?”

He shrugs. “Not as exciting or sharp maybe, but they sure are easy to deal with. Nice and even. And earnest.”

“You’re dating a girl named Ernest?”

“What?” he says, leaning closer, cocking his ear.

“Never mind.” It’s time to get back to the here and now. “So,” I lean in to make myself heard over the music, “want to see what goes on behind that curtain?”

David looks over his shoulder, and turns back to me. “What is it?”

“Don’t know exactly. Some kind of dog and pony show.”

David raises his eyebrows. “Like the *Price is Right*?”

“Doubt it. You game?” I say.

David puts an arm over my shoulder and smiles. He licks his lips. “Abso-fucking-lutely. But what about Rachael?”

He has a point. Rachael likes to have the whole pack around her at all times and she’ll definitely resist us wandering off. Something occurs to me. “Wait a minute. Didn’t I just save her ass from being crushed to death?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Doesn’t she owe me her life?”

“Without a doubt.” He jabs my shoulder with his finger. “What are you going to do about it?”

I give David a quick follow-me nod and we head her way. Have to admit, I’m glad to have David as back up. Rachael always claims she’s found the only two straight men in America comfortable enough in their own skin to hang with the boys no matter what. This is the chance to prove her right.

Rachael gives us a suspicious look. “What are you two gentlemen up to?”

“We’re going to check out the sex-position.”

She wags her finger at me. “Oh no, uh-uh. I think that’s a really bad idea.

“Come on, what’s the big deal?” says David.

One on one, neither of us stands much of a chance, but as a determined, not to mention tweaked, tag team we are formidable.

“Okay,” she says. She slides her still-cold water bottle across David’s forehead. “But don’t come back here with your tails, or something else, between your legs.”

“Oh please,” I say, “what haven’t we seen?”

“Plenty,” says Randall. “Just over there is a guy with jumper cables attached to his nipples.”

I nudge Rachael. “See, I told you that a Triple-A membership pays for itself in the long run.”

David giggles.

In her serious voice, Rachael says, “You guys *have* to remember how to find us. Right here under the disco ball, okay? *Okay?*” she says louder, squeezing my hands hard.

“Under the disco ball. Is that a Merchant Ivory film?” asks David.

He and I look at each other and burst out laughing.

Rachael waves us off. “Go on then. Hope you both come back with a good case of Chlamydia.”

And so, with my arm draped around David and both of us tittering like nine year olds who’ve sneaked into the movie theater, we make our way across the dance floor and around the curtain.

Hundreds of men mill around, waiting in front of a stage that’s empty save for one folding chair, illuminated by a spot light. We position ourselves to get the best view. Five minutes pass and nothing happens. David throws me a so-what’s-the-big-deal look. I shrug. How should I know?

David turns to the man standing to his left, a very tall, very pale, very thin, skinhead-meets-Iggy Pop type. “So, what goes on here?” he asks.

“One never quite knows,” he says in a British accent.

“We’ve never been back here before,” I say. By the way he looks at me, I know I’ve stated the obvious. “I heard the shows can get pretty heavy.”

“Actually, I’d say they’re just about spot-on,” he says, smiling. His two canines jut forward, like a vampire.

“So, nobody really gets hurt,” David says, reassuring himself.

“Oh, no, I didn’t say that,” he says.

A very muscular man, square-jawed with salty-grey close-cropped hair, wearing tight black chaps, criss-cross harness and a black leather short-brimmed hat, mounts the stage and stands next to the chair.

Slowly and theatrically, the man inserts each thick finger of his hands into a pair of surgical gloves, rolls them down over his palms to his wrists and gives each one a loud *snap*. Then, he takes a tooth-paste-like tube from the chair and squeezes a clear, viscous liquid down each hand. The excess drips onto the floor of the riser.

“Oh my,” says Iggy-skinhead.

David looks at him, and then at me. He nudges me with his elbow. “Vlad the Impaler here just said ‘oh my.’ That can’t be good.”

A thin, olive-skinned man, baby-faced, naked and hairless walks onto the riser. His dick and balls look small and shriveled. Can’t say I blame him. If I had to walk across this stage towards that guy and who knows what, my genitals would disappear so deep into my large intestine I’d have to hire spelunkers to retrieve them. A smattering of applause spreads through the crowd, but so does a nervous buzz. The boy bends forward, resting his palms on the seat of the chair.

The large man’s foreplay consists of slowly inserting four fingers of his right hand, then

his palm, and finally, his thumb into the boy's rectum. He pauses for a moment, then shoves his hand forward, burying it inside him up to his wrist. The boy throws his head back and gives a sharp, high shriek. The man pulls his arm back, revealing his balled-up fist.

"No way," I whisper.

I'm horrified, yet transfixed, unable even to blink. This guy is banging the kid the way George Forman works a heavy bag, just barely withdrawing one fist before slamming in the other, right up to the wrist.

Many of the men standing around us cringe and turn away, but neither David nor I can take our eyes off what's happening on stage. The fact that someone would choose to engage in something that looked more like an Inquisitor's fantasy than a sex act is as fascinating as it is revolting. There's only one problem, and it's a big one: all that lovely empathy and unity brought on by the drugs and the scene is beginning to work against me. I'm beginning to feel those pounding fists deep inside me.

Someone taps me on my shoulder. Iggy-skinhead has his arm around David's waist. He leans over and says to me, "I think your friend is having a bit of a problem."

David has gone bleached-bone white, except for the dark bruise-like circles which have formed perfect half moons under his eyes. Beads of sweat dot his forehead, dripping down his cheeks and off the end of his chin.

"Time to go," he says.

I put my arm across David's back to support him and we slowly thread our way back out of the exposition area and over to a quiet spot in the corner. We lean back against the wall and slide down onto our haunches.

After a few moments, he says, "Sorry. I couldn't deal."

"Don't apologize. That was intense."

An understatement, to be sure. But as repulsive as I had found the exposition, the truth is that I wasn't affected in the same way as David, or, for that matter, many of the gay men, had

been. Why not?

“One thing’s for sure,” says David.

“What’s that?”

“I’m never getting another prostate exam as long as I live.”

“Amen, brother.”

He turns to me. “More bad news.”

“What’s that?”

“Rachael was right.”

I groan and rest my head back against the wall.

The Waiting Game

In retrospect, the Black Party may not have been the best choice to introduce someone to the circuit. Unlike other events, which were cheery-themed and inclusive, often attended by circuit dabblers and straight women out to have fun with their gay friends, the Black Party was, well, black—a testosterone-filled freak-fest.

The sadomasochistic theme wasn't all for show. Beyond the outfits, decorations and other external trapping, there was a palpable feeling of the down and dirty out to play. The hard core guys came here, men who enjoyed rough, primal, painful sex. If you hooked up with one of them, you'd better have agreed on the phrase that would end the dominance, humiliation, or pain—the stop word—or risk ending up like one of our friends: blindfolded with duck tape and hogtied, getting slapped around and fucked in the ass hard, crying and yelling “Stop, please, stop,” which his dates interpreted as encouragement.

True, there were plenty of posers and straight-laced professionals out there in that sea of leather and skin. But on this night even they might find themselves tangled up in a scrum of rough, wicked sex, letting go of conventions and visiting the dark side.

For the vast majority of straight men, including those like David who considered themselves open-minded, the Black Party was too raw and too intense. Why wasn't that the case for me? I returned from the Black Party feeling as though a veil had been lifted—or in this case a rubber bondage mask with little air holes cut into it.

Up until now, I had let Rachael take the lead regarding all the major decisions in our life. Now, I began to recognize that her effort to control me along with everything else in her life, was, as David had pointed out, based in fear. It was also a sign of weakness. The episode in coat check room may not have been the stuff of legend or superheroes, but, symbolically, it signaled a shift in the way I felt about myself and Rachael, not to mention the way others began to feel about

me. Randall and I would not become close, but I no longer felt I had anything to prove to him—or anyone else.

I saw the circuit as my pathway to a new, more powerful me. Apart from whipping up my self esteem, I began to see the parties as a kind of primordial initiation ritual to manhood. Urged on by the dark, relentless music, the lights, the drugs and the men, dancing on and on for hours to the point of exhaustion and pushing past it, I imagined myself part of a ritual stretching back through time, when hunters celebrated around a gigantic bonfire celebrating a massive kill.

True, as was the case with the fisting demo at the Black Party, there would be moments of challenge and trepidation, including one horror-house like excursion in search of a bathroom which led me down a pitch-black corridor, surrounded by moans, grunts and screams, or another time when I was pulled into a group of men on the dance floor, feeling the press of their bodies and their hands all over me.

But didn't most initiation rituals involve mental and physical challenges, tests of bravery and the necessity to face one's fears?

The truth is, I rarely felt threatened, partly because no one at these events imagined any straight man in his right mind would attend. I was just another one of the boys, an assumption I used to my advantage. Like a bomber employing the latest cloaking technology, I operated under the radar. And increasingly, I began to chafe against and resent Rachael's power and her control.

I need to be honest here. My attraction to the circuit wasn't based solely on a high-minded quest for self-enlightenment. There was another motivating factor. It may seem strange that women would factor in at all, especially given their scarcity in this world. It's true, females were fairly rare in the circuit, which was, as far as Rachael was concerned, just fine by her. In a world dominated by men, she was the pretty, profane anomaly. Around Rachael, the boys could be themselves; around them, Rachael could tap into her tendencies to control and titillate—which is where I came in. At first, I was a bright, shiny token, to be presented, admired and then snatched back. This was Rachael's scene; she owned it—and by extension, I suppose, me.

I may have been off limits to the boys, but not the girls—at least, not to all of them. There was always a smattering of straight girls, out with their gay buddies. Though many of these women were attractive and some were clearly interested in us, they were off limits. Rachael viewed straight girls as a potential threat, which left us with a small but surprisingly solicitous subset of women.

Most lesbians were turned off by the wild excesses and promiscuity of the circuit. They preferred monogamous relationships (or, at least their versions of them, which tended to be short-lived, rapid-fire and serial in nature), camping trips and house parties. However, there was a small cadre of lesbians—pretty, sharp, and, on occasion, wild—who partied like (and with) the boys. These girls liked me—a lot. In fact, I became something of a girrrrl magnet. I'm not discounting the added attraction provided by the fact that I was paired up with a beautiful, bisexual woman. But, in many cases, it was obvious that it was me, rather than she, that was the prime motivating factor. I'm not sure what was the source of that attraction was. The setting, combined with my ability to blend in with the rest of the boys seemed to reduce their inherent distrust of straight men. Whatever the reason, I appeared to awaken in many of them a vestigial desire for, um, how shall I put this—manhood.

Rachael, determined to replicate the free-wheeling, anything-goes sexual mores of most of our gay friends, dangled the possibility of liaisons with these girls before me like ripened fruit. I was game. To be honest, I was more than that. Any man that won't admit the fantasy of bedding two women at once is either lying or gay.

A mitigating factor working against us in consummating these liaisons was the tremendous cultural pressure placed on lesbians by the more radical elements of their society: whatever you do, the tenet goes, don't cross over to the other side. I'm no expert on feminist theory, but, apparently, the prohibition has something to do with the deleterious effect of dabbling with men would have upon the entire sisterhood. There were several flirtations and quite a few near misses: the Latina nurse at Liquid in Miami who took me and Rachael over to a quiet part of

the club and kissed us like she meant it—until she didn't; the smoking hot blond/brunette couple who sandwiched me between them for hours, dancing away the night at Christian and Eric's New Year's Eve party, whispering what they had in mind—until, at the last possible moment, they pulled the lifeline and floated safely, and chastely, to earth; the diminutive and adorable mortician (yes, mortician), who made it all the way to our bedroom before, at the last possible moment, her blood turned to embalming fluid. This stuff never happened to me with straight women.

Similarly to the way I drew strength and confidence from gay men in spite of the fact that I didn't desire them, I was at least equally affected by the attentions of these women, most of whom I found highly attractive. Go figure.

Now, there were certain protocols to be followed. In this activity, as with most others, Rachael had to take the lead. Though I could observe and remark about other women, I couldn't show *too* much interest lest Rachael feel threatened. Nor could I take the point position in either the quest or the seduction. She made it clear that the pursuit of these girls was a joint venture; whatever we did, it would be done together, as a couple. Finally, these were to be one night stands—no attachments and no follow up.

Notwithstanding the elaborate rule book, I regarded this aspect of our relationship as a boon. Unlike the average married *schlub*, I didn't have to feign disinterest in attractive women or sneak down to the basement with videos to indulge my fantasies.

I figured that all I had to do was be patient, sit back and wait. Eventually, someone would come along.

Her name was Trudie.

Home Run

I sit shirtless on the sofa in our parlor, my head resting on Christian's shoulder as we watch Rachael seduce the only other woman in a house chock full of gay men.

The object of Rachael's attention—Trudie, the abundantly-tattooed-thirty-something lesbian with the Paige-boy haircut and cherubic lips drawn into a perpetual pout—lies flat on her back on the floor just a few feet away from us. Rachael, wearing a white-leather studded bra and patent-leather hot pants, kneels over her and carefully taps out a small dollop of crystal from a clear glass vial onto the girl's bare stomach.

Half-naked men are everywhere, bathed in candle light, in and out of the bathroom, drifting down the stairs from our bedrooms, laughing, flirting. Hours of carrying on at TRAX have shaved the edge off of everyone's jacked-up, manic energy. Now, it's almost dawn, and sex, or at least the possibility of it, floats through the party like a caressing mist.

Earlier, I'd done two hits of weak X, which have all but worn off. This is when I'd normally gulp down a smoothie, excuse myself and head to bed, leaving Rachael to play hostess. Instead, I'm glued to the sofa, my heart careening around in my chest.

Trudie giggles. "That tickles."

"Think that's funny?" says Rachael. She throws a knee over the girl and straddles her. "Hold back my hair." Their lips are so close they almost touch. Trudie smiles, flashing dimples, and gathers Rachael's long, dark hair up in her hands, giving her a full-on view of Rachael's best features—cocoa eyes, flawless skin. Wispy strands of Rachael's hair flow between Trudie's fingers, brushing over her cheek and neck.

"Face like a movie star," says Trudie.

"Which one?" asks Rachael.

"Does it really matter?" asks Christian.

Rachael looks up at us. “Kind of,” she says. “For example, I’d prefer Elizabeth Taylor to, say, Kathy Bates.”

“Who wouldn’t,” says Christian.

“No, not Elizabeth Taylor,” says Trudie. “Not quite.”

Trudie squints, studying Rachael’s disappointed expression a moment more. “You’re Scarlet O’Hara,” she says, proud of herself. “Look just like her. Small, but put together. Those eyes. The little waist. Without the accent, of course—or the hoop skirt.”

“You picking up a pattern here?” I ask Christian, under my breath. “Liz Taylor, Vivien Leigh. Not exactly shrinking violets.”

“Ball busters. Old, too” says Christian.

“Stop it, she’ll hear you,” I whisper.

“Too late,” says Rachael.

“He meant that in the nicest possible way, I’m sure,” I say, frowning at Christian.

Trudie looks at me, confused. “I say something wrong?” she says to Rachael. “I thought everyone loves Scarlet O’Hara.”

“Not at all, darling. Scarlet was lovely. A little shrill at times. A bit needy. Manipulative, perhaps.” She looks over to me and Christian, both of us smirking. “Oh, shut up, you two,” she says.

I hold out my hands. “Didn’t say a word.”

Rachael turns back to Trudie, lowers her head slightly and slides her lips past the girl’s. “Who would *you* like me to be, Trudie dear?” she says in a husky whisper.

Trudie stops smiling and blinks three times, the importance of her response now apparent. “Well,” she says, tentatively, “I did have this massive crush on that British chick on that old TV spy show.” She looks past Rachael, thinking. “You know—black leather and Judo? Hot.” Her eyes lock back on Rachael. She purses those thick, red, button-shaped lips, and furrows her forehead. “Right?”

Christian grins, turn his head slightly, and says into my ear, “That was a home run.”

“We’ll see,” I say. “We’ve been down this road before. Ball looks like it will make the left field wall,” I motion with my hand from right to left, “then it swings foul.”

Rachael arches her eyebrows. “Emma Peele? Dianna Riggs in *The Avengers*.” She takes two fingers of one hand and taps Trudie’s lips. “Right answer,” she says. “Now, stop worrying. You just sit back and let Ms. Peele take over.”

Trudie closes her eyes. Rachael leans over and draws the tip of her tongue very slowly down the girl’s neck, past her small, bare, silver hoop-pierced breasts, down the flat of her stomach, past the little mound of white powder. Using her teeth, she undoes the top snap of Trudie’s jeans, exposing a small tattoo of a scorpion, claws up, stinger coiled. Rachael smiles as though she’s been reunited with an old friend, kisses each claw, then gives the stinger a little bite. Trudie lets out a low moan and arches her back. Rachael slides her lips back up Trudie’s stomach, sniffs the powder, and traces her mouth around her belly button.

“Not giggling now, are you?” says Rachael, resting her head on Trudie’s stomach.

I swallow hard.

Christian grunts and says to me, “Rachael’s playing that little lesbian girl like a piano.”

“Bravo, maestro,” I whisper.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here, straight guy,” says Christian, handing me the baggie with the Ketamine, “and suppose that you’re finding this display highly entertaining.”

I take the baggie, tap some on to my wrist. “How tremendously intuitive of you,” I say, then bend forward and bump. “Thanks.” I hand it back to him.

“Who is she, anyway?”

“The feisty brunette is my wife, Rachael.”

Christian clicks his tongue. “Smart ass.”

“She’s Trudie. Directs an art gallery up in Baltimore,” I say. “Walked right up to us on the dance floor last night and wedged herself in. Just broke up with her girlfriend and came down to drown her sorrows.”

“Doing a pretty good job of it,” says Christian. He leans back and drapes his arms across the top of the sofa. The beads woven into his braided extensions clack together. He seems calm and measured—must be the K.

“So, gay man, nothing about this Sapphic sideshow appeals? Not even a little?” I say, holding my thumb and index finger close together. We look over at the girls. Rachael is working tip of her tongue in ever-smaller concentric circles around Trudie’s left breast. Trudie parts her lips and draws in a long, low, lungful of air through her clenched teeth.

“Wouldn’t say that,” says Christian. “Women still hold a—what’s the word—*nostalgic* charm for me. I used to be married to one, remember?”

“Right,” I say. “Speaking of married, where’s that husband of yours?”

“Eric?” Christian looks up toward the ceiling. “In one of your bedrooms, I expect. Entertaining or being entertained.”

“And yet here you sit with me, watching the girls.” I wag my finger at him. “I’m beginning to wonder about you.”

He shrugs. “I’ll be along soon. The boys aren’t going anywhere. Besides, this is special.”

I nod. “The way things are proceeding? Unprecedented.”

“Plus,” he says, lowering his voice, “I need to see how it turns out for you.”

A ripple of excitement and anxiety shoot through me. “You mean after all these years of hearing about you and our other friend’s sex-capades—the three-ways, four-ways, orgies, sex in sex clubs, sex in public bathrooms, in parks, in truck stops—have I left anything out?”

“There was that time in the cab on the way back from the Manhole.”

“Of course,” I say. “So now you want to see if Rachael and I might finally score, huh?”

“Score,” he says, making a face like he just inhaled pepper spray. “Sounds so *tawdry* when you say it.”

“Listen.” I squirm. “I have to ask you something. This is a little embarrassing, but was there a time, like maybe the first time, when you felt, you know, like maybe you didn’t know if, you know, how you’d—do?”

Christian leans away and looks me over. “Are you kidding me?”

I clamp my hand over his mouth. “Keep it down.”

He pushes my hand away. “I thought this was *it* for you straight guys.”

“It is. It’s the holy-frickin’ grail.”

“So?”

“I’m always a little nervous the first time. Takes me a while, and that’s with *one* woman. Don’t you guys ever have trouble?”

“It’s different with boys. Besides, if we can’t give, we can always receive.”

I stare at the floor and nod. “Right. Forgot about that.”

He pokes my arm with his finger. “Oh Nicky. You could at least wait for the performance to get the performance anxiety.”

“By then it could be too late.”

Rachael takes Trudie’s nipple ring between her teeth and gives it a tug. “Oww!” says Trudie. “You magnificent bitch. That made me wet.”

I say, “I want to *want* to, not to have to. You know what I mean?”

Christian closes his eyes and shakes his head. “It’s too late and I’m too high to know what you mean. All I know is that you had better want to have to, and soon.”

Rachael says, “What in the world could you two be talking about that would be more interesting than this?”

“She’s got a point,” says Christian.

“My turn,” Trudie says.

Rachael sits back on her haunches and smiles. “I have a better idea,” she says, looking at me. She pats the floor next to Trudie. My heart races. “Me?” I say, looking at Trudie for some signal that it’s okay.

“Brother, you’re on,” says Christian.

“Interesting,” says Trudie, squinting. She gets up to her knees next to Rachael. They sit there smiling like silent sirens.

Christian nudges me with his elbow. “Stop thinking and get in there, boy. That’s as close to a green light as you’re going to get.”

“I thought gay men were supposed to be so sensitive.”

“When it comes to this, we’re pigs—gay or straight.” I lean forward to get up, but Christian catches my forearm. “One more thing.”

“What?” I say, annoyed.

“Thought you should know—there’s ground up Viagra in the K.”

I bite my lower lip. “Viagra? Does it really work?”

“Like a charm.”

“You might have mentioned.” I sigh, relieved. “But thanks, anyway.”

Christian pinches my cheek. “Who loves ya’ baby?”

My heart pounding like a bass drum, I slide off the sofa and lie down on my back between Rachael and Trudie, cradling my head in my intertwined fingers.

“Comfortable?” says Rachael. She hands Trudie the vial. “Here, you do it.”

Trudie takes it and bends over my chest. “How much?” she asks. I can smell her hair, the sweat from all the dancing and underneath that, a hint of floral.

Rachael takes her hand and shakes it. “Just enough.”

I feel the powder collect on my sternum. Gentle music throbs and pulses and my heart finds the rhythm and locks in. The edges of the room blur and underneath me, the floor rocks gently, like swells in the ocean. “Whoa,” I say, “feeling that K.” Rachael takes Trudie’s other

hand and starts working it up and down my chest, across my stomach. “Quite the little alchemist, isn’t she?” I say to Trudie.

“Don’t know what an alchemist is,” says Trudie, “but if it means somebody used to getting their way, yes she is.”

Rachael doesn’t say anything, just smiles. Perfect white teeth hover above me.

“Haven’t felt a man this way in a long time,” says Trudie, watching her hand being directed up and down.

“It’s like riding a bicycle,” says Rachael. “You just let go,” she releases Trudie’s hand, “and your body,” she leans over and nibbles Trudie’s earlobe, “somehow, it does the rest.”

Trudie pauses a moment, then glides all ten fingernails across my chest. I break out in goose bumps. Delicious.

“Nice frame on this bike,” says Trudie. “You shave your chest?”

“No, I wax,” says Rachael.

Trudie snickers. “You remind me a little of my ex. A gorgeous smart ass.” She reaches down and undoes the top two buttons of my jeans.

“Well,” says Rachael. “It’s all coming back to you rather nicely.”

I consider some clever response, but get the distinct impression that anything I say will ruin the moment. Instead, I look over at Christian and open my eyes wide in mock surprise. He winks, takes his braids with both hands and draws them behind his head.

“Well, now. Interesting. Suddenly, *much* more interesting,” he says, smiling and leaning forward on the sofa.

A couple of men headed from the bathroom to the kitchen stop dead in their tracks. Trudie presses her hand under my jeans a few inches. Horizontal slivers of wan early morning light slip through the blinds and play across the women’s faces. Rachael and Trudie’s lips press together, twist, part, then rejoin. I gulp again, take in a long, full breath.

“Don’t forget about this,” says Rachael, tapping my chest just next to the crystal, “Or this,” she says, pressing on Trudies hand, moving it farther down my pants.

“I hadn’t,” says Trudie. “I won’t.” She bends over and I feel her hot breath against the base of my neck.

“Lower,” says Rachael. “Much.”

“I know,” says Trudie. There’s a quick rush of air on my chest as she sniffs, replaced by something warm, then wet—her lips and tongue—working down.

I close my eyes. A sizzling, crimson ball of light spins and sparks, draws in on itself, then explodes into jagged shards. When I open my eyes, there’s Rachael, looking down on me, smiling. She holds her little finger out, a shiny red nail just over my nostril. “Here,” she says. I lift my head up and sniff. There’s the burn, followed by a rush and a pang—a hunger. Whatever misgivings I had have been immolated. In its place, there’s desire—urgent and searing hot.

I get up and place my hands under both their arms, drawing them to me.

“Ladies, shall we?” I say.

“Yeah. Like, immediately,” says Trudie, rubbing my chest with one hand, Rachael’s back with the other. “Before the lesbo gene kicks in.”

“Here, here,” says Christian, clapping.

“Rooms upstairs are probably occupied, but a couple of half-naked women ought to send the boys scurrying,” says Rachael.

With a woman tucked under each of my arms, we turn and head up the stairs.

Throw the Switch

The success of Big Bark, my acceptance into Rachael's world, the acquisition of our new house, all our new friends—even our encounter with Trudie—shoved my confidence level into orbit somewhere above the ionosphere. The story of my life seemed to be in the hands of an author with a predilection for happy endings. For the first time, I developed something approaching a swagger. Over the next few years, with money coming in and Anna able to handle many of the day-to-day responsibilities of running Big Bark, Rachael and I threw the switch and completed the circuit.

I grew my hair down to my shoulders, got an arm-band tattoo in the pattern of a Greek key and, in the manner of many of our friends, shaved my chest. I hit the gym with a new intensity, often working out with one of our gym-rat friends who showed me state-of-the-art routines designed to get the maximum bang for the buck in the places that count most: shoulders, abs, chest, and arms.

Rachael and I got a hold of the latest dance re-mixes and listened to little else. As a drummer, the multilayered rhythms used to construct (rather than compose) the best of house music fascinated me. Deejays and producers became the new rock stars of the dance circuit. The cult of the deejay was born and we bought right into it. We compiled a wish-list of the most popular and exotic parties and planned our social lives around an ever-expanding list of events.

We were not alone. The circuit scene was exploding. Every month, it seemed there were more parties in more places. There was even a publication, "Circuit Noise," with splashy ads for upcoming parties, featuring lasers, disco balls and half-naked men, containing hard-hitting and incisive exposes with titles such as, "The Party Diet: back out the carbs and jack up the fun!"

I had disappeared into a glitter filled crucible and emerged as a new and extremely rare sub-sub species: straight circuit boy.

First up: The Black and Blue Party in Montreal. Rachael, Christian, Eric and I joined twelve thousand people to dance under one enormous roof that made the Warsaw Ballroom in Miami Beach look like someone's spare bedroom. Cirque du Soleil performers and bungee jumpers dropped from the ceiling; deejay Junior Vasquez soaked the whole place down with his beats and then wrung us out like a dishrag. We met boys from Boston, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, London, and Australia. It seemed to me that the Black and Blue had drained most of the hip, attractive people from all of Canada—including gorgeous French-Canadian women who wore nothing but spray paint and glitter and were name Genevieve. Our hotel became a dorm, our doors flung open all the time, the party rolling from one room the next.

That summer, we went to New York for the gay pride celebration. We stayed with Ramon at his place in the heart of Chelsea. Ramon was quite the host, supremely attentive. In fact, he never seemed to sleep or eat. One day, the laconic deejay that Ramon had hired and installed in his loft, played, with the assistance of Ramon's meth, an uninterrupted twelve-hour set. I, wanting to be a good guest, ended up dancing on the coffee table for much of it.

On New Year's Eve, we returned to South Beach, which had been busy since our first visit transforming itself into the hippest place on the planet. A group of us had dinner at the newly-renovated Delano hotel, amid the surreal Phillipe-Starke-designed, gauze-draped lobby and the Alice-in-Wonderland inspired oversized chess pieces out by the pool. In the bathroom, I urinated next to a grey-sharkskin-suit-clad Jack Nicholson.

Another night, we ate at the red-hot Pacific Time restaurant, located on a resurgent Lincoln Road Mall. At the next table over sat Cher, who looked like a *kabuki*, porcelain doll version of herself.

Later, fifteen of us rang in the New Year at Salvation. We ordered champagne. I lay on the floor and took a picture of everyone from below holding their flutes together, a disco ball center frame.

After Salvation, with Christian resting his chin on my shoulder like a slumbering dog, we cabbed it over to Hombre, “the club of last resort,” as Ramon referred to it. Hombre was a tiny hole in the wall with fog blown in so thick on the dance floor you couldn’t see a thing, which, at the bar, revealed itself to be a blessing. There were drag queens, gay boys, gang-bangers, club kids, strippers and one hulking, hairy, glaring bald guy who looked as though he just been asked to leave the set of an Ed Wood movie.

The next morning at ten, Rachael and I did the vampire-walk back to the hotel, bathed in tropical sunshine. We were *so* last night. She wore a little dominatrix number, complete with black boots, short leather skirt, and fishnets. I had dropped my shirt in the bathroom at Hombre, took a look at the condition of the floor and decided to let it rest in peace. I was down to my distressed leather pants and my “stay high” shades: ostrich-skin framed sunglasses with yellow lenses which strapped around my head and attach with Velcro. We traipsed right through the hotel lobby to the lounge where they served continental breakfast each morning. “After all, it’s included,” Rachael pointed out. We sat down to pick at bran muffins, sip orange juice and watch Oprah on TV, right next to a family of four from Brazil who did their best not to notice.

In the fall of the following year, we met Christian, Eric, Ramon, Wes and Randall in Mykonos for the Twelve Gods Party. I showed off by ordering from the *taverna* menus in Greek. The party was held under a spray of stars at the new Hard Rock Café, cut into the side of a craggy hill. We spent our days high on X at Go-Go Bar, an open-air lounge and pool set on the edge of a precipitous cliff overlooking Super Paradise Beach. (*Love* that name, as if ordinary paradise wouldn’t do.)

I ran myself down and got the flu but managed to fend it off with frequent hits of crystal, whose base ingredient, I learned from Ramon, is the decongestant Pseudophedrine.

Afterwards, Rachael, Christian (and his blond, braided, beaded hair), Eric, and I went on to Istanbul to see a friend who now had a prominent position at the American Consulate. We got the tour of gay Istanbul, still very much on the down low: lots of straight guys tired of chasing

virtuous Turkish women, cruising dark little subterranean clubs for dick and rent boys. Turkish culture, it turns out, is rather convoluted in its attitudes towards sexuality. Though men often turn to other men for sex, calling someone gay was an enormous insult, one that would likely get you knifed. With that in mind, we tried our best to ignore the male Turkish soldiers, who often strolled, fully armed, down the street arm-in-arm with other male soldiers, as if they were out on patrol with their high school sweethearts.

On our final night in Turkey, Christian, in the mists of yet another skirmish with his hair, decided to remove his extensions. The frizzled mess that remained looked as though he swam too close to a nuclear power plant. Eric was appalled, but we convinced him to go out on the town. We ended up at the casino in the Hyatt wearing ill-fitting loaner blazers, getting drunk, sitting at the blackjack table next to some super-rich, humorless Saudis who had a stack of chips as high as a three-layer wedding cake. They couldn't stop staring at Rachael or the cute, mini-skirted croupiers who were relieved at regular intervals by another set of cute mini-skirted croupiers who marched in single file with military precision. We dropped \$200 in five straight losing hands which, for some reason (I think it must have had something to do with the continuous stream of free vodka and soda brought to us by the cute, mini-skirted waitresses) I found so funny I spilled my cocktail across the length of the green felt table. The Saudi guys were not amused.

The next New Years Eve, Ramon, celebrating his six-figure contract to lend his name to a group of upscale boutique AIDS clinics, invited us to Rio de Janeiro. We dressed in white and joined the two million others gathered on the edge of Ipanema Beach, where we enjoyed displays of fireworks and black magic courtesy of the *mocumba*, witch doctors, who spun and danced and chanted—a harbinger of what we'd do later, packed into a stifling dance club.

In the evenings, Ramon made a habit of disappearing for hours, often not returning to our hotel until the wee hours. He claimed he was out jogging. Back in New York, his latest boyfriend figured otherwise. They argued on the phone incessantly. By now, Ramon was doing a ton of crystal, excessive even by the excessive standards of our group. But Ramon was blessed

with the constitution of a pack mule. He could stay up for days, grab a few hours sleep and appear rested and composed. Maybe the rigors of medical school had prepared him for a life of drug abuse. Still, Rio was infamous for combining its easy attitudes regarding sex with easy access to the same. The incidence of AIDS here was on the rise, and I had to wonder if Ramon, the famous AIDS researcher, might be as reckless as he was indiscreet.

The following summer, Christian and Eric invited me and Rachael to their house in Provincetown, a sliver of sand and dunes at the very tip of Cape Cod, for many decades an artist community and gay Mecca. We brought along *The Wart*. Immediately, we connected with the place—its natural beauty, the lack of pretence, the way everyone of every persuasion blended.

One night, 150 of us went out on a Fourth of July disco cruise aboard a whale watch boat. Christmas lights were strung along the deck, the Milky Way sparkled overhead, music thumped, flags snapped in the wind, boys perched, posed and danced everywhere. I spent half the night sandwiched between Rachael and a lovely blond lesbian from Boston who kept pressing a bumper of K (among her other ample attributes) into my hand, the other half sitting on deck, tripping, watching the sky go from indigo to amber to vermillion. When the sun broke the horizon, the deejay played the Beatles' "Here Comes The Sun" and I, overcome by the poignancy and the pharmaceuticals, burst into tears.

We had intended to stay in Provincetown for four days, but ended up staying ten. God bless Anna. We found a little cottage with a sweet garden off Bradford Street and fell in love with it. We ran the numbers and determined that the rental income would pay for the mortgage, so we made a down payment.

Back at home, we began hosting dinner parties, cocktail parties—parties of all sort, the biggest of which was held on Rachael's thirty-sixth birthday, the day after Halloween. Over a hundred people attended. Rachael, Christian, and I dressed as the three Lizas, circa *Cabaret*, complete with page-boy wigs and matching flapper dresses. Only Rachael shaved her legs. One couple came as Cruella deVille and a Dalmation. They had a three-way with another guest in our

shower. The next day, it took me hours and a whole can of turpentine to clean the theatrical grease paint off the tiles.

Jenny, a lesbian with a remarkable resemblance to the actress Sean Young, sat on my lap most of the night, until she drank too much and passed out in the living room. A very muscular man I'd never met before helped me carry her up three flights of stairs and put her into our bathtub, where we removed her wine-stained shirt and, while he held her hand and I tried not to stare at her breasts, waited until she revived enough to call her bull-dyke girlfriend. She and I carried Jenny, shirtless, back down the steps, through the crowded party, out the front door, across the street and into her car.

I have no idea what our neighbors—a government attorney, a professor, and their families—must have made of us. There just wasn't enough time or energy to make a big effort with them or anything else, including my music. I started bowing out of gigs, stopped practicing and eventually told the guys to find another drummer.

How could being an anonymous drummer in a lame wedding band compare to being known world-wide as half of the straight couple who parties with the boys? Our pictures cropped up in gay magazines and websites, not to mention conversations. More than once, in locales as far-flung as Amsterdam, Sydney, and London, men who'd never met each other before found they had "Rachael and Nick" in common. We had become an entire subculture's six degrees of separation.

I had substituted a life filled with self-doubt for one brimming with confidence, of self-pity and meagerness for self-indulgence and plenty, of isolation for inclusion, of denial for decadence and anonymity for a kind of celebrity. I didn't know where my life was headed, but one thing was for

sure: Against the Busby Berkley spectacle of the circuit, presented in its wide-screen, Technicolor, Panavision, Smell-O-Rama, Cinerama, Technirama, 3-D, Glow-in-the Dark, multi-story IMAX format, the rest of life was, in comparison, about as engaging as a faded black and

white snapshot.

Trying To Keep It Straight

If my new life had resulted in greater self-assurance, I can't say it did much to clear up my gender confusion issues. In fact, things were a bit topsy-turvy in that department: I'd married a woman who was in many respects (with the exception of a few key physical attributes) a gay man, my social network was comprised almost exclusively of homosexuals, and I was courted by lesbians. Life in the circuit only helped to muddle matters even more by providing a series of encounters which often left me shaking my head.

One afternoon during tea dance during our first visit to Provincetown, I managed to catch the eye of a woman who was accompanied by her gay friend. She was tall and curvaceous—a cross between Sofia Lauren and Charro. And, unlike the rest of us who'd come straight from the beach in our bathing suits and flip-flops, she was dressed as if she had just finished up a shopping spree at Bloomingdale's: a form-fitting off-white dress, spike heels and designer bag. She made her way over to me and, before I knew it, she, Rachael and I we were locked in a passable imitation of the lambada.

Rachael leaned over to the woman. "What's your name, honey?"

"Valentina," she said in a heavy Spanish accent.

Her voice was sort of husky. I liked that. Why was Rachael smirking?

Just then, Valentina's friend danced over to check on her. She leaned over to him and tried to whisper, but I could hear.

"*Mira*," she said. "Leave him to me. He's as *ess*straight as an arrow."

Rachael bit her upper lip. What the hell was so funny? This bodacious Latin bombshell obviously thought I was hot. Rachael broke away and joined the rest of our group, including Christian and Eric, all of whom began to point and natter.

With Rachael's out of the picture, Valentina apparently felt she had received permission to unleash all of her ample attributes upon me. There was much grinding and squeezing and her hot breath on my neck. When Valentina took my shirt and rolled it up to my armpits, there was a round of applause from Rachael and our friends, who had now formed a circle around us on the dance floor. Emboldened, Valentina spun me around so that I faced away from her, slid the top of her dress down and began to rake her breasts, remarkably taut for their size, up and down my back, and then, spinning me half-way around, my front.

Nothing even remotely like this had ever happened to me before. I glanced over at Rachael for her reaction. She had her head buried in Eric's shoulder, laughing uncontrollably. Oh, she thought that was funny, did she? I'd show her funny. I took Valentina's breasts in my hands and buried my face between them. Even through the mounds of mammary I could make out the roar of laughter.

Rachael came over and, much to Valentina's dismay and obvious disappointment led me back to Christian and Eric.

"What?" I asked her. "Gay men and lesbians can maul each other anytime, anyplace and it's okay, but when straight people do it, it's funny?"

"It is when one of them is straight and the other—*isn't*," Christian said.

"Who *isn't*?" I asked.

Rachael patted my cheek. "Oh, come on. That voice? Those tits?"

"That *outfit*," said Eric.

"Va-len-tina?" said Rachael, deepening her voice.

"If you really want to see her again," said Christian, "you can catch her at Trannie Shack on Tuesday night."

Oh brother. I looked across the dance floor. There she was, staring back, practically batting those long eyelashes.

Then there were the encounters that showed me that, as unusual as were my circumstances and lifestyle, they were by no means the most extreme.

One night at Club Amnesia during Winter Party in Miami Beach, I was up in the VIP lounge alone, sprawled luxuriously across two cushions and resting my back against the overstuffed arms. A man drifted over and stood directly in front of me, staring. He was a little long in the tooth for the circuit. Some of the hair on his chest had grayed and he has a slight middle-age paunch extending over the waistband of his jeans. He took four or five wobbly steps over to me and stands, unsteady, not three feet away.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, slurring the word *beautiful* badly, like a bad actor’s impersonation of a drunk.

This certainly wasn’t the first time I’d been hit on by some trashed man at a nightclub. Normally, I’d have smiled and moved away, but this sofa’s was too comfortable to just give up on it so easily.

“Thanks,” I say and look away.

He takes a step to me. “So, you alone?”

Still smiling and in my breeziest voice, I say “No, just taking a break.”

He stood there staring at me, struggling to form a thought.

“You know, I could make you feel really good,” he says.

“I’m leaving in a few minutes,” I say.

“I’ve got a much better idea.” He sat down with a thud next to me.

I shifted my head and body to the right and hard up against the arm of the sofa. I could feel his hot breath against my ear. A few feet away sat two young blond girls smoking cigarettes and looking bored. I tapped the nearest one on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I’m having a hard time with this guy. Do you mind if I sit with you for a while.”

The girl took a drag from her cigarette, looked over at her girlfriend and said, “Yeah, it’s okay.”

I got up and quickly slide in between the two girls.

“Thanks,” I say, “he was persistent.”

“Not your type, huh?” said the girl on my left.

Now I was faced with another dilemma: whether to come clean with these girls. This was turning into my own twisted version of *Victor Victoria*: straight man flees gay man by impersonating gay man to straight girls.

I decide to fess up. “Actually, he’s not my gender. I’m straight.”

“Really?”

“Yep. My wife and friends are downstairs.”

“Wow.” She looked me over. “Now I’m really sorry. He can be such a pain, especially when he’s high like this.”

“You know him?” I asked.

“Oh I know him all right,” she says laughing. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t. He was driving *us* crazy, so when he saw you sit down I told him to go for it. Sorry about that.”

I shrug. “Honest mistake.”

The man, seeing the momentary pause in the conversation as in opportunity, leaned towards me, but before he could get into groping range, the girl on my left jumped halfway off of the sofa and swatted his hand.

“*Dad,*” she said, “he’s straight. Leave him alone!”

I did a classic slow take, swiveling my head towards the girl. “I’m sorry, but did you just call him dad?”

“Yeah,” she said, “*that’s* my father.”

“So, do you guys do this often?”

“Yeah,” she said, taking another drag on her cigarette. “Some families go out to brunch. My sister and I like to come out with him to the clubs. It’s fun, except when he gets like this.”

Dad had drifted over to my right and was now standing in front his other daughter.

“Cindy, give me a cigarette, would you honey?” he asked.

Cindy pulled a cigarette and lighter from her purse, put it in his mouth and lit it. As he puffed, Cindy placed her left hand on the inside of his thigh and slowly slid it upward, until her hand cupped the bottom of his crotch. I turned to look at daddy’s little girl. She smiled back at me.

“I think it’s time to find my friends,” I said, bolting out of the sofa, down the steps and onto the more familiar freakiness of the dance floor.

There was the gorgeous girl who sat at on top of a speaker at Liquid in Miami Beach, casually sucking on the toe of her twin brother; the woman at Twilo in New York who couldn’t take her eyes off me and who finally got up the nerve to approach me only to ask if I would be interested in meeting her gay ex-husband. I could go on. The effect of these encounters, combined with the overall extreme nature of our lifestyle, was that, gradually, what was once shocking became, if not mundane, then pretty damn close to normal. And that made what most people considered normal, pretty damn close to stultifying.

Now, Rachael and I had to answer an important question: What happens when a couple who has scratched the surface of almost everything deal with the seven-year itch?

Enough

One chilly, clear night in early Spring, Rachael and I sit in the Jacuzzi just outside the kitchen door, steam rising up, her head leaning back against my arm.

“Feels good to do nothing,” I say.

“Yeah.” She looks at me. “Your birthday is coming up pretty soon. A big one.”

“Guess so.”

“What do you want?”

I roll my eyes. “Want?”

“I was thinking a party in New York. Happens to be Gay Pride Weekend.”

“How appropriate.”

“Christian would host it at his place in the City. Would you like that? A big party?”

“Sure,” I said. “That would be nice.”

She paused a moment. “Are we doing okay?”

“Better than okay, I’d say.”

“Everything’s good, right?”

The obvious answer to her question was yes—hell yes. By any measurable standard we had a wonderful life. And yet, in quiet moments such as these, I had the sense that there was a flaw in the architecture of our life. Not in the façade; that was flawless. But something deep in the foundation had developed a stress fracture. Given just the right circumstances everything might come straight down. The key was, I suppose, to avoid those circumstances.

“Everything’s great.” I say, “What are you worried about?”

“Everything. I’m a worrier,” she says.

“I noticed. Try to relax. Like this, see?” I sink a little deeper in the tub. I sigh. “All of this. It’s because of you. You know that, right?”

She shrugs. “You’ve worked hard for it, too.”

“Sure. But I couldn’t have done this myself. I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“My job is to stop worrying. Yours is to start believing. So you feel good?”

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“Can’t tell sometimes. You don’t show much, either way. No anger, no exuberance.

“Exuberance? Hate to tell you, this is about as exuberant as I get. Angry? Takes a lot.”

Rachael looks away, dissatisfied.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“This party. You don’t seem very excited about it.”

“That’s not true. Who wouldn’t want to celebrate their fortieth birthday at some fabulous place in Manhattan? What do you want me to do, cartwheels?”

“Why not? You live in the middle. You don’t say what you feel most of the time I have no idea what’s going on with you. Makes me feel like a thrashing, crazy person. Not that I’m not. I know I can be controlling, but goddamn I’ve never seen anyone so locked down.”

I never thought of myself as locked down. Attenuated, was more like it. Maybe my inclination towards being reserved was in direct response to my grandmother’s disinclination to exhibit the slightest evidence of it. I’ve always admired people who could just put it out there to the world—people who didn’t edit themselves. But there was always fear mixed in with the admiration. Could the quiet, sensitive boy ever stand up to someone like that? And if he did, what would happen to him?

“You’re not the first to bring this up,” I say. “Though you may be the first to do so soaking naked in a hot tub.”

“See, there you go,” she says, stiffening, sending a shock wave of steamy water over the lip of the tub. “When the conversation gets too close, you get slippery.”

“Sorry. It’s an old trick I picked up along the way. When things get hot, you hide behind anything you can find—a table, a sofa, even a joke.” I dip my head beneath the water and

resurface.

“You’re not a kid now. You’re married.” Rachael shakes her head. “That grandmother of yours. Wish I had met her.”

“That makes one of us.”

“She sure did a number on you. At least she didn’t hit you like my father.”

“Sometimes I wish she had. I could have just hated her, nice and simple.”

“There’s nothing nice and simple about having your parents beat you. Just ask my sisters: the hippy environmentalist, the school teacher wound up so tight she might implode, and the crazy bird lady that lives down the hall. Four sisters, right? Not one of us has children. Now what’s the likelihood of that?”

“Let’s just say it’s statistically improbable.”

“That’s why it drives me crazy when you tell me how nice my parents are. Mr. and Mrs. hit now and ask questions later.”

“Have you noticed that the only problems we have regarding your parents is when I say something nice about them? Maybe they’ve changed. Maybe watching their children grow has healed whatever it was in them that made them so angry. That can happen. Or so I understand.”

Rachael nods her head and looks as though she’s just confirmed an old suspicion. “So that’s what this is about.”

“Huh?”

“Why don’t you just come out and say it? You wish you were with a woman who wasn’t so fucked up. Someone who could give you children. Is that what’s going on here?”

“I thought what’s going on here is that we were soaking in the hot tub.”

“I knew it. You want kids.”

I’d always been ambivalent about children. I hadn’t been witness to a lot of good, stable parenting. And with Rachael being adamant about not having them, I’d put them out of my mind.

“We talked about this a long time ago,” I say. “Between your childhood and mine, it’s better not to go there. Remember?”

“People change. You just said so.”

“People—maybe. Not us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, who says that a change would be for the better?” I put my arm around her and draw her to me, then find one of her feet with both of mine and sandwich it between them. “Why risk what we have now?” I kiss her ear. “Besides, you’re the one who always says the kid would be born with disco balls for eyes.”

Rachael frowns. “It’s okay to want things, to love things, to hate things, to get angry.”

“I know.”

“When we’re with friends, you don’t say too much. Why is that?”

“You do a pretty good job for both of us.”

“True enough. That’s the only reason?”

“I prefer to observe.”

“So tell me, Mr. emotional peeping Tom, what are you feeling right this moment?”

I don’t say anything, but the image that comes to mind is standing with my parents and a bunch of their musician friends staring at me, trying to get me to sing. As a kid, no one could make me sing. It’s more than shyness. It’s the fear that if I tear open the packaging, the contents may spill out—and keep on spilling.

A few seconds pass, then Rachael says, “Never mind. It’s like I asked you to saw off an arm.”

Pretty close.

She says, “Maybe I’m just used to gay men. Most of them wear their emotions on their sleeve. Or, if they’re your mom’s friends, their poofy blouses.” She reaches over and tugs my earlobe. “So, now what?”

“What do you mean?” I say, defensive.

“I mean, I wonder what’s next.”

“Oh. Hell,” I say, “I never expected *this*, much less a *next*. Can’t this be enough?”

“Hmm.” The edges of her mouth turn down. “Never thought of that before.”

Until this moment, neither had I.

Rachael and I take deep breaths, slip down into water up to our chins and stare up at the sky.

To See the Wizard

At the time, I thought our little conversation in the hot tub was simply Rachael's call for reassurance. Looking back, I see things differently. Veiled by her apparent insecurity may have been a request—for me to take charge—to tell her there were going to have to be some changes in our life. We weren't kids anymore. It was time to start thinking about pulling out of the passing lane. We needed to, as W.C. Fields put it, "take the bull by the tail and face the situation."

Of course, suggesting so would have required me to visit a strange, parallel universe—one in which men told women what to do. Besides, our lifestyle wasn't exactly conducive to protracted periods of introspection or long-range planning. We had only a couple of months until my birthday and plenty of arrangements to make.

So, we packed up whatever misgivings we might have had about the future and headed off to Oz. We arranged to stay at Sabrina's studio in the City for the weekend while she was away on a sales trip to Brazil. On our first night there, we decided to take it easy and rest up for what would be a full weekend of festivities. In those days, taking it easy could also mean inviting Christian and Eric over and taking a dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms. My previous experience with mushrooms had been light and enjoyable, like a mild hit of laughing gas at the dentist (albeit one which lasted several hours).

I've heard it said that one of the interesting properties of hallucinogenic substances is their ability to root out and amplify our deepest feelings. If that's the case, then I should have taken what happened that night as an omen. We boiled the mushrooms into a tea the color (and aroma) of dirty dish water and sipped it down. Almost immediately, Rachael felt nauseated and then became violently ill. She ended up falling asleep with her head in my lap. Christian and Eric felt nothing and left early.

There I sat, slumped on Sabrina's futon, enjoying the quiet as I stroked Rachael's head while she slept. At the time, Sabrina was going through her I'm-edgy-so-I-only-wear-black phase. The statement was also reflected in her design choices. Her studio was well appointed, but decorated in a subdued palette of dark gray and black. The effect was slightly macabre. I felt not the slightest effects from the mushrooms and was ready to gently lift Rachael's head off my lap and get ready for bed, when I noticed, directly in front of me on the black-lacquered dresser, a black-and-white portrait of Sabrina set in a brushed-silver frame. I hadn't seen it before.

Sabrina, smiling slyly and looking as lovely as always, gazed back at me. And then, without warning, the image began to morph. Very slowly, her smile drooped to a frown, as if someone I couldn't see or hear was whispering in her ear the saddest story ever told. Her eyes lost their joyous luster and welled with tears. I watch, transfixed, as the portrait, which just a moment before had portrayed Sabrina as utterly composed and content, was transformed into a lament. Tears streamed down Sabrina's cheeks, flowing off the bottom edge of the photo and down the frame. I shook my head and forced myself to look away, hoping the vision could be erased. But when I looked back, she was just as I had left her—grief stricken and mournful.

I sat there staring at the portrait a long time, waiting to see what would happen next. But nothing did. Her tears kept coming and coming, until, finally, exhausted, I drifted off into a restless sleep filled with dreams I wouldn't remember.

Baby Steps

“Hey, birthday boy—you lost?”

I turn from the dance floor and there he is—another clone—baby-faced, blonde, shirtless and muscular. He smiles affably, waiting for an answer. I’ve met him half a dozen times at different parties. I should remember his name but I don’t. Instead, I buy some time. “Am I lost? As in, am I having an existential crisis? Feeling morally and spiritually bankrupt?”

He raises one eyebrow. “As in, are you so fucked up you lost your wife and friends on the dance floor?”

“Ahhh. The answer is yes.”

“To everything?”

“Just about.”

“Then, let’s finish the job.”

“How so?”

He pats his pocket. “Got a little something-something right here.”

I give up on remembering his name and consider his offer. The ecstasy has all but worn off; only the slightest tinge remains, soon to be replaced entirely by fatigue. I’d felt the shadowy edges closing in, forcing me off the dance floor to the relative quiet of the mezzanine.

“Must look like I need it, huh?” I say.

“Way too serious for the occasion.”

I’m at a familiar crossroad. Pass, and I’ll straighten up soon, call it a night—before dawn—and spare myself days a day of feeling like I need dialysis. I look out over the packed dance floor. On the other hand, tomorrow *is* my birthday. What is it Rachael always says? “More is more.” Besides, this is Saturday night of Pride weekend—prime time. No one I know is going anywhere for a long, long while.

I smile. “Awfully generous of you.”

“Atta’ boy.”

He reaches into the front pocket of his jeans and pulls out the bullet-shaped snuff-snorter attached to a large vial, nearly full of white powder.

“K, I assume?” I ask.

“Yepper.”

He gives the bullet a backwards-forwards twist filling the chamber and brings it up to my nostril. I inhale deeply and jerk my head back as the Ketamine slams against my sinuses. A chemically-tinged sweetness with a hint of vanilla drains down my throat.

“Thanks.” I rub my nose. “I think.”

He smiles. “The gayest straight man in America? He deserves it”.

Now I remember this guy’s name and reputation. Michael Murray, The Ketamine Kid, is notorious for treating his K like a precious commodity, spending hours chopping it up so finely it blasts into your bloodstream like a *blitzkrieg*, sweetening the assault with a little vanilla extract. Michael does some minor-league dealing, but is as proud of his handicraft as any artisan, frequently offering up free samples to the unsuspecting. I’m going down, and soon.

I nod, resigned to my fate. “Five minutes to blast off.”

“It’s not for nothing they call it tripping, my man.”

I watch him administer himself two bumps. If he’s standing in five minutes, he’s an alien. Michael leanings forward, palms down, resting his weight on the railing which runs the length of the nearly-empty mezzanine. He looks on, proud as a lord surveying his land.

“Fierce night,” he says.

Indeed. The crowd is packed chest-to-chest—a mass of color shifting with the music: red to green to white. After several hours of dancing and layering on drugs like stacks of firewood, everyone is settling in for the long haul—distance runners catching a second wind.

“Hey Michael,” I say, “Remember the days when we used to do one hit of X, be home in

bed by 4 a.m., and that was enough?”

Michael cocks his head, then clicks his tongue. “Vaguely.”

The lights flash bright and I squint.

He taps my shoulder. “Come on now, don’t get nostalgic on me. Go home before dawn? Might as well stay home. Junior doesn’t get serious until the sun comes up.”

He has a point. The music is a potent force, especially when it’s delivered by deejay Junior Vasquez: club icon, protégé of Madonna, and volatile diva in his own right. His specialty is blending songs and beats, wrapping them in nearly sub-sonic bass, and slamming them down on the crowd like a giant, percussive fist. When he’s on, Junior creates sounds—sonic booms; droning, jagged low tones; high-pitched shrieks—building them to a punishing crescendo. He takes music and turns it inside out, folds it back on itself. It’s the soundtrack to insanity—powerful as any drug.

The music and lights synchronize and begin another slow build up, a single snare drum snapping slow eighth notes, increasing tempo, faster and faster, measure after measure, blending to a blur of sound and light, bursting to a new plateau, the base line rips air, the crowd screams, leaps, reaches for the sky. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck rise. I laugh out loud, every sense overloaded, overwhelmed. *There it is.* For a moment everything is as it used to be—brilliant, joyous, connected—the X stages a slight comeback, filling me with warmth and euphoria.

“See what I mean?” yells Michael. He waves one hand over his head and spins like a dervish. “You want to get nostalgic about something, wait a few years and get nostalgic about this. *This* is what it’s all about.”

The house lights spin wildly on dozens of criss-crossed aluminum trusses and descend from far above us to rest just above the tallest dancers. Thin strands of green lasers fan out from each side of the club, tracing broad, slashing vertical arcs. At each corner of the dance floor, muscular go-go boys mount four floodlit six-foot square black boxes and begin to sway, detached

and blasé, as the crowd swirls below.

Spectacle—no one delivers it like the boys. I rock side to side with the music. “Proud to be a gay man in America?” I ask.

Michael looks at the podium dancers, then at me. “Bursting with it.”

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. There’s that grinding feeling in my gut again, the one I get just before the house lights come up and I have to step out from the club into the daylight—a pang of dread—the jarring reentry to the other world, the crash, the depression, dragging myself along. This world has always been the opposition of dark and light, but tonight for some reason, the demons have the upper hand.

“It’s the end of the world as we know it,” I say.

“Nah.” His eyes don’t leaving the dance floor. “It’s Gay Pride weekend in New York.”

“The difference being?”

“Whatever it is, it’s amazing.” His attention is fixed on the podium dancer on the far side of the dance floor. “And so is *he*. I’m going to get a closer look. Interested?”

I shake my head no.

“Right,” he says. “Why would you be?” Michael nudges me with his shoulder. “Not that there’s anything wrong with girls.”

I smile. “Wouldn’t go that far.”

He laughs. “I’ll take your word for it. Lost the little woman, huh?”

“Yeah, she must be off baking cookies and pressing my shirt.”

Michael points to the black cotton tank top tucked into the waist band of my leather jeans. “Thought that one looked a little wrinkled.”

“She’s been falling down on the job. Time I sat her down and gave her a talkin’ to.”

Michael shows me his palms. “Give Rachael a talkin’ too? Better you than me, my man.” He takes a step away from me, stops as though he’s forgotten something and says, “By the way, take it from a professional. You better sit your ass down somewhere, and soon.”

Thanks, Michael.

“You can thank me later.” He leans over and plants a kiss on my cheek. “Happy birthday.” I wipe the wet spot with my palm and watch Michael navigate the crowded steps leading down to the dance floor on steady legs, impressive, considering he’s done enough K to bring down a Wildebeest.

It won’t be long now before it hits me like a sharp right cross. I look around for Rachael, beginning at the center of the dance floor though I know it’s unlikely I’ll find her there. That space—downtown—is generally staked out by the largest, highest and horniest boys. Tonight is no exception. Dozens of them have formed a tight, groping conga line, spiraling out from the center like a constellation. Women aren’t welcomed downtown, not even Rachael.

Then I spot her—the femininity set in stark relief against the plane of shirtless men. She’s outfitted in full club regalia: black vinyl combat boots, white leather hot pants, and a studded black leather bra top. Her dark mane of hair is arranged the way I like it best: pulled back, exposing the magnificent face—full lips, dark eyes, brilliant smile. She and Christian are deep in conversation, oblivious to the two-story bank of speakers pounding out the music just above their heads. Rachael bends forward, convulsed with laughter. Christian spots me over Rachael’s shoulder, spins her around and, using the cocktail in his left hand, points up in my direction. They smile and wave for me to come down.

I raise my hand, but at that moment I become viscous, my blood replaced by racing-grade motor oil. The dance floor fractures into angular splinters of color then reforms into a crystalline carousel, spinning clockwise like a dervish. I close my eyes and imagine individual particles of Ketamine teaming up with the Ecstasy, racing through my nervous system like a frenzied Pac Man.

My eyes open and Palladium has been filled with automobile-sized fluffy pom-pom balls made of cotton and anthracite. I reach for the mezzanine’s railing and grasp air. Down on the dance floor, bodies are tinged with spectacular orange and cobalt auras. The music cracks,

sending sparks flying from the ceiling in neon shards. Then, sound fades to a muffled thump and I am suddenly aware of a heartbeat rumbling through my body, down to the dance floor, through the walls and ceiling and catapulted up to the sky.

I am on the move. This fact vexes me because I cannot feel my legs, much less imagine them capable of propulsion. Yet there's no denying the slight rush of air past my face and the flash of smiles and shadows of those I pass. I feel pressure on my arm, glance down and see a hand clutched to it, just above my elbow. I am being led along somewhere by a disembodied hand. Oddly enough, I find this arrangement comforting.

I arrive before a gold, clinky-beaded entranceway. Before me, stands an enormous pale man with a shaved head and a tattoo which runs the entire length of his left arm. His face is emblazoned with jagged Maori warrior tattoos. I blink and now they're gone. Something takes hold of my wrist and turns it so the big man may inspect. I sense this is someone in authority, someone with the ability to make or break my evening—not to mention my arm. I straighten my back and try to focus.

“K or G?” asks the big man. He still has hold of my wrist. The tattoo on his arm, the head of a phoenix rising from the ashes, throbs to the beat of the music.

I open my mouth to answer, but from behind me a voice something like mine says, “It's K. He'll be fine.”

I have become a ventriloquist.

The big man says, “Better be. If he's G'd up and goes down, he's out of here. This is a lounge, not a frickin' emergency room. Had three ambulances here last weekend.”

“I'm ab-so-lu—” I'm stuck on the third syllable, partly because of the K, but mostly because I'm surprised that my voice has returned to my throat. I must learn to harness the power of this new-found skill. I try to give the big man a thumb up, but there's a good chance the gesture I just made looks like late-stage Parkinson's disease. I wrack my brain for something to say to set him at ease, something casual, but not glib. I lay a Clint Eastwood squint on him, grin,

and point both fingers at him as if I'm firing pistols.

“No prob-le-mo,” I say.

He grunts, nods and releases my arm. I glide forward and push through the beads which drag themselves across my neck and shoulders like a quilt made of marbles. Here I go again, sliding along, a puck on ice, closing in on a padded silver lame banquette coming up hard on my right. Now, the hand is on my left forearm, guiding me as though I'm a truck backing into a loading dock. I flop down and backwards, grateful for the banquette's generous padding. The table-top's polished surface swirls and coils.

“Stay here,” the voice says.

I look up to see a broad-shouldered silhouette. “No prob-le-mo,” I say.

The silhouette laughs and disappears.

I'm back. Funny thing about K—one second you're in the spin cycle, the next, you've materialized, as if through the transporter on the old Star Trek.

The lounge is cool, long and narrow, the walls black and lined with banquettes. At the far end of the room is the deejay booth, whose occupant is laying down a groove, soft and sinuous, nothing like Junior's take-no-prisoners assault. The laid-back sound and gentle lighting soften up what's left of my high.

Knots of men and a few women are clustered together at the banquettes, talking and smoking cigarettes. I look around to see if anyone noticed my spastic tightrope act, but no one's paying the slightest attention. I suppose they've seen worse.

As if to prove the point, a sinewy, black drag queen appears from the back of the room. She's all legs and lanky arms as she glides past. The five-inch stiletto heels may be a bit much, but they *are* a look. She wears a short, black leather mini-skirt, bustier, and a long, straight, onyx-colored wig. The center of the VIP lounge is her runway, and she's working it—hard. Hands on hips, the perfect combination of nonchalance and attitude, she shoots past me trailing strong perfume.

There's a little hitch in her walk and I see why. The heel of her right shoe is loose at the point it attaches to the sole. Her Achilles heel. I'm pleased with my pun and I smile. She pauses a moment, pivots her body and whips her head around last, like fashion week in Paris. As she comes by me again, I'm still smiling. We lock eyes, just long enough for her to give me a knowing grin and whisper, "*Hola, Papi.*"

The drag queen reaches the other end of the lounge and spins. I close my eyes and watch her image flick and skip forward like a snippet of old film. When I open them she's next to me, sliding into the banquette, trapping me against the wall. I'm in no condition—and no mood—to chitchat with a scrawny drag queen. She smiles and her eyes sweep over me. Nice teeth—capped or bleached? I always notice teeth. Got that from my mother who says the first things she notices about a man are his teeth and his smile. The thing about Sinatra, she says—as much as the silken voice and those azure eyes—was that smile.

"Having fun, Papi?" The illusion is shattered. Her voice is Brooklyn, Queens, Puerto Rico with an overlay of Telly Savalas.

"Maybe too much," I say. The full force of her perfume hits me like a whiff from a broken ammonia ampoule.

"Been to this little *soiree* before?"

I sigh, trying to sound blasé. "My second. And you?"

Her laugh rumbles. "Papi, she's a circuit girl through and through." Why do drag queens refer to themselves in the third person? And why do they always call me Papi? "This is my sixth," she says. I purse my lips and widen my eyes, trying to look suitably impressed. "I love to paaa-ty."

'Paaa-ty'—this could be the lost love child of Tony Curtis and Rosie Perez.

"Saw you come in," she says. "You was in quite a state, Papi."

"That obvious?" I set her up for the winner. "I'd rather be in your state."

"Which is?"

“*Fabulous,*” I say.

She waves me off, but I can tell she dug it. “Mmmm-hhhhhmmmm, honey, what-eva.” She looks off straight ahead and slides a couple of inches closer to me. “What’s your name?” Her big, liquid eyes shift to my chest.

“I thought we decided I’m Papi.”

She laughs that husky laugh again. “You *awe* soooo right. I’m Bianca,” she says earnestly, like a well-mannered eight year old meeting her daddy’s boss. She extends her hand, dangling from her narrow wrist.

Well *of course* your name is Bianca. And I’m the Dali Lama. I touch her hand and it’s all I can do not to jerk mine back. Her fingers are cold and wiry and tremble like the claw of a terrified bird.

“So what are you doing up here all alone?” she asks.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Oh Papi, Bianca’s heard everything, trust her.”

“Trust *me*—Bianca’s you haven’t.”

Her Adam’s apple quivers. She puts her hand on my forearm. “Boyfriend trouble?”

I shake my head no.

“Trouble, though.”

This is silly. I have everything I ever wanted. “Bianca,” I say, “I think you’re barking up the wrong Papi.”

She takes my hand in hers and turns it over, leans forward and traces one fingernail across my palm. “Oh, Papi. My poor Papi.” Her voice is softer now, gentle and less affected. “Ever since I was little, my momma told me I could see things about people.” The lewdness has disappeared from her voice and her eyes. “She was right.”

I shake my head to clear it. Either I’m still high as hell or there’s something to her. Maybe it’s both. Nothing to lose. I spread my fingers. “What do you see?”

My hand hovers inches below her face. Bianca reaches across the table and brings over a glass votive, pinched between her slender, dark fingers. She cocks her head. “What you doing here, Papi?”

She knows something. Not everything, but something.

“I’m here,” I say. “Same as you.”

She closes her eyes and shakes her head. A shadow skips across the table.

“No. Not the same as me.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“I belong.”

I smile. “Hey, I paid my cover.”

She studies my face and squints, as though peering through fog. My smile vanishes.

“You’re looking for something, but you in the wrong place, lover.”

What *is* this?

“How’d you get yourself here?” she asks.

“Took a cab. You?”

She squeezes my hand. “*Stop playing*. Tell me.”

I bite my bottom lip. “It’s a long story.”

“I’m sure it is. Try making it short.”

“How does anybody get anywhere—baby steps.”

“What you talking about?” she asks.

“Have to walk before you can run, don’t you?”

She looks me over. “You runnin’ now, ain’t you?” She smiles and shakes her head.

“Talkin’ in riddles. Chasing something or somebody and don’t even know why. Like one of them little puppies at the park hustling after their momma bitch.”

I don’t like the notion or the image. I yank my hand away from Bianca and press my palm onto the table top. “This is some crazy talk for the VIP room at Palladium.”

“Yes it is.” She puts down the candle and shifts her body away from me. “But there’s one thing Bianca knows, Papi.”

“What’s that?”

“You need to back yourself up and get on out of here.”

I grin. “Something I said?”

She places her index and middle finger on my forehead. My skin tingles beneath her touch. “Something you didn’t say. And those little baby steps? They ain’t going to work in reverse. It’s going to take some big-ass strides to get you where *you* belong.”

I want to say something funny, but can’t think of a single thing.

Bianca slides away from me. “You’ll excuse me, Papi. My inner diva is calling.” She stands and smooths the front of her skirt with her hands. “I’m sure you understand.”

Actually, I’m pretty sure I don’t.

She does a pirouette and disappears. I rub my thighs with my palms. What was that all about? I take inventory: no shirt, shaved chest, tattoos, leather pants, long hair, drug paraphernalia crammed into every pocket. I look like a hundred other guys in here. Why would she think I didn’t belong?

“No prob-le-mo?” a voice says. “That the best you could come up with?”

I look up at Rachael, standing next to me glassy eyed and fidgety. I should be relieved to see her, but I’m not. I need some time to sort through Bianca’s words and figure out which ones to try on and which ones to toss. “So, I’m not a wordsmith,” I say, hoping to hide behind some *sh tick*. “We all have our crosses to bear. For instance, you’re short.”

She smiles. “Yeah, and you’re about to be old.”

“Yeah, but you’re shorter than I am older.”

She closes her eyes. “I’m not even sure what that means.”

“That makes two of us, but it sounded clever.”

Rachael scrunches up her nose. “I’ll take your word for it. Christian said you were okay,

but you looked like one of Jerry's kids to me. I sent him up to fetch you. He said you were in no condition to be fetched."

"I'm fine."

She cocks her head and looks at me as though she knows better. All four people in the next banquette have turned around to stare at Rachael and make admiring comments to each other.

"You look rattled," she says. "What happened?"

Rattled—I think I'm entitled. Last night, I watched a picture of our friend turn into a tragedy mask and now I have a mystical connection with a clairvoyant drag queen. I have a sinking feeling that these events are somehow linked to my sinking feeling, but this isn't the time or place to sort it out.

"What happened?" I say. "Michael Murray happened."

Rachael rolls her eyes. "Oh God. Someone should make him put a warning label on that bumper."

Bianca clomps by and winks. I'm relieved she doesn't stop to chat. Momma-bitch references delivered by a snide drag queen wouldn't go over big with Rachael.

"Who's your friend?" she asks.

"Bianca. Odd girl, that one." Bianca pauses so that her hand may be kissed with great formality by a shirtless man in skin-tight black patent leather pants.

Rachael pushes the hair out of my eyes. "So, are you feeling better? Everyone's asking where you've been hiding out."

She wants me to come downstairs with her. It's not jealousy; it's control. She needs to know where everyone is at all times, especially me. Well, this is one duckling that isn't going to be rounded up. "Who's everyone? I doubt anyone knows I'm gone."

Rachael frowns, her strategy derailed. "Okay, I'd like you to come down with me and start enjoying your birthday." She slides onto my lap and puts an arm over my shoulder, rocking

her combat boots in mid-air. I wrap my arms around her, but there's nothing behind my embrace except for a vague feeling of resentment. "Really," she says, "you don't want to sit up here all alone, do you? Just you and Binaca?"

"It's *Bianca*. Binaca's a breath freshener."

"Come on, Nicky, don't leave me alone on your birthday."

At least she's being honest. Except for the part about using my birthday to guilt me into doing what she wants. I'll be mostly-honest back. "Need some down time. Besides, I'm still a little woozy."

Rachael leans in, puts her lips to my ear and says, "Come with me, husband, and I'll put an end to that wooziness—guaranteed."

Tweaked—thought so.

"Thought we were staying away from that," I say.

She shrugs. "Michael Murray found you; Ramon found me."

Ramon, huh? A bit of his crystal ought to knock the voodoo out of my head. Rachael slides off and tugs on my hand to follow her. I do, and with her hands holding mine to her shoulders, allow her to lead me towards the exit. I take small, mincing steps so I don't step on her heels.

"Like a puppy."

Rachael turns part way around. "What?"

"Something Bianca said."

She frowns. "That girl is a bad influence."

I nudge her forward. We'll see.

Sky High

My birthday party—not to mention my New York state of mind—both sky high. Fifty-four floors up to be exact, in Christian’s corporate apartment with floor to ceiling windows and the Empire State Building framed dead center. The crowd swirls, glasses clink, bleached teeth flash.

The groove is definitely on.

I stand in the kitchen staring slack-jawed at the blender. It’s all Wes’ fault, God love him. Thirty hits of X in one blender full of cranberry juice—his birthday gift to me. The X, not the cranberry juice. Or the blender. Broken capsules and empty Dixie cups are strewn across the olive-colored granite counter top. Thirty hits in one blender. I’m too high to do the math. He should have posted a warning, though. It’s too late now. Someone spread the word and it was over in a second.

The music pulses through me, waves of it, like a heartbeat. Such a party. I should be out there mingling but I’m a little woozy. I need to hold on to something. The granite countertop—smooth and cool and solid—perfect.

Here’s Wes, his pupils the size of manhole covers, “Doing okay?” He puts his arm on my shoulder.

“Only the best day of my life.” I lean into Wes, lovely Wes. No words to describe how much I love him. “Thank you, my friend.”

“My pleasure, honey. Actually, your pleasure, by the looks of you.”

The music changes to “You’re Free,” Ultra Nate’s anthem *du jour*, on every circuit deejay’s play list, bursting forth from a thousand boom boxes on Fire Island, Rehoboth, and Provincetown. I hate screaming diva anthems, but just now it’s working, working just fine.

Wes says, “Listen, Nicky, are you going to be right here for a while?”

I look at Wes, trying to figure out where the hell I would go. He pats my face. “I’ll take that as a yes. Be right back. We got you something special.”

My mouth opens to say something but he’s already gone.

Oh, no. Here’s that Michael Murray, the one from last night with that bored-out K bumper, smiling like a fool, headed my way. One hit of that and I’m a goner. I make a cross with my index fingers and he backs away, laughing. *Vampire*. One thing’s for sure, that vision at Sabrina’s and the weird run-in with Bianca seem a million years ago. In fact, I should have invited Bianca here, shown *her* who belongs and who doesn’t.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. It’s Gary, wearing a pale-blue polo shirt, khakis and looking like his face might slide right off his skull.

“Nick?”

“Yes, Gary.”

“*Nick?*”

“Yes, Gary.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder.

“That punch.”

“I know.”

“That guy you just chased away? He just gave me something else.”

“Oh, oh,” I say.

“Oh, oh? What does *that* mean? I have a wife and kids back home. I can’t do this.”

“Man, you just did.”

He rubs one eye with his fist. “Just tell me one thing.” He squeezes my shoulder with his hand. “Just tell me it won’t be like the time we were in high school and we went to the Santana concert and bought that joint from a guy and it turned out to be PCP and I watched Carlos Santana’s head burst into flames right before he turned into a tarantula.”

I try not to laugh. “Gary?”

“Yes?”

“Do you feel good?”

He smiles and snorts. “Exquisite.” He shakes his head and gets serious again. “No, really, because if I see everyone start to combust and turn into big leggy bugs, it’s going to put a huge damper on your party.”

“Stop worrying.” I put my hand on top of his and squeeze. “Here’s how it may be.” Gary’s all ears, trying desperately to focus on my face. “Remember when we used to go to that theme park, Kings Dominion, and you loved to ride that big-ass roller coaster over and over again?”

“The Rebel Yell?”

“That’s it. You’d always try to get in that first car and ride it hands up the whole way. As soon as it was over, you’d run out and get back in line. Well, it might be like that.”

Gary’s expression doesn’t change. Softly, he says, “Like riding the Rebel Yell?”

“Yep. Right up in the first car. One long ride. No waiting and no lines.” I twitch my eyebrows twice to emphasize the point.

Gary throws his hands above his head and yells, “Well then, *bring it on.*”

“But you might want to go ahead and grab a seat pretty soon.”

He chucks my shoulder with his fist. “That’s just what I needed to hear. This is *your* birthday party and I’m going to go sit on *that* sofa over there,” he motions behind him with his thumb. “Right over there. And enjoy myself. Did I tell you everyone here is fascinating?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“They are. *Fascinating.*”

“Well, so are you, my friend.”

He lurches forward and hugs me. He’s as warm and damp as the hot towels they give you on first class flights. “Oh man, we are friends, aren’t we?”

“Always.”

Gary turns and walks between two muscular boys in matching tight, white tank tops. He stops, looks at one, then the other, and says, “Hey, guys. I’m going to go ride the Rebel Yell. *Waaaahoooo*,” he yells and throws both arms up in the air again.

The boys rear back, protecting their drinks with their free hands. They look at me, bemused and appalled. I wrinkle up my nose, shrug and mouth “Never mind.”

I turn and there’s Trudie, sitting on the other end of the countertop her legs dangling down from a sundress as thin as rice paper. She came all the way from Baltimore. I haven’t seen her since that night at our house. Tanned. Looking good. She smiles at me, showing off those dimples. I always liked those dimples. I slide down the counter towards her, tapping on the marble with my fingertips like I’m playing a piano, right up and over her thighs. She spreads her knees so I can rest in between them. Sweet. A velvet cloud surrounds us.

“Had the punch, huh?” I ask.

“It’s that obvious?” She touches her cheeks with the tips of her fingers.

“You look about how I feel.”

Her eyes drift down. “You look like you feel pretty good.”

Good line.

She says, “Having a nice birthday?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Going out later?”

“I expect.”

“Good. So do I.”

Two in a row. You *go*, Trudie. Felt that one right in the old bread basket.

I tilt forward and give her a kiss. That’s enough. I try to lean back, but she puts her hands on mine and traps them on her thighs. Her legs scissor behind me as her mouth slams against mine, her tongue between my lips. She drops her legs, lets go of my hands and it’s over. I back away. She licks her lips and winks.

I *rule*. I am *the man* in a tight, black Versace shirt and Diesel jeans.

Here's Wes, Randall, Ramon, Rachael, and Eric, trashed, variations on a theme. They're smirking, like they're in on the same secret. Rachael puts my hands on her cheeks and rolls her eyes.

"Oh my God," she says. "Feel that? I could power the entire Eastern Seaboard." Her hand brushes back my hair. "What's up with the lipstick, my darling?" She drags her thumb across my lips. "Are we entering a new phase?"

Should I make something up? Fuck no. Today, I call the shots. "Some birthday wishes from Trudie." I look over to where Trudie was, but she's gone.

Rachael smiles. "After all these years surrounded by the boys, I suppose you're entitled. Just don't let me find lipstick on your dick, or dick on your lipstick, for that matter. Besides, it's not your shade."

"Deal."

Her lips are on mine now. I'm thinking about Trudie.

"Okay, lovebirds." It's Randall. "Let's not forget why we're here."

Eric moves to me, hiding something behind him.

"We got you something appropriate." He holds it out. It's a brass plaque.

"What's this?"

"Read it."

My eyes won't focus. I hold it arms length away and cover one eye with my hand.

Ramon says, "He's forty all right."

They laugh.

"Here, I'll do it," says Rachael.

She reads:

“In recognition of years of effort, by unanimous decision of fags everywhere, Nicholas Garnett shall, from this day forward, be honored as THE GAYEST STRAIGHT MAN IN AMERICA, with all according rights and privileges.”

Fantastic. “It’s nice to finally get some official recognition.”

“You deserve it,” says Wes.

Everyone is smiling. Except for Christian. “Where’s Christian?”

Eric says, “He had two cups of the punch. He’s standing over by the windows with his eyes rolling around in his head. Serves him right. He sends his best wishes, though.”

Poor Christian. I love them all so much.

Someone says, “How about a speech?”

The room is packed with people. I should be nervous, but right now I can do anything. Even prepared a few remarks, just in case. “Give me a bump and I’ll give you a mama-jamma speech, the mother of all speeches, a speech of the millennium—”

“All right, already,” says Rachael. “Ramon, please shut him up.”

Here comes a pen cap, piled high with white powder. *Whammo.*

“And while you’re at it.” she says.

“Help me up,” I say.

“Up where?” says Rachael.

“The counter.”

“You’re going to stand up there and give a speech?” Rachael asks. “Who are you and what have you done with my husband?”

Their hands are all over me, lifting, pushing, and I’m standing on the kitchen counter, holding the plaque. Now what? Heads turn, fingers tap shoulders and point to me. My nerves crack through the faux audacity. What was I thinking? I turn around to get down, but they’re standing behind me, shaking their heads *no*, pushing me back and snickering like kids. *Fuckers.* Someone turns the music down. No going back now.

Across the room, there's my Christian. It's hard to miss him, wearing a sparkly silver shirt, shoulders pressed against the glass like he's hanging on hooks. He doesn't seem at all surprised to see me standing on the kitchen counter. He gives me big thumb up. Now, there's a real friend for you.

"Uh, excuse me. Um, hi there." I wave. (*Nervous laughter*). Everyone's quiet now. My forehead and armpits turn prickly hot—flop sweat. I freeze. I need to think of something to say. Like my father when he leads one of his AA meetings.

"Hello, my name is Nick and I'm a heterosexual."

"*Hello, Nick.*"

"Welcome to this week's meeting of heterosexuals anonymous." (*Laughing*). I take a deep breath. Adrenaline and the crystal work their magic. My heart pounds and I'm sharp and clear.

"I know some of you don't have any idea who I am, and to tell you the truth, that makes two of us. (*More laughing*). Those of you who do know me know that it's not like me to stand up here and give a speech. I can attribute part of my courage to the punch. But I thought it was appropriate this Gay Pride Weekend to celebrate a couple of personal milestones. One's no big deal: Today, I'm forty years old." (*Applause*) The other achievement has been much more arduous. I know this may be hard to believe, but there was a time I could be seen out in public wearing pleated khakis. My apartment looked like a Salvation Army warehouse. I said 'hey man' and 'dude.' Sometimes I drank beer. Budweiser. (*eeeewwww!*) I was headed towards a future of boys-night-outs at the local sports bar, a couple of kids, and Costco." I hold up my index finger. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. Now, however, you should see me fluff our house for a dinner party. See, I just said fluff. (*More laughter*). I can quote several lines of dialogue from *The Women*, and I know what a peplum is. Do you?"

I've got 'em now.

“I’m not saying that it’s easy. Just the other day I was in my car and a guy in a tricked-out GTO pulled up next to me blasting Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” and I broke out into spontaneous air guitar.” I slam imaginary power cords with my right hand.

And there is the whole ‘sex with men’ thing,” I make quotation marks in the air, “which I just haven’t gotten the knack of. I’m afraid girls shall forever remain irresistibly yummy.” Trudie blows me a kiss.

“The most important lesson of all is this: We’re all just people looking for a place to belong, right? A place to be loved, a home. I’ve found that place among you, the warmest, loveliest and most accepting people in the world. (*aaaaaawwwwh*). With a couple of exceptions. (*Laughing*). I know there are plenty of people that think my life is bizarre, or that I’m just still in the closet, buried under a pile of dirty laundry. But look around. Is there anywhere else you’d want to be today?”

Everyone yells, “No!”

“This weekend is a celebration of pride in who we are, but it should also remind us that we should be thankful that we live in a place that lets us be, like the song says, ‘free to be what we want.’”

Time to bring it home.

“My wife and dear friends have presented me with this plaque proclaiming me the gayest straight man in America.” I hold it above my head. “I’ll do my best to live up to that responsibility. And today, paraphrasing the words of President Kennedy at the Berlin Wall, ‘today, I’m proud to say—*Ich bien ein poofter!*’” (*Uproarious applause*).

I bow. Hands help me down and I’m showered with hugs, gropes, and kisses—high as a kite, on top of the world.

#

“*Please* slow down, Nick,” says Rachael from the back seat.

“Relax,” I say. “This car’s made to go fast.”

“Not at night and not in the rain. And *not* after you’ve been up partying for a day and a half.”

“How about you go back to your conversation and let me drive.”

“I’d be happy to—after you slow the fuck down.”

I grunt and let off the accelerator, just a little.

We’re somewhere on the Jersey Turnpike—cranky, cracked out, and exhausted. It’s me and Rachael, Christian and Eric, on the highway to hell headed back to D.C. from my birthday party. The mood is distinctly not pretty. The weather—stormy and unsettled—isn’t helping. The four of us couldn’t muster enough serotonin to cheer up an amoeba.

“Sorry,” says Rachael, “I’m just trying to get us home alive.”

“So we can get suicidal in the comfort of our own home?” I say.

“No one made you get up at eight in the morning and party all day at Twilo.”

“You’re going to lecture *me* on partying responsibly? Did I shove crystal up your nose?”

“Did *I* do it all goddamn day long?”

“Actually, you did.”

“Now, now, kids,” says Eric, ever the peacemaker, slumped in the back seat, his leather jacket draped over him like a blanket. “Why don’t we let Christian continue with his story?”

“Sorry,” says Rachael. “Of course. Please go on.”

Christian had been recounting the story of the breakup of his marriage and how he’d come out to his wife. Very poignant. Given my state of mind, overly so.

“Remind me. Where was I?” says Christian. He’s in the passenger seat, his head resting on a pillow, leaning against the window.

“You and Marsha were high school sweethearts,” says Rachael.

“Right. Sounds corny, but we really were. The all-American couple. We did the usual teenage stuff together. Rock concerts. Keg parties. Even went through a Goth phase. Believe it

or not, Eric, I spent my junior year of high school wearing black eyeliner and hair halfway down my back.”

“That explains a lot,” says Eric. His voice is muffled by the jacket pulled up over half his face.

“Anyway, after we graduated we moved in together. I got a job as a security guard at the mall, started night school, and she became a secretary at a law firm. We got married a year later, bought a little house, got a dog, thought everything was settled, thought we’d be together forever.”

Rachael says, “And the whole time, you had no idea?”

“I knew something was wrong, but I wouldn’t admit it to myself. Not for years.”

“Years?” I say.

“Yeah, years, literally. Sounds crazy, I know, even to me.”

“You mean you wouldn’t acknowledge your attraction to men all that time?” says Rachael.

“Looking back, it was there, as far back as grade school, but once I was with Marsha, I wouldn’t let myself go there.”

“So, then what?”

“I couldn’t ignore it anymore. I finally got up the nerve to go to a gay bar one night on the way home from school. Soon as I walked through those doors, I knew.”

“And Marsha never suspected?” says Rachael.

“She knew something was up. She could see how miserable I was. The sex was harder and harder for me. But she never put it together that I was gay.”

“Not even while you were having sex with men?” I say.

“That’s the thing. I wasn’t. I made a promise to myself I’d never cheat on her.”

My stomach tightens.

Rachael says, “You mean the whole time—years—you knew you were gay but you didn’t act on it because you were so in love with her.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d been sneaking around.”

I’m cold and queasy.

Rachael begins to cry. “That’s so amazing. So honorable and so sad.” Eric puts an arm around her.

“It was a dark time. I was so unhappy. And so was she. I just couldn’t bring myself to tell her. Then one night she sits me down. Asks me if I’m having an affair.”

Rachael pulls out some Kleenex from her purse and blows her nose. “And?”

“I had to tell her. I’m sure it’s the hardest thing I’ll ever have to do. At least I hope it is. I moved out the next day.”

“How’d she take it?” I ask.

“Wouldn’t believe it at first. Then she got furious, felt betrayed—everything you’d expect.”

My hands grip the steering wheel so hard I might snap it in two.

“That’s so brave of you, Christian. So brave,” says Rachael. “But you must have been relieved, too, right? I mean at least you could finally come out and start living your life.”

“Not really. I promised myself I wouldn’t act on it until we were divorced.”

“You’re kidding me,” I say. My mouth is so dry I can barely speak. “You didn’t have sex with a man until your divorce was final?”

Christian nods yes. “I think it’s the reason we’re such good friends now. She’s thanked me a million times for waiting.”

Rachael gasps a huge sob. “That is the saddest, most beautiful story I’ve ever heard.”

Eric pulls Rachael closer. Her body heaves. “Oh, my darling,” says Eric, “I think we’re all a little tender right about now. How about a lovely Ambien to take the edge off?”

“Good idea,” I say. Rachael nods. I hear Eric rummage through his jacket. He pulls out a pill bottle and shakes one out onto Rachel’s palm.

She swallows the pill. “I know I’m cracked out and fragile, but really, the courage and integrity, Christian. I don’t know how you did it.”

Neither do I. I glance over at him, feeling equal parts admiration and resentment. Could I do what he did? Allow love to trump desire? Gee, Nick, based on recent events, you’d have to say no, wouldn’t you? God, I wish I was gay and all I had to do was admit I’d finally given in and gone down on someone. No, my dirty little secret can’t be explained away by sublimated or even confused sexuality.

After my award acceptance speech I go to the bathroom and Trudie’s coming out. I block her at the entrance, she takes me by the hand and we cross the hall into the bedroom and lock the door behind us.

She undoes my belt and slides my pants and underwear down around my ankles. Trudie looks down at my hard-on, smiles, but doesn’t say anything. She walks to the nearest nightstand and returns with a condom. With one hand, she pulls at the wrapper with her teeth and with the other, hooks her thumb under one and then the other of the thin straps holding up her dress. It falls to the floor. One of her nipples is erect. The condom wrapper is still in her mouth. She struggles to tear it open.

“Little out of practice,” she mumbles.

“Here,” I say. “Let me help.” I shuffle over to her and she hands me the condom. I find the tiny notch cut into the wrapper and tear it open. It’s one of those high tech lubricated things and I fumble to put it on. I manage to get it set and look over at Trudie. She’s bent over the desk. The muscles in her back and shoulders are tensed. She places a hand between her legs and glides a finger across herself.

My pants are still around my ankles. I could shuffle along as though I’m in shackles, or untie my shoes and remove the rest of my clothes. I choose expediency: With four clumsy,

thumping leaps, I hop over to her like a big, sexed-up bunny. Trudie is motionless, her breath high and soft.

I place one hand on either side of her hips. She reaches back, guides me into her, and lets out a low, throaty growl. Using her balled-up fists, she sweeps her hand forward and braces herself against the wall. In the process, she sends everything on the desk—pens, a tissue box, books—crashing to the floor. The noise distracts me and I lose my rhythm. She responds by driving her hips back into me. The force of her thrust almost knocks me backwards and to steady myself, I bring one hand up to the base of her neck and the other to her waist. Now I'm ready for her and our rhythm synchronizes and builds. The intensity of our sex surprises me. With Rachael in the mix, I had been careful and tentative. Now, one on one, Trudie and I are anything but. Sweat drips off my forehead onto the small of her back. Trudie breathes in quick, shallow gasps. She throws her head back, grabs my hand from the back of her neck and brings it around to her throat. I feel the surge of her pulse under my thumb. "That's *it*," she says. Her back arches and she explodes into a great, surging spasm. I grab her waist with both hands and shove, bursting into her five, six, seven times. The force of my orgasm lifts the front legs of the desk off the floor. It slides sideways against the wall, making a jagged, grinding noise. We're motionless for a few seconds and breathing hard, afraid we might have been heard, then returning back to ourselves. I pull away from her and back up a step. I look down, suddenly self-conscious about standing half-naked, my pants around my ankles with a rapidly diminishing erection. I remove the condom and pull up my pants and underwear. Trudie takes a quick step towards me and leans forward. She finds my upper lip with her teeth and gives it a little bite.

"Guess I needed that," she says. She walks past me to the door, stops to listen for a moment, then slips out.

I put myself back together and go to the bathroom to flush the condom. As it spins round and round, I make a futile attempt to think of something other than Trudie. I've forgotten what a powerful force raw sex could be. I want more. The thought of being with Trudie again explodes

in my head like pornography projected on a five-story IMAX screen. I turn to the sink and splash cold water on my face.

Get a grip I told myself. But I didn't—not by a long shot.

This morning I can't get Rachael out of bed, so I go to Twilo by myself. Flag a cab on a Monday morning wearing a tank top and pale-blue satin pants. Pretty. Twilo, a subterranean mosh-pit of a club, is still raging from the night before. Trudie's there. I knew she would be. We go back to her hotel room and have sex for hours. Crazy-ass-porn-bust-up-the-furniture sex—the kind Rachael and I don't have. I get back to Ramon's just in time to take a shower, pack, and leave.

The bedroom incident at Christian's I can explain away, at least to myself. I was high and pumped up from the accolades at the party. What's the word—an indiscretion? Rachael wouldn't like it, but she might understand.

But today? Today was different: Premeditated. Unforgivable. Worst of all, I liked it. I liked it a lot. Even now, through the guilt and shame and fear I feel a spike of excitement. I shiver and break into a guilt-infused sweat. I hate myself. I want more.

“You all right?” It's Christian, looking at me from the passenger seat. Car headlights play across his face like searchlights.

“Doing okay. A little ragged is all.”

“Want me to drive?”

“No. It's not much farther now.”

“That was one epic birthday party, my man. We'll be talking about that one until you're eighty.”

I shake my head yes. In the rear view mirror I see Rachael, sound asleep, leaning against Eric's shoulder, his arm draped across her. Christian peeks over the headrest into the back seat.

“How cute. Our babies are down and out, like sleeping angels.”

I nod, but keep my eyes on the road.

“Are things okay with you and Rachael?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Things seem a little tense lately.”

“Everthing’s fine.”

Christian sighs. “Good. Glad to hear it. Lord knows, after fifteen years Eric and I have had our share of everything. Including tense.”

I glance over at him. “How do you deal with it?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes you talk it out. Sometimes you wait it out.” He groans and rubs his eyes with his balled up fists. “One thing’s for sure, it’s time to park the party bus for a while.”

I nod again.

“I’m going to close my eyes for a few minutes, okay?” he says.

“Sure thing.”

Christian shifts around, settling in.

The rain has let up. I punch the accelerator and the engine kicks down into overdrive.

We surge ahead with a force that shocks me, just before it makes me smile.

Jason and Mandy

I returned home from my birthday party certain of two things: Rachael could never know about my liaison with Trudie and that it could never happen again. The brutal, irresistible power of the encounter was undeniable and I had no doubt about the outcome if I gave in to it. I had to stay away from her, to keep myself distracted, or risk everything.

Fortunately, the circuit was nothing if not good at providing distractions. By now, even conservative, staid Washington, D.C. had tossed its glow stick into the circuit mix with the unfortunately-named event, Cherries Jubilee.

One afternoon at an outdoor block party, we were introduced by Ramon to Jason, a twenty-something personal trainer. Jason was a gravely-voiced, two-hundred and twenty pounds of beef on the hoof, with an IQ slightly north of his body fat percentage (an assessment based more on my ego than the limits of his intellect—anyone who looked like him deserved to be dumb). To my astonishment and Rachael’s delight, Jason was also straight, a fact revealed to us in the most offhand manner:

I motioned over to Rachael’s muscle boy. “What’s his story?”

“Just moved here from New York. He trained half of Chelsea,” Ramon says.

“Boyfriend?”

“*Boyfriend?*” Ramon repeats, as though I’d just asked him if Jason owned a pet Ocelot.

“Hardly.”

“Guess I’m not surprised. Guy like that could have his pick.”

“Suppose so, but considering he’s straight, the point is moot.”

Another straight guy in this scene? My surprise was quickly overcome by a stab of an emotion I didn’t expect: jealousy—and not because of Rachael’s fawning either. It was the interest he was generating from the other boys. I’d never had to share the spotlight with another

straight guy and, although I pretended to be indifferent to the attention, a part of me liked it—more than I would admit.

That night, we went to TRAX with Jason and Mandy, his equally-built trainer girlfriend who had a face like Minnie Driver and a voice like Minnie Mouse. Though Mandy had never been with another woman, she took quite a shine to Rachael, an attraction she made no effort to conceal and one that led to an evening of Jason and me exchanging satisfied smiles as we watched Mandy and Rachael kiss and paw at each other for long stretches on the dance floor.

We closed TRAX and on the way out someone handed Jason a tiny slip of paper the size of a Chinese fortune with the address of an after-hours party. It took us an hour to find the cracked-out shell of a building, four floors above a nefarious-looking palm reading business. We worked our way upstairs, stepping over chunks of cement and graffiti-covered plaster, paid ten dollars each to get into the decrepit two-bedroom flat some enterprising soul had converted into a disco and danced until dawn.

Up until now, the thought of sleeping with another couple had conjured up the unsavory prospect of fat, old swingers chasing me and Rachael around the coffee table. Jason and Mandy, however, were neither old, nor fat. For the first time in years, though, I was feeling knocked off my roost—a condition that was ameliorated by Mandy's rock-hard body, which she pressed and ground into me in the direct, unabashed manner of a woman fully in control of her sexuality—and mine.

With the sun peeking over the squalor of the neighborhood, the time came to seal the deal.

“So,” said Rachael, “as creepy as this may sound, how about a nightcap in our hot tub?”

Mandy said, “Not creepy at all, but guys, I have to go.”

“Have to go?” I repeated.

“Yeah. I have to meet my mother. It's her birthday.

“When?” I ask.

“Today.”

“Today?” I say. I am Charlie Brown and Lucy has just yanked the football away.

“I promise though,” Mandy says brightly, “we’ll get together soon. For sure.”

As Jason walks Mandy out to get a cab, Rachael turns to me. “Guess you enjoyed watching me making a fool of myself around the hot, young straight guy with the girlfriend.”

I did. It was rare to see Rachael in a situation in which she was not fully in control of the circumstances and the outcome. There would be no point and no advantage to gloating over it, though. I would have to satisfy myself with the result.

“He didn’t seem to mind much,” I say. “Besides, Mrs. Robinson, I doubt he has that long an attention span. I’m sure we were just a blip on his radar.” I smile. “In fact, we could disappear now and all pretend it never happened.”

Rachael’s eyes shifted from a petulant squint to a mischievous and certain glower.

“There’s another option.”

“What’s that?”

“We finish things off.”

“Kill him? That’s a little extreme, don’t you think?”

“No. I had in mind something more intimate.” She smirked. “You owe me. For Trudie. Remember?”

Like an aspiring pool shark who’s gotten in over his head, I’d grown cocky and blown an easy shot. All I could do now was watch, helpless, as Rachael ran the table.

Rachael leans over. “You’re going to have to go with me on this,” she says, nodding towards Jason, who is headed back our way.

I take a big breath. “I guess I’m game. But one thing.”

“What?”

“If his dick is bigger than mine, you can’t pretend to notice.”

Rachel laughs. “If his dick is bigger than yours, he’s moving in with us.”

In the cab ride over to Jason’s apartment near Dupont Circle, I’d tried to block out the image of watching Conan the Barbarian have sex with my wife. There was one thought I couldn’t shake, though. What if Jason wasn’t as straight as he let on? He certainly talked a good game. Rachael had asked him how he felt being constantly surrounded by gay men.

“That’s my clientele. If the boys want to pay me \$150 an hour to train them and I have to get a little flirty, that’s all right by me. It’s a fantasy thing. If it turned out I was gay, I’d be just another \$70 an hour fag trainer.”

One look at Jason’s apartment, however, quelled my doubts. The dirty dishes in the sink, the mauve Herculon sofa, the harsh lighting, the bad art hung way too high, and the clincher—the complete boxed set of *Van Halen*. It made the place I lived when I met Rachael look like Liberace’s boudoir.

“I don’t mind telling you guys, I am tweaked,” Jason said as he reached down to take the vial and rolled-up bill from Rachael. “I usually stick to cocaine. This stuff gets a bit intense.”

As I watched Jason prance around his living room, I felt my energy and my libido sag. I look over at Rachael, glassy eyed and drawn. Just under the thin crust of our high, our bodies were screaming for food and rest, our serotonin-depleted brains furious at us, no doubt planning their revenge. We should have been in bed hours ago. Sitting in Jason’s shabby apartment in my sweaty club clothes with grimy grey light coming through his crooked Venetian blinds, I felt very last night—verging on last month.

Still, here I was.

“Guess I’d better do some of that too,” I said.

Rachael handed me the vial. Jason sat next to Rachael on the sofa and she looked over at me, smiled and patted the cushion on the other side. I slid over.

“How are you feeling?” she asked me.

“Fine. A little strange.”

“Same here,” says Jason. “Never did this with a couple.”

Rachael rubbed our thighs. “Just relax boys and let me handle things.”

The crystal rallies me for one last surge. It’s now or never, I thought, as I unbuttoned my jeans.

A few minutes later, Rachael slumped back, breathing hard and damp with sweat.

“Gentlemen,” she said, “My bag of tricks is officially empty.”

Jason and I had been afflicted with the unfortunate but not uncommon combo of nerves, too much Tina and not enough rest—crystal dick.

“I’m open to suggestions,” she said, leaning towards the coffee table for a glass of water. She groaned at the effort. “My arms are sore. You boys don’t have to touch each other, but you could at least respect my limited wingspan.”

I looked over at Jason, sitting a few feet away from me on the couch, a pile of slack muscle and tattoos. We exchanged sheepish grins. “Never happened to me quite this bad,” he said, looking down at himself.

I feigned disappointment. Actually, I was quite relieved at the way things had turned out, with me and Jason sharing the same leaky boat.

Rachael swallowed her water. “Just my luck, two hot men, two limp dicks, and no Viagra.”

“Guess we’ll have to take a rain check,” said Jason.

“Yeah,” said Rachael, rubbing her shoulder, “at least Mandy will be there to share the—um—load.”

Prelude to a Kiss

Thursday nights at Randall and Wes' had become a tradition destined to become a legend. As Wes' customer base had grown, so had the demands placed on his time and his relationship. Much to Randall's dismay, customers began to call and show up at their door at all hours of the day and night. At Randall's urging, Wes announced that henceforth, business would only be conducted on Thursday nights between the hours of 8 and 11 p.m., when Randall would be out of the house working at his restaurant. Surprisingly, everyone had complied.

Ever the gracious host, Wes had infused Thursday evenings with some of his Savannah-bred southern hospitality. Folks dropped by for a leisurely chat and a cocktail as they stocked up on the weekend's supply of party favors. With Wes holding court behind his broad walnut custom made desk set in the corner of their tastefully decorated Sixteenth Street townhouse, Thursday nights felt much more like *Gone With The Wind* or Victorian-era salon than crack den.

The clientele was nothing if not eclectic—and handy. It ranged from Rhan Chen, the frail, birdlike Vietnamese seamstress who had produced our window treatments, to Ronald Silver, Rachael's dashing gynecologist with the movie-star looks.

One of the few reminders of the business at hand were the ever-present hangers-on, usually young, cute boys Wes had serving cocktails and making runs to the safe in the basement to bring up the raw materials. These, he dispensed like a pharmacist or weighed carefully on the digital scale set up on his desk. Every so often, a friend (Wes always referred to customers as friends, even if he'd never laid eyes on them) would arrive in a rush, but that was just tough luck for them. Wes expected a certain level of decorum. Friends could count on several minutes of polite banter before getting down to business, signaled by him asking his lilting drawl, "and what can I do for you this evening, honey?"

One Thursday evening, Randall came home early, took a look around his crowded living room and tried to shake Wes out of his complacency, pointing out that the night had become so popular that “if the police ever raid this place, they’d be booking people as fast as the express check-out at Target on a Christmas Eve.”

By then, it was too late. The evening had insinuated itself into our hearts and minds, not to mention our calendars.

This particular evening, Rachael, Christian, Eric and I sat on the sofa in Wes’ living room, cocktails in hand, discussing our plans to invite Jason and Mandy, the personal trainers we’d met at Cherries Jubilee, to Morning Party.

“So I figure, what better place to initiate our newbies? Just imagine the four of us unleashed on Fire Island,” Rachael said.

“Oh, I’m imagining it,” Christian said. He took a sip of his Cape Cod and shook his head.

“What?” Rachael said. “That article?” The previous Sunday, *The Times* had run an expose regarding the excesses of the circuit scene and how far it had strayed from its altruistic origins. Morning Party on Fire Island was singled out for its tolerance of rampant, often unprotected, sex and blatant drug use.

“It has gone a bit over the top,” Eric said. “I heard that they’re going to station police up on towers at the beach party with binoculars.”

“Maybe they should rename it the POW party,” I said.

“Over the top?” Rachael said. “May I remind you all whose home we’re sitting in?” She pointed around the room. “And what goes on here.” She glanced over to the coffee table on which there was set a round mirror partially obscured by white powder. “By the way, Wes, what is this?”

“Cocaine,” he replied. “Help yourself.”

“Cocaine,” Rachael said, sounding as though someone showed her a photo of a puppy.

“So two years ago.” She licked her finger, dipped it in the powder and rubbed it on her gums.

“Used to think this was the shit, now the dealers can’t give it away.”

“Crystal raised the bar,” I said. “Makes this stuff feel like baking powder.”

“True,” said Christian, “but the bar can only go so high.” He traced the tip of one finger around the rim of his glass.

“Which means what exactly?” I asked.

“Look, I’m going to assume I can’t talk you out of anything, but at least let me be able to say I warned you. Fire Island is not conducive to relationship building. I can’t tell you how many couples I’ve seen come out of that place broken up. Messing around with another couple is new to you guys. The four of you hardly know each other.”

“I expect we’ll know each other a bit better after a few days,” I said, then winked at Rachael.

“I always said,” added Rachael, “the next best thing to having a successful relationship is ruining one.”

Christian sneered and shook his head. “Lovely. All I’m saying is this isn’t like that thing you two had with Trudie, a one-night hook-up.”

I crossed and uncrossed my legs.

“You’re going to be together for days in a pressure cooker—with Ramon in charge of the stove. That alone should scare the hell out of you.”

Someone knocked at the door and I went over and opened it. It was that lobbyist whose name I couldn’t ever remember. I nodded to him and he looked past me to Wes, whose etiquette demanded an invitation before entering. From across the room, Wes looked over and said, “Come in, Rob darling. Be right with you.” Rob entered, I swung the door shut behind him, walked back over and sat on the arm of the sofa.

I said to Christian, “We’re not exactly neophytes. Why should this be so different?”

“Because this time you’re throwing sex in the mix,” said Christian. “My advice—treat it

like porn. Keep your emotions out of it. Think of it as an Olympic event.”

“Sport fucking,” Eric said.

“Right,” Christian said. “Couple on couple. No drifting off, two or three at a time for little trysts. That’s trouble, guaranteed.”

Eric gave a thoughtful nod. “At least you’ll be two on two. One time, we hosted a sex party and the odd man out no one wanted to touch ended up in our living room, whining ‘okay, who’s going to fuck me now?’”

“How endearing,” Rachael said.

“Endearing enough for us all to pitch in for cab fare to send his ass back to Annapolis,” Christian said.

A young boy in a tight white tank top comes over. “Anyone up for another drink?” he asked.

“I’ll take a refresh on this,” Christian said. He handed him his glass. Christian and Eric eyed him up and down as he walked away.

I tapped him on his shin with my toe. “You were saying?”

“Right. Sorry. Now, it’s true, foursomes are the best formula because no one feels left out, but that only works if you all stay together. And you’re going to be tempted not to, trust me. Another thing: in spite of everything going on around you, try not to do drugs twenty four, seven. They *will*, as the authorities love to say, impair your judgment.”

“Watch the G,” Eric added. “Especially the G.”

Rachael threw up her hands. “You’re preaching to the choir. Stuff makes me queasy.” She motioned to me. “It’s this one you need to talk to.”

GhB has spread quickly through the scene. It was cheap, easy to carry and consume (just pour a little vial full in a bottle of Gatorade), and gave you a warm, fabulous high (similar to ecstasy but without the hangover or depression). Unfortunately, the same dose which delivered that delicious buzz the last twenty times, could, the very next time, throw you into a coma,

suppress your respiratory system and kill you.

Usually, it was Rachael under the spotlight for her drug use. I didn't like being the center of this kind of attention.

"Got it," I said. I paused for effect. "Last time, we all did it together, remember?"

"True," said Christian. "That was before Patrick, though." Our friend Patrick was found in bed in his Miami Beach studio, his computer logged on to a sex site, a bottle of G and another of Poppers, a deadly combination, on the bedside table.

"Anything else?" I asked.

Christian nodded. "Matter of fact, there is. Don't wait until you're knee deep in cha-cha at the Pavillion to work this stuff out with them. Set some ground rules and talk about them *before* you get there. This is Fire Island, my pets. Morning Party—the big freaky-deaky."

"Damn," Rachael said. "Should I be writing all this down?"

Christian patted her cheek with his hand. "Laugh now, but you're getting privileged information here, the result of years of experience and fuck ups. Wes, what do you think?" he yelled.

Wes held a stack of money in one hand and several baggies in the other. "About what, darling?"

"About our hetero couple here cavorting around the morning party with a similarly inclined twosome, exchanging precious bodily fluids."

"What does the other couple look like?"

"It's those personal trainers who moved here from New York," Rachael said.

"Those two?" said Wes. "If you don't do them, I will."

"See," said Rachael, "you can always count on Wes to cut to the chase."

Christian sighed. "How hot they are is not the point."

"Then, what is?" said Wes.

"Never mind. Go about your business." Christian rolled his eyes. "Why would I ask

that one anything involving responsible behavior?”

“Everything will be fine,” said Rachael. “Mandy’s lovely and sincere, and Jason’s cool.”

Christian shrugged. “Maybe so, but here’s one more thing you aren’t going to want to hear. Even if you follow all the rules and do everything I just told you to do—which of course you won’t—you’re still risking your marriage every time you mess around with other people.”

“Great,” I said. “So why do you guys still do it?” Of all our many friends with non-exclusive relationships, Christian and Eric seemed to be the best at avoiding the emotional minefields, employing a policy of full participation when they were together and discretion when they were not, an arrangement I referred to as “Don’t ask; don’t smell.”

“We do it because we can. It is different when it’s all boys. We’ve got a knack for keeping our heads and our dicks on different planets. Even so—maybe the very next time—one of us sticks his willy in someone else and the damn thing blows up like an exploding cigar.” He throws his hands up, “*Ka-BOOM.*”

“Nice,” I said, clutching my crotch.

“Then come with us,” Rachael said. “Save us from our baser instincts.”

Christian rolled his eyes. “How fun. Spend all of Morning Party trying to manage the four of you.”

“The last time, we had a hard enough time managing ourselves,” Eric said.

“We don’t need to go into that right now,” Christian said.

“Please do,” Rachael said. “I have a feeling this is good”

“I seem to recall a certain party featuring a whip, a dildo and a Piñata,” Eric said.

Christian pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers as though he’s suddenly been afflicted by a viscous headache. “Enough said.”

Fairy Boats

Christian and Eric were wrong about Morning Party. It was more—much more. Fire Island turned out to be over the top as William Shatner reciting Shakespeare, as a watch made from a Dali clock. Narrow boardwalks wound through pine forests and connected the houses together like the yellow brick road. Sort of. Trees reverberated with the *clickity-clack* of big men pulling little red wagons full of groceries and luggage to and from the ferry terminal. White-tail deer were everywhere, so fearless they blocked our path and had to be shooed away. There were miles of desolate sand dunes and achingly beautiful sea-grass lined beaches. At night, it was so dark that it was possible (and common) to walk right off the end of the unlighted boardwalks.

Then, injected into this verdant, bucolic setting like a hit of speed, were New York City sensibilities: outrageous displays of wealth and excess; designer-decorated homes where a summer share cost the same as a three-bedroom rambler in most parts of the country; huge, lavish parties; smaller, yet more lavish parties; social climbing galore; one-upsmanship; balls-to-the-wall energy.

The only nightclub, the Pavilion, was a wooden sweat box. In the morning, a stream of clubbed-out zombies shuffled shamelessly along the walkways looking for their house or an after party, knowing everyone else whose path they'd cross was probably in the same shape and doing exactly the same thing. On Sunday evenings (or worse, Monday mornings), the human effluence made it's jittery, sleep-deprived way down to the dock for the dreaded "bucket of blood" ferry boat ride back to Sayville.

Keep in mind that the Fire Island I've described was representative of a *typical* summer weekend, not Moring Party, one of the original and (if such a word can be applied to such an event) venerable, stops on the circuit—and one which hit the island like a renegade taser.

So, it's little wonder that, in spite of Christian and Eric's sound advice, Jason, Mandy,

Rachael, and I arrived on Fire Island and promptly disregarded every bit of it. In our defense, it wasn't easy to figure out appropriate standards of behavior, *especially* at Ramon's house, a deceptively cozy, two-story wooden structure with an enormous deck overlooking Great South Bay.

The first people we met were the porn boys, Tweaked and Chipper, whose real names I kept forgetting—awkward considering how often I ran into them traipsing around the house undressed. The morning after we arrived on Fire Island, at the crack of dawn so to speak, we encountered them in the living room, naked, smoking crystal from a big glass water pipe—a real ice breaker. Chipper, the more outgoing of the two, took me under his wing, even sharing some of the secrets of his trade, such as how to insert oneself into a thick, chrome cock ring (it's counterintuitive –testicles first).

As for drugs, there were vials of everything, everywhere, all the time. If it's wasn't in front of you, all you had to do was ask: K, G, X, poppers, weed, Viagra and crystal—especially crystal. Snorted, smoked, or shot up, only crystal could keep the party going full-tilt for days. More than anything, it was crystal that stoked the fire on Fire Island.

The only thing in short supply was food. One morning, I opened Ramon's fridge and found only a case of Ensure and a bag of frozen *pirogues*. The Ensure was no surprise; it was the preferred choice of the elderly, the infirm, and crack heads (Rachael and I regularly stocked a case in the fridge). But *pirogues*? I wouldn't have known what they were, much less thought to bring them, especially considering someone had to haul them all the way on the ferry from the City, or buy them at a huge mark up at the one general store on the island—either way, an odd choice. Sure enough though, people stopped by one day and Ramon, wearing nothing but a black leather thong, served them up like canapés by the pool.

Speaking of Ramon, one day I watched him do fat, cocaine-appropriate rails of crystal and had to wonder how much longer he could keep it up. He was still managing his career, still pulling himself together during the week, “breaking the cycle” as he called it with massive

amounts of Klonopin. But among our friends in New York, word was that he was slipping, that his colleagues and patients were beginning to notice a change in him.

He seemed flightier than ever. The day before, he'd mentioned he was thinking about turning the grounds of the house into a shelter for abused animals.

"What a lovely idea," Rachael said. "What kind?"

"I'd like to start with Giraffes."

I waited for the punch line, but there wasn't one. I suppose Fire Island helped fuel the notion that anything was possible, including a refuge for wayward Giraffes.

Following Tweaked and Chipper's lead, Jason, Mandy, Rachael and I quickly abandoned all formalities including clothes or the pretense of sexual modesty. The perception among most of the gay men we knew was that straight people, especially couples, were less inclined than their homo counterparts to engage in no-holds-barred sexual romps. Around us, our friends were usually discrete. Once our housemates caught on to our foursome's sexual shenanigans, though, they began to treat us as four of the boys.

Tweaked and Chipper had a constant stream of men visiting them, eager to go home and brag to their friends about their brush with celebrity. The first time I'd walked by the Porn Boy's room, the door left half open during one of their frequent double dates, I'd been frozen in place by the sight of a tangle of muscular, moaning bodies. It was as if here, at its extreme fringe, with the glitter and the glamour stripped away, gay culture was savaging itself. Some men were, quite purposely, having unprotected sex—barebacking, they called it. It was a practice partially explained by the recent introduction of protease inhibitors, which had the potential to turn AIDS from a death sentence into a manageable condition. Even so, for many, barebacking was a rebellious act. *Fuck you*; you took my friends, now let's see if you can take me. For others, the danger heightened the pleasure.

We were oblivious to this darker element of what was happening all around us. All Rachael and I knew was that we were finally able to experience what our gay friends took for

granted—a blast of voracious, supercharged debauchery. The sex with Jason and Mandy had a dreamy quality, as if I was watching myself through a Vaseline-coated camera lens operated by a ghost. Christian was correct—couple on couple worked. And his trick of treating it like a porn reenactment worked, too, tamping down the jealousy, even when it involved Rachael and Jason.

Then, just as Christian and Eric had predicted, things began to come undone. I came upon Rachael and Jason having sex in the poolside shower. I pretended that it didn't bother me, but it did. I gave Mandy her first hit of G, and she loved it, woke me up in the middle of the night to see the stars. We did another dose, jumped in the pool and had sex as the sun came up. Mandy's couplings with Jason were raw, animal like, but with me she was tender and sweet, a perfect counterpoint to her rock-hard body.

I fell into a crush. And that's when, with the two of us standing in the shallow end of the pool, her legs wrapped around my waist, she made a confession:

"It's not just his looks. I've dated plenty of guys built like him—you know other trainers and body builders. He's so good to me. A genuinely nice guy. Slide back a little." I do. She swivels her hips and lowers herself onto me. "There," she says, "that's better."

"No arguments here."

Mandy, languid now, lets her head lean to one side and closes her eyes. "Ahh. You know, I think I'm a little ga-ga."

That makes two of us. "Does he know?"

"Oh, he knows, all right. But I just can't get him to make a commitment. At least not the way I want him to." Her thigh muscles pulse against my hips.

"So, you'd be willing to be exclusive if he agreed?"

"Sure. I'd be monogamous in a heartbeat with him—and you and Rachael, of course. Pull my hair. Harder."

Mandy was proposing a monogamous relationship involving four people, two couples—one of them married—living in different cities, a union comprised of two heterosexual men and a

couple of bisexual women. Strange thing, in the moment, that arrangement hadn't sounded odd. Not one little bit.

That's about the time all the boys start paying special attention to Jason and Mandy—understandable, given they looked as though they'd stepped off the cover of a fitness magazine. The problem was that Jason and Mandy, jacked up on the scene and the drugs, began paying attention right back.

First up was Mark, a handsome, goateed, twenty-five-year old fashion photographer Ramon had been seeing for a few weeks. Rachael, Ramon, and I walked in the guest bedroom and found Mandy pancaked between Mark and Jason. Ramon played it off as though it didn't bother him, but Rachael was mortified that our guests had pilfered our host's date. It did strike me as bad form. Mark high-tailed it the next morning, claiming he had a shoot back in the City.

Maybe so.

The next evening, we all went over to the neighbor's pool to watch the sunset. Rachael and I headed back to the house, leaving Jason and Mandy, who, according to Ramon, gave in to the urging of the crowd and had sex on a lounge chair. We could hear the applause from next door.

Jason and Mandy became the show. They also became distant, less interested in companionship—much less coitus—at least with us. Mandy, in particular, had problems managing her drug use, especially G, which she'd taken a particular shine to.

I was feeling left out. Rachael was starting a slow burn, stoked by tons of crystal, which was becoming her first response to any kind of stress. It was a question of when, not if, she'd blow.

Behind my hurt feelings and Rachael's indignation hid another emotion. We were jealous, but not of each other. We were used to being *the* hot straight couple in this scene. After having the spotlight for so long, neither of us was okay with second billing.

I had made one serious attempt to bond with Jason. He was, after all, the only other

straight guy around for miles. One morning, during a rare quiet moment while Rachael and Mandy were in the shower, he and I sat at the edge of the pool in the shimmering sun, our feet dangling in the water.

“You know,” I said, “the girls are probably having sex in there right now.”

Jason looked back over his shoulder and shook his head. “I never thought I’d say this, but I don’t care.”

“Two hot girls in the shower having sex and you don’t want to watch? That is saying something.”

“I’m a little sexed-out at the moment. Don’t get me wrong, it’ll pass. But it’s been kind of nonstop.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” Jason didn’t bite, so I moved on. “How are you and Mandy doing?”

“Hell if I know. We haven’t had a chance to check in with each other. Ah, she’s all right. You know, all you have to do is pay some attention, tell them you love them every once in a while and they keep coming back for more.”

“Do you love her?”

“She’s a sweet girl, and the sex is great, but,” he shrugged, “not having to deal with women and their bullshit is one reason I hang with the boys. It’s simpler. And more fun. I swear to God, sometimes I wish I was gay. With these dudes,” he spun his index finger in a circle, “it’s one big party all the time. Fuck,” he slapped his palms together like he was wiping something off them, “and move on. Which is the way it should be.” He nudged me with his elbow. “Think about it. If it weren’t for sex, what good would women be? I swear, I’d rather hang with men, straight or gay, anytime.”

I stopped churning my feet around in the water and stared down at my toes. There it was: exactly the attitude Rachael claimed lurked just below the surface of most straight men, even easy-going Jason who’d just bared his inner misogynist.

“I tell you what,” he continued, “the day someone builds a female robot with the right

anatomy—one that'll fuck you and keep her mouth shut—on that day, my friend, women will be obsolete—useless—extinct.”

Elegant and terrifying logic. Strong women have been such a big part of my life. I've never even considered the possibility of a world in which they didn't exist.

Rachael and Mandy came out of the house together, fresh from the shower. Rachael had her towel tied just above her breasts, Mandy, just below.

“Hello boys,” said Rachael. “What's up? A little male bonding, Fire Island style?”

I was tempted to shatter Rachel and Mandy's illusion about Jason, that he was so cool and evolved and nice. But we were all skating on thin ice, plus there was Mandy to consider. Quite a lot of Mandy, I realized, as she let her towel fall and dropped herself onto a chaise lounge.

“Bonding,” I said, “but not the way you mean it. Just sharing a utopian dream of a world without chaos and drama and—”

“Let me guess,” said Rachael. “Me?”

Jason and I laughed and stared at our feet.

“Thought so,” she said.

If there was bonding going on that weekend, it wasn't the kind any of us could have imagined. Turns out Jason, Mandy, Rachael and I were sharing the first car on a renegade rollercoaster—a ride with no rules or limits, our arms held over our heads as it plunged straight down into a free fall.

Fire Island

With a few more thrusts and grunts, Jason finally finishes with Mandy. A couple of the men applaud—polite, dry clapping. I lean over to Rachael and say, “Maybe we should start charging admission.” She glares at me, but doesn’t speak.

Ramon comes out of the house and says, “Guys, we really should head on over.” Four men are crowded around the Jacuzzi, hovering like the paparazzi at Cannes. None of them pay any attention to Ramon—or to us.

Rachael says, “That’s enough. This is getting ridiculous.”

“I don’t see how making a scene is going to help things.”

“We did not invite them here just to humiliate us.” She turns back towards Jason and Mandy who’ve emerged from the Jacuzzi and are being toweled off by two very attentive men. “Don’t worry. As usual, I’ll handle it.”

“What’s really bothering you?” I say. “The fact that it’s Mandy in the Jacuzzi with Jason and not you?”

“You’ve got nerve. After those late-night stargazing sessions in the pool?”

“You should go in and smoke some more crack. It brings out a lovely side of you.”

Ramon comes over and puts his hands on our shoulders. “Shall we go?”

Rachael hooks her arm in his. “Yes. Let’s.”

Ramon, Rachael, Jason, Mandy and I are waiting to enter the *oh-so-fabulous* house party thrown by a New York power couple who’ve imported nightclub-quality sound and lights and

hired the red-hot deejay, Victor Calderone, turning their spacious bayside deck into *the* place to be. Ramon has, once again, worked his magic connections and procured tickets—no small feat. Everyone’s been talking about this party for days and the buzz is cranked up to a deafening screech.

We get in a short line at the gated entrance to the property. On the other side of the tall redwood fence comes the telltale thump of music. The party hosts, rumored to be big-time drug dealers from New York, have brought in the biggest, most intimidating bouncers I’ve ever laid eyes on and a haughty ice princess to act as gate keeper. She’s wispy and wan, her skin, alabaster, her hair a braided pony tail that reaches far down her back. But underneath that delicate exterior must be a cold reptilian soul who’d slice off your balls with one pass of her perfectly manicured nails.

Ice Princess stands just outside the gate, flanked by a massive black man in a silly Hawaiian shirt (tonight’s party theme is “jungle fever”), dealing with some unlucky boy wearing a palm-tree print sarong and black combat boots.

“Look, I’m sure I’m on the list,” the boy says. He attempts to lean over the clipboard being held by the bouncer. “T-u-r-n-e-r,” he spells it out slowly.

I whisper to Mandy,” As if there are a million other ways to spell it.”

She giggles and squeezes my arm.

“I’m sorry, no,” says Ice Princess. “I’ve checked twice now, but I don’t see your name on the list.” Her smile is perfect—and chilling.

“Well, can you call Bradley over? I’m sure he can straighten this out. We talked about it in Miami.”

“I’m sorry, no. Mr. Morris and I went over the guest list earlier just so I wouldn’t have to bother him this evening.” Polite, sensible, consistent, and firm—a real pro. We could use her at Big Bark.

“If you just let me in for one minute, I know I can find Bradley and clear this up.”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m not allowed to let anyone in without a ticket.”

“Well then, I’ll buy a ticket.” He reaches down into his boot and pulls out a wad of bills.

“I’m sorry, no. All the tickets for the party have been sold.”

“Oh, come *on*. His voice has become a full falsetto. “Look, I don’t care what it costs.”

“This party is sold out. Unless you have a ticket, I’m afraid I can’t help you.” She looks past the boy, brightens, and slides her glossed lips back and away from her astoundingly white teeth. “Ramon! I didn’t see you standing there.”

Ramon moves past the boy, who is busy snapping out several twenty dollar bills in what must be an effort to impress or bribe the Ice Princess. *Fat fucking chance*, I think.

“Genevieve,” he says. He leans over and air-kisses one cheek, then the other. “It’s so good to see you again.” He presses our tickets into her long fingers.

“How many?” She looks past Ramon to us.

He motions over his shoulder. “Five.”

“Five coming in,” Genevieve says to the bouncer. She welcomes us with a wave of her arm.

Rachael, Jason, Mandy, and I slip past the exasperated boy, through the gate, and into the compound.

“Rock stars,” Mandy says.

I hold up one finger. “Rock stars with tickets and Ramon. Otherwise, we’d have to deal with Ms. I’m Sorry, No.”

“Hey, Ramon,” I say, “is there a door person anywhere in the world you don’t know?”

“Her brother is one of my patients,” he says.

“If I had to grow up with her, I’d be one of your patients, too,” says Rachael. She adjusts one of the plastic leis she has strung around her neck.

“Could I have another sip?” Mandy says quietly, referring to the half-full bottle of G-spiked Gatorade the porn boys prepared for me before we left the house.

“Didn’t you do some earlier?”

“Hours ago.”

“Remember what I told you about waiting.” I point the neck of the bottle at her and impersonate the Ice Princess. “*I’m sorry, no.*” I pat her rear. Mandy and Jason’s sexual antics had gotten to me, but I’m getting over it. I’ve never been much at holding a grudge. Plus, it’s difficult to stay angry with Mandy when she keeps telling me what she’s going to do to me later and augments the explanation with a demonstration. Besides, Rachael is more than making up for my thaw with arctic blasts directed towards Jason and Mandy emanating from her very cold shoulder.

The five of us start up the pathway leading to the pale-grey contemporary two-story house.

Ramon leans over to me and says, “Welcome to the home that crystal built.”

“Now can I have that hit?” asks Mandy.

“Honestly, are you going to ask me every two minutes?”

“Honestly? Yes.”

We step off the path and I hand her the bottle. “One sip. A *small* one.”

“Thank you Nicky,” she says in that Mini-Mouse voice.

She drinks. “That’s enough.” I tug at the bottom of the bottle. Mandy purses her lips, but doesn’t let go. “Rachael’s pissed at us, isn’t she?”

I take a deep breath through my mouth and let it out through my nose.

“She’s—we’re—feeling kind of left out, that’s all.”

“I knew it. I told Jason. This isn’t like me, really. This is a crazy place, such a crazy place. When we get back to Ramon’s I’m going to make it up to you. Her free hand slides down my chest and under the front of my jeans. I don’t notice Rachael until she’s next to me. Her eyes shift from Mandy’s hand plunged down my jeans to the other one holding the bottle.

“I thought you were going to be more careful with that,” she says, ostensibly referring to

the G.

“I am. Don’t worry.” I turn to Mandy and she has the bottle up to her lips again.

“We should get to the party. *Now*,” says Rachael.

“Okay,” I say, and take the bottle away from Mandy. It feels considerably lighter.

“Damn. How much did you drink?” I hold the bottle up to the light coming from the house.

“I sipped, like you told me.”

“Yeah, like Popeye sips spinach.”

“Let’s go,” says Rachael. “Ramon’s waiting.”

I take a quick swig from the bottle and pour the rest onto the ground.

We catch up with Ramon and Jason just in time to round the corner of the house. It’s full-on circuit spectacle. Every square inch of the broad deck surrounding the pool is jammed with people. Lights are mounted everywhere, spinning and playing across the crowd, the trees, the bay and the pool, which has been put to good use by dozens of men and a few topless women, some of whom are perched on their shoulders, arms over head, swaying to Victor Calderone’s steady, heavy, percussive mix.

“Holy fucking shit,” says Jason. He shakes his head and pulls Mandy and Rachael close to him. “This is a house party? Not where I come from.”

Rachael gives me a satisfied look. This is more like it—a high-volume hit of the circuit and the opportunity for us to show off our connections.

“Now I see why that guy at the gate was causing such a fuss,” I say.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore,” says Rachael. She puts her hand on Jason’s shoulder. His hand slides down her back and under the top of her shorts. *OK, fine*. I walk behind Mandy and wrap my hands around her waist. She leans back into me. A warm buzz melts through me.

I’m about to ask Ramon exactly how much crystal one has to move in order to buy a place on Fire Island and throw this kind of party, when a spot light swings around and points up to the gently sloped roof of the house. There, arms outstretched, is perched a lithe, lame-clad,

drag queen in a Marilyn Monroe wig. The crowd hoots. She reaches down and picks up a cardboard box overflowing with glowing bracelets and showers the crowd with them by the fistful. Jason catches a bunch and we put them on our heads like halos—or as close to halos as we’re likely to get.

Across the bay, a bright-orange full moon breaks the surface of the water. I tap Mandy on the shoulder and point to it. She puts her mouth to my ear and says, “This doesn’t suck.”

“Not a bit,” I say. “How are you feeling?”

“Fantastic. Can’t believe how good I feel.” Her eyes are a little droopy, but clear and focused. She puts the palm of her hand to her forehead. “Kind of warm though. Might need a dip in the pool later. With you.”

A dip in the pool, huh? Things *are* looking up. She’s high as hell, but steady on her feet and lucid. Looks as though I dodged a bullet with that G. Victor Calderone drops in a slamming remix of Toni Braxton’s “Unbreak My Heart,” and Mandy wiggles away from me, spinning circles, one hand waving over her head like a bull rider.

“I love this song.” She backs into Jason, who turns around and smiles at her. “Dance with me,” she says. She pulls him away from Rachael. “Dance with me now.”

Mandy presses herself against Jason, runs her hands through his thick black hair and down his chest. Rachael backs away from them, throws me a sarcastic smile, and crosses her arms.

“Come on, dance with me, baby,” Mandy says to Jason. She tosses her head back and closes her eyes.

Jason brings his arms down to her waist and pulls her closer. “What do you call this?”

“That’s not dancing,” she says. “This is.” She pulls up the front of his tank top with one hand and hers with the other. Her breasts burst free. She rubs herself up and down against Jason’s chest and stomach. Several people form a semi-circle around them, clapping time to the rhythm.

“Damn, girl,” says Jason, laughing, “feeling pretty good, are we?”

Rachael looks around at the crowd and grinds her jaw.

Mandy takes Jason’s hands and puts them on her breasts. “That’s it, baby.”

Calderone loops the lead-in to the chorus, repeats it over and over, cranking the energy.

“Get it, girl,” says a bald-headed guy who bears a remarkable resemblance to Mr. Clean.

Without looking back, Mandy pulls Mr. Clean to her, takes his hands and puts them on Jason’s shoulders, sandwiching herself between the two of them. She pulls her shirt off and twirls it over her head. Mr. Clean works his hands over her stomach and breasts. The three of them bend at the knees and grind down to the floor.

“Now *that’s* dancing,” she yells.

She’s high—we all are—but that is no excuse for dumping me and making yet another spectacle of herself. Rachael’s right, this is embarrassing. To huge applause, Mandy pulls off Jason’s shirt and begins kissing his chest. More people have noticed the threesome and are gathering around. Two big boys step in front of Rachael, jostling her out of the way. She gives them a dirty look and walks over to me.

“Isn’t this just lovely,” she says.

I put my arm around her.

“No, it isn’t.”

“Well, it certainly took you long enough to get there. It’s bad enough doing it in front of a few tweaked queens by the pool, but here, at this party? In front of all these people who know Ramon? This is *not* okay,” she says in the same tone she uses to reprimand The Wart.

I nod in agreement, but the truth is, no one looks appalled. Ramon will probably be immortalized as the guy who brought the fabulous hot straight couple to the party. But that’s not the point.

Mandy leans back against Mr. Clean and drops her head against his chest. He puts his hands under her arms and lifts her up off the ground. Jason wraps Mandy’s legs around his waist,

thrusting against her. She undoes the top button of her shorts, then reaches forward and tries to unzip Jason's pants. The crowd whoops.

Rachael grabs my arm. "Do something."

The song breaks free to the chorus, the lights shift to harsh white as the crowd leaps into the air, screaming, surging upward. As I take a step forward, still not sure what I'm going to say or do, Mandy's legs drop down from Jason's hips, causing Mr. Clean to lose his balance and pitch backwards. He lands heavily on the floor with Mandy on top of him. Everyone's laughing, but I'm close enough to see her expressionless face and limp body. Mr. Clean tries to get out from under her but is trapped in a tangle of legs. He yells something, but the music and crowd noise drown him out. Jason leans down and tries to help both of them up, but Mandy is dead weight. Her head, lifeless, rolls off his chest and rests at an impossible angle on her own shoulder.

Jason looks up at me. "Is she all right?" he says.

"No."

Ramon pushes through the crowd and drops down to one knee, studying Mandy's face. Her eyes clear for a moment, then roll back in her head. "Help me lift her up." Jason and I each take an arm and we lift Mandy up onto her feet. Her knees fail and we just manage to catch her before she falls forward.

Mr. Clean yells into my ear, "You need to deal with her right away before security notices." We drag her off the dance floor away from the lights, and set her down against the trunk of a tree.

Jason squats down next to her. "What's wrong with her?"

"It's G," I say.

"For fuck's sake, Nick," says Rachael.

Sweat drips off my forehead. I've heard of people dying from G overdoses but I've never witnessed one, much less been implicated. The prospect of being the person who gave her the fatal dose scares me sober.

“Mandy, you okay?” Jason says. She’s drifting in and out, trying to speak, but I can’t make out any words, only the thousand-yard stare.

Jason turns to Ramon. “What do we do?”

Ramon holds Mandy’s wrist, taking her pulse. “We need to get her to my place without attracting too much attention, especially from security, or we’re going to end up in jail. And if anyone asks, it’s K, not G.”

He’s right, a K-hole is temporary, not life threatening. Mr. Clean comes over and hands me her tee shirt. “She dropped this,” he says. He bends over, resting both hands on his knees.

Ramon drops her wrist. “It’s K. She’ll be all right in a few minutes.”

“Poor thing. Here’s something that’ll help.” He hands me a small plastic tube the size of a travel-sized container of tooth paste. “Cake frosting,” he says. “The sugar will bring her out of it. I keep it handy.”

In the midst of all the chaos and panic, I can’t help but wonder if the folks back at the Betty Crocker plant have heard that the fruit of their labor doubles as the antidote to a ketamine overdose. “Thanks,” I say, and hand it to Ramon.

“You should get her up and on her feet soon,” he says. “I heard there’re undercover cops.”

“Thanks, we’ll take it from here,” says Ramon.

He backs away. “The things we do for fun, huh?”

Ramon waits until Mr. Clean is out of earshot, throws the tube of frosting into a bush, then says, “Give me a few second to talk to Genevieve. Put her shirt on. Do not let her fall asleep. Got it?” he says to me.

I bend down next to Mandy and take her chin in my hand. Her head trembles and I for a moment I think she’s starting a seizure, until I realize that it’s my hand that is shaking uncontrollably. Sweat runs down my forearm. “Mandy. Please,” I say. Jason and Rachael slip Mandy’s shirt over her head and pass her limp arms through each side.

Ramon comes back and says, "Let's go."

"Come on Mandy, we're going to go now," says Jason. He takes Mandy's arm.

"You're going to need help," I say. I take one more hopeful look at Mandy, but nothing has changed. Jason and I get her on her feet and drape her arms around our shoulders.

Out we go, with Jason and me flanking Mandy as we take small, shuffling steps past the dozens of people still arriving. A few of them look concerned, some avert their eyes. One guy smirks and says, "Must be hell of a party."

At the entrance to the property, we pass Genevieve, who takes a worried glance at Mandy and says, "You need any help with her?"

"She'll be fine," says Ramon. "Just needs a little time to herself." Genevieve wishes us luck, but also seems very relieved to see us go.

The boardwalk appears unusually narrow and dark tonight. The moon helps a bit, casting a soft glow along the path, but it's terribly slow going, especially with Mandy stopping dead in her tracks every few steps. Rachael and Ramon, who are ahead of us, stop frequently to turn and wait. It's only a couple of hundred yards to Ramon's house, but at this rate it will take us hours.

Jason says to me, "Maybe we should carry her. What do you think?"

"I'm game," I say.

Jason and I lock arms and form a modified fireman's carry. We slide our arms under Mandy and carefully lift her up.

"Put your hands on our shoulders," says Jason. Mandy sits motionless between us.

"Just go," I say.

We're half way to Ramon's and making good progress when Mandy lets out a strange, howling moan.

"You okay?" asks Jason. Mandy doesn't answer. Her body trembles.

"She's seizing," says Ramon. "Hurry."

Jason and I break into a trot. With Mandy's head bouncing against Jason's chest, we make

the sharp right to the entrance to the house, squeeze through the front door, and deposit her on the living room sofa.

Tweaked and Chipper, wearing matching orange Speedos, stand in the kitchen. “Jesus,” says one of them, “what happened?”

“G hole,” says Ramon.

“Shit. I warned her,” says the other. “Warned her more than once.”

Mandy is out cold. Her breathing is slow but steady. Ramon taps Mandy on both cheeks and yells, “Mandy. Mandy, WAKE UP.”

There’s no response.

“How about crystal?” says Jason. He leans over the arm of the sofa, breathing hard, staring down at her. “Won’t that bring her out of it?”

“No,” says Ramon. “Just the opposite.”

“So, what then?”

Ramon waves Jason off as he calculates Mandy’s pulse rate. “Get me some ice in a towel.” I run to the fridge and empty two ice trays into a beach towel. I hand it to Ramon. “Right. Now lift her up. I need to get this under her head.” Jason and I pull Mandy up and Ramon places the towel-wrapped ice at the base of her neck.

“What’s this do?” I ask.

“The ice slows down the absorption of the G.”

Mandy’s eyes open again and then slam shut.

“Now what?” says Jason.

Ramon puffs up his cheeks and exhales. “We watch and we wait.”

“Are you kidding?” I say. “She needs to go to a hospital.”

Ramon shakes his head. “St. Bartholemew’s gets a ton of G overdoses. They won’t do anything in a hospital we can’t do here. The G suppresses your respiratory system. Stimulants make it worse, not better. She’s fading in and out, which is a good sign. It will probably pass on

its own.”

“And if it doesn’t?” asks Jason.

Ramon doesn’t say anything.

Jason throws his hand up to his head and spins away. “Jesus Christ. I’ve been doing G for days. Why her?”

“For one thing, you’re twice her size,” says Ramon, his flighty demeanor replaced by calm professionalism. “Which means she should have been twice as careful.”

I slump down on the floor next to the sofa and drop my head in my hands, rocking back and forth.

“It’s not *her* fault,” says Rachael. “She’s never done it before.”

The shame burns through me.

For an hour, perhaps more, we watch and wait. Jason sits across the living room on an arm chair, occasionally walking over to touch Mandy’s hair. Every few minutes, Ramon takes Mandy’s pulse.

Each time he does, Jason asks, “Any better?”

Each time, Ramon replies, “The same.”

The porn boys wander back and forth from their room. For a while, Rachael sits at the end of the sofa, rubbing Mandy’s feet, but on porn boys’ second or third trip, Rachael follows them. When she returns, she’s wide eyed and jumpy, pacing around the sofa and sighing a lot.

I’m tempted to join them, but I can’t shake a horrifying image: Mandy takes her last breath just as I touch my lips to a crack pipe. I sit on the floor staring at her calm face.

Two or three times, it seems Mandy is about to come to. She groans and mumbles, shifts on the sofa, but then fades away. I watch her, my heart a pile driver, then check Ramon’s expression, in vain, for some clue to her condition. The air in the room, the room itself, feels compressed, as if we’re inside a car being crushed at the junkyard.

“How long can this go on?” Jason asks.

“A few minutes to a few hours,” Ramon answers.

“A few *hours*?” Jason yells. And you’re sure we shouldn’t get her to a hospital? I know you’re concerned about your license and rep, but—”

Ramon snaps his head around toward Jason. “This has nothing to do with either my license or my rep.”

“Hi,” says Mandy. I push away from the sofa and almost fall over.

“Hi,” she says again.

No one says anything.

“What’s going on?”

I smile, relief flowing through me like class-five white-water rapids.

“How do you feel?” says Ramon.

“Groggy as hell,” she says. “Can you help me sit up?”

Ramon and I slide her up onto one of the cushions of the sofa. Mandy looks down, feels her legs and checks herself over. Jason crosses the room in two long strides and hugs her. “You scared us to death, girl.”

“What happened?” she says. She cradles Jason’s head in her hands. “Last thing I remember we were at the party, dancing.” She scrunches up her nose. “A lot.”

“It was the G,” I say.

“Love that stuff,” says Mandy. She looks around the room at all of us. “*What?*”

Ramon says, “You were out for more than an hour.”

Mandy shakes her head. “No way. Thought I was dreaming. Couple of times I could see you all, but it was distorted, like I was under water. Then the water got very cold. I was freezing.” She reaches behind her and pulls out the icy, wet towel and drops it on the floor. “No wonder.” Mandy looks down at her chest. “Hey, my shirt’s on inside out.”

“Yeah, so is my stomach,” I say.

“What, you were worried?”

“Just a little,” says Rachael.

Mandy rubs her eyes. “Tell you what, I feel rested. Like I took a long nap.”

“Your nap started on the middle of the dance floor,” says Jason.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “Just give me a few minutes. I’ll go back to the party, if that’s what you all want.”

“We’re going, if you want to come back with us,” says Chipper.

I say, “You’re kidding, right?”

“Sure,” says Mandy. “I’m up for anything.”

“I’m game,” says Jason.

“Seems a waste not to,” says Rachael, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Is this where I take a stand? Make the scene that Rachael’s been asking from me?

Everyone is gathered by the front door now, chuckling and jovial, as if nothing had happened.

Even Custer had some back up.

“Come on, Nicky,” says Rachael.

I get up slowly. For some reason, that thing Mr. Clean said comes back to me.

“The things we do for fun,” I say.

Crash Landing

It was payback time. We returned home from Fire Island and tumbled into a spectacular crash. Sure, we'd had post-party hangovers before, but this one was different. Our sleep-and-food-deprived bodies finally teamed up with our ravaged nervous systems and our bruised egos to let us have it, right in the old cerebellum. An immense black shroud descended over both of us, beyond sadness—it was a grinding, relentless hopelessness. We slept twelve, fourteen hours a day yet never felt rested. The smallest task seemed insurmountable. It was all I could do to drag myself to the kitchen to let the The Wart out.

Two days into her crash, Rachael, who'd been chewing on Jason and Mandy's behavior in Fire Island like a junkyard dog, called Jason to tell him she thought he owed Ramon an apology. Before he hung up on her, Jason managed to work into the conversation that he thought Rachael a self-centered, pathetic cunt who couldn't even satisfy her own husband.

She didn't take it well.

I heard the sound of shattering glass and hurried down to the kitchen to find Rachael in a fetal position on the floor, uninjured, but crying as though she's just severed an arm. A porcelain vase, a wedding present from my mother, was smashed on the tile floor. I managed to get her up and into bed but not until she told me, quite convincingly, that if I didn't find her some crystal, she was going to kill herself.

Wes, who's started a home delivery service, sent someone over. The deliveries become frequent.

Big Bark continued to be profitable, though less so than before, probably a natural flattening of the growth curve encountered by every business. Nevertheless, Rachael panicked, blamed the slowed growth on Anna's lack of management skill and became convinced that

without her immediate intervention the business would fail, that we'll spend our golden years destitute, "eating cat food."

She began to spend a lot of time at Big Bark, including evenings and weekends, the crystal her constant companion. At Rachael's insistence, I started covering more shifts. I lost all interest in participating in the management of the business or interacting with the customers, choosing instead to occupy myself with the dirty, menial chores such as cleaning out the cages and scooping shit from the play yard—tasks which gave me good reason to remain sullen and uncommunicative.

Rachael and Anna had their first serious argument over whether or not to offer grooming services. Privately, Anna admitted to me the real problem was that she felt micro-managed, unappreciated, her authority undermined. She was finding it increasingly difficult to work with Rachael who was becoming more demanding and irrational. I kept it all from Rachael, terrified at the prospect she'd overreact and fire Anna.

Rachael's ambitious plan to expand Big Bark and become the doyenne of dog-dom now seemed as outlandish as it did grandiose.

Concerned about Rachael's state, I suggested she try yoga. One day, a substitute instructor named Hans, who looked and acted like a direct descendant of a Nazi Brown Shirt, forced Rachael into a challenging pose and something in her neck gave way. She couldn't get out of bed for days.

An MRI turned up a degenerated disc in her neck. Surgery—spinal fusion—was an option, though not one recommended by the doctors, at least not yet. For her pain, she was prescribed Percocet and for acute flare-ups, Oxycontin.

One day, we heard a report on NPR warning about Oxycontin abuse—how kids and housewives in the Midwest were smashing the pills into powder and snorting them. Sounded good to us. It worked, temporarily taking the edge off Rachael's anxiety and my despondency. Between Rachael's increasing appetite and me dipping into her stock, she quickly ran through her

prescriptions and took to pressing me to press our friends for pills. “Did you ask him?” became her mantra. Fortunately, Ramon began to fill in the gaps with scripts he mailed to us from New York.

Early one morning, we received a phone call from Wes informing us that Randall had had been taken to George Washington Hospital Center. We rushed over and were shocked to find him in intensive care, breathing only with the aid of a respirator. Wes and Randall had just returned from a week in Provincetown. They’d been, as Wes put it, out and about—nothing out of the ordinary—an expression I interpreted as Wes’s attempt to downplay what was probably a vacation characterized by little sleep and plenty of boys and crystal. Ever since they returned, Randall had been feeling a little run down—nothing serious. That morning, he’d awoken with a raging fever, unable to lift his head. The doctors had diagnosed a serious systemic infection which had attacked his body and, in particular, his heart. Randall had been HIV positive for years, but this was the first time he’d been ill. Now, with his immune system seriously compromised, things were touch and go. Touch and go? What do you mean touch and go, asked Rachael? In response, Wes broke down. A friend of ours, an anesthesiologist at the hospital, swung by and looked in on Randall. Afterwards, he took us to the side. He’d never say it in front of Wes, but he’d seen similar cases over the years. It didn’t look good. The risk of further infection to him was so great that they wouldn’t even allow any visitors. Best we could do is steal a couple of quick glances through the door at Randall, lying there lifeless with the regular, bellows-like sound of the respirator his only company.

On the way back home, Rachael stared out of the window and slowly shook her head. “I’ve known him since I was fifteen years old. If he dies, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

That made two of us. My former swagger had turned into a sulking shuffle. Lying in bed with all the shutters closed, I would fantasize about running away, then punish myself for allowing myself such thoughts, for being irresponsible, ungrateful and a coward. All around me, the doors seemed to be slamming shut on the life that had, not that long ago, seemed so wide open.

The Road to Nowhere

One evening, while Rachael was at Big Bark with Anna installing a new point-of-sale software system, Christian and Eric paid me an unexpected visit. We sat on the sofa in the parlor.

“What’s up?”

“We’re worried about you and Rachael,” says Eric.

“And we’re not alone,” says Christian.

I think I know what they’re going to say. I could save them the awkwardness of having to say it, but I don’t.

“I know you guys are having a tough time,” says Eric.

“It’s more than that,” says Christian. “She’s headed to a very bad place.” Christian has always been more direct.

“She’s so volatile and distant, there’s just no warmth there, no humor. She’s not the Rachael we knew,” says Eric.

Christian leans forward, “And this bit about Mandy and the G. If I hear that story one more time, I’m going to lose it. She beats you with it like a drum. And you never say anything.”

I stare at the coffee table and say, “I’ve noticed.”

“You need to do more than notice,” says Christian. “You need to consider your responsibility in all this.”

This I didn’t expect. “Me?”

“You seem miserable. Lost.”

“It’s hard to watch,” says Eric.

“Let’s get down to it,” says Christian. “It’s the crystal, and now the pain killers. I’m not sure about you, but she’s addicted, for sure. And it’s affecting your lives.”

“And your friendships,” says Eric.

Christian nods. “Have you noticed we don’t get together as much as we used to? There was a reason we didn’t go with you to Fire Island. We knew how it would be. We’re headed in different directions. Most of your friends are scaling back from that life. Moving on. But you guys, you just keep going deeper.”

I don’t say anything. Secretly, I hoped someone might intervene regarding Rachael, but I didn’t expect to be considered part of the problem. I spend most of my time taking care of her, don’t I? My hackles rise.

“I admit, we’ve had a bad run. But I seem to recall a certain party at your house, the night we met—you serving up bumps like bon-bons. Out of our minds in Montreal and Mykonos. That time at Hombre. Provincetown. Seems a bit hypocritical for you to call us on it now. When we’re down.”

Christian shakes his head. “Hate to say it, but most of your wounds are self-inflicted. Look, we’ve seen stuff, done stuff some people can’t even imagine. I wouldn’t trade a second of it. When we’re toothless old trolls, we’ll sit around, dig out our old club wear that doesn’t fit anymore and talk about the good old days. But let’s face it—that life is a calculated risk. Look at what’s happened to Randall.” He taps the coffee table with his index finger. “We all danced right up to the edge. Rachael has gone over. You’re right behind her. I warned you guys about doing crystal at work, about smoking it, and you did it. Then I warned you about bringing Mandy and Jason to Morning Party and the G and Ramon, too.”

I say, “Ramon is pretty, well—”

Christian punches his knee with his balled up fist. “Ramon is the next catastrophe waiting to happen. I was in New York last month and I saw him at Body and Soul, a Sunday night, dancing like a freak, completely cracked out. I’d hate to be one of his Monday morning patients.”

“We don’t want to see that happen to Rachael,” says Eric. “Or to you. I don’t know you as well as Rachael. I don’t think anyone really knows you, Nick, especially not lately. Ever since Fire Island, it feels like you checked-out.”

Christian says, “I don’t think you’re an addict. Not yet, anyway. But if you keep on living your life like this, sooner or later, you’re going to be the big Greek tragedy.”

Eric glances at Christian, looking pained. He touches Christian’s arm and says, “Besides, we don’t want to be fifty and still hanging on to that kind of life.”

“Look at what has happened to Randall. Unless she does something about it, Rachael isn’t going to see fifty,” says Christian.

“That’s a little dramatic, Christian,” says Eric.

“Maybe. But it’s also true. Randall’s hanging on by a thread. But Rachael and Ramon? They’re right there, too. On the road to nowhere.” He turns to Eric, “Don’t get soft on me now; we’ve talked about this a million times.”

Eric looks me right in the eyes. “We’re here to tell you that we’ll support you in any way we can, but we think Rachael needs to consider some drastic changes in her life.”

“Drastic changes?” I say.

“Say what you mean, Eric,” says Christian. “She needs professional help. Rehab. And yes, Eric’s right, you’ll get all the support in the world from us and your other friends if you two decide to tackle this thing.”

“And if we don’t.”

Christian looks down at his feet. “Well then, it’s safe to say you won’t have many real friends left.”

I lean forward on the sofa and dig my elbows into my thighs. “What if I can’t get her to do it? What if she won’t change?”

There’s silence.

Christian says, “Then we drag her ass—”

“No,” says Eric—gentle Eric—emphatic and with an edge to his voice. “If she won’t change, you save yourself. You try your best, but the day—the minute—you know it won’t work, you’re gone. You disappear.”

Christian puts his hand on Eric’s knee and nods his head.

Eric continues, “By disappear, I don’t mean—”

“Got it, Eric,” I said, my head cradled in my arms.

No one needed to explain the meaning of disappearing, not to me. I’d read the book and seen the movie. It is who I had been when Rachael met me—The Invisible Man.

The Nudge

That night, with Christian and Eric sitting right next to me, I called Rachael and proposed to her that she consider rehab. I had expected the line to go dead. But it didn't. She agreed—she was out of control; our lives were spiraling down. She'd think about it. But there was no way she'd even consider such a drastic move with Randall as sick as he was.

As it turns out, it was Randall who would provide Rachael with the nudge she needed—by getting better. Somehow, he fought off the worst of the infection and began to recover. About a week later, they had taken him off the respirator. On the first day he was allowed visitors, Rachael and I spent several hours at his bedside. Randall was pale and thin, but in good spirits. Rachael sat next to him, holding his hand and smiling, visibly relieved. Though the respirator tube was out of his throat, it would be several days before Randall could speak. In the meantime, he communicated by means of a Ouija board, which Wes had dug up somewhere.

“How appropriate,” Rachael said.

Randall moved the heart-shaped planchette around the alphabet printed on board, slowly piecing together a request: “Dish the dirt.”

Rachael laughed. “You almost go and die on me and the first thing you want to do is catch up on gossip?”

Randall nodded.

“Well, okay then.” Rachael launched in on the latest news regarding Big Bark, the crash of the NASDAQ, who had broken up with whom. And then, so casually it almost slipped by me, she added, “And I've decided to go to rehab.”

I sat there for a moment, stunned. “What?” I asked. “When? I mean when were you going to tell me?”

“A few days ago,” Rachael said.

“Well, I wish you would have said—”

Randall reached over and touched my forearm. With his free hand, he moved the planchette past the image of the skull with protruding bat wings: “YES,” and then down to the lower right-hand corner: “GOODBYE.”

Rachael’s only conditions: that she got to pick the facility and that I would participate fully and support her in her recovery. Of course, I said. Anything.

After several days of research on the Internet, a search that ruled out several prominent facilities, including Hazelden (“Minnesota in January? You *must* be kidding.”) and the Betty Ford Clinic (“I am *not* spending a month in The Valley of the Dolls”), Rachael found the perfect place. She would kick her habit caressed by the steady Trade Winds and the glorious beaches of Antigua.

She was aware of the harsher aspects of rehab, but the setting allowed Rachael a more palatable vision of what might await, one in which she sat on a sun-dappled veranda sporting Jackie-O sunglasses and a scarf, her fingers soaking in a gentle solution of hibiscus water and butterfly emollients as she awaited her manicure.

A few phone calls and a wire transfer later, things were all set.

Now all I had to do was get her there.

On the Road to Rehab

I come down from our bedroom to the office rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Rachael is where I left her hours ago—in front of the computer, wearing a white waffle-weave bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, making minute and undetectable changes to an ad she is designing for Big Bark.

“You cannot still be tinkering with that,” I say.

Her eyes stay fixed on the screen. A small bag of crystal with a blue plastic pen cap shoved in it lies next to the keyboard.

“This is not tinkering. See how unbalanced it looks? The design is totally fucked. And the copy is a disaster.”

She’s hoarse. I take a step closer and swing around to get a look at her. She’s never looked quite this haggard. Well, maybe once at the Black Party, but the light at Roseland was more flattering than the morning sun streaming through the office window. I look at the time displayed at the bottom right hand corner of the computer screen—8:12 a.m.

“Why don’t you let me take a shot at it later?” I suggest. “We have to leave by 11 for the airport and —”

She slams down the mouse. The Wart, who’s been sleeping by her feet under the desk, wakes, ears pinned back. “I know what time it is. I have to get this done. I have to get everything done.”

“What exactly are you getting done? The ad looks exactly the same as it did when I went to bed.”

“Are you crazy?” She swivels around in her chair. The circles under her eyes are black gashes. “Just leave me alone and let me get this finished so I can do the other five hundred things I have to do.”

“*Fine*,” I say. I dig the pen cap deep into the crystal and do a bump—a big one.

Before we leave for the airport, we follow through on our plan to perform a narcotic exorcism. In room after room, we open cabinets and drawers and are shocked by the at the volume and variety of what we find: bumpers in the bedside tables, residue-encrusted baggies on and under the desk, rusty single-edged razor blades in the silverware drawer (left over from those comparatively innocent days of snorting cocaine), and the mother lode—the junk drawer next to the kitchen sink—the holding and re-supply area for whatever is in the house.

As I watch the last baggie of crystal swirl down the toilet I'm relieved—for now. The truth is, I'm still high and not sure how I'm going to feel about it later, after she's gone, when the inevitable crash comes—when I'm alone.

I load her luggage in the car and she says a blubbering goodbye to the Wart. It's 11:30. We're cutting it close. The late departure doesn't help settle my nerves. Both of us are as scattered as kittens in a yarn factory.

Finally, we're halfway to the airport and I'm beginning to relax.

“So, look, you are coming to the family program, right? Then we come home together?” she asks.

“Yes, I'll be there, I promise.”

“It's really important to be there.”

“I've already made my reservations. Already paid for it. We've gone over all this, remember?”

“Right.”

Then, a moment later. “Oh Fuck.”

“What is it?”

My passport. I think I left it in the office.”

She rummages through her purse. “I think I left it in on the desk, Nicky,” she says, with more certainty.

“Are you sure? I thought you put it in your purse.” I glance at the digital clock on the dash. Not enough time to go home.

“It’s not here,” she says, her voice full of anguish and edge. She takes her purse and dumps everything onto the floor of the car.

“What the hell are you doing?” I’m on the verge of panic, too. My mind is already running through scenarios. Missing this flight means missing her connection in San Juan, the last one of the day. The thought of trying to repeat this process tomorrow is too much to bear, especially since we’ve flushed all the crystal. Once Rachael crashes, I won’t be able to get her out of the house much less onto a plane bound for rehab. Besides, any delay in her departure will give her an excuse to call off the whole damn thing.

Rachael is bent over, rifling through the contents of her purse. I hear the rustling and snap of keys, makeup cases, and paper.

“Any luck?” I say, trying to sound calm.

“I can’t believe this.” She takes her wallet and turns it upside down. Hundreds of dollars dump onto her lap and spill onto the floor. “I know I it was on the desk. I saw it yesterday.”

“I saw it too. Maybe Christian or Eric can go by the house and meet us at the airport.”

She shrieks and stomps both feet to the floor. “*Forget it.* This is obviously not meant to be.”

My stomach draws up into a tight, dark knot. “Just calm down.”

Rachael straightens up and turns to me. She’s crying. “I can’t do this. Who was I kidding? I need a vacation, not rehab. For ten thousand dollars, we could have a hell of a vacation, right? I hear the beaches in Antigua are beautiful.”

I’m about to lose all the initiative. Frankly, a vacation on a tropical island sounds pretty good to me, too. I try to refocus. Where is that passport? I’d seen it yesterday, made a mental note to make sure she took it with her. In fact, I’d picked it up, held it in my hands.

“Oh hell,” I say.

“What?”

“Look in the glove compartment.”

Rachael opens the hinged door and removes her passport. “For Christ’s sake. Like we don’t have enough stress?”

“I put it there yesterday,” I say. “So we wouldn’t forget.”

She tosses the passport in her purse, leans back in her seat, sighs, and closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It’s been a little hectic, you know.”

She takes deep and steady breaths, her eyes closed. “I know, I know. The thing is, I’m scared shitless.”

“I don’t blame you. But we’ve gone through this over and over. Do you want to keep living like this? I mean, look at yourself.” It’s a harsh tactic, but one I know will get through to her.

Rachael leans forward, flips down the sun visor and angles the mirror mounted on the back of it. She turns her head from side to side. The sky has turned overcast, the light is as thin and grey as she.

“I look awful,” she says, disgusted. She flips the visor away from her. “I’m just saying maybe I need some sun and a break.”

“How many breaks have we committed to? How long have they lasted?”

“I know.” She shakes her head, resigned. “All right.” She leans forward and, one by one, puts things back into her purse. “Let’s do this thing.”

Love Letters in the Sand

Day five

Nick:

So sorry about the rather desperate-sounding phone call when I arrived, but I have to say—this was such a mistake. First thing they did is ransack my suitcase. My suitcase! As if I hadn't done up every drug I could get my hands on before I arrived. Then, they put me in some sort of holding pen. That's when I bolted and called you.

Anyway, after they managed to wrench the phone out of my hand, they stuck me in medically-supervised isolation for three nights to wean me off the Percocet so I wouldn't go into seizures. Three sleepless nights and I wasn't even partying! I don't know what they were giving me but I was wired and climbing the wall, so it might as well been crystal. Then I crashed so hard, they had to wake me and force me to eat. By the way, I weighed in at ninety-four pounds. I must have looked like a lemur hanging from a tree in Madagascar. They take a picture of you when you arrive. That's one photo I NEVER want to see.

It's pretty here, but rehab is rehab. No leaving the grounds (not that there's anywhere to go), breakfast at 7 a.m. sharp, morning group, lunch at noon, afternoon group, dinner at 5:30, evening meeting, lights out at 10. Rules and meetings—meetings and rules. I can already recite the fucking twelve steps backwards and forwards. They don't trust you for shit. Wes sent me a lovely care package and they went through it and confiscated the goddamn cologne because of the alcohol content. Figures they'd worry about me abusing the only drug I've never been interested in.

The other inmates are a trip. So successful and so fucked up. Heirs to fortunes, investment bankers, high-end hookers, you name it. Guess what? Compared to these people, I'm an addict lightweight! This tiny little girl from Texas, I swear she can't

weight but eighty pounds, has been shooting crystal and slugging down thirty Percoset a day. Thirty! You know how competitive I am. Had I known that was humanly possible, I would have trained harder and gone for the record.

Yesterday, this high-powered corporate attorney/alcoholic checked herself out after only eighteen days. Said she was sick of all the rules and restrictions. The counselors predicted she'd relapse before she hit the airport.

I don't know if I can do this for a whole month. I haven't been able to call myself an addict yet, but there's no doubt I'm a big old mess. I'm trying not to worry about things back home, how you're doing—the business. Trying my best to 'Let go and let God.' I miss you so much it hurts. I've already started counting the days.

Now that they've entrusted me with a pen which I've promised not to jam into myself or anyone else, I promise to write.

Love,

Shaky Spice

Day eleven

Nick:

Don't get me wrong, this is the hardest thing I've ever done, but the sight of the sun setting behind the cliff over the cove is transcendent. There's no way you can witness it and feel that there isn't something out there bigger than yourself and whatever that thing is must have had a hand in creating it. Isn't that a trip, coming from the daughter of a dyed-in-the-wool-atheist-intellectual Jew? Every evening after our last group session, Arnold (the cocaine addicted chemist), and I sit under the gazebo overlooking the cliff and meditate. Arnold claims that the light of the setting sun stimulates the pituitary glands. I'm not sure why you'd want to have your

pituitary glands stimulated, but Arnold's worth about fifty million dollars and claims to have produced a new, more potent version of crack, so I'm willing to go along.

That's my life these days. The rest of the world is a distant echo. I have no idea what's going on out there and, frankly, I don't have time to care.

Love

Miss Mess

Day nineteen

Nick:

Get this: at yoga today (twice a week, poolside, taught by a real yogi, not Hans the storm trooper), something happened, like a switch flipped in my head. For about fifteen minutes I was (ready for this?) at peace. I don't know how else to describe it. Minutes passed and I was without need, want, craving, worry, or anger. Susan, my roommate, saw it in my face and described my expression as 'blissful surprise.' Next thing I knew, I was actually looking forward to the next meeting. I finally admitted to being an addict—in front of the whole damn group. Everyone applauded and I cried and cried.

Something is happening to me here, something I didn't expect and can't explain. It appears that I am 'getting it' as they say, coming to realize how out of control and selfish I've been.

Speaking of getting it—I'm so horny I could pop, and I'm not alone. There are unauthorized hook-ups going on all over the place. Susan (the very cute sail boat skipper) and I have come to rely on long make out sessions and furious groping to pass the time after lights out. Both of us are too reliant on the high hard one to get much

relief from second base, but it's better than nothing. Under different circumstances, I'd recommend that you, she, and I check into a hotel with a few hits of X, but that's definitely not standard operating procedure for recovering addicts. Still, the idea is not entirely without merit.

I don't know where all this is leading. I'm beginning to see how fruitless my efforts to control everything and everyone in my life have been, how I've masked my pain and fear with drugs and possessions and other crap that I thought would make me happy. I'm seeing the same patterns in the other inmates, many of whom are incredible people—really special. I can't wait for you to meet some of them. Nicky, I hope it's not too late for me to turn my life around. I'm on to something here. I'm just not quite sure what it is yet.

You'll be here soon. Maybe we can figure it out together?

Love,

Randy Rachael

Home Alone

“How are *you* doing?”

With Rachael away in rehab, that’s what everyone wanted to know. Well, to be honest, I was doing pretty damn well. There was emptiness in the house, sure, but there was also peace and quiet. The last few months had been a never-ending string of drama, of dreading Rachael’s cycles of anger and depression, watching her weight and health diminish, seeing the circles under her eyes spread and deepen.

Things at Big Bark were good again. Anna, freed from Rachael’s oppressive oversight, enjoyed having things back in her control. Sales were up, customers were happy and so was Anna. Without the pressure and drama, I actually enjoyed spending time there. The official word was that Rachael was undergoing treatment for her back injury. Though we never discussed it, I’m sure Anna knew better.

I was feeling better physically, too. After Rachael left, I crashed for three days, hardly getting out of bed except to eat and walk the Wart. Gradually, my nerves and my body began to mend. I was relieved to find that, with the junk drawer now full of nothing more tempting than Chinese takeout menus, I wasn’t craving anything. I fell into my own routine: The gym, long walks with Wart, cooking big meals for myself, movies with Christian and Eric. It was a new kind of normal.

I made an effort to reconnect with the people who had drifted away. My friend Gary came to town to visit his mother and brought along his toddler twins and a four year old. We spent the afternoon watching them terrorize The Wart and create inventive ways to endanger themselves.

“Don’t know how you do it, Gary,” I said. I pulled a lamp cord out of the little girl’s mouth.

“Not much choice in the matter. You just do it. Allan! *Allan*. Don’t throw the chess pieces.” He sighs. “Christie and I spend most of our time reacting. Raising kids doesn’t give you much time to reflect. Sometimes, that’s a good thing.”

“Are things good with Christie? You happy?”

“She’s a great mom. I love my kids.” He shrugs. “The rest just happens.”

I spent a quiet Christmas with my mother at our house. It was pleasant, free from the subtle but ever-present tension when she and Rachael were around each other. After dinner she helped me with the dishes.

“I never wanted to say it,” she said, “but I could see this coming. I’ve been around alcoholics enough to see the signs. I know how they can pull you in. They’re so charming and exciting. And if you’ve got a nurturing streak, you just want to take care of them. I hope what they teach her sticks. It did for Vance. He’s a different person.” She sighed. “Lot of good it did me, though. You’d think I’d have learned my lesson by now,” she said, referring to her current husband, with whom she had recently separated after he’d fallen off the wagon following eight years of sobriety.

“We sure know how to pick them,” I said.

She grunted, then handed me the large, oval platter. “Anyway, if you’re lucky maybe Rachael will be a different person, too.” She catches herself. “That’s not what I mean—not exactly. It’s just that I’ve always made an effort with her and she’s kept me at a distance.”

“I know. She’s got a thing about family—hers, mine, and everyone else’s.”

“Sometimes family is all there is.”

About a week after Rachael left for Antigua, Trudie called. She’d heard about Rachael through the grapevine and was calling to see how things were going and to get her address so she could write. We began to speak on the phone frequently. She was a good listener and I found myself opening up to her.

“Too bad you don’t live closer,” I said one evening after we’d talked for more than an hour. “I’d buy you lunch.”

“Baltimore’s not that far. But maybe that wouldn’t be such a good idea.”

“Why not? I thought you’ve sworn off of men.”

“That’s the problem. I have. Many times.”

“I’m only suggesting lunch.”

“I don’t think this is a good time for us to be having anything—even lunch. Trudie sighed. “*Boys.*”

Turns out the last man Trudie had a serious relationship with had been to rehab for cocaine and alcohol.

“I know the drill,” she said. “Rest up and get yourself ready, because when she gets home is when it starts getting tough. Don’t try to wing it. You’ll need a plan. Do you have a plan?”

I didn’t have a clue, much less a plan. In search of one, I turned to my father. He and I hadn’t had much contact for years. His sober lifestyle hadn’t seemed like a good fit with mine. The whole notion of sobriety, which had been so necessary for him, seemed irrelevant to me. But now, who better, I thought, to impart some wisdom regarding abstinence than someone with almost twenty years of it under his belt.

He was compassionate, but direct.

“The hell with a plan. There’s a good reason they say to take it one day at a time. At first, that’s about as far out as you can see. A lot less, especially early on. Don’t get all grandiose with timelines; you’re just setting yourself up to fail. Remember, when it comes to not getting high, failure is *always* an option.”

Fair enough, but I wanted something that felt a little more tangible than just clinging on, day to day.

I found that something—courtesy of Randall, who had been released from the hospital and was back to doing short shifts at work. Just a few days before leaving for Antigua, I went to dinner at his restaurant and afterwards, sitting at the bar, over several glasses of red wine, we formulated a strategy.

“Anything less than a year of sobriety is trivial,” he said. “Six months doesn’t have enough heft. Anything more than a year will seem overwhelming. One year. That’s long enough to break the patterns and really change her behavior. It’ll be over before you know it. Everyone will be so supportive, you’ll see. We’ll catch up on movies and dinners. Besides,” he swirled the wine around in his goblet, “we can all stand to back off some. Maybe it’s time we all grew up a little.”

“What about Wes’ little business?”

“I’ve been encouraging him to get out. While he still can.”

Randall’s confidence was an effective pairing with his Cabernet. After all, a year would fly by, wouldn’t it? Randall was right, how much longer could we keep behaving like twenty-five-year-old circuit boys? I pictured our friends, gathered as a big family around a long, candle lit table. We exchange warm and witty banter. Rachael is radiant as she watches Randall carve a giant roasted something-or-another on an ornate serving platter, the same one on which she used to serve cocaine. Next, I flash to us all sitting at the concert hall at the Kennedy Center, clutching playbills, marveling at the brilliance of the evening’s performance, rising enthusiastically to applaud as we cast knowing, satisfied glances to each other, feeling urbane and adult in our fine clothes and our new lifestyle.

Then, I glanced down at Randall’s wine glass and my fantasy bubble popped. From what I understood of recovery doctrine, addicts, even ones with a disdain for alcohol, couldn’t sit around and sip wine. A buzz was a buzz, and a buzz would lead to impaired judgment and

inevitably to just one bump, then chaos and ruin. The consequences of a truly sober lifestyle, even a temporary one, constricted my stomach like a tourniquet.

Randall must have seen my expression change.

“What is it?” he asked. “More wine?”

I shook my head as if I were clearing it and extended my empty glass. “Yes. Please. Quite a bit more.”

Outtakes

The official staff uniform at the Crossroads rehab center seems to be khaki shorts, floral print shirts, and flip flops. Nevertheless, Ms. Wells, the Senior Counselor, is dressed in a one-piece navy dress and sensible black mid-rise heels.

“Her outtake session will be over in a few minutes,” she says. “She should be packed and ready to go so I’ll have her meet you right here. Why don’t you just have a seat and relax.” Her business attire, combined with her crisp, authoritative manner, lovely chocolate-hued skin and brilliant smile, get my attention—and command my obedience. I swallow hard, find the nearest seat in the waiting area, a cream-colored folding chair, and sit.

Her smile is compassionate yet unsettling. She shakes her head, almost imperceptibly. Have I done something wrong? She points to a large overstuffed leather sofa a few feet away. “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable over there?”

“Of course.” I move over to the sofa.

“There, that’s better. In fact, it’s the best seat in the entire facility. Fabulous view of the grounds.”

I follow her gaze across the room to a long bank of French doors, framed by sun-dappled hibiscus and bougainvillea. Beyond them, across a short stretch of lush grass, lies a white wooden gazebo with several white chairs arranged in a semi-circle underneath. Past the gazebo, the ground drops away, reappearing several hundred yards away as steep, rocky cliff.

“You have a beautiful setting. That must help.”

Ms. Wells looks off into the distance and sighs. “Yes, they help. Some. We need all the help we can get.” Her eyes and attention snap back to me. “So, any specific questions? Things that weren’t covered in the session?” she asks, referring to the last four hours I’ve spent with five

other family members of guests (as they are referred to by the staff) in a session designed to prepare us for what to expect from our sobered-up loved ones.

“I suppose the obvious one: How is she doing?”

Ms. Wells takes a step closer to me, but does not sit. She puts both hands on her hips. “I must say she was in pretty bad shape when she got here. Pretty bad shape. Physically, she was frail and a bit anemic, too. We’re used to that, especially with crystal meth abusers. Many of our guests squeeze in one more bender before they get here and show up a wreck. The withdrawal from the opiates is not pleasant—not as dangerous as alcohol, but very uncomfortable. And we had to sort out the pain associated with her back problems from the temporary symptoms of her withdrawal. Physically, she’s come back rather quickly, as you’ll see. She’s able to manage the discomfort in her back using anti-inflammatories now.”

“That great, right?” I smile.

“Yes.” She frowns. “But I’m more concerned about Rachael’s attitude.”

I wince.

“Specifically, her issues with authority and control. Early on, we had some problems with her challenging the rules. I believe you received an unauthorized phone call the night she arrived?”

“She sounded a mess.”

“Indeed. A very insistent and demanding one at that. Initially, there was quite a bit of that sort of resistance. She’s come around. Rachael is fully engaged in her sobriety, very enthusiastic. We just need to be sure that she doesn’t get over confident. A little humility goes a long way in the recovery process.”

A humble Rachael, willing to give up control to a higher power? I squirm in my seat.

“There’s another issue we should face,” she says.

I don’t know what she’s going to say, but I’m sure I’m not going to like it.

What she says is: “There’s a much higher instance of relapse in households in which the addict’s partner abuses drugs or alcohol. I understand you used drugs together?”

What I hear her say is: You are the enemy—the lowest of the low—you spineless, drug-addled bastard.

I look past her. “That’s all over.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it, Nick. She’s going to need all the support she can get, especially from you.” Ms. Wells smiles. “We’ve seen more difficult cases than Rachael do very well. Just don’t get snowed by her bravado. There’s a fragile little girl under there.”

“I know there is. And I know she’s trying. And when Rachael tries, she usually gets what she wants.”

“Controlling the outcome—it’s a common trait among addicts. Sobriety isn’t maintained through sheer force of will.” She sighs. “Anyway, just take it a day at a time. She’s excited to see you. Been talking about nothing else for days. I’ll say goodbye before you leave.”

She turns and walks out of the room, her heels clacking on the terra cotta tile.

I take a deep breath and rub my sweaty palms together. I pushed her hard to come here and now I’m not sure how to act, what to say.

I shift back in the sofa and look right, then left, around the waiting room, which must also function as the guest/inmate recreation room. On the coffee table in front of me are several board games piled one on top of the other. One of them is Trivial Pursuit, the game we’d played (sandwiched between frequent lines of cocaine) on our first night together. I could use a big, fat line right about now. The thought and the urge shame me. Agitated, I get up and pace around the room.

To my right are bookcases with recovery-oriented journals and books crammed into every gap. In the corner, there’s a big-screen TV on a stainless steel cart with a pile of videos neatly stacked next to it. I can’t read any of the titles from here, but Rachael told me all the movies had been carefully screened for content. She’d seen *28 Days* with Sandra Bullock at least

four times. Playing on the TV is a *60 Minutes* interview with founder, Eric Clapton. Rachael and I had seen the segment when it aired a couple of years ago.

I turn up the volume on the TV. Clapton is sitting in a recording studio with a Stratocaster guitar in his lap. He tells the interviewer that the first half of his life had been a blur of alcohol and drugs and how AA had saved him, how he decided to establish Crossroads in Antigua where he owned a home since the sixties. The scene changes and now he's standing with Ed Bradlee at the entrance to the facility. The camera pans back to reveal the same lush grounds I'd just admired.

Ed Bradlee says, "This place looks more like an upscale resort than a rehab clinic. Why is that?"

"It's intentional. Anything you can do to soften the edges helps, because let me tell you man, rehab is hard. People may check in here expecting a spa." He smiles. "But once we've got them, we've got them. That's why it's in the middle of nowhere. Nowhere to go but down the cliff or up the hill with the goats."

On the cab ride over from my hotel, waiting for a herd of grey goats to clear the narrow road, the driver, Jackson, an old-timer with skin the color of charred leather and who drove an equally weathered mid-seventies Mercedes sedan, regaled me with stories about Clapton-and-company's carousing days.

"Man," he said, "that Clapton and Mick Jagger and their crew, they used to tear this place up. Huge assholes. Hit on all the women, got in fights, car accidents, you name it. Bar owners used to see them comin' and shake in their shoes, knowing it was even chances their place'd get wrecked. That's all changed now, though. He's on the straight and narrow. Hardly see the man anymore." Jackson's eyes, the whites the color of an old cue ball, shifted to me in the rear view mirror. "So man, you don't mind me asking—you here for a while?"

"No. Leaving later today. With my wife."

Jackson nodded and looked relieved. "Ah, your wife. Didn't think it was you. You don't have the look about you. I've brought a lot of people up this way. A lot of people. Some of them in a bad way." Jackson tooted his horn at a couple of dawdling goats. They stopped dead in the middle of the road and gave him a withering stare. "Goddamn goats. That's Antigua: goats and beaches. Yes, I've seen them come and seen them go. Sometimes more than once." His voice dropped low. "Your wife, eh? I hope she's doing better."

"Yes, I think she's is."

"Hope she can stay on the straight and narrow, man. A person's *got* to stay on the straight and narrow. Anything else'll get you in trouble, and quick."

The last goat moseyed on. Jackson put the car in gear and pulled away. "Don't worry, man. If that guitar playing Limey can do it, I'm right sure your wife can, too. One thing though." Jackson had stopped smiling.

"What's that?"

"She coming out today?"

"Yes."

Well then, I'd get her off the island fast. This place stinks of the goats and the white powder."

"White powder?"

"Yes, man, the devil's candy."

"Cocaine?"

"It rains the stuff here. Comes right through from South America, headed up your way in the States. You want to keep her on the straight and narrow, you get her out of Antigua quick. That crack cocaine killed my little brother." Jackson shakes his head. "Thirty-two years old. By the end he looked older than me, and I'm almost twice as old."

Great, we spent all this money to get Rachael into rehab and we send her straight to cocaine central. Is that what Clapton had in mind when he named the place Crossroads?

“If you want, I can meet you here about 4:30. That’s when everybody checks out. Take you right down to the airport.”

“Our flight is at 6.”

Jackson smiled. Compared to his skin, those teeth were magnificent. “Well, that’ll work out just fine then. Just fine.”

Jackson might have been trying to line up a juicy fare to the airport, but he certainly sounded genuine. “Sure. Four-thirty, then.”

The interview with Eric Clapton ends. I check my watch again. It’s almost four. She should be out any minute now. I keep pacing around the room. In spite of Ms. Wells’ efforts to prepare me, I don’t know what to expect from Rachael—a sober, healthy Rachael. In the session, Ms. Wells told us of the dramatic physical changes most people experienced in just twenty-eight days of healthy living: the weight gain (an average of fifteen pounds), tans from days at the pool and field trips to the beach, fit and toned bodies from exercise, yoga, aerobics, and weight training. We’d heard about how the brain reacts to having its pleasure sensors deprived, how many addicts would turn to sex or food as surrogates. She had also warned us about their unbridled enthusiasm, how they often left rehab feeling they could take on the world, that they’d beaten their demons and trumped their addiction once and for all—that they were now invincible. Then, in the blink of an eye, it could come crashing down on them once they were back in the real world. She had stressed the importance of going to meetings, every day for a long, long time, of avoiding friends and places that could trigger a relapse, how we could expect wild mood shifts, from run-away optimism to utter despair.

Throughout the session, I’d nodded and asked appropriate questions, but I couldn’t ignore the knot in my belly that grew and churned as she spoke. Rachael was an addict. She would always be an addict. Avoid friends and places that she might associate with drug use? Might as well tell us to live in a cave. Abandon our friends? Was Rachael ready to dismantle her life to put it back together? Was I?

Stop worrying. They're the ones that keep saying to take it one day at a time, right?

I stop pacing long enough to glance out the window. A black hummingbird with iridescent-blue highlights flits among the flowers surrounding the gazebo. I open the door and walk out to it. From here I can see the base of the cliff, anchored by a desolate, white sand cove, the one Rachael had written about.

The hummingbird buzzes past me. I sense Rachael before I see her, as if she's pushing charged molecules of air. I stand and look back towards the French doors. She emerges and heads to me. I recognize the walk: clipped and confident. Now I see her silhouette, backlit by the sun. Her hair is longer, well past her shoulders, and the humid air has caused it to curl. The sun filters through, creating red and sparkly highlights. I'm astonished at the change to her body. She has hips. Now she's close enough for me to see her face and I stop mid-breath. She is glowing with health. The extra weight has filled in her face and brought back her features. She's smiling, her brilliant white teeth emphasized by her tan. Three more steps and she's on me, her head slides under my chin, her arms circle my back. She squeezes hard. I put one hand on the top of her head and the other on the small of her back and press her closer to me. She smells of jasmine.

We stand there swaying, not saying anything. I'm transported back to Miami Beach, the night at the Warsaw on the dance floor.

I break the silence. "How are you?"

"That's a complicated question. But they tell us to keep it simple, so I'll just say: at the moment—fantastic."

"You feel fantastic."

She looks up at me. "Clean living."

"Must be something to it."

She kisses me.

"I missed you," I say.

She rolls her eyes. “You have no idea.”

“Everyone says hello, and how proud of you they are.”

“I’ve got a lot to tell you. I don’t really know where to start.”

“Start.”

“No, not yet. There’s a more pressing need.” She takes her hand, cups it over my crotch and squeezes.

“Oh, my,” I say. I look around. “I doubt that’s allowed.”

Rachael takes my hand and tugs me towards the building. “I don’t care. I’ve been following the goddamn rules for twenty seven and a half days. If I don’t get laid I’m going to explode or get high.”

“Where are we going?” I say.

“My room.”

She leads me across the lawn to a door and taps one time.

A woman’s voice answers.

“Rachael?”

I look back over my shoulder.

“Susan, it’s me.” Rachael sounds impatient.

The door opens and there she is: late thirties, shoulder length blond hair with straight bangs, green eyes, about Rachael’s height, but broad-shouldered and more athletic. She’s striking—once stunning I imagine, but there’s a sadness etched around her eyes and mouth. She smiles and reveals a Lauren Hutton-style gap in her front teeth.

“Welcome, Nick,” she says. She stands back to let us in. Her voice is soft and sweet.

“You have been missed.”

The room is clean and institutional. There are a couple of single beds, each with a swiveling reading light mounted to the wall behind it, two bedside tables, and two small desks and chairs.

“This is Susan, the one I wrote you about,” says Rachael.

I lean over to give Susan a kiss on the cheek, but she grabs my shoulders, pulls me in and hugs me hard. “My God, I feel like I know you.”

“Likewise,” I say and hug her stiffly.

Susan’s hands press against my back and slide down my arms, squeezing them.

“Lucky girl,” she says to Rachael.

“I told you.” They look past me to each other. Acknowledgement—an arrangement confirmed.

Susan checks her watch, opens the door, sticks her head out and peeks. “I’ll be at the gazebo watching the door. We’ve got about half an hour until they start wondering where we are.”

“Thank you, honey,” says Rachael. She gives Susan a full kiss that lingers a moment longer than I expect. I tried to prepare myself for everything I might encounter here, including the run-away libidos, but this display catches me off guard. I try not to think about the fact that Rachael is not even out of rehab and already breaking rules.

Susan closes the door and Rachael is on me immediately. She backs me toward the nearest bed, moaning all the way.

“Are you sure this is okay?” I ask.

She unzips my jeans and slides her hand down on me. “Don’t worry,” she says, breathless. “We’ve had weeks to work this out. From the gazebo she can see anyone coming.” She drops her shorts and gets on the bed. “Besides, all the other inmates have left and the counselors are at a staff meeting.”

My jeans are down around my ankles, so I shuffle over to her. With one hand she pulls down my underwear and with the other guides me into her mouth. I hear something outside the door. I pull away and bend over to yank up my pants.

Rachael grabs my hand. “It’s okay. The signal is one loud knock on the door. Just relax, would you?”

“I’m finding that a little difficult.”

“Oh, *please*. I’ve been thinking about this for days. Just fuck me. Believe me, it won’t take long.”

I have to laugh. “You sure know how to romance a guy.”

“Plenty of time for romance later.” She slides me back into her mouth.

She’s right. It’s over in a minute. Rachael moans once, then collapses back on the bed, breathing fast. Her face is damp and flushed.

“Jesus,” she says. “That was intense.”

“Sure was.” For her.

“You didn’t come.”

I begin to pull my pants up. “I guess I’ll be able to deduct that one from my taxes. You know, like a charitable contribution?”

“Get me out of this wacky place, okay?” she says. “I need to go home.”

“Amen, sister.” I grab her suitcase and garment bag and follow her out the door. No more than ten yards away, Susan and Ms. Wells stand by the gazebo.

“Uh, oh,” I whisper.

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle her. What can she do, sentence me to another twenty eight days?”

Ms. Wells sports that professional, competent smile; Susan’s smile seems so uncomfortable it hurts to look at.

“There you are,” Ms. Wells says.

“Let me just grab my suitcase,” Susan says. She hurries past us.

“Nick was helping me get my things,” Rachael says.

“I came to tell him the cab was here. But he wasn’t there.” She cocks her head ever so slightly as her eyes play across Rachael’s face, studying and probing. “*The mind of the addict is cagey, manipulative and willful.*” That’s what Ms. Wells had told us this morning. Now I understand how these two must have gone at each other, like chess champions packing AK47s.

“Susan needed some help too,” Rachael says. With one foot out the door, Rachael is poking Ms. Wells with a stick.

Ms. Wells pauses a beat. “I thought we’d gone over the outtake procedure. I would have had one of our staff move your bags to the waiting area.”

“I didn’t see anyone. Besides it only took a minute. Right Nick?”

“Uh, right.” It’s one thing for Rachael to get her digs in, but I don’t appreciate being used as the shovel. Ms. Wells takes a breath and is about to say something but the door opens and Susan emerges, rolling out her big, red suitcase.

“All set,” says Susan. She doesn’t look at anyone.

Whatever she had in mind, the interruption has caused Ms. Wells to reconsider. “As I said, the reason I came looking was to tell you your rides are here.” She sounds resigned.

“My ride?” says Susan.

“Yes. Your boss sent a car for you.”

“Oh,” says Rachael, “I thought we’d just share a cab.”

“That won’t be necessary,” says Ms. Wells, a touch of victory in her tone. “And Jackson’s here for you and Nick.”

“Who’s Jackson,” asks Rachael?

“The cab driver who brought me up here. Quite a character.” I look at my watch. “And very prompt,” I add.

“Yes, he’s all that and more,” Ms. Wells says. “Over the years, he’s shuttled many of our visitors and guests here. And back. Since his brother died of an overdose, he’s taken quite an interest in the well being of our guests.”

The four of us walk through the waiting room, past the TV where the Eric Clapton interview has started again, and into the main lobby. Parked in the circular driveway is a black Jaguar sedan and Jackson's beat-up grey Mercedes.

A small, black woman mops the lobby floor.

"Goodbye Allie," Rachael says.

Allie looks up, props the mop in the bucket and walks over smiling. Rachael had written to me about Allie, a sweet and gentle soul who looked out for the inmates like a surrogate mother. Rachael and Susan give Allie a big hug.

"You two take care of yourselves," she says, squeezing them tight. "I'm gonna' miss my girls."

Ms. Wells and I stand back and watch. Our silence is awkward. She knows Rachael, Susan and I were up to something and I'm guessing she thinks I smuggled in drugs, which, in Ms. Wells' world makes me scum—the worst of the worst. The thought that someone would think me capable of that is excruciating, but one glance at Ms. Well's stern profile wipes away any notion of a confession.

Instead, I try empathy. I turn to her and say, "This must be hard on you, getting to know everyone and then losing them."

"Especially when we don't know what we're losing them to." Ms. Well's eyes bore into me. I look away. "Some will keep in touch. Others, we'll never hear from. We'll see more than a few again. One gets used to it." She looks at her watch. "Besides, in about two hours a new group starts to arrive and it begins again."

Rachael, Susan, and Allie finish their goodbyes. The four of us walk out the front doors of the lobby. Jackson, who's been leaning against the trunk of his car, sees us and hurries over.

"Afternoon, Ms. Wells," he says. He takes Rachael's bags from me.

"Good to see you, Jackson," she says. "How have you been?"

"Mighty fine." He puts the bags in the trunk and slams it.

“And your family?” says Ms. Wells.

“Everyone’s just fine, ma’am. Thanks for asking. On the straight and narrow. You know that’s how I like it.”

Ms. Wells smiles. “Us too, Jackson. Us too.”

The front door of the black Jag swings open and an older, distinguished looking man wearing a pale blue polo shirt, khaki shorts and topsiders gets out.

“Luciano,” says Susan. She looks surprised. “I didn’t expect you here.”

Luciano takes Susan’s bag. “My brother asked me to come for you. The whole family and crew are anxious to see you, Susan. You look wonderful.”

“Okay,” says Ms. Wells, “I suppose it’s time for us to say goodbye.”

Susan and Rachael hug Ms. Wells. Compared to the so-long with Allie, it seems stiff and forced. Ms. Wells places a hand on their shoulders.

“Now you both have your referrals for follow-up counseling at home, right?” Susan and Rachael nod. “And it’s ninety meetings in ninety days, right?” They nod again, less earnestly. “There are rules.” She looks at Rachael, then at me. “There are rules, because they work.” She gives Rachael’s arm a little squeeze and then takes a step back. “Well, that’s it. Let me know how it’s going.”

“We will,” says Susan.

“Thanks for everything,” says Rachael.

Ms. Wells stops at the entrance to the lobby and turns to watch us say our goodbyes. Susan and Rachael hug for a long time and whisper things I can’t hear. Rachael breaks away and motions me over.

“Take good care of that girl,” Susan says. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me to her. I look past her to Ms. Wells who stands there with that probing, distrustful look. I nudge Susan away and give her a peck on the cheek.

“And you take care of yourself.” I say.

Susan nods.

We head to our respective cars. Jackson holds the door open so Rachael and I can slide in. The Jaguar pulls away and we follow it around the circular drive and out the gate. Rachael and I look out the back window as the building and grounds fade away. We turn and flop back in the seat.

“Bet you two aren’t going to forget that place too soon,” says Jackson.

“That’s for sure,” I say. “Jackson, meet Rachael.”

“A pleasure,” says Jackson, swerving to avoid a goat.

“Nice to meet you, Jackson.” Rachael grips the headrest to steady herself. “Might you be Jackson Tills, Robby’s older brother?”

“Sure am.” He glances back over his shoulder. “You heard about Robby?”

“He’s a legend. Very sad, him dying so young, and all. You’re pretty well known there yourself.”

“Yes ma’am, I suppose I am,” says Jackson. He stares straight ahead. “You folks are lucky, don’t forget that. Once somebody’s gone, they’re gone. You got each other to—”

“Keep us on the straight and narrow,” I say.

Jackson smiles. “That’s right, my man.”

For the rest of the drive to the airport, Rachael and I don’t say much. She rests her head on my shoulder and presses my hand between hers. We’re lost in our thoughts. I expect Rachael is replaying events of the last month, trying to put them in context. So am I.

“That was an interesting episode of our life.” I say.

Rachael rocks her head from side to side. “You have no idea. No idea.”

“So what’s the main thing you learned?” I’m curious, but I’m also testing her. The old Rachael would say something glib.

“Don’t know where to start. I feel humbled.” Her voice is flat, as if she’s tired. “I know I’m very small and inconsequential in this big world and that there must be some kind of higher power out there. I know I’m an addict and that my addiction controls me and always will.”

Oh brother. Am I going to have to live the rest of my life with an AA-dogma-spouting automaton?

“The important things you learn from the other inmates. You hear their stories and you see yourself in them. Want to hear the most amazing thing?”

Not really. “Sure,” I say.

“Do you know what Fentinol is?”

“Fentinol? No.”

“It’s synthetic morphine. Just about the strongest shit out there. It’s used for chronic pain management and terminal cancer patients. One way it’s administered is in a time release patch you wear on your skin.”

“So?” Here comes the tale of how AA rescued another lost soul from the clutches of hopeless addiction.

“I learned that if you cut open a Fentinol patch, squeeze out the gel and lick it, it gets you high as hell.”

I rest my head back on the seat. There’s hope after all.

Living In the Land of No

So far, so good—sort of.

Rachael was seeing her therapist twice a week (the bearded and venerable Dr. Schulman who looked like he was picked by central casting), putting in some hours at Big Bark, going to physical therapy for her back, eating well, and—oh yes—not doing drugs.

In one matter only did she stray from recovery doctrine. We found an NA meeting near our home and met many of the unfailingly-nice recovering addicts who showered us with encouragement, empathy and phone numbers. They were so friendly, so warm, so earnest—which was the problem. Where was the edge? Where was the delicious and dark sarcasm? All these people wanted to do was talk recovery, drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, and talk more recovery.

Another odd thing: Everyone loved, *loved*, to talk about drinking and doing drugs, especially to newbies. Invariably, someone took us aside, ostensibly to get to know us, only to regale us with stories of epic benders and lost weekends, night clubbing, and running wild with the pack. The stories began as cautionary tales but ended up reminding us all of a time when life hadn't revolved around meetings held in stuffy church basements.

We started missing meetings, then skipping them all together. We were towing the recovery line, though. As proof, all we needed to do was glance over at the answering machine. No calls. Our friends had started out supportive, offering to go to movies and shows and other “safe” activities. For the first few weeks, they were diligent about dropping by and calling us to check in. The calls and visits had tapered off now, the differences in our lifestyles trumping the best of intentions.

The sense of isolation was overwhelming. About a month after Rachael's return, Christian threw himself a party to celebrate his fortieth birthday. That night, we sat alone, trying to pretend that we would rather watch *Notorious* than be at our best friend's house only two blocks away. I could empathize with Ingrid Bergman, the bird in the gilded cage, trapped and slowly being poised to death by her Nazi spouse for being a double agent. Rachael cried for hours. I tried to buck her up and stay positive, but my heart wasn't in it. In fact, it was all I could do to keep a lid on my own anger and resentment. It had been Christian, after all, who'd taken the lead in getting Rachael into rehab. Rachael's fortieth was coming up. What would we do for that, stay in and order the *pu-pu* platter?

My father warned me (Since Rachael returned from rehab, he and I had been speaking regularly). He didn't mince words.

"You're in for it," he said. "Not getting high is only the beginning. You've got to be ready to change everything. What you think of as fun, where you go to find it, who goes with you. At first, the whole world feels like a trigger with the barrel pointed right between your eyes."

"How'd you get through it?"

"I jumped in to the program—all the way. Went to so many meetings I almost lived in the rooms. I found a sponsor, made friends, never looked back."

"Never had a slip? Not once?"

"They don't give you a coupon for one free slip. You were there for my last binge. You think I wanted to repeat that? I'm not saying it was easy. I didn't see any of my old friends for a long time. Even your grandparents weren't above offering me a little wine before dinner. Sobriety worked, but that's because I worked it. Sorry, I'm breaking out the lingo now. "

With a couple of exceptions, all of Rachael's rehab friends had disappeared. We heard from Susan a couple of times from various ports of call. Her bosses, the Antonellis, were keeping a close watch on her. Arnold, the cocaine-addicted chemist, had relapsed and died of a heart

attack in bed with a bag of crack and a couple of hookers—probably his idea of heaven. (One could make a case for it.)

The night of Christian’s birthday party, however, was the first time I became aware of my resentment for the entire recovery process, including, I hated to admit, Rachael.

While Rachael was away, I had found it easy to stay away from drugs. For me, the high had never been the point. Drugs were the glue that connected me to our friends, to the tribe. It was the social interaction I was missing, not the buzz. That lack of connection spilled over into all my interactions with Rachael.

Where were the unprecedented levels of intimacy and communication the Crossroads counselors said we could expect? Rachael had set up her easel and art supplies in the office and spent hours up there doing who knows what. I dusted off my drums and started playing again, but it sure didn’t feel as though we were spending any meaningful time together, unless one counted episodes of being alternatively cranky or sullen.

She and I did experience one radical change. Rachael had always been the sexual initiator. The thing was, she rarely wanted sex when she was high, which had become a near-constant condition. Sober, though, her appetite became voracious—as single-minded as had been her lust for drugs. Sex became an obligation. It reminded me of the way my Grandmother used to demand other kinds of attention and, believe me, having my Grandmother somehow—anyhow—associated with my sexual relationship with Rachael was no aphrodisiac. Too many nights I lay in bed hoping she’d just let me sleep.

As my father put it, “when a woman breaks your balls all day, the last thing you want is her tugging on them at night.”

Guilt is a strong motivator, though, and Rachael knew just how and when to apply it. I took to going through the motions, relying on porn or fantasy, often involving Trudie, to get me through. Try as I might, I just couldn’t get Trudie out of my head, especially now that the contrast between my visceral encounter with her at my birthday party and the punching-a-time-

clock sex with Rachael had become so stark. Like everything else seemed to be, though, Trudie was off limits.

Rachael and I were living the straight and narrow all right—smack in the middle of the land of no.

I'm splayed out across the king-sized bed in our master bedroom absent mindedly channel surfing as I wait for the Chinese food to be delivered. The Wart lies sound asleep, draped around my head like a wizened ear muff. Rachael is in the bathroom soaking in the big old claw-foot tub, from which I catch a whiff of jasmine and citrus scented bath salts.

I skip past the Weather Channel. We're getting our first blast of heat and humidity. You don't need a meteorologist to predict Summer weather, not in Washington, DC. *I* could tape the forecast for them on Memorial Day: "Folks, for the next three months it's going to be hot and very humid, highs in the nineties, lows in the upper seventies with a chance of a late afternoon thunderstorm, so I'm getting the fuck out of this hell hole and suggest you do the same."

I sigh. Another Friday night in recovery. Another Friday night staying in, staying out of trouble, keeping, as Jackson had put it, "on the straight and narrow." Another Friday night date with the remote control.

I pause on Home Shopping Network to get a better look at Suzanne Sommers (not bad, considering) earnestly hawking some new exercise contraption.

A moment later, The Wart tenses, springs over my head, lands like a gymnast on the sisal rug, and launches himself through the bedroom door and down the steps. He lets out a wavering, high-pitched, squealing bark.

"Jesus," says Rachael from the tub, "what's going on?"

"It's General Tso," I say. "Do you want to eat him up here?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay, then, get yourself dried off, and I'll be right back."

Rachael doesn't answer, but I hear water slosh in the tub and the *thunk* of the plug being pulled from the drain.

Me telling Rachael what to do and her doing it—this life in recovery has turned everything topsy-turvy. Not that I'm counting, but this will be our sixteenth consecutive drug-free weekend and I keep expecting Rachael to falter, to do something—anything—that would be frowned upon by the folks at Crossroads. Expecting, or wishing?

I skip down the stairs and hurry to the front door. Wart is on full intruder alert, his nose pressed against the edge of the door, barking and snarling. His wagging whip of a tail gives him away, though. We order from Blue Diamond at least three nights a week, and it's always delivered by Jorge, a nice young guy from El Salvador.

“Shut—up,” I yell, and push him away from the door with my foot a little harder than I intended. I reach over to the table, grab the money, bend down and pick up The Wart, tuck him under my arm, turn the latch, and open the door a few inches.

It's Jorge, smiling as always, not one bit phased by the Wart's savagery.

“Twenty-nine, ninety-eight, right?”

“That's it: General Tso chicken, salt and pepper shrimp and an order of spring rolls, twenty-six, ninety-eight.” He makes smoochy baby faces at Wart who squirms and snarls.

I exchange the bills for the white plastic shopping bag. The stifling humidity seeps through the crack in the door. It's a good night to stay in, I suppose. Wart stops barking. I wonder if he'd be so easily distracted by a real intruder. I look at him and he is oblivious now to everything but the white bag in my left hand and realize Charles Manson could saunter into our house as long as he thought to bring along some KFC.

“Keep the change, Jorge,” I say.

“Have a good evening.”

I will. A perfectly good evening, a quiet evening—a fine and uneventful motherfucker of an evening. I lock the door and put the Wart down.

I walk across the length of the house to the kitchen, the Wart right at my heels. I arrange the food, plates and silverware on a big, wooden tray. As I do, I glance down at The Wart,

trembling, absolutely riveted by the food. I'm convinced he'd do anything for fried chicken. And for *bacon*? For bacon, he'd murder me in my sleep. Guess we all want what we can't have.

I stride through the empty, dark dining room holding the tray with the food, trying not to think about how often we used to host dinner parties. I let out another big sigh and plod up the stairs with the Wart just ahead of me. Every few steps he looks back to make sure I'm still coming, reminding me of that first night with Rachael, walking up to her bedroom surrounded by the dogs, that knot in my belly, feeling nervous, excited and perilous.

Miss that.

I turn the corner into the bedroom and there is Rachael standing in front of the full-length mirror. She's naked except for a towel she's wrapped around her head like a turban. Her eyes sweep up and down her reflection.

"Food's here," I say.

Rachael turns sideways to the mirror, then three-quarters around, looking herself over. She had put on fifteen pounds in rehab and another five or so since being home. She looks healthy and strong. Her face, always her best feature, has filled out. While I'd never admit it to her, though, she *is* getting a little thick through the middle—still a Caravaggio, but drifting towards Rubens.

"I'm getting fat," she says. Her voice is flat, with a touch of fear wedged in. Rachael's terror of being heavy is imbedded in her, part of her DNA.

"That's crazy," I say. "You look . . . healthy."

"Healthy?" The sides of her mouth turns down sharply, "Okay, Mr. Euphemism, look at my ass and look at my stomach. I am definitely gaining weight."

"You can always drop a few pounds later." I squeeze my eyes shut.

"A few pounds?" She turns to me. "Where?"

“No, what I mean is *I* think you were too thin.” The look on her face tells me I have as much chance of changing her mind as I do of stopping the Wart from barking at delivery guys.

“Look at your tits!” I say. “You have tits again. What did you call them before?”

She’s not listening. She stares at herself in the mirror and shakes her head.

“Hey, Rachael. *Rachael*,” I say, louder. “How did you refer to your tits just a couple of months ago?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Road kill, was it?” I say.

She shakes her head slowly. “Pillow cases with curtain weights tied to the ends.” Her voice is distant.

One tiny chink in the armor.

“So, come on, let’s eat. Then some porn. What do you say?”

Susanne Sommers stares from the TV, Rachael stares at herself, I stare at Rachael, and the Wart stares at the Chinese food.

“I am *not* going to get fat again,” she says. She stomps her foot on the floor. “Besides, it’s Friday night, for Christ’s sake. How many more nights do I have to sit up here eating takeout, watching you channel surf, bored out of your mind, not saying anything. Let’s call Wes.”

So this is how it happens. I imagined a more gradual process. Our friends would be disappointed. They know she’s not ready, that she hasn’t done nearly enough work. Soon enough, though, we’d be back in the fold.

Am I disappointed? I can smell the Chinese food. I’m sick of Chinese food, sick of Friday nights like this, sick of not seeing our friends. Besides, this is *her* sobriety, right? Recovery is *her* decision and *her* responsibility. That’s what they told us in rehab. That’s what they say in the meetings. I’m not going to take the rap for this later, though—not from her and not from our friends.

I wag my finger at her. “Don’t make this about me, Rachael. I’m *not* making that call. Besides, you think Wes is going to allow himself to be the one that knocks you off the wagon?”

She’s already headed to the phone. “Don’t worry, you’re off the hook. And no one else needs to know right now. He’ll understand.”

She’s right. She’ll make him understand.

I sit down on the bed with the tray of food on my lap. The Wart jumps on the bed next to me. I look at the bag, then at the dog.

“Well, boy, guess you’re in luck.” The Wart responds by spinning his tail in tiny, slashing circles. “From now on, plenty of leftovers.”

Back To Square One, Pt. 2

Rachael and I spent the next several weeks proving the addiction theory which claims that addicts will, when they relapse, pick right up where they left off. The road from cocaine and K to X and crystal was remarkably straight and well paved.

One Friday evening while we were up in Provincetown for a few days, Rachael opened her hand to reveal a couple of tablets and a small baggie of white powder and that was that.

Yes, our friends were surprised and some, particularly Christian and Eric, expressed their disappointment. There was, however, also relief—on everyone’s part—certainly mine. We were back.

Still, there was no getting around the fact that Rachael and I had made a pact, to get sober and stay that way for a year—a pact she had chosen to break. In my mind, that breach of contract gave me permission to do the same. As excuses go, it was pretty perfect.

One afternoon, when Rachael was at Big Bark, I drank a cocktail, did a bump, picked up the phone and placed the call I’d wanted to make for a long, long time.

A Messy Embrace

We lie in bed—me on my back, Trudie face down, her head on my chest. The sheets are twisted around us like a vine. I don't want to know the time. I force my head up enough to see the red readout on the motel's digital clock on the night table.

"It's almost 3 o'clock." I drop my head back down to the pillow. "I've been gone a long time."

"Me too. I told the folks at the gallery I was having a gynecological procedure."

"You have this amazing way of blending the truth into your lies."

"True. If I'm gone too much longer, though, they're going to call the doctor and suggest implanting a homing device in my snatch. What did you tell Rachael?"

"Getting the car serviced."

"Again? That is one well-maintained vehicle. Want another line? There's a little bit left."

I stare at the ceiling. "No."

"Want some juice or something? There's cranberry in the mini-bar."

"No. Nothing."

"Something I said?"

"Nope."

"I see." She rolls off me onto her back. "So we've come to the part of the afternoon where you begin hating yourself."

I laugh sarcastically. "Hate myself? Why? I'm only cheating on my wife with someone she thinks is a confidant."

"You know it's not that simple."

"When you get right down to it, it kinda is."

“Then why do you continue to do it?”

Excellent question. There’s the sex. It’s something more though, something repulsive and compelling at the same time.

“I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Ah.” She lifts one leg and scratches beneath it. That’s the most sensible thing you’ve said in weeks.”

“Sensible? I just said I don’t know why I’m sleeping with you and betraying my wife. That’s not sensible, it’s clueless.”

She drops her leg. “What we do can’t always be explained away so easy. Life is messy.”

“Oh, you don’t need to convince me of that.”

“Yeah, but to you that’s something to be avoided. You need to embrace the messiness.”

She takes a pillow and hugs it to her chest. “Learned that in therapy. Let life happen.”

“If that philosophy also embraces deceit, lying, and cheating, then I’ve got it down cold.”

Trudie swings the pillow and smacks me on the stomach. “That’s not what I mean. I’ve been telling you since the beginning you need to come clean with Rachael, that the lies are poison. The truth will set you free, lover boy.”

“Give me *some* credit. I resisted calling you for months.”

“And then you did.”

I frown. “Is this the part that’s supposed to make me feel better about myself?” I take the pillow and toss it to the floor.

“Sorry, you don’t need any more reasons to beat yourself up, I suppose. You and Rachael, you’re both great at it. God, you should have seen the letters she wrote me from rehab about squaring with the people that hurt you along the way. The hurt and anger. Especially with her father.”

“Strange she would share that with you.”

“She had to get it out, I think. Anyway, it scared the shit out of me. The intimacy. And so much pain.” She crosses her arms over her head, covering her eyes. “We’ve all got that stuff in us, I guess. Just comes out in different ways.”

“I guess that’s right.”

“Still,” she says.

“Still what?”

“I don’t want to say right now.”

“Tell me.”

“No. You should go.”

“Now who’s avoiding? Say it.”

Trudie takes a deep breath. “Okay. I get where it comes from, but I still think someone needs to call her on how she behaves. The way she treats people. Especially you.”

“Me? As far as I know, she’s not fucking *my* friend.”

“Which one of *her* friends would want to fuck her? Anyway, what I mean is, the way she controls you. The way she gets what she wants out of you. Right down to dressing you up like a gay boy and parading you around her friends like a Ken doll. Or one of those spoiled dogs at Big Bark.”

I’m reminded now of how Bianca the drag queen described me as a puppy, trailing along behind its mother. I didn’t like the image then and I don’t like it now.

“Hey, it’s not like I didn’t know what I was getting into.”

“You need to consider that.”

“So, I’m just another recessive-gened queen.”

“When I saw you on that dance floor dressed the way you were, surrounded by gay boys, I figured that you were and Rachael was kidding herself. But then, the more we talked I realized I was wrong about that.” She drops one hand between my legs. “And I don’t mean for of the obvious reasons.”

“You met our friends at my birthday party. Didn’t you like them?”

“They were all wonderful. That’s not the point.”

“Tell me, then, why do you think I’ve chosen this life.”

“I’m not sure you did. There’s a part of you that allows someone else and what they want to choose for you. I think Rachael sniffed that out in you from the get-go.”

“That would make her one calculating, scary bitch.”

“Don’t know.” Trudie shrugs. “I don’t know if she knows what she does or why she does it. When I first met her, I was bowled over. She’s beautiful, smart, funny, seems to have it all together. Hell, the truth is, I had just had my heart broken by some chick. I had a crush on your wife something awful.”

“You’re right. This is complicated.”

“The point is, it took a while for me to start to see her, really see her. She wrote about it. One afternoon by the pool after yoga, the little girl who’s buried under all that stuff she throws out there, peeked out. A little girl that just wants to please her dad and have her mom love her. For a few minutes she’d forgiven everyone. She found what she was looking for.”

“That’s the part of her that getting high blots out.”

“Yeah, all the drugs don’t help. That’s why I swore off them for so long. But they’re just a symptom. Scary bitch? She can be. Powerful and scary. Do you realize that we spend as much time talking about her as we do having sex. More, I think.”

I hadn’t thought about it, but I know at once that she’s right. “Here’s the last thing I’ll say about her, then. You didn’t know me before Rachael. I was lost. No idea who I was or what I was doing—what I could do. That’s different now and it’s because of her. In her own way, she has helped me. Stood by me, too.”

Trudie laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

She turns and puts her hand on my forehead.

“Oh, sweetie, if you could hear yourself. I used to say the same stuff when I was seeing Paul and he was doing an eight-ball a day and beating me up. What have you found? A nice house, some money, a Jag and getting high all the time? You think that’s going to cut it for the rest of your life? When are you going to wake up, Nick? There is so much bottled up in you. Somewhere along the line you shut yourself down and whatever day that was is the last day you grew as a person. And then you married someone trapped in her own little box who’d let you stay in yours. You and Rachael? You’re like two sides of a coin.”

I grasp her hand and shove it away. “I don’t need this. This I can get at home.” I don’t care if Trudie is right, she sliced in to me pretty deep and now I want to slash back. “Know what? You’re right. Let’s stop talking about Rachael. Let’s talk about something we never get around to.”

“Like what?”

“Like you, Dr. Joyce Brothers, and how you’ve figured it all out and become so *evolved* as a person.”

Trudie sits up and whirls toward me. Her hair spins in a tight arc.

“Don’t you *dare*.” She jabs my shoulder with both fists. “Don’t you dare make this about me. I sit here and listen to you go on and on about how guilty and scared and unhappy you are and when I suggest some reasons you don’t want to hear, you turn on me. Well, I’ll beat you to the punch. Yeah, I’m doing great. Let’s see.” She counts on her fingers. “First off, I’m doing drugs again after I swore I wouldn’t ever again. Second, I’m lying to my employers who have stuck by me like family—no, way better than family—risking my whole career. Third, I’ve entered into a dead-end affair with a married guy who’s an emotional cripple. Should I go on? Is this helping? Because if it is I’ve got some stuff I could tell you about my father that’ll make you jump for joy.” She turns her back to me, sniffs and rubs her nose.

I feel like I just shoved my head into a bucket of ice water after a three day bender. Why would I lash out at Trudie of all people? For speaking the truth? It's fear. Fear that she's right. Fear of saying the things to Rachael I've kept to myself all these years.

Fear of the consequences.

I sigh. "Why? Why me? From what I hear the world is full of messed up guys. Ones that aren't married to people you've slept with."

She bends over and puts her head between her knees. "I don't know, exactly." The anger has left her voice. "Don't worry, it's not love. I don't trust you enough to love you. But I do feel close to you. There's something about you. You're good. Kind. But until you figure out what you want and a way to say it—to get it—you're not trustworthy. Not as a lover, not even as a friend. I don't know how many other ways I can put it."

"You can stop thinking of new ways. I get it."

"I'm not sure you do. Until you're honest with yourself and with the people in your life, you're not ready to be with anybody."

I had been with somebody almost all my adult life. In fact, I had never really thought of myself as an autonomous entity, someone who could—who deserved—to strike out on their own. I wasn't someone who made decisions by themselves and for themselves, people like Rachael who dragged the world along in their wake. I glance over at Trudie, her pale and supple back glowing in the dim light. No, I wasn't that kind of person. Not until now, that is.

Her cell phone rings. "Oh, great." She reaches down and pulls it from her purse.

"Hello. Yes, everything's fine. Just finished up. About an hour. Maybe a little more. See you then."

She tosses the phone, which skids and bounces across the carpeting and comes to rest by the door.

"Goddamn cell. Might as well have a leash the way they check up on me all the time."

"Just be thankful it's not a GPS."

She laughs and I feel her shoulders relax. I bring my hand up and rub the spot between her shoulder blades. “I’m really sorry. It’s been a one way street.”

Trudie takes a deep breath and lets it out. “Stop apologizing. It’s okay to get angry. Yeah, it has been one sided, but that’s my choice. Look, I may be a mess, but I am *evolved* enough to know that if you left Rachael tomorrow and begged to be with me, I wouldn’t let you in any more than this. I don’t need you latching on to me just because you’re scared of being alone. I know what that’s like. Hell, I’ve done it. You need to grow some as a person, Nick. If you’re miserable, you’ve got to do something about it, for your own sake. *Before you start loving someone, you’d better start liking yourself.*” She sings the line with a country twang.

“What’s that from?”

“Just made it up.”

I think about the lyric. When was the last time I can remember liking myself? “How do I do it? I’m not kidding, Trudie. I’m really asking.”

“By doing the things that are right even when they’re hard—especially when they’re hard.”

She puts her hand on my thigh and drops next to me, her head back on my shoulder. I trace my finger around one of her dimples.

“I need to get going,” I say.

“I know. One for the road?”

“Coke? No, I’m good.”

She smiles. “I wasn’t referring to cocaine.” Her hand slides down my stomach.

“Oh. I figured you’d had about enough of me.”

“Of you? Maybe.” She tosses her leg up and over me. “But not of this.”

She leans forward and I find her lips.

Here's To You, Mrs. Robinson

There's a section in the movie, *The Graduate*, which summarizes the events of the next few weeks. In fact, that movie serves as a pretty good allegory for my entire life up until this point. In it, Benjamin, played by Dustin Hoffman, is having a desultory, dead-end affair with the much older and equally desultory Mrs. Robinson, played by Ann Bancroft. *God*, I have a thing for Anne Bancroft in that movie. By thing, I mean a kind of irresistible, perverse attraction in which I detest and am appalled by her, yet find her so seductive that when she's on screen the saliva builds up in my mouth as though I've just bitten into the most delicious fruit harvested from a yet-to-be discovered grove of endorphin-producing orchids, which must exist, probably somewhere in Bali. There's that world-weary manipulation she unleashes on poor, unsuspecting Benjamin—the devastation and pain she conceals under a façade of boredom and sophistication. There's that husky voice.

Anyway, there's a montage in the movie in which Benjamin, accompanied by “The Sounds of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel, drifts, disengaged, through life, a condition portrayed by a series of juxtaposed scenes: he leafs through a magazine at his parent's backyard pool, he drives aimlessly around Los Angeles in his Alfa Romeo, he stares off at nothing during breakfast—each moment bookended with yet another casual, meaningless tryst with Ms. Robinson in yet another sterile hotel room.

That was me. Like a drug, I enjoyed the momentary thrill at being with Trudie, one which quickly faded into guilt and sense of drifting to nowhere. Benjamin and I shared something else, too. Obscured by the numbing regularity of our routines was a wound. Not the sudden, slashing kind that unleashes a fountain of blood and must be attended to immediately. Our injury was more subtle, easier to ignore, and yet, in the end just as traumatic. It was an ache—a chafe—caused by a life that was slowly wearing us down and away, erasing us, line by

line. Benjamin escaped with the benefit of his Alfa, Kathleen Ross, a bus and a great script. I'd have to improvise.

One thing was for sure: I couldn't go on like this. Something had to give. And then, it did.

We stand in the kitchen, separated by the cooking island. “I’m curious,” says Rachael. “Exactly how stupid do you think I am?”

She holds several sheets of paper, stapled together at the corner. She snaps the first page free from the rest and slaps it down on the counter top. Line after line of type has been carefully gone over with the broad yellow slash of a highlighter pen. She recites: “September 22, 11:14 a.m., Baltimore, Maryland 410-555-7756, fourteen minutes. September 23, 12:22 p.m., Baltimore, Maryland 410-555-7756, seventeen minutes. September, 25, 4:08 p.m., nine minutes.” She clears her throat and picks up the pace. “Calls on the 27th, the 28th, the 30th.” she flips the paper over. “August 1, forty four minutes—my, we had *lots* to talk about that day, didn’t we? And my favorite, August 3. On August 3, we have four, no, sorry, *five* calls to Trudie from your cell phone. What were you thinking?”

Rachael’s lips are pulled tight across her teeth, her jaw muscles flexed.

“Did you think that if you erased the call history from your phone every day, I wouldn’t get suspicious? Did you think I wouldn’t look at a copy of the cell phone bill? That you could continue to lie to me? That you could keep talking to her and fucking her forever.”

She’s had plenty of time to prepare, to build her case. I picture her upstairs in the office with the bill, the desk lamp beaming down, pen in hand, carefully highlighting each listing, call after call—Perry Mason with a vagina and a hard-on.

I’ve just returned from the gym and found her here in the kitchen, waiting. I don’t stand a chance. When she wants to eviscerate, she can do it with the precision of a surgeon, like the time that contractor screwed up laying the floor in the kitchen. He was standing right where I am now when she dismantled him, tile by tile. The thought of having this kind of anger—vicious and

retributive—directed at me had terrified me all my life. Strangely, now that it's here I feel far away, almost impervious.

“So this is what you've been up to when you say you're going to the gym or getting the car fixed and don't come home for hours.” She throws the rest of the papers onto the floor. “You promised me you wouldn't speak to her again.”

Yes, I had promised.

The Wart comes running in from the dining room, takes one look at Rachael and backs out.

“Say something. You are not allowed to stay silent, not about this. You'd better talk to me. It's time. If you want us to stay together, you'd better start talking, and this time I want the truth.”

Here's that familiar feeling—doors slam shut, latches turn, lights out.

“Look at me,” she says. “You cannot run away from this. Do you understand? This is not what adults do. I'm tired of your passive-aggressive bullshit. Talk to me.”

Here's what no one has ever understood. When I'm confronted by rage, overwhelmed by it, the cogs come off the machine and I'm trapped, trapped inside myself. My eyes fixate on a single sheet of paper, dangling at the edge of the counter top, raked with those yellow highlights.

Rachael paces back and forth, up and down the length of the kitchen, punctuating her words by driving her heels down into the floor tiles. Wherever that kitchen contractor is, I bet he just slammed his thumb with a hammer.

“Hell, I could understand a one-time thing. It's *not* the sex. Let's not forget who served her up to you on a platter. It's the lying. You said you wouldn't see her or talk to her again. Remember? Did I need to specify the cell phone? Did I need to rule out telegrams and carrier pigeons, too?”

Even as I had made the promise not to contact Trudie again, I knew that someday I'd break it. Not for love. Trudie was sweet and direct and it might have become that, but I didn't

need love. Love was obligation. I had that in spades. There was the sex, but there was something else, just as alluring. It was the act of breaking away, of rebelling. I'd never experienced it before. All my life, I'd felt boxed in and controlled. Rachael's relapse had opened the door, so I had stood at the threshold and made some phone calls. I knew it wouldn't end there. I didn't want it to. The inevitability of the outcome, the certainty of the consequences, they were intoxicating. Like staying too long at a party, like taking that last bump, knowing you shouldn't, knowing full well you're racking up a huge bill that, sooner or later, will be presented for payment.

“By the way, don't bother calling her anymore, much less try to see her.” She smirks. “I had a nice little conversation with Ms. Trudie, thanking her for being such a friend, for lending such a big ear when I was in rehab. Told her the next call I'd make would be to her bosses. I'm sure they'd like to hear about her lies. I'd make sure her next job was a cashier at the carwash.”

Rachael looks down at my cell phone on the counter top. “It's over.” She snaps open a drawer, pulls out a meat tenderizer and slams it down on the phone, shattering it into dozens of jagged shards.

She tosses the mallet onto the counter and comes close to me. Too close.

“And so are we, if that's what you want. You can go right back to your shitty little apartment, your shitty little life and your, your—mother, back to delivering those lovely roses in that beautiful tuxedo.”

Now, I feel something. It wells up from that dark place, a cache of it buried for years under piles of guilt and fear. This has nothing to do with Trudie. What I did with her was wrong. And I wanted to be caught, like one of those serial killers that leave behind incriminating evidence. I might as well have scrawled, “Stop me before I cheat again,” on that cell phone bill. No, it's not Trudie's face I see floating in front of me, nor, strangely enough, is it Rachael's. It is my grandmother, pleading with me, begging me for love, threatening me if I don't give it. Her arms are wrapped around me, clinging, forcing me down.

“I’d like to know where else you think you’d find what we have. Look around, Nick,” she says, sweeping her arm in a circle. “Who else could give you *this*. I gave you a life.”

I look around the kitchen at the rows of platters, vases, glassware, and china—the objects we’ve accumulated over the years, displayed just so. Once a month, I climb on a step stool and dust each one. Out beyond the picture windows is our patio, paved with vintage red bricks, each one surrounded by pale-green moss which I spray with a thin mist of water every week. There’s the wooden fence Christian, Eric, and I erected, lined with ceramic plant holders from Tuscany, flowers spilling out and down from them in cascades of white, pink, and orange. I have loved these things, cared for them, as I have for Rachael. Will I miss any of it?

She takes a half step closer, her face inches from mine.

“Don’t you know I would do whatever it takes, anything, to protect my interests? Do you hear what I’m saying? I would do what you can’t. You can’t take a stand, not for us, not for me, not even for yourself.” She takes my arm and shakes it. “Speak, you fucking coward,” she screams.

The room swirls. I explode forward, grasp her arms above her elbows and lift. There’s nothing to her—a weightless husk. I hold her above me, legs dangling down, her face a blur of fear. I am overcome with an exquisite, exhilarating force. My lips curl back in a cruel smile. This is what I’ve wanted, craved, chased after with drugs. The penultimate high: exultant, obliterating the gray areas, the self doubt, the guilt. I’m hot-wired; power snaps through me like an electrical impulse, finding new synapses, completing circuits, resetting me. I’m barely aware I’m standing there, holding Rachael up and away from me like an offering to a God—or to my demons.

She doesn’t say anything. She shouldn’t. Whatever kicked the door open in me is seething and looking for something, or someone, to punish. Murderous rage—the phrase runs through my head. That’s how the story goes. Take three steps forward and thrust her through the window. Shake her until her neck snaps. He killed her in a murderous rage, they’d say. Nice

enough guy. A quiet fellow. My arms tremble, not from exertion, but from the certainty that I could do it, right here, right now.

Then, I see her face, floating above me, shot through with fear and the realization that she's lost me. I turn, set her down on the kitchen counter and back away, blinking and stunned. She rubs her arms where I held her, her jaw still set hard, but her eyes give her away. I want to run out the door and never stop. But I must tell her. Dizzy and weak, I walk over to the cooking island and lean back against it.

Her voice quivering, she says, "You need to leave here. If you don't, I'll call the police. I don't want you near this house again. Ever. I'm going to divorce you, Nick. You've made a terrible mistake which you're going to regret. That's your problem now. I'm done with you."

It's a good show of bravado on her part, but when I straighten up and look her in the eyes, she draws back and swallows hard. She needn't worry; my anger is gone. It wouldn't matter what she said or did to me now. She is irrelevant.

"You're done?" I say. "Funny thing, so am I."

Then I make myself form the words that I know will forever put me outside her circle in the sand, burn my bridges to a cinder, and shove me into the unknown. "There's nothing for me here. There never was."

Even now, this is not what she expected. Her face twists into a mixture of fury and sadness. Before she can react, I'm out of the kitchen past the cowering Wart, squeezing my hands into fists so hard they ache, liking the pain, headed for the front door, trying not to look at anything on the way out.

Sleep Over

When there was nowhere else to go, there was always Mom's sofa—sofa bed, to be exact. It was tan, brushed cotton—the kind with the brutal, sadistic metal bar under the mattress that cuts people right in half, left them feeling like they've been beaten with a lead pipe, a not-so-gentle reminder that their life was a mess. Many years before, my father had stumbled onto it, stone drunk, on what would be his final epic drinking binge. Now, it was my turn.

I lay there, one leg on the floor, a glass of white wine balanced on my chest. The valium my mother gave me was beginning to work quite nicely.

Two days earlier, I'd shown up in a daze, having walked all the way from our house following the incident with Rachael in the kitchen. I hadn't been to my mother's place in months, since the time I'd swung by to pick up a couple of Percoset for Rachael who was in a bad way. I must have been quite a sight. In point of fact, I still was.

My mother poked her head out of the kitchen. "You need anything else?"

"Little more wine?"

"You're cut off."

"Nothing like a little alcohol and barbiturates—that's what Judy Garland used to say."

"There's a good role model for you." My mother emerged from the kitchen holding a juice glass half full with a thick, coffee-colored liquid.

"What in the world is that? Gear oil and molasses?"

She takes a seat across from me on a black leather arm chair. "Close. Kahlua."

"You? You're having a drink?"

She takes a sip, sits back in the chair and crosses her legs. "I think we both need to take the edge off." She takes another sip.

“You’re tipsy,” I say, amused. I’ve only seen her take a drink a few times in my life, most recently at my wedding almost ten years ago. “Here I am feeling guilty for not helping you with the dishes and you’re in the kitchen hitting the hooch.”

“It’s not every day your son comes back into your life.”

She’s celebrating, which is something she’d never admit to but for the Kahlua.

“This is what family is all about. Don’t get me wrong, I know about dysfunctional families. But sometimes you have to circle the wagons. That’s what Rachael doesn’t understand. Actually, there’s a lot that girl doesn’t understand.” She laughs and nips the Kahlua again.

“Better watch that stuff,” I say. “It’s a slippery slope. Next thing you know, I’ll be running you to rehab.”

Mom waves me off with her free hand. “Please. Do you know how long that bottle has been in the cabinet? Since Larry and I went on the cruise to Mexico. Actually has dust on it.”

It’s been a long time since she and I sat around like this. Since before Larry died of AIDS. I never even made it to his funeral.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“For what?”

“For not being around.”

“She didn’t make it easy.”

I slide back on the sofa, prop myself up against the arm, and sip the wine. “You never really liked Rachael, did you?”

She shakes her head. “That’s not true. I made an effort. I just never got anything back. After a while I quit trying.”

“She could be stubborn that way.”

“It hurt. But that wasn’t the worst part.”

“What was?”

“Watching you get all caught up in her.” She scratches the side of her head, just above her ear. “By it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Your lifestyle, the money, the things. It was a trap. From the first day I met Rachael I thought that. Larry used to sit right where you are and we’d talk about it.”

“I should have seen it, but I didn’t.”

“You may not have wanted to see it, but you felt it. I saw it in your eyes, the part of you that reminds me of your grandfather the most—so sad and resigned. I never wanted to see that look in your eyes.” Mom tears up. “I couldn’t say any of this while you and Rachael were still together. I didn’t want you to think I was bitter for being shut out.” She sighs again. “I know you have plenty to think about now. Lots to deal with. Just thought it might help somehow, you know, make some sense of things.”

“From now on, I want to move the chess pieces, not the other way around.”

“I think you took the first step a couple of days ago. A big one.”

For the first time in years, I allow myself a dash of pride. Is this what Trudie meant by doing the hard thing—the right thing? I raise my eyebrows. “That’s some pretty profound stuff coming from someone half in the bag on cheap coffee liquor.”

“The only thing profound about me right now is my sleepiness.” Mom slaps her thighs and stands up. “I’m going to bed.” She walks by me and roughs up my hair. “You’ll see, everything will work out.” We don’t hug—another one of my grandmother’s unfortunate legacies.

“Night,” I say. I down the rest of the wine in one gulp, set it by the bed and slump, face down, across the length of the sofa. So, I’d finally made like Custer and taken the stand. “Now what?” I say into the mattress. *Don’t think, just do*—that’s how I’d gotten myself into and out of this mess. But had I just replaced one catastrophe with another? Where will I live? What will I do for work? That character from Elmore Leonard’s book comes to mind, this time wearing a

tuxedo and clutching a box of roses. Tentacles of panic and dread shove past the Valium and vodka, grab hold of my heart and squeeze. I reach down to the floor, drag my hand around in circles until I find my mother's phone, lean my head over the side of the mattress and tap in Trudie's number. I hear the ring, tinny and distant, then the second and the third.

"Hello," she says.

I snatch the phone off the floor, almost disconnecting, and spin over onto my back. "Jesus, where the hell have you been?" I ask.

A pause. "Here."

"I must have called you fifteen times."

"More."

"You got my voicemails?"

"Yes. All of them."

"So?"

"So, I'm calling you back." She sounds so remote. "How are you?" she asks.

"How am I? How do you think I am? I'm a disaster. Everything is a disaster. I'm staying with my mother. Most of my friends won't even talk to me."

Trudie sighs. "I knew if it happened it wouldn't be pretty."

"I need to see you."

Silence.

"Trudie?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"First off, I leave tomorrow with my bosses for a show in London. I'll be gone for a couple of weeks."

My throat constricts. "That's why you waited until the last minute to call me back—so you couldn't see me. This is no time for tough love. Not now."

“This is no time for any kind of love. I told you before.” Her voice cracks. “I can’t get pulled into this. Not now. I’m not doing so great myself.”

“Why?”

“Why? She threatened to call my bosses. I don’t doubt she would. I could be out on my ass. I can’t handle one more thing, Nick. Especially not this.”

“Maybe we could,” I swallow, “help each other.”

“You know damn well it doesn’t work that way. All we’d do is take each other down.”

“Please, Trudie.” I can’t mask the desperation in my voice.

“God, baby, don’t do this. You’re not thinking clearly now. You need some time. We both do.”

My head spins. “Take all the time you need.” I slam the phone down to the floor.

Ninety Seconds

I lean back in her attorney's conference room chair and rub my eyes. Got to stay sharp, but I was so wound up about this meeting I hardly slept at all. So far, so good, though. For a top divorce attorney about to negotiate a settlement for her vindictive client, Ms. Spenser isn't the pit-bull I had imagined. She'd offered me coffee, the use of the phone—even said I could call her Mary. I can handle her. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. There's another slow, throttling constriction, like an anaconda tightening its grip around my chest and throat.

I check my watch, tap on the crystal. It's been four minutes since Ms. Spenser left me to go fetch Rachael. My heart races, my forehead and arm pits break out in sweat. "Breathe," I say. Maybe I should start counting now. No, my father was clear about how it works.

"Little trick I learned in AA," he said. "We use it to get through the cravings, but it works for anxiety too. Break time into small increments, as small as you need to get through the situation. Try ninety seconds. Worked for me."

Of course I might not need help with the *situation* had I followed his and everyone's advice and hired my own attorney. But *no*, I hadn't wanted to stir the pot, to antagonize Rachael even more. I look around the conference room at the good art, the plush, off-white carpeting, the conference table with the burlled-walnut veneer that probably cost more than my car. Who am I kidding? Ms. Spenser comes off as easygoing, but you only charge her rates and afford downtown D.C. digs like this one way: by winning.

I swallow hard and check my watch again. No, I'm doing this wrong. Randomly checking your watch only makes it worse. Ninety seconds from the time they enter the room. Then another ninety and so on, like that. Think of something else—anything else.

Rachael hasn't made that so easy. Her response to my leaving her had been swift and, in retrospect, predictable. A few days after the screaming scene in the kitchen I'd gone to make a

withdrawal from an ATM and gotten a zero balance. A call to the banking center had confirmed what I'd feared. That's when I'd had the first panic attack, standing right there on the street with nine dollars in my pocket.

I took the subway back to my mother's place. Hands shaking, I called Rachael.

"Yes," she said, flat as the blade on a paring knife.

"Why is there no money in our checking account?"

I pictured her tapping her chin with her index finger, smiling, almost jovial. "Let's see. Give me a minute. Oh yes, I remember now—that's because I withdrew it all."

"How can you possibly justify doing that, after ten years—"

"Justify? Remember what I said to you in the kitchen before you turned into a raging maniac? That I would do whatever it took to protect my interests?"

Her *interests*? "We're talking about a marriage here, not a corporate downsizing. That money is as much mine—"

Click.

So there I was, penniless, possibly friendless, sleeping on my mother's sofa. I needed a plan, but first I needed some cash. I got up the nerve to call Christian.

"Man," he said, "when you decide to end a marriage, you do it big."

"You heard," I said, disappointed. I'd wanted to tell him my version, my way.

"Oh yeah, I've heard. So has everybody but Oprah."

"Let me guess: I come off pretty bad."

"There's you, Jeffrey Dahmer, Stalin and some guy whose name I can't remember. He impaled babies on stakes."

"Great. You forgot about Hitler."

"No I didn't. Unlike you, Hitler had some redeeming qualities. He liked dogs."

I was about to insist that I loved dogs, until I realized I was about to make the case to my dear friend that I possessed redemptive qualities equal to those of Hitler. Instead, I massaged my temple with the tips of my finger and let out a groan.

“Listen,” said Christian, “even I wouldn’t joke with you if I thought half of what she told me was true. I know how it’s been. You okay? How you fixed for money?”

At that moment if Christian had asked me to marry him, I’d have gone straight out shopping for a trousseau.

I borrowed a few thousand dollars, enough to live on until we reached a settlement, but not enough, I told myself, to hire an attorney.

“Are you crazy,” my father said. “That’s like boxing with one hand tied behind your back, like dancing with one leg, like showing up to a gunfight with a knife—”

“Enough with the analogies. I got it,” I said.

“Well if you *got* it, why don’t you go out and hire yourself an attorney?”

“I can handle her,” I said. “That’s why.” I’d always been conciliatory. The peace maker. Why change now?

So, instead of seeking counsel, I sat down and wrote Ms. Spenser a series of carefully-constructed letters, laying out in the most logical and reasonable terms my proposal for a fair and equitable division of our assets. I had not received a response.

The door to the conference room swings open and they enter, Ms. Spenser in the lead, brisk and business like, Rachael just behind her, jaw set hard, wearing that black Chanel suit and holding the Vuitton briefcase I got her for her birthday. Dressed to annihilate. Throw in some flashing lights, a deep voiced announcer, a rabid crowd, and you’ve got the start of an Ultimate Death Match.

My throat tightens. Five seconds have passed—ten, tops.

The two women sit side by side, open their briefcases and begin removing file after file, stacking them next to each other like fastidious waiters setting an elegant table. Rachael's perfume slams me like a Chanel-infused fist.

Fifteen seconds.

Rachael won't look at me, intent on arranging her files just so. When she's done, she closes the briefcase clasp with a surprisingly loud *snap* which, in spite of myself, causes me to flinch. She places the briefcase beside her, puts her hands on the table, interlocks her fingers and glares at me, unblinking.

My scalp is on fire, thousands of follicles begging for relief, but I don't dare give in. I don't dare move anything but my gaze—down to my watch.

Thirty eight seconds.

Ms. Spenser adjusts her reading glasses, clears her throat and says, "We all know why we're here, so let's get down to business, shall we? We've received your correspondence regarding the terms of your settlement and have found it completely unacceptable." She slides a file folder across the table at me. It stops two inches from my right hand which I'm pressing down so hard onto the gleaming table top I'm sure it'll leave a divot.

Fifty four seconds.

"We've prepared an alternative arrangement which we believe is much more realistic." Another folder skids toward me, this one launched by Rachael. It rests next to the first, forming a perfect L.

I will my left hand to open the file. For some reason, my left hand shakes less than my right. "Assets" is written across the top, a trail of numbers cascade down.

I shift my eyes from the paper to my watch and leave them there.

Seventy four seconds.

Ms. Spenser says, "As you'll see, we've proposed that the settlement take into account the considerable mental anguish—"

Ninety seconds. “Excuse me,” I say.

Ms. Spenser shifts her eyes up to me over the top of her reading glasses.

“Yes?”

“I have to use the bathroom.”

They give each other sidelong glances, clearly annoyed at the unanticipated interruption to their carefully orchestrated assault.

Ms. Spenser sighs. “Just past the reception area.”

“Thank you,” I say, standing. I walk out of the room, springing along the thickly padded carpeting past the pretty receptionist with the tiny hands. She’s on the phone.

“Bathroom?” I mouth to her, pointing straight ahead. She smiles and nods. Past the men’s room I find what I’m looking for, an exit door, which I plow through, freefalling down the steps two at a time. Four flights down and I burst into the pale, marble-lined lobby and out the revolving door into the bustle of K Street. I lean against the building, close my eyes, throw my head back and take in a lungful of crisp, autumn air, the weight lifting from my chest.

I walk to the corner to hail a cab. While I wait, I do the math:

Ninety seconds before they wonder what’s up.

Ninety more until Ms. Spenser asks the receptionist about me.

Another ninety until they put it together.

A yellow cab pulls up. I reach out to open the door and the face of my watch glints in the sun. I smile. Got to tell my father he was right—about everything. Ninety seconds is plenty of time. All you ever need.

Come On, Get Happy

It would be a stretch to call my impromptu Houdini impersonation at the attorney's office a strategy. My decision to flee had involved approximately the same planning and foresight as yanking my hand out of a vat of boiling oil. It may not have been my proudest moment, but the episode did lead to one unintended consequence that would work in my favor. Like a couple of used car salesmen who were sure they had the customer just where they wanted him only to have him bolt from the showroom, my disappearing act made it obvious to Ms. Spenser and Rachael that they needed to hammer out a deal—and fast.

According to Washington, D.C. divorce law, I was entitled to half of everything Rachael and I had accumulated while we were together, which was everything. I was obviously unstable, so, they reasoned, unless Rachael wanted to risk liquidating every single thing she owned she needed to present me with a revised counter offer before I had time to reconsider and get lawyered-up. The very next day after our truncated meeting, a polite and subdued Ms. Spenser called me to tell me she'd have something for me to look over in a few days.

I would fight some for the Provincetown cottage, the one possession that meant something to me, but in the end, I settled for some cash—enough to buy me some time.

Now what?

Christian, the one friend with whom I was in daily contact, suggested I come to Provincetown. At first, I resisted. With the exception of D.C., Provincetown was the one place that burst with memories—good ones—of times when things were fresh and new and exciting. There was no denying the fact that I could use a break from all the worry, not to mention my mother's sofa. Was I ready for Provincetown, though, a place in which I'd never stepped foot without Rachael?

“Come on,” Christian said. “You could use a little fun.”

“Where would I stay?”

“With us. We’ll make it all about you.”

“But I—”

“Not I. *You.*”

“Well—”

“Great. We’ll see you this weekend.”

So I caught the shuttle up to Boston and took the mid-day ferry. I decided to walk from the docks through the center of town.

Summer transformed Provincetown from a scant village into one great, sexual and cultural mash-up. Walking down Commercial Street, there were shirtless muscle-boys in for the parties; couples (gay and straight) pushing babies in strollers; skate board punks; mullet-haired dykes in sleeveless shirts, Harley riders in fringed-leather jackets; fawn-like teenage girls wearing too-tight low-rise jeans; drag queens and comedians—striking and strident—hawking their evening shows; and elderly couples wearing comfortable shoes. Drivers dumb enough to try to navigate their SUVs down jam-packed Commercial Street crept right along with the pedestrians and bicycle riders. Outside of town hall, Ellie, the swinging seventy-two-year-old transsexual wearing her signature denim mini-skirt and four-inch heels, belted out a Judy Garland tune into a mic attached to a portable karaoke machine she hauled around in a little red wagon. Nice gamas for an old broad, I thought, as I snapped my fingers in time to the tune.

Forget your troubles, come on get happy

We’re gonna’ chase all the blues away . . .

There was a friendly, familiar buzz to the town that fit me like a pair of well-worn jeans.

Christian, Eric and I spent the rest of that afternoon up on the deck of their house, set up high in the dunes with a sweeping view of the Provincetown harbor, and beyond that, the brilliant blue of the sailboat-specked bay. We sipped cocktails and caught up.

Finally, after all these years, Christian had come to terms with his hair courtesy of a pair

of clippers. I spun him around. "I'd have said you were crazy, but, you know, bald kind of works for you," I said.

"Thanks for the ringing endorsement."

"No, I like it." I rubbed my hand back and forth over his head. "Just takes some getting used to." I pointed to the base of his skull which formed a distinct V shape. "What's the significance of this?"

"It's either *V* for 'very hot guy' or an arrow pointing straight to my ass."

"As if there's anyone left on the planet that doesn't know where your ass is," said Eric.

"Sometimes I think you've forgotten."

"Really, the more I look at it, the more it grows on me," I said.

"My ass or my head?" said Christian.

"Tell me again, which is which?" said Eric.

I laughed and shook my head. "It's good to be here. Thanks."

"See," said Christian, pinching my cheek, "there's a smile. You should listen to your uncle Christian more often. You stay here as long as you like. There's only one rule this weekend: We have fun. Like the old days. Deal?"

"Deal."

Sleepy from the trip and the alcohol, I dozed off and woke at sunset to find a note on the dining room table. "Off to the Crown—*be there.*"

Out With the Boys

“Aren’t you Nick of Nick and Rachael?” asks the perky, curly haired boy sitting at the table outside the entrance of the Crown & Anchor.

“Used to be,” I reply. “I mean, it used to be Nick and Rachael.”

“How exciting,” he says. “Feels like I’m talking to a celebrity.” I don’t quite know what to say to that, so I don’t say anything. He fidgets with the green glow-in-the-dark band around his neck. His demeanor shifts to sympathetic and solemn. “I’m *so* sorry. I heard.”

He’s not alone. The word of our break-up had spread quickly, like the shock wave from a nuclear explosion, first among our closest circle of friends, then the supporting players, acquaintances, and now, apparently, twenty-two year olds working the door at the Crown & Anchor.

“Stuff happens,” I say.

“You doing okay?”

Does he really want me to get into this here? “Uh, yeah.” I look past him to the entrance to the club. “Meeting my friends inside. You know, out with the boys.”

He nods sincerely. “Oh that’s *such* a great idea. It really helps to have your friends around you. I know, I’ve been there.” A few people have lined up behind me. “When Barry and I split, I thought my life was over.”

I can feel eyes burning a hole through my back. “I should get in there,” I say. “They’ll be looking for me.”

He checks his watch. “Goodness, you’re right. Getting late.” He slides the admission strap across the table. “You have yourself a good time, honey.” Softly, so the others behind me can’t hear, he adds, “The cover’s on me. The broken hearted have to stick together.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ll try to remember that.”

I approach the entrance to the club, which throbs with music, hold up my left wrist to the doorman and step inside. Dense, humid air shrouds me. I'm reminded of a tour I'd taken through the rainforest of Kauai, purportedly one of the wettest places on earth. This is comparable, but there is one important difference. Kauai smelled of orchids, The Crown—a fifteen-year-old boy's clothes hamper.

I stand on the edge of the dance floor, letting my eyes adjust to the lights. The thick air seems to have gummed everything up, even the music which is oddly muddled and indistinct. I'm sweating. I take off my shirt, tuck it in my jeans and head to the nearest bar for water. Rumor has it that on the busiest nights, the owner of the Crown turns off the cold water to the bathroom sinks to force bottled water sales. It's an effective business strategy, I decide, as I pay four dollars for a small bottle.

I need to get plugged in and find Christian and Eric. I slide into the crowd and turn a full circle looking for a familiar face, but I'm surrounded by an endless tangle of indistinguishable shoulders, arms and shaved heads.

Why do I feel disconnected, even a little scared? There's one thing that might help. My hiatus from drugs has been intentional. I figured dealing with my split with Rachael was going to be difficult enough without messing with my brain chemistry. But tonight is supposed to be about fun—like the old days. Holding my bottle of water above my head like a torch in a cave, I make my way to the spot we always used to congregate, just under a series of platforms set against the wall like bleachers.

I'm almost to the corner when I spot the back of Christian's head and that distinctive V. I grab Christian's shoulders with both hands and squeeze hard. The physical connection feels grounding—familiar. He has his arms draped around someone's waist. It's not Eric. Christian cranes his head back over his neck to see who's groping him. Finally, he recognizes me and smiles, takes one hand off the boy's waist and grabs me around the neck, pulls me to him and plants a kiss on my forehead. His body glistens with sweat.

Christian yells, “Where – been – life – tiful?”

I catch every other syllable or so of what he says, like a defective speaker at the drive-through. I shake my head. “What?”

“turd – na – val – eez!” he says, laughing, like a stand-up comic doing his routine in Kurdish.

I give up on conversation. I put my mouth right to his ear and shout “Eric?”

He hunches his shoulders and mouths “Who knows?” Christian taps the shoulder of his dance partner, a short guy whose pupils drift like sleeping fish in an aquarium, and tries, in vain, to make introductions. Christian and he turn their backs to me and continue their dance.

I sway in place as perspiration runs down my face, the back of my neck, my arms, my chest, soaking the top of my jeans. I drain the water, now lukewarm, in one long swig and stare at the back of Christian’s head. I hoped he’d offer, but it looks like I’m going to have to ask.

I catch Christian’s attention by pinching his ear just above his piercing, stick my face inches from his and touch my finger to my nose. Christian reaches into his front pocket, fishes around and emerges with an indigo colored bullet attached to a glass vial. Ketamine—just what the doctor ordered. Unlike crystal or X, a dose of disorientation without the commitment. I press my palm against Christian’s hand and allow him to push the vial into mine, then stoop down to do a hit. Why bother to be discreet, I wonder, as I bring the bullet to my nostril? The entire Provincetown police force could be standing ten feet away and they’d never see me.

I take a long, deep snort. Nothing. He must have forgotten to load it. It’s a lapse of drug etiquette, but given the circumstances, understandable. I give it a quick twist and take another hit. Nothing—must be the humidity causing the K stick to the sides of the vial. I hold the bullet up and a second later a white strobe shines through the clear vial. Empty! I roll my eyes and shake my head. Not so long ago, people showered me with drugs; now it has come to this.

Once again, I tap Christian on the shoulder, hold up the empty vial and shake my head. Christian cups one hand over his left eye and squints with the other. He brings the bullet closer,

then farther away, trying to find a focal point. For a moment, I question the wisdom of waving it over his head in a crowded nightclub, but as far as I know, the law is only interested in drug paraphernalia which actually *contain* drugs. Christian leans in close to me, puts his mouth to my ear and yells, “It’s empty!”

A thousand sarcastic responses cross my mind, but now is not the time or the place. I give him a thumb-up and a look that says “no problem.”

Christian turns his attention back to his dance partner and I to a small space that has opened up behind me on the first tier of the bleacher. I hop onto it. From my perch, I see a few familiar blissed-out faces. What *is* this music, though—another screeching-diva anthem or tired top-forty remix? What happened to that wicked, dark, insidious pulse that used to slam me all night long?

No air, bad music, no drugs, no friends—no wife. I catch myself in mid-wallow. What is this—pity-party night at the Crown & Anchor? Still, the so-familiar setting combined with my lack of connection to it rattles me. How many times have I danced in this very spot, on this stupid bleacher, feeling on top of the world?

I look at the faces all around me, the lights playing off their features. There’s something in those expressions, something just beneath the smiles and the flirting and the tribal bonding. It’s desperation—chasing the tail of the dragon night after night because the day you stop, you’re done for. Strike the set, move on to the next town and do it all over again. How had I not seen it before? How? Because I’d thought I was somehow removed from it—by being straight, by being with Rachael. But here, now, alone, without her, all I am is just another one of the boys.

That drag queen with the gift, Bianca, had been right about me: I stand with my feet planted squarely in two worlds, not belonging in either. That realization hits me hard and low, right in my stomach. It’s time to follow her suggestion and take those big-ass strides, right on out of here. I jump down off the bleacher and slip on the wet floor. To steady myself, I grab the shoulder of a brawny guy who glances at me, annoyed, before turning away. I work my way

across the club, towards the exit.

Almost there, I see a familiar face. I have no idea who he is or where we've met. He smiles at me, then squints, trying to place me. Of course, without Rachael I'm way out of context.

I'm almost at the door when I feel a hand on the back of my neck. I turn. It's Christian.

"Where you going?" he asks.

"Good question."

"You just got here."

"I know."

Christian studies my face as though he's trying to peer through a dirty window. He nods towards the back of the club. "Outside."

I follow him out through the back doors leading to the pool and deck, set against the harbor. Our skin steams in the clean, bracing air. We wind our way through the crowd, stopping once to say hello to a few acquaintances who treat me with the strained, sugary concern and avoidance usually reserved for someone who's just been diagnosed with cancer, get drinks at the thatched tiki bar and then find a couple of empty seats at a table over in the far corner of the deck. A new moon shows over the harbor, bright, fresh and full. The masts of sailboats wag in the moonlight.

Christian takes a swig from his Cape Cod and leans back in his chair.

"So, what's going on?" he asks.

"Sure you want to know? I thought it was all fun and games this weekend."

"It was until I got a look at you. Last time I saw that expression on a guy's face, I was at his funeral."

I take a swallow of water. "I thought it would be different. Like the old days, right? But it's not. Makes me wonder where the hell I belong anymore. I went ahead and blew up my life. For what? Rachael and I had our problems, sure, but at least I knew where I stood. We had

friends. We had a life.” I point to the people milling around on the pool. “We had this.”

Christian takes his free hand, rubs it back over his bald head, leans forward and says, “In spite of two hits of pretty good X and a few cocktails, I’m about to get serious and I need you to pay close attention because I don’t know how long I can maintain, okay?”

I nod.

“I never told you this before, but when I first met you, I resented the hell out of you. Know why?”

I shake my head.

“I thought, here’s this straight guy with the beautiful wife that gets all the benefits of this life without having to pay any dues. You got all the attention, the fun—everything. Except you never had to do the hard stuff.” He pauses.

I stare at him and blink.

“*Hello?*” he says. “This is where you’re supposed to ask me ‘What hard stuff?’”

“Since when do you need prompting to talk?”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “Right. Hard stuff—like growing up knowing you’re different from everybody else, thinking you’re the only freak in the world. Marry somebody you’ve loved since the seventh grade only to break her heart. Laugh along with the faggot jokes at school, hating yourself the whole time. Kiss some guy in a bathroom stall and feel so ashamed the next day, all you can think about is how you’ll word the suicide note. Stay up night after night, your guts a mess, because you know if you get up the nerve to tell your parents your gay, there’s a good chance your father—the one guy you admire most in the whole fucking world—will never speak to you again. Wonder if you’re going to die because the condom slipped. Understand?”

I don’t answer. I can’t.

“So, you get through all that. You carve out a life for yourself. Meet someone you’ll know you’ll be with the rest of your life. Make some money. Tell yourself you don’t have to

give a shit anymore what anybody thinks about you. You create this club, the circuit, which is like a big ‘fuck you’ to the world. Where everyone understands you, where everybody’s fabulous. And then, after all that pain, all that work, all those dues—in strolls this dude, ambles up to the bar like he owns the place. Get it?”

In spite of the cool air, my skin flushes with anger. “I get it, all right. My best friend thinks I’m an arrogant asshole.”

Christian puts his hand on my shoulder. “Relax, honey. I’m not saying this to make you feel bad. I just want you to understand. That’s how I felt at first. But then, I got to know you better and I understood something about you. That you were as confused and lost as I used to be. In your own way, you were searching for yourself, too, just like a fag. But what I get about you is that you’ve never lived your life for yourself, always through other people, for other people. Leaving Rachael?” he takes his hand off my shoulder and puts it on my cheek, “That’s your coming out. And nothing is free. I learned that in business and I learned it in life. All this uncertainty and fear? They’re the dues. With interest, going back a long time.”

I take a long swig from my cocktail and look up to the moon. “I’m banished. Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

Christian sighs, then smiles. “I respect what you’re trying to do, and Erica and I hope you’ll always be in our lives. But you need to find your own way. It’s a big world. Go out and find where you belong. That was never going to happen for you, not with Rachael. So don’t waste your time trying to recreate what you had with her. The whole point is not to. What’s that thing you said you did when you left her—jumped through a ring of fire?”

I laugh. “No, not fire. Sand. The circle in the sand.”

“I’d stick with ring of fire. It’s more dramatic. You know us fags, we love the drama. Anyway, call it what you want, you’re outside it now—way outside. No going back. Besides, this?” he motions to the crowd. “This isn’t a life. It’s a party. And no matter how much we don’t want it to, the party always has to end.”

Something has ended. Or, at least, it has shifted, never to shift back. My eyes swell with tears. I lean forward and we touch, forehead to forehead. We stay that way a while.

He rears back and says, “Right. And that, my friend, is the extent of my insight for the evening. Now, I’m going to spend the rest of the evening reenacting several of the most degenerate scenes from the movie *Caligula*. What are your plans?”

“I’m out of here.”

“I bet there’s some drunken snatch over at the Governor Bradford with your name on it.”

“You, my friend, are one tawdry-assed sissy.”

Christian winks and clicks his tongue. “Thanks.”

We plow back through the crowd and part at the dance floor. I make my way out the way I came in, past the same kid working the door.

“Hey,” he says, “done so soon?”

“Yeah,” I say, stopping to put on my shirt. “I am. Thanks again for the comp.”

“Oh, sure. Least I could do.” He checks his watch. “Almost midnight. Where to next?”

I look both ways down Commercial Street—nothing but dark store fronts and a few early-birds sitting on the steps in front of Spiritus Pizza, nibbling on slices, waiting for the throngs to join them when the clubs close. I shrug. “Good question.”

He shakes, as though a chill just ran through him. “Ah, don’t you just love the night. So full of possibilities.”

Possibilities. I grin. “Maybe so.” I take a deep breath and hang a right towards the house, down the nearly empty street.

Peace(d) Together

My impromptu July 4th visit to Provincetown had, at Christian and Eric's urging, turned into a three-month sabbatical. Far away from Rachael and her attorney, not to mention my mother's sofa, that summer wrapped itself around me like a velvety cloak.

The days were filled with bike rides to the end of Bradford Street and the path leading to the boy beach, enduring Christian's verbal jabs at my bike—a retro beach cruiser with white-wall tires and the basket festooned with Mardi Gras beads—dubbed the gayest bike in Provincetown (which was saying something). If the tide was in, Christian, Eric and I would slosh across the marshy wetlands in thigh-deep water, climb over the dunes down to the shore, smoke a joint and watch the boys cruise us relentlessly. As Christian and Eric rated the passing parade of cocks and asses, I watched them flirt in that easy, direct way that makes flirting between straight people seem so awkward and forced.

Evenings were often spent cooking in and eating out on the deck. Friends came over regularly, some close, some merely acquaintances. Without Rachael to dominate or direct the conversation, I found my own social voice. To my surprise, probably theirs too, I had plenty to talk about. People told me they felt they were getting to know me for the first time.

That is precisely how I felt about Provincetown. I was seeing it with brand new eyes—mine. I did what I wanted when I wanted, including things Rachael would never have agreed to do, such as karaoke night at the local dive, the Governor Bradford, or dancing like a crazy man to Space Pussy, a metal band with a transsexual drummer who performed in a striped bikini. One night, my lesbian friend, Roxanne, the percussionist with Manheim Steamroller, had me join her to play conga drums over the house music at the Crown & Anchor and the crowd loved it. So did the promoter, who hired us to perform on the busiest nights.

One evening during the Friday night gallery crawl, I met a young blonde girl who worked at one of the art galleries on the east end of town. She took me sailing by day and bar-hopping at night. It turned out that, in a town known worldwide for its gayness, there existed a thriving straight scene with its own hot spots and more-than-occasional opportunities for debauchery.

On a lark, I signed on for a workshop at the Fine Arts Work Center, submitted a story about my grandmother for critique. The feedback from the participants was surprising. The instructor took me aside and told me to keep at it, that I clearly had talent. I couldn't remember the last time someone had said that to me.

I was hitting a groove.

Then, Christian broke the news to me: Rachael had called to tell him the renters who were supposed to take the cottage for the week had cancelled at the last minute. She was headed up. My inclination was immediate and overpowering—to flee. After all, I had come to Provincetown to put myself back together, not to worry about running into my spiteful ex-wife.

Christian had a different take on it.

“You’re giving her too much power, my man,” he said. “She got the house, she got the cottage down the road, she got most of the money, the business, the car. Now you’re going to give up all of Provincetown? What’s next? Leave the country?”

“I know, Christian,” I said, “But there’s this image I can’t shake. I turn a corner on Commercial Street and there she is—”

“That’s exactly why you need to face her.”

“Hmmm, seems to me I’ve heard a similar line of reasoning from someone else.”

“About this tall?” he says, indicating the top of his chest, “Dimples, tattoos, pierced nipples, nice ass?”

“Trudie.”

“She called me to find out how you’re doing.”

I'd been thinking about Trudie, almost picked up the phone to call her more than once, but had fought off the urge. My ego wasn't yet up to an abject rejection. Besides, as much as I hadn't wanted to hear it, her mistrust of me and my intentions was justified. I wasn't ready—closer perhaps—but not there.

“What did you tell her?” I asked.

“The truth. You're doing so much better. Panic attacks?”

“No, not for a long time.”

“See? There's the writing, the, um, socializing, with that cutie from the gallery. Don't worry, I didn't mention her to Trudie. I see a change in you. I see *you*. It's time. For your sake and hers—not to mention mine.”

That's when he proposed a meeting, somewhere neutral, somewhere where we'd both be comfortable, like warring heads of state or rival mob bosses. I'd agreed—in principle.

“You set the time and place,” I said, “and I'll be there.”

“Good. She and I are having lunch tomorrow. I'll try to set it up.”

I didn't doubt he would. Christian had the entrepreneur's determination and ability to persuade. Still, this was Rachael we were talking about.

I wanted her to nix the meeting. I'd be off the hook and could, for once, feel morally superior, having made the grand gesture. Christian was right, though. Something had to give. I couldn't imagine spending the entire next week wondering when she'd pop out of the next gallery or restaurant.

For the moment at least, I could let my guard down. I felt safe up here at Christian and Eric's, glad to have the place all to myself on this splendid and sparkling day. I'd put in a load of laundry, taken a long, cool outdoor shower, and let the late summer sun dry me off and drain the tension out of me. I was outside on the deck, naked, sipping an iced tea, sitting on one of the generously-padded Pottery Barn lounge chairs, *bossa nova* slinking from the outdoor speakers,

leisurely folding my first load of laundry still warm from the dryer, feeling drowsy and a little decadent.

Then, my phone rang.

Tête-à-Tête, Mano-a-Mano

I saunter across the broad gray expanse of the deck towards the wrought iron table where I'd left the phone. Surrounding the deck, the wildflower garden Eric planted had recently burst to full bloom. A tall, violet butterfly bush had attracted several Monarchs, angling and swooping in every direction, the contrasting ribbons of color in their wings enriched by the unfiltered sun.

I looked at the caller ID. It's Christian, probably calling to tell me Rachael has put the kibosh on the meeting. I'm prepared to sound indignant but feel relieved. I snap open the phone.

"How was lunch?"

"Where are you?"

"At your house, doing laundry."

"Listen, I don't have much time. She's in the bathroom. The meeting's on."

I manage a weak, unconvincing, "Good. When?"

"How about now?"

"Now? As in *now*, now?"

A few feet away, a butterfly lands on the one of the blossoms of the bush. A moment ago, it had been exquisite. Now, its wings pulse methodically, diabolically, like a bellows, creating a tiny wisp of wind that would, no doubt, weeks from now and thousands of miles away, end up a devastating, ravaging storm. Lives would be lost.

"We need to seize the moment. How about I bring her over? You guys chat for a while out on the deck, then I'll run her back to town."

I look down at my genitals. They've lost their swagger. My balls are nowhere in sight, scrambling off somewhere in search of safe haven. I envy them. "Well, I just don't know. I was thinking it wouldn't be for another day or two. I mean, I'm in the middle of doing laundry."

Christian is silent. I have just used the laundry excuse not to see Rachael. He takes the initiative and goes through the trouble to set this whole thing up and I try to get out of it because my socks and underwear are in the rinse cycle. How big a coward must he think I am? How big a coward am I? A wave of shame shoves aside my fear and I feel my face go flush. I take a deep breath.

“Okay, bring her over.”

“Good, Nick, I think it’s the right thing.”

“How long until you get here?”

“I have to swing by the post office. About twenty minutes. Relax. It’ll be fine. She’s coming back to the table now. I’ll see you soon.”

“Uh, Christian?” I say, trying too hard to be casual. “Valium. Might you have any Valium?”

Christian stifles a laugh. “Sure. They’re in the master bedroom. The drawer on the left side of the bed. They’re ten milligrams, so break one in half. Don’t take the whole thing or we’ll find you passed out on the deck.”

“And the downside of that would be?”

By the time I flip the phone shut I’m already through the screen door and halfway up the steps to the master bedroom. I take the steps two at a time up to the top level, turn the sharp corner into the master bedroom, hit the area rug and do a skidding, *Kramer-from-Seinfeld* entrance. I find the bottle of Valium where Christian said it would be, pop open the lid, bite a pill in half and swallow it dry. Next, down to the kitchen, I open the freezer, yank out the vodka and pour myself a stiff cocktail with just a splash of cranberry juice. I take a long, deep pull from the drink as I head back out to the deck, my mind still racing.

Here I stand, pacing around in little circles, cocktail in hand, waiting for my buzz, and my ex, to arrive. In that order, I hope. How is it that someone who’s supposed to be irrelevant still

has the power to make me chase my tail around in circles? The answer to that will have to wait. Right now, I need to figure out how to play this.

Cool and sophisticated?

I'm dressed in silk pajamas like Cary Grant, sprawled on the lounge chair reading the *New Yorker*. With great aplomb, I rise to kiss the back of her hand. "Well hello, darling." I say. "How in the world have you been? Can I get you a cocktail? Let's dispense with all this silly bitterness, shall we? Time we were civilized and adult about things." I remove two Dunhills from my engraved sterling case, put them both in my mouth, light them, and slide one between her lips. We discuss world events and fashion as we sip martinis from crystal stemware.

What if cool doesn't work? What if she interprets my cool as weakness, as an opportunity to get even?

I should be distant and inaccessible—dangerous.

I lean against the wrought iron table, wearing torn jeans, a tight white tee shirt with the sleeves cut off, arms crossed, silent, sizing her up as she approaches me. I'm James Dean. No, better yet, Brando. I'm an animal presence, a coiled spring, unpredictable. Haven't bathed for days. Scrape away the cool and I seethe. Don't fuck with *me*, bitch, there's just no telling what I might do.

I take another swig of vodka. I'm being ridiculous. I'll be myself—whoever that is. An ice-cold drop of condensation falls from the bottom of my glass onto my big toe. I look down at my foot and realize I'm standing in the middle of the deck stark naked. Here I am deciding on which persona to wear and I haven't bothered to put on any clothes. For the briefest moment, I think about greeting her just like this, smiling, hands on my hips like an underwear model from an old Sears catalog, minus the underwear.

I walk over to the lounge chair, piled high with my folded laundry, rummage through it and come up with jeans and a white-ribbed tank top. That'll have to do. I hurry to pull them on. I gather up the laundry, slide the screen door open with my elbow and head down to the guest

room, leaving a trail of socks and underwear in my wake. I dump the laundry onto the bed, go to the bathroom and comb my hair, regarding myself in the mirror. I'm pretty tan and have been hitting the gym regularly. How will she look? How will she think I look? *Wait a minute.* I toss the comb onto the vanity. Why should I care? Christian was right. So was Susan. Why would I let her creep back inside and muck things up?

My father had a theory. "As bad as she was for you," he said, "she's familiar, too, right? It's like me and booze. I know it would take me down hard and fast. But there's still a little part of me that misses it. You've got to recognize that. Otherwise, she'll blind side you. And that, my boy, won't be pretty."

I straighten up, raise my chin. "It ends here," I say.

The sound of car tires grinding against gravel. I retrace my steps back out to the deck, pausing to collect the laundry I'd dropped which I roll into a ball and dump onto a lounge chair. Christian's silver Mercedes pulls into the driveway. The sun reflects hard off the windshield. I remember my cocktail, sitting where I left it on the deck. I reach down and take one more swallow.

The passenger and driver's side doors open simultaneously. A brown blur shoots out the door and starts up the walk towards me, barking all the way. It's The Wart. He's running for me as fast as his stubby legs can carry him, those giant ears pinned back, eyes opened wide. I drop to one knee and he's on me, squealing, snorting, spinning little circles. It's been months, but it feels like a minute. He looks the same, still the ugliest, cutest creature I've ever seen.

I'm kneeling, making coo-coo baby noises and look up. Christian and Rachael are out of the car, halfway up the walk. There she is, an apparition, a mirage. If she were a hologram, I'd say whoever programmed her got it just about right. The slow, careful walk; the shape of her, compact and well-proportioned; the smile—broad but also wry; the brilliant white teeth; makeup and bright-red lipstick expertly applied; her shoulders slightly hunched (I was always correcting her posture). Jewelry everywhere: a ruby pendant hanging from a thick silver chain around her

neck, matching sparkling earrings, oversized rings on several fingers of her tiny hands, all David Yurman, her favorite. A few things slightly off, though: Her hair, shorter now, more styled, the color redder than I remember, obviously colored. And her clothes: tight, low-rise jeans, the kind I could never get her to wear, exposing her stomach. A pale-blue halter top, barely containing her breasts. She was always so self-conscious about her breasts, never wanted to draw attention to them. Bright blue, pointy-toed boots made of lizard or snake skin—a little flashy, especially for this time of day.

She's a few feet away and I stand, arms open to hug her. Christian passes us and says, "I've got some phone calls to make. I'll be inside," and throws me a look that all but says, "until the shooting starts."

Her body presses against me and I squeeze her close, then remember her bad back and let up a little. The fear leaves me, as does the desire to engage in any kind of emotional chess match.

Then, a thing happens I didn't expect: Something inside me gives way. I start to cry—not my usual stunted, choked-back tears, but huge rolling, bursting sobs. Once it begins, I can't stop. I'm so beset by the surge, that I can't make out the source. It's not fear, not regret, shame, or guilt—the usual suspects. Nor is it a sense of loss, or hate, or anger—my more recent companions. My body convulses and heaves. I squeeze her tighter and she squeezes back, though not with the same conviction. We stand like this for a while.

"I'm so sorry," I manage to say, half laughing. Here is stupendous irony: only now that I am no longer with her can I display the vulnerability she said she wanted from me.

I hear her say. "It's okay. I know."

I don't think she does know. She's going through the motions of consoling me, but she's not crying and I can sense she doesn't know quite what to make of me—which makes two of us. I drag the back of my hand across my eyes, smearing tears across my face. "I've turned into a blubbering idiot."

"No, no, I understand. But I have to say, in ten years I never saw you cry."

She's right. I never let my guard down like this. Not ever. Not when my grandparents died, not in the blackest of my black depressions and certainly never with her. "I suppose I'm making up for lost time." I take a step back from her. She looks me over.

"You look great," she says. "Still missing the aging gene."

"You know me." I blink my eyes to clear them, the crying over, at least for now. "I'm Dorian Grey. Somewhere in a closet there's a portrait of me that looks like Freddy Kruger."

"Let's sit," she says.

The vodka, valium, and crying have drained me, but I haven't felt so calm and relaxed in months, maybe years. We sit across from each other at the table. Wart jumps into my lap. I rub his favorite spot, just behind his ear and he settles down. I watch Rachael fish a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of her small black purse and go through the motions of lighting it.

"You started smoking again?" I say.

"Like a fiend," she says, exhaling. I brace myself for the sickening smell of cigarette smoke, but this is different—pungent and sweet—like incense.

"What is that?" I say.

"Clove cigarettes. My latest obsession. They're terrible for you, so I love them, of course."

"Can I try one?"

"You? You smoke now?"

"No."

"Help yourself." She slides the pack across the table.

I pull one out, stick it between my lips and light it. I roll the cigarette between my index and middle fingers, watch the smoke drift up. What an excellent prop a cigarette is. Should I take a chance and inhale? Don't push your luck. So," I say, "how are you?"

She gives a little smile and shrugs her shoulders. "I'm okay. Better."

"I'm glad you agreed to meet. This was going to be a rough week, otherwise."

“I know,” she says, waving her cigarette, “It was time, I suppose. Time to try to move past this.”

I don’t get hostility from her, but she’s detached, as if reading from a script she hasn’t had enough time to memorize.

“And Big Bark?”

“It’s doing fine. Plenty of competitors now, though.”

“That figures. You were right about that business. It was the next big thing.”

“Big things come, big things go. Right?”

I let that one go. “Anna still there?”

“Yes, thank goodness. She kept the whole place running. I was in pretty bad shape there for a while. Didn’t get out of bed for weeks.”

The guilt card. “How is your back doing?”

She shrugs. “Good days and bad days. Mostly bad. The doctors suggest surgery, but I’m not quite ready for that.”

“Must be tough.”

She nods dismissively. “It has given me another idea for a business, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Gay retirement communities.”

I laugh.

“No, really. Think about it. Where are they going to go, once the party’s over, most of them without kids, the ones without families, estranged, disowned, whatever? They’ve got some money and they don’t want to be alone. Now they don’t have to be. They get peace and quiet, tasteful décor, and the company of other fags.”

No kids? Estranged from their family? Afraid of being alone? The company of fags? She’s constructing a whole business model around her personal profile. Brilliant.

“In the next ten years, millions of them will be retiring. I’m telling you, it’s the next big thing.”

“I’m sure it is. Have a name yet?”

“I was thinking EKG Acres.”

We laugh.

“Perfect,” I say. “All those old circuit queens cooking down the Ensure and snorting it.”

“Glow in the dark dentures.”

“Deejays in wheelchairs.”

“Earl Grey Tea dances.”

“Versace-designed hospital gowns.”

Riffing with Rachael—it’s like riding a bicycle. “Well,” I say, “you’ll have to save a bed for me.”

She smiles, but doesn’t say anything. “And you?” she says.

“Me? That’s a good question. I’ve been here for a while, trying to figure out what’s next.”

“Any ideas?”

“I’m thinking Miami.”

She throws back her head. “Ha, Miami. Where it all started, huh? Why not? Nice weather, the beach—hot girls.”

“Seems like a good place to start over.”

“Seeing anyone?”

It’s her way of asking me about Trudie. “No. Not seriously.”

She seems relieved. “You should try the Internet. With that tan and long hair, you’d get a million hits.”

Is she really giving me dating advice? Rachael—always the authority.

“Seems kind of impersonal,” I say.

“Are you kidding? As bad as we are at flirting, impersonal is an advantage. You cut through all the bullshit and get right down to business.”

She has a point. We’d always said our flirting repertoire consisted of not making eye contact and staring at our feet.

“After you left, I went crazy on these dating sites. It’s a brave new world out there. No shortage of younger guys looking for older women. I went through tons of them. Never had so much sex in my life.”

Ouch. I didn’t know what to expect at this meeting, but it wasn’t this. I know she’s giving me a blast of not-so-passive aggression, but her casual delivery is throwing me, as if she’s catching up with a girlfriend instead of someone she was married to for a decade.

“Only two or three stuck for more than a night or two. But one of them, Craig, really helped me discover myself sexually.” She takes another drag from her cigarette and, not knowing how to respond to that, I do the same. “Not the most stable guy in the world. Kind of a mess, actually. But he introduced me to the whole fetish scene.”

“Fetish?”

“Yeah, you know, dominance and submission and role playing. I found out I can be quite the little submissive bottom.”

Rachael, a bottom? A world class dominatrix, sure, but submissive?

“Apparently, the more controlling you are outside the bedroom, the more you want someone to tell you what to do in bed. Anyway, I got heavy into that scene. Remember the right hand closet leading from the bedroom to the bathroom?”

“The one with my suits?”

“Well, now it’s full of restraints, schoolgirl outfits and naughty-nurse uniforms.”

The overwhelmingly surreal quality of this meeting is sinking in, a collision of my past and present. Here’s a cardboard cut-out of Rachael, sitting across from me, describing yet another extreme lifestyle as she recounts her sexual exploits. Is this who I was with for all those years?

There's no jealousy in me, not even a pang, and I realize it's partly because I don't feel the slightest sexual attraction towards her. Sex was never the primary connection between us, anyway. I'd like to make up some outrageous sexual escapade to counter hers, though, something involving a van full of strippers wearing combat boots, but the moment has passed.

There is something I need to say to her, though. I crush the almost spent cigarette against the glass table top and dump the butt in my glass. "Listen. That day in the kitchen? I know I scared you. Scared myself, too. I should never have let it get to that point, where I couldn't control it. I'm sorry about that."

Rachael takes a puff and lets it out. "Yeah, well, we were pushing each other pretty hard, weren't we? For a long time."

That's as close to either forgiveness or an apology as I'm ever going to get. "Mind if I have another one of those cigarettes?" I say.

"Sure," she says, handing me one. "Delicious aren't they?"

I nod yes, reach over for the lighter. "You have to excuse me if I seem a little off, but I was so damn nervous about this meeting, I slammed down a whole Judy Garland cocktail."

"Really. I'd have never known."

"That's adrenaline for you."

I light the cigarette. As I do, I'm trying to think of another topic of conversation. Anything but sex and fetishes.

"Speaking of adrenaline. How's the whole crystal thing going?" I would never bring it up if I thought she was high, but she looks healthy, not displaying any of the maniacal edginess she does when she's tweaked.

"Under control. But wow, I finally get that crystal-sex connection everyone talks about."

So much for changing the subject. It is noteworthy, though. When we were together, she didn't like to be touched when she was high.

“After you left, I hit it pretty hard, but I’m staying away. I have a tough enough time getting out of bed without being cracked out and suicidal. Besides, all I need to do is look around at some of our friends to see what can happen if you give in to it. Did you hear about Ramon?”

Ramon was, not surprisingly, part of the group of friends who’d drifted her way following our breakup. “No. Not for a long time.”

“It finally caught up with him. He had to leave the clinic, give up his practice, everything. He’s in rehab in Ft. Lauderdale right now. And none of this twenty-eight day bullshit, I’m talking three-month rehab for doctors.”

So Christian had been right all along about Ramon. His fall from grace is fitting. He’d been there with us from the very beginning.

“Three months? That’s hard time.”

“Speaking of which. Did you hear about Wes?”

“No.”

“Busted. The police raided him Memorial Day. Confiscated the safe, his computer, money, everything.”

“No kidding? You mean something finally stuck to the Teflon dealer? Is he in jail?”

“Out on bail.”

“How’s David taking it?”

“About how you’d image. He was away visiting his family in Jersey or they’d have him too.”

Ramon and Wes—the doctor and the dealer. The end of an era.

“And you?” she asks.

“Well, I was going to say I’ve been having a tough time, but I’m not in rehab or jail, so I guess I’m doing great.” Rachael laughs. “I’ve been out to the clubs a few times, but it’s not the same. The circuit parties, the scene, the drugs; it all feels like it’s trying too hard. High just isn’t all it’s cracked up to be anymore.”

“Yeah, well, what is?” she says. Rachael stands, trying to dig something out of the little change pocket in the front of her jeans. She says, “Speaking of high—”

She tosses two blue and white capsules onto the table.

“What is that?” I say.

“Oxycontin AR.” She breaks the first one in two. I watch the white powder collect in a neat mound. “The doctors keep me pretty well stocked. Do you have a credit card on you? I left mine back at the cottage.”

My reaction is instant, instinctive. I can still conjure up that soft, dreamy, care-melting high. But it’s more than the anticipation of a buzz. Drugs are a common ground, a bond—our bond.

“I’ll be right back.” I push Wart off my lap and head inside to get my wallet. Christian is sitting at the dining room table, talking on his cell phone. He glances over and gives me a thumb-up, eyebrows arched, and mouths, “Everything okay?”

What can I say? Everything’s going fine, Christian. We’ve been discussing Rachael’s newly discovered propensity to lick boots, the shattered lives of many of our mutual friends, and now we’re about to follow it up with a few fat lines of Oxycontin. Instead, I scrunch up my nose and signal okay. He nods, satisfied, and goes back to his conversation.

I grab my Visa card and a dollar bill, and head back out to the deck. Rachael’s broken the other capsule open, creating a second heaping mound. I hand her the credit card.

“Thanks,” she says, and starts cutting the powder into lines. I roll up the bill, watching her the whole time. I should be appalled. Here she is, not all that long out of rehab, behaving the same as ever. But I’m not appalled. I’m not even surprised. In fact, it’s only now I feel any real connection to her. Watching her cut those lines feels like putting on a pair of comfortable old slippers. For the first time in a long time, I don’t have to worry about what I’m going to do or say next or how to explain the excesses of our relationship to some outsider, therapist, or

acquaintance as they look at me with shock or barely-concealed disapproval. This may not be who I am now, but for a long time, it is precisely who I was.

I give Rachael the rolled up bill and she snorts up her line. She hands the bill to me.

“Want one?” she says. “You know, for old time’s sake.”

I shouldn’t, but fuck it. I take the bill from her, come up halfway from the chair and do the fattest one, top to bottom. No guilt, no regrets. I sit back down and look Rachael right in the eyes. Already, I can feel it working, smoothing like the finest sandpaper all the rough edges the valium missed.

She’s smiling at me now. Teary and sad. I close my eyes and nod. Rachael slides her hand across the table toward me. I look past the rings and jewels to the slender, elegant fingers. I put my hand on the table and press it forward until the tips of my fingers touch hers, just barely.

A tear strikes her forearm and rolls off. And then another.

“You know,” she says, “I really should go.”

I don’t want her to leave, to break this fragile little connection. But she’s right. It can’t last. We’ve been apart for almost a year but it’s only now that I know, with absolute certainty, there’s no going back. Now that I’ve cut through the anger and the guilt, there’s nothing to hold us together anymore. Nothing except for those fluffy white lines.

Then I get it. What hit me so hard before, the thing that that launched all those tears? It’s relief. I’m free of her. What she feels and wants, what she hates and fears, none of it matters anymore, not to me. We’re done.

Still staring at her hand, I nod yes. “Goodbye, then.”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for, Nick.” Her voice is gentle.

Her hand slips away, leaving mine on the table, alone.

Thanks, Rachael. I believe I just did.

Mooning Over Miami

Now what? Why not Miami? Hey, why *not* Miami. I rented a pick-up, strapped everything I owned to it and took off.

Within a month, I bought a little studio near Flamingo Park in South Beach, not much bigger than the place I'd lived in when I met Rachael, and settled in. Sure, it could fit into the master bedroom of our former house in D.C. with room to spare, but it was, after applying a decade's worth of decorating techniques I'd picked up from Rachael and the boys, cute, stylish—and, most importantly, all mine.

I didn't know what to expect from South Beach. I suppose I imagined a slightly tamer version of the place Rachael and I had discovered a decade earlier. Though the place looked the same, some things had definitely changed.

Gianni Versace was shot dead right on Ocean Drive, the movie *The Birdcage* was released, the Warsaw Ballroom had become a deli and the club Salvation an office supply store. South Beach was now solidly, undeniably mainstream. The artist, models, and celebrities who had made the place had been largely replaced by tourists from Indiana snapping pictures of Ocean Drive from the top of the Duck Tour bus.

The Beach wasn't the only thing that changed. So, seemingly, had what it meant to be a homo. Funny thing, as I had become gayer in my sensibilities and lifestyle, gay society had become straighter. The heart of the gay scene—made up partly of men given new, unexpected futures courtesy the protease inhibitors which kept their HIV in check—had packed up and moved north to Ft. Lauderdale to renovate houses in quiet neighborhoods, adopt kids, and live lives in most ways undistinguishable from their straight neighbors. Assimilation—it happened to my ancestors, the Greeks, so why shouldn't it happen to my associates, the gays?

And the time I'd spent with the boys had been a serendipitous courtship, "a beautiful friendship," as Bogey put it to Claude Rains at the end of *Casablanca*. I had hitched a ride on the rainbow-colored party float at exactly the right time, just as the ticker-tape parade turned, triumphant, down 5th Avenue. In the end, of course, we had to part ways. The differences, as Christian had pointed out, may have been irreconcilable, but the parting was amicable. Like all relationships—even the failed ones—this one left its mark upon me. I had not only survived the decade in which it became hip to be gay, but, like them, had emerged more secure and accepted, more open and confident. Yes, the boys had, by their acceptance and through their example, shown me how to be a man. I had no doubt that a part of me would remain—proudly—"the gayest straight man in America."

So, what was next? Walking along the beach, I would hear a low rumble and look up to see a cigarette boat, sleek and fast, skipping over the waves. Miami was changing, sure, but that was always part of its appeal. Recent waves of immigrants from South America, France, Italy and Central Europe had given the place an international feel. "Come to Miami," the locals said, "it's *almost* like being in the USA." There was a buzz about the city, the energy of a boom town, the feeling that it was evolving, that was not yet what it would become. There was a future here—if I could only find a place in it.

One day at the gym, I saw a flier posted by the management looking for personal trainers. I had responded, taken a certification course, and, at an age when most guys' bodies started working against them, put mine to work for me. Soon, I'd developed a small, but devoted clientele—mostly men and women in my age bracket happy not to have to listen to some twenty year old bark out orders like a commandant at a POW camp.

The personal training paid the bills, but my passion became something more cerebral. I set aside a part of each day to work on a story that was just beginning to take shape—mine. It was sad and funny, dark and light, tragic and hopeful—full of contrasts, like my new life. If I could finish it, the tale would be mine in a way nothing else had ever been.

As disparate as my life was, something about it was working now, was beginning to make sense. I even liked the sound of it: Muscles and metaphors—literature and lats.

Still, there clung to me a whiff of melancholy, a hint of forlornness, a sense of loss and loneliness that brushed up against me, often when I least expected it. Could I avoid falling back into my inexorable patterns and temptations, the origins of which I could trace back through all my relationships to land at the feet of an emerald-eyed diva who'd married my grandfather and lorded over my family?

Avoiding my demons wasn't going to be enough; this time, I had to annihilate them. There was only one way for that to happen: In order to free myself from my past, I'd have to face it.

The Rhythm Method

Holding my bongos, I circle the chain link fence surrounding the perimeter of the Muscle Beach party, the final official event of White Party. High banks of speakers line the football-length dance area set on Twelfth Street, not fifty yards from the ocean. It's early, not yet one o'clock. The deejay is in the middle of sound check, playing some soft, smooth jazz, nice and easy. Inside, a small, but growing crowd—the early birds—mill about, waiting for the real deal. The party is just beginning to build, like thunderheads gathering off in the distance. It's a good day for it: sunny, not too hot, with a steady breeze off the water. For a second, I get that pulse-quickenning stab—I want in. I rock back and forth to the music, scanning the crowd for a familiar face.

I pass a young couple standing by the fence, swaying ever-so-slightly to the music. They're both holding beers, not taking their eyes off the crowd. As I walk by, the guy looks over and says, "Excuse me, but what's this all about?"

"It's part of White Party."

"White Party?" he says in a slight drawl.

"Yeah, a big fundraiser.

The guy laughs. "We're from Beaumont, Texas and when we have a fundraiser, it's usually a bake sale or a car wash."

"They've been doing them this way here for a long time."

The girl turns to me and says, "Looks to me like one big excuse for something."

I'm about to make the argument that White Party raises thousands of dollars for several community based AIDS-related organizations, when, not ten feet away, a guy in sailor pants and no shirt puts his hand down the back of another guy's sarong.

Something about that image reverses the polarity of the moment. A chain link fence doesn't just keep people out, it also traps them in.

“Yeah,” I say to her, “I suppose you're right.”

I turn and walk away, finding the spot I was looking for: just next to the life guard stand—the place where Rachael had introduced me to Ramon and a whole new life on another sunny day in November, twelve years ago. I sit down, cross legged on the sand, adjust the bongos between my knees and face out towards the ocean. To either side of me the beach extends in a lovely turquoise-rimmed arch.

Just as I settle in, a shockwave consisting entirely bass plows into me from behind. Sound check is over. Exactly what I was waiting for. A slow, steady beat lumbers forth, the deejay feeling his way like an athlete limbering up before a long, tough match.

I shut my eyes and tap out a simple figure on the skin of the drums, letting the rhythm soak into me. I play gently at first, but then, gradually, as my fingers and wrists begin to warm up and become more nimble, I dig in. My fingers dance across the heads, creating warm tones, punctuated by sharp slaps, blending with the anchoring bass, creating contrasting polyrhythmic patterns. I'm inside the music now—clean and deep.

I open my eyes and look up into a sky that is endless and open and free.

I tilt back my head. “Woof,” I say.

III. Afterword

So, now you know the story. Or at least most of it. Or at least the parts that I could remember.

Here's one more thing you couldn't know. When I was still in the early stages of assembling this manuscript I received a box sent from a familiar address in Washington, D.C. There, among my high school yearbooks and old photographs, I found a paperback by Elmore Leonard. It is the novel I'd been reading that lonely night so long ago, the one with the pathetic loser, standing there in that busboy outfit, feeling as though he'd just missed the last train to nowhere. You could say it's that story which had thrust me out of my home and my life and into the one you've just read. I decided I would put that book away until I had finished this one. Now that I have, it seems high time to dust it off and find out what happens to that fellow. I'm curious, not concerned. I pretty sure I've finally taken those big-ass strides Bianca had suggested. Whatever happens—what I do, what I become—won't depend on some minor-league character in a novel, or, for that matter, some major-league woman.

That kid working the door at the Crown on the Fourth of July said it: “The world—full of possibilities.” Made me smile then and it still does.