



Chance

Encounters

edited by M. Rode

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Chance Encounters

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Forward

What is chance? Chance is capricious, unpredictable and risky. It can be an accidental happening or a gamble. Chance is that leap of faith that you take when you step forward into a new situation, into a new pair of arms.

Welcome to the world of the chance encounter. This anthology brings together 26 diverse stories by 25 different authors. Veterans and newcomers alike will delight you with their spin on the chance encounter.

Spanning the centuries from the time of the crusades to the present, the stories in this anthology all present the reader with a different set of circumstances under which the protagonist finds a potential lover. Many bring with them that heart pounding thrill of instant attraction, of need being so strong one risks public discovery. Others explore the chance meeting of old lovers or of unsuitable lovers.

Think the chance encounter can only happen at a bar or other familiar pick up joint? Think again. While some of the stories in this anthology find folks meeting up that way, the ways of meeting are as varied as the writers themselves, as the characters themselves.

What each story does contain is that moment when chance drops someone in front of the protagonist and he, or she, must choose between moving forward or stepping back. And having taken that chance, are they rewarded with love, happiness, or at least hot sex? You'll have to read to find out.

M. Rode

Virtuoso

By Jodi Payne

I roll my hips to the beat of the techno house mix, a Heineken in one hand and a Marlboro in the other, bathed in the disco grape Kool-Aid of the dance floor lighting. It's hot and over-crowded, exactly how I like it. I'm a loose cannon tonight, flying solo as they say, a thousand miles from home in a dyke bar called *Wet*. Practically speaking, it makes little difference what city I'm in, the grrl clubs all have the same names: *Wet*, *Splash*, *Atlantis*, anything to conjure up images in horny women's minds of flooded panties soaked by dildo-ready, self-lubricated cunts.

I'm going home with someone tonight. Yes, I'm always this sure of myself. This time I didn't even bother with a hotel room. I am seeing someone regularly at home, but like I said she's a thousand miles away and as a wise man once sang, if you can't be with the one you love, honey, love the one you're with.

I take a drag off my cigarette and stomp it out on the nearly invisible floor, chasing it with the last swig of a beer that never got the chance to get warm. I set the empty bottle on a narrow ledge near a set of stairs that seems to lead to a second floor bar, and venture a little further into the crowd. I can feel the beat of the music through the thick soles of my boots. It tingles in my toes and travels all the way up my spine. If I close my eyes the music explodes in bright colors like Independence Day behind my eyelids. No, I'm not high, but I should be. It might be even better if I were. I just haven't run into the right people yet.

I'm the first to admit that I'm jaded. I've been around the block a few times and I'm hard to please. When I scan a dance floor I'm looking for a real woman. Her body is a factor but it's not everything. I like a decent rack. I like to see some cleavage that makes my mouth water -- sure, who doesn't? I love a good ass. In fact, her ass is even more important than her tits. But if I have to pick a deciding factor, one particular thing that must be there regardless of the packaging, it's her eyes. Her eyes will tell me what I'm really in for. I look for experience; for someone whose mind is on my body, whose hands can read my goosebumps like Braille, someone who looks as if she can play me like a concert pianist masters Rachmaninoff. Oh, and while we're on a musical metaphor, I'll admit that I want a woman who isn't going to rush me to crescendo. I'll willingly give a lover all night and I want her to use it.

So yeah, of course I laugh at the baby punk who suddenly slips her hand into mine. She tugs me into a space between the gyrating bodies that's just big enough for two. Not at all the overture I'd been expecting. I mean, look at her. She's adorable, yes, with her neon-blue-tipped hair and her knee-high, snakeskin Doc Martens. Her fresh

face is set with almond-shaped, azure eyes ringed in black eyeliner that sets off her porcelain skin. Her eyes are alluring, harder for me to get a read on than most. But honey, baby girl, you can't be a day over twenty.

She's quick to smile, another common curse of the young. Gutsy little thing though, I'll give her that. Her eyes are telling me she wants me to dance and she moves closer.

I find it difficult to get into at first, rubbing hips with this little top-dyke in the making. She even has a harness on underneath those hip-huggers. She threads graceful fingers into her hair and combs it back, giving her head a toss when she's done, grinding that dildo strapped across her bush into my hip. Say, little girl, does your mother know who you're hanging out with? Does she know you suck clit? Does she know you pack cock under your size 2 blue jeans? Will she let you stay out past ten?

She's a smooth dancer, she moves easily, freely, and somehow, though we're all moving to the same unrelenting beat, it seems as if she is creating her own. I let my eyes and hands travel over her slender body. She hasn't given me her name yet, or said anything at all for that matter. She just dances and gives me a knowing look that seems a little past her years. I'm intrigued and I return her wily smile, giving her permission to make her move. You think you can teach this old dog a new trick, baby dyke? Well bring it on, sweetheart, show me what you can do.

Her hands slip around my waist and up my back. No, not just up my back, but under my shirt and against my bare skin. She flattens her fingers over my spine. They're cool and seem to mock the slowly building heat of the moment. It's a clever move, suitably forward; it speaks of intention. I'm surprised, but also pleased to discover that she's not fooling around. Chalk another one up for the kid.

I feel scrutinizing eyes on my back and turn to spot several trend-addicted young women a short distance away congregated at the bar. At once, the mystery solves itself before me, the desire-induced fog lifts and I find myself the unwitting object of a school-girl dare. "Are those your friends at the bar?" I ask, lowering my lips to my dance partner's ear to be heard over the music.

She nods.

"They put you up to this?" I pull away and grin knowingly at her. I played this game once, too, but now I know how to win.

"No!" She protests, vehemently enough that I want to believe her. "No, I wanted to ask you to dance. I put myself up to this."

"And they...?"

"They said they didn't believe you'd do it."

Well, well. Break my unbreakable heart. She wanted me, from way over there at the bar, and her catty little girlfriends told her she wasn't worthy of me. It takes a lot of moxie to risk humiliation in front of one's friends. This kitten's got courage, she deserves to beat them at their own game. "So let's give the ladies something to chew on." I suggest, tilting her chin up and brushing her pouting lips with mine.

She doesn't hesitate to kiss me. Her lips are soft and warm and a quick test with my tongue confirms that she's had at least one real drink tonight. I can smell the Jack on her breath, too. She doesn't care for my intrusion it seems because her tongue thrusts back at mine and past my lips impatiently. She's on the hunt, eager to prove her independence. She's determined to get her prey by the throat, or in my case, the ass, as I note her hands are cupping mine and tugging me closer. Ah, but it takes more than a smile and a kiss to get this tiger by the tail, Sunshine.

Like... your tongue ring.

Fuck. This one's a live wire, huh? Have I underestimated her? She's precocious, to be sure. I wonder for a moment if maybe I should show her how to use that cock in an unsolicited etude, but something is telling me she's fairly practiced. Perhaps she's older than I thought? Yet no, her kiss is rushed and unpolished, giving her age away. Which isn't to say I don't enjoy it; quite the contrary. I'm finding our resonance very, very hot.

She circles her hardware over and under my tongue, then lets me play with it, one hand moving to the back of my neck. That's usually my move, but she's earned it. She's on fire, her skin is slick with sweat where I touch her bare midriff, and I drag a moan from her as I cup my hand to her jeans and give her silicone cock a squeeze, pressing it tightly to her body. She smells like patchouli and apple shampoo, her skin is soft, her body is tight, and I'm starting to think that this one should in fact be my evening's entertainment, even if it means shelling out for a hotel room after all.

I'm just starting to simmer in her seduction when the purple pools of light that drench us turn a fiery tangerine. We're jarred from the intoxicating moment and she pulls me off the dance floor toward her so-called friends. I was ready to say hello to them, but instead we waltz steadily past the bar. I make a point of keeping my fingers tangled with hers as I smugly peruse each of the doubting girls with interest. Their reactions are mixed, from wide grins to wider-eyed shock. Slowly, we make our way toward the back of the club.

The encounter I'd envisioned when I walked in to this generic dyke bar tonight has transformed into something else, something unique, something untamed and wild with a deceptive cadence. I have become an instrument at the hands of an unlikely mistress. Relinquishing the reins isn't really my forte, but I'm taken with her deceptively strong hands and with her eyes; eyes that seem to tell only what she wants me to know.

She leads me into the dark powder room. It's humid and smells strongly of woman. The walls are a midnight blue and the room is lit with a single overhead black-light and the stalls are wide enough for a commode and little else. I let her shove me into one, watch her as she locks the door, and just like that we're alone, with the muffled beat of club music vibrating through the walls, through my feet, through my body. I reach for her but she takes hold of my wrists.

"No touching," she tells me. I could break from her grip easily if I wanted to, but I've given over already. She seems to know it. Any hint of that youth-cursed smile is gone and in its place is a heated stare, her telling eyes turned black by the lighting, their whites glowing with the supernatural quality of a 1930's monster flick. Her determined hands travel up my shirt again, lifting it, baring my breasts. She presses her lips to my sternum hungrily and I rest my head against the wall and sigh.

Her fingers work the buttons of my worn out jeans open one by one. She shifts my thong aside and slips her hand against me, palms my mon and caresses my slippery clit with steady fingers. I open my mouth and inhale deeply, spreading my legs to give her better access. Her lips close around my nipple and desire races like lightning from my breasts to my cunt and back again.

It's easy to forget, as I let my eyes slide closed, that she is so young. Her body moves against mine and she slips to her knees. Her fingers tug my jeans down over my hips and she noses me, humming her approval. I look down at her and lick my lips. She taps the back of one of my knees and I lift my leg for her. I brace myself on one leg against the wall feeling the flush of arousal reach my cheeks and palms. She unfastens the buckle and unzips one of my heavy boots to pull it off. The anticipation is slow torture and I beg her to hurry. She tugs the leg of my jeans free and I brace my bootless foot against the toilet seat with my legs spread wantonly wide.

Her tongue is hot and the wet friction is delicious, it makes my thighs shiver and forces a grateful moan from me. Once again she proves to me the worth of her tongue ring, teasing my clit with it over and over and over until I'm panting. My fingers reach for her hair and she impatiently slaps them away. No touching -- I've forgotten her rules. My fingers thread into my own hair instead. I gasp. Every flick of her tongue makes my body pulse and the droning beat of the dance floor fade further and further until there is nothing in my ears but the rush of my own blood. She's relentless, tonguing me again and again, stroking me and lighting a fire in me that I never would have dreamed she could be capable of.

It's not long before she's tuned me into perfect temperament. "Wanna fuck?" She asks me from her knees, a husky tone to her voice. One hand stretches upward and twisting my nipple.

I hiss and shake my head. "No, don't stop." I breathe, shocked at the timbre of my own voice. She giggles, or something like it, amused with me or pleased with herself, it's hard to know which. I don't even care which, just fucking don't stop, maestro, don't stop now, not yet.

She's focused now and so am I, on our concerto of lust. We're working toward a climax that will be all mine; selfish, indulgent, and so so fucking good. I'm grinding down as she fucks me with her fingers. I roll my hips into her tongue. I hear myself moan and pant. I hear her voice encouraging me in muffled counterpoint. I want, I need, I ache and desire. It fills my mind and every nerve in my body until I reach the very limit of my endurance. My body jerks, stretched taunt like the strings of a gypsy fiddle. I bear down and clench around her fingers and my hips arch hard into her mouth.

I linger there, in the dark isolated depths of my release until my heart stops pounding like a timpani in my ears, until my heel, raised of its own accord, finds the floor again, until my body begins to relax. Finally, I open my eyes and blink down at the girl with the blue-tipped hair, inclined to return the favor for her. She is smiling that girlish smile again, though it seems more sophisticated now than it had on the dance floor. I step back into my jeans and she kneels again to zip and buckle my boot for me.

When she gets back to her feet I reach for her, but again she takes hold of my wrists.

"No touching," she chides softly and then licks her lips. I really could get free of her light grip if I wanted to, but I don't want to. Who taught this child her tricks? They're exactly like mine. Every move orchestrated perfectly, right down to the kiss she gives me before she leaves me standing there alone, in the middle of the black-lit john, without a hotel room.

Searching For A Hero

By Lorne Rodman

"I'm sorry, Danny, but it's starting to feel like you're writing the same book over and over. I'm not saying they're bad, but they're sounding more like each other all the time. Maybe you need a vacation, go to the beach, get some new inspiration."

That was what his editor and best friend, Steve, had told Danny Myers just last week, and that was why he was in Key West, grabbing his suitcases off the conveyor belt and preparing for no less than three weeks in the sun and sand, with plenty of those little umbrella drinks. The new inspiration he wasn't so sure about, but Steve had a point about the patterns his novels were taking, and he didn't want to end up as another one of those writers who got successful and then fed their readers book after book of the same old same old.

The Florida sun melted his brain as he left the airport and the humidity hit him like a ton of bricks. He gave the cab driver his hotel and settled back, thinking about the inspiration for his first novel, and every novel since then. Hell, maybe it was time he moved on. That was what, twenty years ago almost? Maybe it really was time he stopped mooning over something he couldn't have and faced reality. Problem was, reality was not high on a fiction writer's list of good things.

Before he knew it, they were at the hotel and he had to dig out money to pay the cabbie, apologizing for pretty much dozing off. Fuck, it had been a long week. Time to check in, oil up, and hit the beach to watch the beefcake. That should be relaxing enough.

Which was just what he did, with the exception of lying on the beach watching the boys. Instead he strolled, window shopping and people watching. Too bad his board shorts and t-shirt had no pockets; he could have brought a notebook and pen with him to write some things down. People fascinated him. Like that lady over there in the pink and turquoise muumuu and the iron gray hair, who was cradling a watermelon like a baby and talking to it. Or the guy over by the shave ice stand who looked like a young Einstein with skateboard. Any of them would be great characters.

But the hero of the story would be someone like the guy strolling toward him in the tan chinos and red and white Bermuda shirt. It should have looked goofy, but he was nicely built and had just enough gray he just looked distinguished. Then the guy looked up and yeah, only the hero would get to have bright blue eyes like that...

Of course, that made him just like every other hero in Danny's books, didn't it? Only this guy was older, with nice

tanned skin and even lighter hair, salted liberally with gray. Danny smiled at him as they got close to each other, feeling his cheeks heat as he realized he was giving the guy all of his I'm interested signals.

Then Mr. Hero flashed him a smile, bright and friendly and oh my god.

Danny stopped dead, his mouth falling open, and the old man following right behind him pretty much ran right up his ass. It couldn't be, not in a million years, but damned if the guy didn't look like twenty years ago, on a late fall night, when Danny's whole life had changed so completely that everything else seemed insignificant.

The kiss left him breathless, Ned's blue eyes all he could see, that hard body all he could feel, pressed up against his. If the music was still playing he couldn't hear it. If they were still dancing, it was just an excuse to rub together.

He'd never felt anything like it before, not ever, and Ned's lips felt so good on his, so right that he was afraid to say anything, because nothing that good could be real and it would disappear if he spoke.

"Danny? Danny Myers?"

"Holy Shit." Danny clapped a hand over his mouth, hoping to keep any more stupidity at bay, then peeled it off to reply. "Ned."

"Yeah. Wow." Ned shook his head and then grinned. "It's been a long time."

"A long time, yeah. You look good."

"Not as good as you." Ned shook his head. "I wasn't even sure it was you. I remember a gangly teenager with the biggest eyes I've ever seen."

"Yeah. I guess I grew up, huh?" Danny shook his head, grinning. Had he ever grown up, compared to how he was when he and Ned were together.

"Yeah. A real swan, kid." Ned laughed. "Not that you are anymore. A kid that is."

Suddenly aware that they were standing in the street, staring, Danny rolled his shoulders, chuckling. "Would you like to have a drink or something? I was in search of one of those umbrella ones."

"I know a little place. Quiet, intimate."

His place. The stud was inviting him home.

His hand was wrapped in Ned's, hot and solid and good, full of promise. Ned gave him a little tug. "Coming?"

If he wasn't careful, he was going to -- on the spot -- but Danny nodded anyway, feeling all sorts of stuff in the pit of his stomach. This man, this beautiful, beautiful man was his for the night. It was too good to be true.

"Sounds good."

"Terrific." Ned turned and they started walking the way he'd been going. "So what have you been up to?"

"I'm a writer, actually." Danny moved his own feet, falling in step with Ned and trying not to gibber like an idiot.

"No -- not Daniel L. Myers? The novelist? I've got all your books!" Ned laughed, hand landing in the small of his back.

"The very same. Wow. You've heard of me." Skin tingling where Ned touched it, even through his shirt, Danny kept his voice even by willpower alone. "My editor thinks I'm becoming a hack."

"Are you kidding? You're the Anne Rice of the gay world. I'm no book critic or anything, but I've enjoyed all of them. Bought them too -- that's what counts, isn't it? Sales?"

"Well, no writer likes to think he's doing the same book over and over. So what about you? What are you up to? And what brings you here?"

"I live here -- semi-retired." Ned turned him at the corner and pointed out a little bar on the beach.

"You must have done well, you're far too young to retire." They settled in and Danny ordered a frou frou drink, trying not to stare, but it was hard. This was like a dream come true.

"Flatterer. I'm not the young stud who swept you off your feet all those years ago." Ned ordered a whiskey, beer chaser. The same he was drinking the night they'd met, if Danny's memory served him right.

The sense of unreality was strong, but Danny wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. There was some sort of fate afoot here; somehow or another this was meant to be.

"You're gorgeous." Shit. Did he say that?

Ned gave him a warm smile, crinkles around the bright eyes. "You're not looking so bad yourself, Danny. Not bad at all."

"Thanks." God, he could feel his cheeks heat until he was blushing as bad as he had the night Ned came on to him, picking him up at the only club that would take his fake ID.

This bar was much quieter. It was open with a grass roof, a bar where they were sitting and a few tables spilling out onto the beach. It was still off-season enough that it was relatively quiet and the noise of the waves and gulls dominated. They could talk without shouting.

The music was so loud he could barely hear himself think, which was probably just as well because his mind was rabbiting along ninety to nothing about the hot stud who just bought him his drink and was leaning in to ask him something, lips dark red, tongue coming out past white teeth to wet...

"Danny? You with me?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sorry." He'd have to watch that. Even if Ned still had those pretty, pretty lips, that didn't mean he wanted to do anything to Danny with them. "So where was I in the process of embarrassing myself?"

Ned smiled. "God, you're just as cute as you were that night. A little more studly, a little less geeky, but just adorable." Those blue eyes were smiling at him, warm and friendly.

"Uh. Thanks." Now he was blushing. Great. "My editor thinks I'm quite the geek. Won't let me use my picture on the jacket covers."

Ned shook his head. "I don't think your picture on the books would hurt sales at all."

"He wanted someone older, more distinguished, at least at first. And well, once you do that, it's hard to go, here he is!" Danny grinned, shaking his head. "Makes for entertaining book signings."

"Oh, I bet that would be fun. 'You look so much younger than your picture.'" Ned grinned. "I could go for some of that action."

Down boy. No doubt Ned meant looking younger, not some of Danny's action, more's the pity. This was just a 'hey, how've you been' drink between a couple of old friends. Nothing more.

"I'm not much on picking up guys at book signings. You never know when you're gonna get that whole Misery, 'I'm your number one fan' thing."

"Damn, there goes my line." Ned winked at him.

This guy got to him, so fast, just like old times, and Danny almost wished they hadn't met up again, because this was just new fuel for his obsession, just reinforcement that no one else was ever going to measure up. It was crazy, but there it was, and he was half hard already.

"You don't need a line with me, Ned."

Ned's mouth was pressed up against his ear. "I said do you want to dance?"

Only it wasn't like any dancing he'd ever done. It was close and bump and grindy and sexy as hell, making him hard and making him shake just a little. Ned moved like he was born to it, body sliding against his, keeping the space between them to a bare minimum.

"Does that mean you'll come home with me?" Ned's voice was husky, those blue eyes dark.

His heart kicked into double time. Fuck yes. "I would love to."

"Good. Now?"

"Yeah." Was he going to say no? No way. This was too fucking surreal; he dreamed of this guy at night. Danny finished off his drink and stood, holding out a hand. "Let's go."

Ned didn't even bother to finish his beer. Just tossed a couple of bills on the bar and took his hand, leading him out.

Ned tugged him along, leading him out of the club and into the cool evening. His hands were sweating, Ned's was hot, but smooth and big, holding his.

He could barely walk he was so hard and he couldn't remember ever being that hard in his entire eighteen years of life. This man, this big, beautiful man, wanted him, and it was overwhelming. Hot as Hell.

They hadn't gone very far, just enough to turn a corner and be off the main drag, when Ned turned and pushed him up against the wall, mouth hot and hard and insistent on his, tongue pushing into his mouth.

He was going to come, just like that, just like he was eighteen again. That was all Danny could think when Ned got them into his car and leaned over to kiss him, big hand cupping his cheek. Ned's lips tasted just the same, warm and soft with the tang of whiskey. Danny wondered if he tasted differently.

Ned's mouth left his, tongue lingering to stroke over his bottom lip as Ned reached past him and did up his seatbelt. "Just a little something to think about for the drive."

"I, uh, was already thinking about it." He grinned, trying to get his brain working again, moving his hand guiltily when he realized it had settled on his crotch.

Ned's glance landed in his lap. "I can see that."

"Yeah. I uh, well. Yeah." He couldn't exactly hide it, could he? "You get to me."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Ned grinned and drove them out of the city along the beach. "It's not far, just enough for privacy. Can you wait?"

He only just stopped himself from saying something really stupid like he'd been waiting twenty years and nodded instead. "Yeah, I can wait."

"Well there's something growing up will do for a man." Ned smiled at him, one hand reaching to stroke his thigh. "Bit of a shame, really."

He closed one hand over Ned's. "I can wait, but only if you don't tease me. You? Make me feel like a teenager again." It was no lie. He was practically shaking with it.

Ned gave him a hot look. "You do know how to make an aging man feel like a stud again, Danny."

"Aging?" Danny snorted. There was no way Ned was aging. Sure, he wasn't as much in his prime as he was the first time they'd met, but Danny would bet under those clothes Ned was still trim and muscled and hot as Hell. "If you're aging, sign me up for Florida and the fountain of youth."

"Flatterer -- you've already bagged me, you don't have to keep trying." Ned looked happy though, hands returning to the steering wheel, their speed increasing.

He couldn't wait to get to Ned's place, so he didn't protest how fast they were going, even though he would have loved to have more of those amazing, drugging kisses. His lips were swollen, bruised, and Danny touched them lightly, so hot he thought he might bust. "Are we almost there?"

"Yeah. We are." Ned's hand slid down to his ass, squeezing, the other found his cock through his jeans, massaging. "Just around this last corner."

"Oh, God. Yeah. We need to go faster."

Ned scanned the area and pushed him back up against another wall, the tall stud dropping to his knees. "We just need to take the top off the urgency." Ned's long fingers worked open his button, slid on his cock through his jeans.

Unable to believe what was happening, Danny stared down at the blonde head hovering over his zipper, the hand on his covered cock, and almost collapsed, his knees going weak. It was too amazing. Ned was amazing.

Then his zipper came down, Ned working quickly, but careful not to get anything important caught and then, oh shit, this couldn't be happening -- Ned's mouth sank down over his cock.

They were there. Or at least Danny assumed they were because the car stopped, and they weren't at a red light. He was breathing hard, both the memories and the proximity of the man responsible for them making him need. Danny turned, reaching for Ned, needing another kiss.

Ned put the car in park and gave him what he wanted, what he needed. Strong arms slid around him, hands sliding over his back as Ned's mouth covered his, the kiss hot and hard. Groaning, Danny opened wide, tongue pushing out to meet Ned's, the taste exploding in his mouth. So good. Just right. Danny held on as his head spun, Ned the only solid thing in the world.

Ned's hand slid back down to his thigh, teasing, reaching toward his groin, but not quite going there.

This time Danny let it, hell, he helped it, grabbing Ned's hand and pushing it to cover his zipper. "Want you."

Ned bit at his bottom lip, hand kneading his cock through his pants. "Yeah? Tell me what you want."

"I want you. Any way I can get you. But I swear to God, Ned, I'm gonna come in my pants if you're not careful." He could feel it, rising up his spine, just like that. Jesus.

"Fuck. That was hot twenty years ago and it still is." The pressure of Ned's hand increased, working him through his pants.

"Oh God." Danny bucked, meeting the pressure of that strong hand, his cock throbbing, belly and thighs jumping, so close he couldn't see straight. "Please."

Moaning, Ned's mouth nibbled it's way along his jaw, down his neck. "Please what?" His zipper was teased open, Ned's free hand sliding into his waistband, fingers sliding across the tip of his cock.

That hot mouth swallowing him down was more than he could take and Danny moaned, stuffing his own wrist into his mouth to stifle the noise and his hips rolled. He knew he was about to come, but wanted to make it last, just in case he was dreaming or something.

Ned's mouth slipped away for a moment, a condom slid onto him, but almost before he could even register that it was cold, Ned's mouth was on him again, sucking him in deep.

That calmed him down just the tiniest bit, just enough to register the rough brick at his back, the way his zipper rasped against his skin, and the wet sounds Ned made sucking him off.

Ned's hands wrapped around his hips, encouraging him to pump into the tight, wet heat. Those high cheekbones stood out as Ned sucked him in, and Danny touched them, fingers light and wondering, one finger tracing Ned's lips, feeling where they came together.

The blue eyes looked up at him, stared right into him.

Ned's eyes pinned him, that hand just as hot and sure around his cock as he remembered.

"Oh. Damn." So hot and good and he was just going to explode and embarrass himself horribly, not matter how sexy Ned said it was.

Ned reached over to the glove compartment and oh, god, he had a box of condoms in there and that move was still just as practiced, the latex sliding over Danny's cock smooth as anything. He got a smile and then Ned's mouth was sliding over him.

There were differences, of course. The car seat was soft under him and the angle wasn't as good, but damned if Ned's mouth didn't feel the same, hot and wet, even through the condom, and so good, the pressure just right.

Danny lifted his hips, head falling back, hands going to Ned's hair, stroking down Ned's neck, a long moan coming out of him.

Ned hummed around his cock, hands sliding, one finding his balls, the other stroking his belly as the silver-shot blond head bobbed over his prick. Danny spread his thighs as wide as they would go and started moving, unable to stay still, humping up. There were a thousand things he wanted to say, but all of them would sound absurd to a virtual stranger, so he kept his mouth shut, panting and groaning.

Ned took him deep, swallowed around the tip of his cock, just like the first time all those years ago.

The next time Ned went all the way down, swallowing like a pro, Danny just lost it, hoarse sounds escaping the hand he had stuffed back in his mouth, his head hitting the wall behind him, making him see stars.

Ned made him see stars.

Ned kept sucking after he'd come, making it seem like it was lasting forever, making him shake.

It didn't take long, not between the memories and the hot pressure of Ned's hand on his balls, the strong suction on his prick. Danny could be noisy this time, though, could let Ned know how much he liked it, and when he came, he shouted his pleasure, making it echo in the tight confines of the car. Ned kept sucking him, licking, teasing out aftershocks and making him shiver.

His breath took a long time evening out, the muscles in his thighs jumping with each of Ned's movements. "God. Can I just say I'm glad some things don't change?"

Ned pulled off, smiling up at him as he disposed of the condom. One hand dropped back over his cock, pumping lightly. "You mean how you're still hot off the mark and ready to go again?"

"No. Oh. Damn. I mean how you're so good at that." He'd dreamed of that mouth, had written ode after ode to it in his books.

"Thank you, Danny. Come on -- you can keep boosting my ego inside where there's a little more room."

"Excellent." He smiled, doing up his pants reluctantly, gently nudging Ned's hand out of the way. There was something too exposed about walking into the house with his cock hanging out. He was curious to see Ned's house, really curious. The man was obviously successful, so it would be a far cry from the modest apartment all those years ago.

Ned gave him a smile like the man knew, and then opened the door for him before getting out. His hand was taken and he was led toward a bungalow. The house itself was modest rather than huge, but it sat on a large lot with the beach right out behind it.

"Home sweet home."

He was pushed up against the door as it closed, Ned's mouth closing urgently over his, the taste of latex and whiskey filling his mouth.

It dawned on him, right then and there, that he could touch back now, could get under the clothes and see Ned's skin, and Danny kissed back, even as he fumbled, trying to get Ned's jacket and shirt off. Ned took pity on his nerveless fingers and shrugged the jacket off, pulled the shirt open and off. His own t-shirt was pushed up, their kiss breaking as it was pulled over his head.

Oh. Skin on skin, and Danny had never felt anything so good, not ever. Ned's chest was a study of perfectly sculpted muscles, leaving his fingers itching and his mouth hanging open in awe. "You're amazing."

"You can touch you know." Ned matched actions to words, fingers sliding over his skin.

"Thank God." Ned's skin was warm, smooth, with just a bit of hair, and Danny touched carefully, half afraid that he would do something wrong in his obvious inexperience.

"Harder," muttered Ned, mouth closing over his again.

Danny kissed Ned harder, their lips mashing together as he pushed Ned back against the door this time, his hand not faltering a bit as he stripped off Ned's tropical shirt. That skin was still like sun warmed satin, still made his fingers twitch and his kiss stutter so he could lean back and admire. Ned took advantage of the break to lean in and lick at his neck, lips and teeth and tongue playing over his skin, Ned's hands finding his hips, tugging him close.

"Hey! I was looking." Danny grinned, the complaint utterly lacking heat as he tilted his head back and let Ned have his throat, hands testing the muscles of Ned's shoulders.

Ned chuckled, the sound sliding on his skin. "You can look after."

"Okay." He was happy with that, even happier with the feel of Ned's body, the taste of Ned's skin as he leaned over and licked just under Ned's ear.

"Mmm, bolder now. I like it."

"And I still like your voice." Strong, confident and male, that was what Ned sounded like, and it made Danny feel like a king that he was the one to out that little growl in it.

"So you're still sexy, I'm still sexy. You want to see my bed?"

"Yes. Oh, yeah. Please." More than that he wanted to see Ned on that bed, spread out, totally nude.

Ned grabbed his hand and led him through the well-appointed bungalow. Ned's room was colorful, welcoming, but Danny only had eyes for the large bed that dominated.

He'd never even been on a bed with another man. Heck, he'd never done anything at all like what Ned made him want to do, never been so reckless in his life. That bed was the most inviting thing he'd ever seen, though, and when Ned tugged their joined hands and pulled him over to sit on it, he went happily. Eagerly.

Ned's fingers slid up his belly, dancing over his skin as he was pushed back onto the bed. Everything was new. Everything. None of it was like the fumbling efforts of the many boys and the few men he'd been with, from the strong arms to the perfect pressure of the touch. It was dizzying.

Ned's mouth covered his as those sure, strong, warm fingers, slid into his jeans.

It was just like the first time. The last time. Whatever. Danny was just as breathless, just as eager, though a bit less likely to come all over them both when Ned touched him. The bedspread was soft under his back as Ned eased him down, Ned's lips soft on his as they kissed again and he was just absolutely lost.

His shirt was opened, pushed apart as Ned's fingers warmed his skin. "Sexy Danny. Very sexy."

"Mmm. You're the sexy one." He grinned up, hand going to Ned's cheek, feeling the roughness there, letting his fingers trace the lines of nose and chin. "So hot."

Ned turned and kissed his hand. "You sure you aren't seeing me with 18 year old eyes?"

"Maybe. But I doubt it. I'm not eighteen. Not anymore." Proving it, he pulled Ned down for a kiss, putting all of his hard won experience and all of his years old admiration, into it.

Ned moaned, pressing against him, hand pushing eagerly into his pants. That drove him crazy, made him moan just as loudly, loving the heat and the thrill of it, up through his belly and down through his thighs. Fingertips brushed against the tip of his cock only to dance away, sliding over his hip. He wanted to push Ned's hand right back, feel it close around him, but he wanted to touch Ned more, and after a moment of stuttering hesitation, of hips rolling up in search of that hand, Danny went in search of the waist of Ned's shorts, tugging.

"Oh, you have aged," murmured Ned, lips sliding along his jaw, teeth threatening to find his skin. "I like the confidence, Daniel. Very sexy." Ned lay back down, letting him have his way while warm hands explored him idly.

He'd come and then he'd come again and now Ned was lying back sliding his hands over the hot muscles. "Touch me, Daniel. Learn me."

It was a heady thing, having that body at his beck and call, being able to do what he wanted. He'd never really been able to explore someone fully and Danny was both honored and excited to be able to start with this body.

He began with Ned's face, touching forehead, cheeks, nose, touch light and easy, bending to kiss Ned's lips after his fingers opened them. If he was going too slow, Ned showed no sign of impatience, purring softly and murmuring encouragements.

Ned's neck was thick, but not football player nonexistent, the Adam's apple standing out plainly. Danny nibbled on it, fingers sliding down over the softest skin at the base of Ned's throat before moving to trace the pectoral muscles, finding tiny male nipples and squeezing.

Shoulders pushing off the bed, Ned gasped and moaned. "You're doing great, kid."

"You make it easy." God, Ned was beautiful. Taking a deep breath, Danny headed south, hands moving to Ned's hips, mouth following.

There was more gray in the chest hair, just like there was on Ned's head, but oh, he still tasted the same, still smelled like salt and musk, pure man. His lips tugged on Ned's little nipples, making the flesh harden up for his tongue. Ned's gasp was sweet, all his.

He knew, now. Knew what would make a man gasp and twitch and beg for more, but with Ned it was like that first time. It was discovery. Danny licked around one nipple, sucking and biting, letting his hand drop between Ned's legs. Ned spread for him, hips moving eagerly toward his touch.

The little creases between hip and thigh drew his other hand; Danny knew the nerve endings there would make it almost unbearable. The other nipple got the same treatment from his mouth as he found Ned's cock, hand curling lightly around it.

Ned jerked and cried out beneath him, making soft, breathless noises. "God, you're something else, Danny."

"Hold that thought." He grinned up, taking in Ned's heightened color and glazed eyes with pride before bending to lick all the way down, then up, the length of Ned's prick.

"Christ!" Ned's shoulders came up and he could feel Ned's eyes on him, hot and piercing.

"God, you taste good. I hate to cover that up. You got any more rubbers?" He really did hate to ask, but he figured it was better than getting into the moment so far there was no return and forgetting.

"Yeah. Just a sec." Ned stretched up to pull open a drawer and fish out a condom.

Shit. Danny tore the condom when he opened the foil, had to go back in for another, but that was okay, because he knew where they were now. That and he found something else in there, just as interesting. He grabbed that small tube too, wanting to keep it handy for later.

"Help me?" He wanted to make sure the rubber was going on right, wanted Ned's big hands helping him smooth it into place.

Ned's hand closed over his, warm and solid, sure as his hand was guided down over the thick prick. "Just like that, you hold it lightly but firmly, let the guy you're with feel you do it."

Blushing, Danny nodded, smiling into Ned's eyes, letting Ned see everything. How excited he was, how nervous. How grateful.

The next step was all up to him, and Danny took the plunge, so to speak, bending to wrap his lips around Ned's cock and suck him in.

"Fuck! Yeah. Sweet, Danny, sweet." Ned's hand slid around his skull, fingers stroking his scalp.

There was something about that sandpaper note in Ned's voice that made him bold, just like it did all those years ago, made him confident enough to roll Ned's balls, to turn his head side to side as he backed off and pushed back down with his tongue. Ned's legs spread wider for him, hips pushing up to meet the downward slides of his mouth.

Danny gave Ned his all, knowing he knew this better this time, was less clumsy, knowing also that Ned probably didn't care. The muscles in Ned's thighs and belly quivered by the time he backed off, licking his lips and searching for that tiny tube of lube.

"You ready for the next part?" Danny grinned, pulled his pants off, and got Ned's shorts the rest of the way off, waiting.

He got a sexy grin in reply. "I was born ready, Danny."

"I bet you were. You were made for this, man." Now it was time to really blow Ned's socks off. Danny opened the lube, getting a few fingers good and wet before reaching around and sliding one right into his own body, looking Ned right in the eye.

The heat in Ned's eyes turned into a full-fledged blaze. "I'll be dammed."

"Oh." Danny moaned, letting Ned touch him where no one had except his doctor, and that was totally not sexy. This was. Ned was so gentle, so good, opening him, easing him. The tip of one hot finger slid into him and then backed away. Then pressed in again and backed away. It wasn't long before he was pushing back, trying to get more.

Feelings he'd never imagined zinged right up his spine and exploded in his brain, making him gasp and wriggle, begging for more. His hands rested on Ned's chest, bracing him, Ned's cock against his belly.

"You look so hot, mouth open like that, the look in your eyes..." Ned's finger finally slid all the way in. Then out. Then in. Then out. Then in.

"Oh, God. Please." He had no idea what he was asking for, but Ned had to know. He had to.

A second finger suddenly pushed in along side the first, stretching him.

That was it. Danny melted, his muscles relaxing, letting Ned in completely. "Yes."

"Yes," Ned whispered, nodding. Then Ned curled his fingers and pushed them even deeper and suddenly something inside him was exploding.

Danny almost came. He really did. He only held on by a thread. "We'd better. I don't think I can. Damn."

"One more finger, Danny. I don't want to hurt you." Ned pushed in another finger, the strokes shallower now, stretching him.

"Oh-okay. But we have to do... something. Soon." Danny thought he was just going to explode from the pressure. From the pleasure and heat.

"Sh. Sh. It'll be soon, I promise. And it'll be better because we took our time."

Those fingers moved in and out of him over and over again. Ned went so slow he thought he might die before they got to the main event. Not that it wasn't good. It was, thrilling and weird and possibly the bravest or stupidest thing he'd ever done in his life. But Ned's voice teased him, soothed him, made him think of getting exactly where Ned wanted him to go. So he waited.

Finally Ned's fingers slid out of him and then Ned was between his legs, something hard and thick and oh so hot pushing against him, trying to push into him. "Relax for me again, Danny. Let me in."

Danny relaxed his muscles, breathing out, letting gravity pull him right down on Ned's cock. It split him open like

nothing had since the first time they'd done it, like Ned had done off and on in his dreams for a lot of years. Moaning, head dropping forward, Danny took it all, moving until Ned was fully seated inside.

"God, you're as tight as you were that first time." Ned's hands were on his hips, hot and solid.

"And you're just as big. And hot. Oh, man, Ned. That feels... God." Danny's cock twitched, his ass finally relaxed, and when he started moving it sent shivers all up and down his spine, telling him he was far closer than he thought. Ned just purred and wrapped one big hand around his cock, letting his motions slide him through the tight tunnel.

They were going a little too fast, the burn told him that, but Danny couldn't stop, just rose and fell, little noises coming from deep in his chest. "Talk to me, Ned."

"Oh, you still like that, do you?" Ned's voice had lowered, was rough with want. "You're still a sexy little number, Danny. So fucking hot and tight around my cock, yours like a brand on my palm."

"You feel so good." He wasn't good at talking, still, not like Ned. But that rough and sweet voice gave him something to concentrate on, something to ease him back from the edge so they could maybe go together.

"So do you, Danny. Like silk heat, squeezing me. God, nobody's ever been as tight as you." Ned groaned, hips starting to meet him.

Danny rocked, braced on straight arms, watching Ned's face with something like awe. He'd never, nothing had ever, and he couldn't believe it now. The feel of Ned's hand on him made him want to howl, but he thought that might be a really dumb thing to do, so he bit his lip, and just went with it.

"That's it Danny-boy. Feel it. Feel my cock deep in your gut. Feel my hand around your prick. Fucking feel it."

He could feel it. That was all he could feel, just pushing and pushing, opening him up. Danny looked down, met Ned's eyes. "I feel you."

"And I feel you, Danny. God, you're so tight."

"I think I'm gonna come." His voice was thready, thin to his own ears, trailing off to a gasp as his hips rolled and his ass clenched and his eyes rolled back.

"That's it Danny, come on my cock."

Danny came as hard as he ever had, as hard as he could remember coming the first time, spunk shooting out over Ned's hand, Ned's belly. God, it was good. So damned good.

"Fuck, yes!" Ned shoved up into him several more times and then came, cock throbbing inside him.

Wheezing, Danny lowered himself to Ned's chest, remembering how he'd done that the first time, how he'd been so jubilant about doing it, and doing it right. This time, it was just as good, but the feeling after was tinged with sadness, because he knew how it was. Knew what it was like to never see Ned again. Danny sighed, closing his eyes and resting. He wouldn't think about it.

Ned's fingers slid over his skin. "Mmm... pretty fucking nice, Danny."

"Yeah. I'd say that went well." He chuckled, kissing Ned's chest. That was the understatement of all time.

"I'm glad we ran into each other again, Danny."

"Yeah. I am too. Is it going to sound corny to say I've thought of you often?" It sounded corny to his own ears, and he wished he could take it back.

"It sounds flattering. I hope I lived up to your memories."

"You did." More than, but he wasn't going to say that and sound even worse. "Thank you."

Ned purred. "You're welcome. How long are you going to be on the island? Maybe we can indulge in a repeat."

"Three weeks. My editor said I needed to find a new hero."

"Maybe I can help you find one."

"I'd like that."

Maybe his editor, Steve, was right. It was time to move on. Maybe it was time to leave the old memories of Ned behind and make new ones.

That was something he could sell books on.

Beach 2

By Steve Berman

Daniel had left the beach house early. Two o'clock was not that long off. His senses were oddly awakened. The shades of dark gray and black were all new, perhaps never even been named before; sand being washed over with spray until it was all overcome by an evening sky. The only real colors came from over his shoulder, the garish flashing bulbs and neon of the casinos.

There were odd sounds and smells, too. The surf had so many different roars. Like snowflakes, no two were exactly alike. The rushing water brought from the ocean the stink of seaweed as well as the cleansing odor of salt. The casinos had a distant din that reached out over the beach, perfectly matched by an atmosphere of dinners, cheap buffet meatloaf vying against trout almandine. Even the sand and the boardwalk itself smelled. Clean and seasoned from so many summer years and layers of suntan oil pounded into the grit and wood by countless feet.

All in all, it felt wonderful to be out there. At least until he looked at his watch and saw he had only twenty minutes left. He turned in the direction of the beach house. It was out of sight, quiet and slumbering. He wasn't sure if he could go back inside.

That afternoon, the two couples had just been settling in. Well, they weren't both couples. Susan had brought along this guy that no one had met before and it seemed so obvious to Daniel that Seth was nothing more than a friend, maybe just a passing fad of a friend. But it was her folks' beach house, so she could invite anyone she wanted along for the weekend.

Natalie instantly disliked Seth. When they were together in the guest bedroom unpacking, she had begun her usual patter. Daniel had become so used to the routine that he only started listening on the third comment.

"And what's with the piercings? Is Susan into skaters now?"

Daniel emptied her suitcase while she sat on the queen-sized bed. "I don't think they're dating." He carefully put each folded, silken undergarment in the top drawer of the dresser. Then he started on the bathing suits and tops and finally the skirts that needed to be hung in the walk-in closet.

"I hope not. He gives me the creeps. I think he was staring at me."

Daniel chuckled. Not that the idea was silly because he knew Natalie was attractive. Many guys told him that. They especially loved her legs, which had always seemed a bit too long for him. But no, he didn't think Seth was staring at her. Seth had hazel eyes. And maybe used a touch of brown eyeliner.

"Don't let him bother you. The weather is supposed to be great, you wanted a tan to show off to your coworkers and everything will be fine." He hugged her, not too tightly, as he still held in one hand a coat hanger draped with her cotton dress, the one with the embroidered neckline.

When he went downstairs, Seth handed him a full wine glass. Daniel smiled back and told himself again that everything would be fine, even as he noticed the faint sepia curl the guy had added to the outside corner of his right eye.

Daniel started to walk back along the shoreline where the sand lay heavy and dark. His sandaled feet were open to every wet clump and when the rushing water came in, he shivered at the coolness.

Not far. Just over a few ridges and a jetty. So what if he ran across anyone out here? He was only out because he couldn't sleep. He rarely slept well these days.

After a day spent soaking in the sun, the four returned to the beach house parched. Natalie had turned a shade redder than she wanted and blamed the manufacturer of the department-store brand oil she had lathered herself with. She had developed a mantra of "SPF 15 my ass."

While she took a cooling soak in the tub, Daniel helped Susan and Seth with dinner. He had never grilled before, it had always been his father's cooking territory, never relinquished, and so he worried that he would lose one of the skewered shrimp down into the hot coals. Thankfully, Seth stood at his shoulder, helping him, showing him how to carefully turn the food and to keep it from being burned. Susan drifted by and winked at both of them, as if she knew a secret, perhaps one about the giant salad bowl she carried.

Out on the deck, they all sat down to eat. Natalie's job turned out to be pouring wine. She was very good at it.

When the dishes were cleared, the night sky turned a bruised purple and the stars were just beginning to shine.

Seth had left the table and leaned against the deck's railing, one bare arm dangling over the side. Daniel wondered if, by summer's end, Seth's skin would have reached the same caramel color of his hair.

A cool breeze off the ocean wrapped around all of them. Natalie shivered, her silent cue to them all that she wanted to go inside.

Back in the den, they stole the cushions from the sofas and lounged on the carpeted floor. What to do was the topic.

Daniel picked up a nearby chamois pillow. "We could build a fort." There were some laughs.

Natalie had her hand on his bare knee, she gave it a squeeze. "Is there any place to go dancing? Danny and I took lessons for a wedding last month." She smiled at him. A nice smile. "He's really good."

Susan shook her head. "Nothing really in A.C." Her tone was curiously flat.

"I brought something."

All heads turned to Seth who looked, to Daniel, suddenly impish, especially with his soft brown bangs and the golden rings along his ears.

"Hold on." Seth rose and left the room.

"Well, what do you think of him?" Susan leaned in close to ask conspiratorially.

Why did Daniel think the question was aimed at him alone? He opened his mouth, but Natalie answered for him. "A little young for you, isn't he?"

"What's wrong with twenty-four? Your man isn't much older."

Seth returned with a board-game box that had seen better days. The edges were bandaged with masking tape. "Here we are. Something different."

Susan fairly squealed when Seth lifted off the top and revealed a ouija board. Daniel heard Natalie's soft 'ugh.'

"I've had it since I was a kid." Seth's grin was wide, his bottom teeth were crooked.

"Oh, let's play." Susan helped to take the board out.

"Shouldn't we dim the lights?" Daniel regretted speaking as Natalie gave him a look.

A harmless game. At least that's what the small print on the back of the lid promised. Susan insisted that two people had to work the small plastic guide, the planchette, but Daniel did not recall reading that in the instructions.

Susan and Seth went first. They knelt close over the board and laid their fingers lightly on the planchette. When it started to move, Natalie whispered in Daniel's ear, "I think the only spirits pushing that thing is the bottle of vino next to Sue."

Seth spoke aloud every letter, number and symbol, his voice dropped to a mock eerie level. Susan's laughter, heavy and alcohol-rich, often skidded the planchette out of control. Daniel grinned madly. The very last movement landed on the question mark, a fitting end as they then spent over twenty minutes trying to unravel the jumble's meaning over soft cheese, apple slices, and lots of cheap, dry wine.

"Your turn," Susan said, nodding at Daniel and Natalie.

"No, I don't like this crap."

Daniel began to beg her, but she just shook her head, the long brown strands of hair getting in her face. He saw it was pointless.

"I'll do it with you."

Daniel blinked suddenly. Then he saw Seth slide the planchette over to him. He blushed.

It would have been awkward for both guys at opposite angles to move the piece, so Seth stood up and moved around next to where Daniel sat.

Daniel caught a whiff of Seth's cologne. It hung lightly about the man's shoulders and neck and smelled wondrous. He took several deep breaths of it.

"Ready?"

He nodded and gently put his fingers on the plastic piece, finding it too small for Seth not to touch him.

Daniel struggled to keep his eyes on the board. But he could barely pay any attention to the black script or numerals, even as he felt the planchette move. He closed his eyes, the safest path he decided, and let Seth guide him.

B. E. A. C. H. Then the planchette reached the 2 and stopped.

"Beach 2? What the hell does that mean?" Natalie drew back, finally removing her hand from Daniel's leg. She nearly knocked over a half-empty bottle of California white.

Daniel was silent. He rubbed the tips of his fingers idly, secretly, remembering Seth's presence.

They spent far less time with that prophecy. Susan had reached the point where any more drink simply made her tired than giddy. Seth had become silent, fingering the silver ring around his thumb, taking it off and on, and rolling it in his palm.

Daniel faked a yawn. His mind turned over one thought, that of Beach 2, again and again, like the movement of that ring.

"Tired, sweetie?" Natalie squeezed his arm. Her breath didn't smell from the wine, which he thought strange considering how much she had drunk.

He nodded. "We're going to turn in."

"So early?" but Susan said it haphazardly, almost breathlessly.

As they undressed in the guestroom, they both had more eyes for the bed than each other. The sheets, so glaringly white, seemed more inviting than the common sight of each other naked. Daniel made an attempt to be amorous, cupping his favorite of her breasts, the one with the dark freckle. She sighed then shuddered. But when he touched her back, she winced at the sunburn.

"Sorry," he said and turned out the light. He heard her ease onto the mattress, then the whisper of the cotton sheets as they slipped over her bare skin.

"What's wrong?"

He realized he was still standing by the bed, still naked. He shook his head, before realizing the gesture would be missed in the darkness. "Nothing."

The creak of springs. "Nothing's keeping you from coming to bed?"

He struggled for an answer, one that at least would sound right. Before he could stop himself, he said the name that had been on his lips all day, all night.

"What did he say to you?" Her tone chilled. "It was about me, right?"

"No." It came out more like a sigh.

"Then what was it?"

It was the promise of softness by the fine hairs along Seth's forearms, the thought of running his hands up their length until he came to the wide shoulders. The chance to bury his head in the crook of Seth's neck and finally taste the way the sun had left the skin.

He paced about the room without realizing it. "I'm not used to guys like him." An honest answer, one he could say without regret.

"Maybe we should just go back home tomorrow."

He sat down on the bed. He could dimly make out where she lay and reached out with his hand, touching her arm. "No. I want to stay."

She stayed silent for a minute. He felt her fingers brush against his forehead. "You're sweating." She then rolled over, her back to him.

The bed sheets felt as cool as they looked.

Nearly back to the beach house, Daniel stopped one last time. He trembled, but not because of the cool breeze. All he had to do to keep life sane was go back, slip into bed, put his arm around her, and forget. Did he really want to abandon everything he knew, to shift a life he had grown, if not fond of, at least accustomed to? He should force himself to follow his tracks back. He found it, off to his right, his footprints deep in the sand. At least, they looked like his. They would lead back to Natalie and the day they'd dance at their own wedding.

But he ached when he thought over the notion of that future. He had so many urges, none of them easy to define, even his turbulent thoughts of Seth. It seemed crazy to let any of them take hold, but these days he constantly imagined things. None of them led to a self he could envision.

He never fell asleep. Instead, Daniel stared at the walls, at the ceiling, trying not to envision any more of Seth than a vague wanting. His hands wandered underneath the pillow, along the mattress edge and, too often, down his own chest, down past his waist. He would find them there by surprise and then stare at the digital clock on the side table. Next to him he could hear the gentle wheeze and movement that told him Natalie was deep asleep. At midnight, he slowly lifted himself up and looked down at her.

Her mouth hung partially opened. She liked to be kissed like that, he remembered. She liked to be woken with a kiss, like her life was a fairy tale and each morning the start of a new life. He envied that fantasy. Envied how it was mostly fulfilled.

Fifteen minutes later he slipped out from the covers and pulled on the shirt and shorts he'd worn that day. They still carried the warmth from his body. He carried his sandals and crept to the door. As if part of the conspiracy, the hinges never creaked.

The kitchen had a screen door that led to the beach. He was across the room when he realized that the silhouette at the table was alive. He stopped dead, holding his breath.

"It's a nice night for a walk." Susan's voice was so deep that it took him several moments to realize it was her.

"Why are you doing this?" Daniel asked. How long had she been planning all this?

"I'm right, aren't I?" She moved closer, into his path. Though too dark to see, he could imagine her eyes, watery with all the wine, perhaps decorated with Seth's handiwork.

Where the tall grass claimed the top of the beach, Daniel saw a small orange glow floating. Then the breeze brought the scent of the smoke to him, smelling sweet. How so like Seth to smoke cloves. What taste did that leave in the mouth?

He didn't bother looking at his watch. Whether or not it was two, he knew deep down it was about time to walk up there, to the edge of the beach, to where the sand promised to be warm.

Tosca's Kiss

By Eumenides

There was a moment of magic, Anthony thought, a gossamer moment when the theater lights faded away and the stage lights flared like torches when for one blessed second you touched both worlds. Then the everyday world of reality blissfully retreated and you were in a land of endless possibilities, where your wildest dreams could be realized through story and song.

The cacophony of the orchestra's warm-ups was fading into quiet chaos as Anthony leaned forward in his box, eager for the opening notes that would signal the beginning of Tosca. The theater was filled almost to capacity and Anthony was grateful for his cousin's offer of the box seat for the evening.

He'd come home only reluctantly -- it had taken repeated missives from Alicia begging him not to miss her wedding, pleading with him to make his peace with the family, to bring him back to the rambling old house with its dark and oppressive memories. After three straight days with his family, he was more than ready for a night out.

Of course, his return had been aided by his father's death in the Influenza epidemic ten years before. Nothing under heaven or on earth could have enticed Anthony to set foot within 100 miles of his father again.

Not that his father would have welcomed him back. *Filthy pervert, disgusting sodomizer*. Those had been the tamest of the names his father had called him, that day in the orchard back in 1914. It was funny, Anthony could not even remember the other boy's name, though he could see him as clearly as if it were yesterday; a dark eyed migrant farmer's son working alongside him plucking the ripe fruit from the burgeoning trees, hands brushing against each other, casually at first, and then more deliberately till it had all culminated in a wonderful, sensuous tangle of limbs and hair and cocks on the soft grass covered with fragrant apple blossoms.

That had not been the end, though. Disgrace and ruin and a ticket to New York slipped into his pocket by his mother when his father's back had been turned had been the true ending, and at the same time, the beginning of his new life. Once in New York, he'd parlayed his looks and charm into enough money to buy a ticket on a steamer to Europe and, when the Great War had broken out, he'd enlisted.

The English army had been glad to have him. No one questioned why the obviously well-educated young American was serving in the lowest capacity possible, they were, especially after the demoralizing horrors of Ypres, pathetically eager to have him. He'd discovered that soldiers too sought comfort in one another, some by choice, some because orgasm was a way to prove you had lived through one more day. Either way, it hadn't

mattered to Anthony. The trenches had been cold and harsh, but the flower of English youth had been open to him there and he'd gloried in his own masculinity as well as that of his comrades.

He'd come to love opera in Europe too, after the war. The shell-shocked cities had been quick to try to restore some semblance of culture and normalcy and Anthony had slipped into a theater one grey and rainy day in Rome, not quite knowing what to expect. It had been Tannhauser and from the moment the music had started and the young tenor singing the lead had taken the stage, Anthony had been transfixed.

The action on the stage below him was taking off in earnest now, with the singer playing Cavaradossi declaiming his lines in a gravelly voice that Anthony found a bit distracting. He had seen Caruso play the role in New York, had even met the great man at a party after the show. Theater people were among his favorites -- on the whole they tended to be most tolerant of his habits. He'd met many of his friends and patrons at New York opera houses. This small-town production was decidedly less than perfect, so, as the familiar music swept over him, he took up the opera glasses he'd borrowed from Alicia and began to lazily scan the crowds below him.

Provincial society dressed to the nines. The other scarlet and gilt bedecked boxes were stuffed full of distinguished looking gentlemen, all identically clad in midnight black evening clothes, their coiffed companions glittering in chiffon and lace. The younger women had bobbed hair, their evening frocks copies of the Worth gowns Anthony had admired in New York. He liked the new fashions for women -- the sylph-like modern girls were almost boyish in appearance with their mannish hair and tightly bound breasts.

On the mezzanine and lower, the middle class predominated; men uncomfortable in unaccustomed collars, women mostly clad in the last decade's fashions. A few younger people sat there too, most likely students from the University who'd taken the trolley downtown for the evening. And there...what was this, now?

Abandoning all pretense of following the opera, Anthony leaned eagerly forward, focusing his glasses on the most beautiful young man he had ever been blessed to see. He was seated by himself, in the worst possible seats -- those to the side of the stage that went for practically nothing -- and his evening clothes were easily two sizes too small for him, as though they had first been worn by the youth while he was still of school age. Even in profile and in the dim lighting of the opera house Anthony could see the look of pure rapture that transformed the young man's face from its beauty to a sublime perfection that caused his prick to harden instantly.

The young man's golden-blond hair was a bit longer than was considered correct and Anthony imagined what it would be like, falling forward around his face to brush against his thighs as lips and tongue caressed his organ. While the drama of the first act played out, Anthony's attention never wavered from the beautiful stranger. When the music swelled in an abrupt crescendo, his quarry closed his eyes with an expression almost orgasmic and

Anthony allowed his left hand to stray downward, stroking his erection through his soft woolen trousers, imagining the stranger's hand enclosing on his hard length.

On an impulse he would never understand, as the first act ended, Anthony abruptly put the glasses down and slipped from the box. An usher stood outside, and he beckoned the man forward and asked for paper and pencil.

Dear Sir,

I beg you to forgive my presumption, but I could not fail to note how your appreciation for the opera rivals my own, and am moved to invite you to join me in my box during the first interval, thus to enjoy the rest of the night's entertainment from a better vantage point than that which you currently occupy.

Yours, Anthony H_

"There is a young man sitting almost in the front row to the left of the stage. He is wearing a suit that does not fit him and has golden hair." And looks like a dissolute angel, he thought, but did not voice aloud. "Please give him this note and directions to my box. You will not need to wait for a reply." Anthony slipped a dollar into the usher's hand along with the note and returned to his box.

The interval had begun and the theater below him was emptying as the patrons took their ease, men to the lounge for a smoke, women off to refresh their coiffures. As Anthony had suspected, his angel stayed in his seat in what he presumed was quiet contemplation of the beauty of the story being played out before him. Anthony watched through the glasses again as the usher approached, passed over the note and pointed up to the box where Anthony quickly put the glasses down. It would not do to be caught staring like a love-struck maiden, but as his angel looked up at him, he nodded deliberately. Anthony's breath caught as the young man rose and started up the aisle.

He moved like a dancer, lithe and powerful, the too-tight trousers clinging to his ass, emphasizing every curve, the slight bulge of his groin just visible as he passed underneath the balcony and temporarily out of view. What would it be like to have that young man naked, spread out under him like a movable feast, their pricks grinding together till ecstasy claimed them both?

Why had he acted on this impulse and invited temptation to attend him, here in this almost-private box with its flocked walls and its curtain and its door that would not lock, with ushers coming and going without warning? It wasn't as if the young man were likely to share his particular tastes, anyway. He probably had a big-bosomed girl waiting on a ramshackle farm, and at any rate, he would undoubtedly lose some of his attraction in person -- that was always the way things were.

The door to the box opened and Anthony rose to greet his guest. God, he was even more perfect close up; how was that even possible? "Thank you for accepting my invitation," Anthony said, extending his hand. The young man's skin felt warm and dry, a firm handshake, and was it his imagination or did his guest hold on just a bit longer, press just a bit tighter than was customary? And as their hands separated, gliding slowly apart, it was as though he could feel the memory of the touch lingering in his flesh like an echo.

The young man smiled up at him, and opened his mouth, presumably in introduction, but the lights flickered and Anthony smiled at him, and gestured to the seats; they were back in Rome and Tosca was singing. The love and pain and passion began to play itself out to its inexorable conclusion on the stage before them, but Anthony could not have been less aware of the singers if he had been on a different continent. The young man's presence beside him drew his mind and his eyes, and he found himself glancing peripherally before shifting slightly in his seat so he could directly admire the almond-shaped dark eyes glowing with pleasure as the interplay between the beautiful diva and the villain built in intensity.

No. He forced his attentions back to the stage. He found himself cataloguing each sequin on Tosca's dress, examining the cut of Scarpia's frock coat, concentrating on anything except for the pulchritude of the young man next to him, and so he was initially unaware of the steady pressure against his thigh.

Anthony looked down. His angel had spread his legs slightly and one thigh was pressed against him in a gesture of invitation that was unmistakable and deliberate. Two layers of cloth were not near enough to insulate Anthony from the passionate heat of the young man's body and he pressed back, rubbing slightly to intensify the contact.

His heart was thumping so loudly, surely it had to be audible throughout the spacious hall, as the young man tentatively lifted his hand from the arm of his seat and laid it softly on Anthony's upper leg, then as no protest was made, began to stroke his hand slowly back and forth along his benefactor's thigh in time with the music.

A low moan escaped from Anthony as the heel of his angel's hand made brushing contact with his groin, and he could not help arching up slightly, seeking more. God, no, he thought, sitting firmly back down before any of the inhabitants of the neighboring boxes could take note of his movements. "You don't have to...I mean, that's not why I invited you here," he whispered, not entirely truthfully.

The young man smiled. "Shh. I know." His hand slid further up, making direct contact with Anthony's aching cock, massaging its thickened length, playing up and down the shaft through the thin woolen trousers. He trembled slightly, wanting nothing more than to pull this marvelous man into his arms, down onto the floor of the box and fuck him till they were both pulsing out their climaxes on the plush scarlet carpet.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"What do you want it to be?" The answering murmur was low and throaty, and Anthony's balls jerked upwards towards his body at the sound. What would that mouth be like around his prick?

"God, you're like an angel. No, an archangel. Gabriel." He gasped as the young man's... as Gabriel's deft fingers slowly unbuttoned his waistcoat, revealing the top of his trousers. Anthony held his breath. Each pearlescent button slowly, agonizingly slid from its tight hole, while Gabriel continued to intently follow the progress of the opera.

The second act was drawing to a close. Scarpia had finished writing the safe conduct and Tosca had the knife in her hand. Anthony's waistcoat fell open as Gabriel's hand stroked his prick through the wool, then Gabriel's fingers slipped into the waistband of his trousers. Anthony held his breath and the smooth, dry hand slid down to encircle his warm organ, thumb grazing over his slit, rubbing the moisture that was building there across his tip and shaft. Anthony closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him along with the waves of pleasure radiating from his groin.

A sharp click behind him gave warning that the door to the box was opening, and without warning, Gabriel's hand was gone, applauding the end of the second act as Anthony, flushed and panting, hurried to fasten his clothes and compose himself.

"Anthony! I heard from Alicia you were coming back to town, but could simply not believe it!" He rose from his seat, acutely conscious of the tenting in his trousers.

"Julie Anderson." He extended his hand reluctantly. Unlike Gabriel's warm touch, her palms were clammy, unpleasant.

"Julie Kramer now, darling. It is so good to see you, and your friend?" She glanced at Gabriel, taking in the ill fitting evening coat and generally disheveled appearance of the young man, who had stood politely at her entrance. Glancing down, Anthony noted that Gabriel too showed signs of a sizable erection.

"Gabriel." He had no intention of encouraging Julie to stay, though she was clearly looking for an invitation to join them. Julie was talking animatedly about old friends, his family and hers, her husband's career as a doctor, but it was as the buzzing of bees as he looked into Gabriel's smoldering eyes, reading the desire and promise within.

Abruptly he turned to his unwanted visitor. "It's been lovely seeing you, Julie, but I believe the last act will be starting soon." He looked back at Gabriel and this time she followed his gaze.

"Oh. OH!" She flushed. "I...I would have thought...after all this time..." Of course she would have heard the rumors about his departure. His father had not been discreet in his rage and disgust. She turned and fled, leaving Gabriel staring quizzically.

"Never mind. But I believe her family has the opposite box and she'll be watching us like a hawk now, I expect." His spirits fell as he realized that this lovely adventure was likely at an end. The lights flickered again.

"I like an audience," Gabriel commented, returning to his seat as the lights fell and darkness covered them.

The third act was relatively short and it was clear from the beginning that Gabriel was intending to waste no time. Abandoning all pretense of watching the drama below them, he slid from his seat and knelt before Anthony, keeping his body just below the level of the barricade that contained them.

With both hands slightly trembling, Gabriel again unfastened the hastily done up waistcoat and then, one by one, the buttons of Anthony's trousers, freeing his iron-hard cock from its confinement. The cool air of the theater was like the lightest of touches on his sensitive prick and, for a moment, Gabriel knelt as though mesmerized by his swaying organ, while the interplay of musical themes swirled around them.

Then, with excruciating slowness, Gabriel's sensuous mouth descended, his tongue flicking out, snakelike, to taste of Anthony's leaking cock. Anthony hissed sharply and clamped his hands hard on the armrests of his chair. He was not usually quiet in the act of love. This would be difficult. It was too bad they weren't seeing something of Wagner's, all dramatic overtures and loud crashes of cymbals. He loved Tosca for its realism, but would have welcomed the cover of noise.

Gabriel's mouth now enclosed him completely, lips firm around him, teeth just brushing him while that wonderful tongue traveled up and down the thick vein, from root to tip. He felt his trousers being pulled down and started to protest -- if they were disturbed again, he'd never be able to pull them on in time to avoid discovery -- but the protests died away before they could be voiced as his legs were spread wide and his balls lifted forward, Gabriel's talented mouth beginning to pay homage to them as well.

Each hot breath on his sac seemed to travel up his spine, sending jolts of lightning through him. First one, then the other of his balls was carefully taken into the moist harbor of Gabriel's mouth, as he gently tugged and pulled, all

the while working his hand over Anthony's prick, the pace of his rubbing maddeningly slow. Anthony could feel his climax building, knew he was so close to bliss.

Then there was emptiness as Gabriel withdrew his mouth and hands, leaving Anthony shaking. "Please," he whispered, begging shamelessly, "please, don't stop."

On the stage, Tosca was explaining the false execution plan to Cavaradossi, and their time was nearly done. "Slide forward," he heard from below him, and he did, slouching back into the seat so that his ass was exposed to the air and, more importantly, to the caress of Gabriel's exquisite fingers.

Looking up into Anthony's eyes, Gabriel slipped his middle finger into his mouth, hollowing his cheeks, riding it up and down as he had Anthony's cock until the digit was dripping wet.

"God, yes," Anthony moaned, not caring who heard him. He felt a probing at his pucker, an insistent pressure on the tight ring of muscle. He exhaled, relaxing his body and Gabriel's finger breached his opening while that hot mouth simultaneously closed around his prick.

God, so wonderful. He thrust upwards, then back down, impaling himself on the finger that filled him, sending sweet sensations throughout his whole body. There was no more time for slow build-up or teasing anticipation. All his existence centered on his prick, on the waves of pleasure spreading from his ass and he was only dimly aware of the shots of the firing squad on the stage.

Gabriel's silky hair brushed against his bare thighs and it was paradise, just as he had thought it would be, the lightest of butterfly touches a contrast to the probing finger and the tight mouth. He looked down to see that the young man, so truly an angel, a dark angel of the senses, had opened his own trousers and was fisting himself with his other hand. The sight of the red cock head disappearing and reappearing in Gabriel's hand caused yet another surge of desire to spark through Anthony.

He was mostly off the seat now and he knew that if anyone was looking across from the other boxes, he was finished, his life would be over, but it did not matter. Tosca was screaming and he let himself cry out a bit louder now, moaning into one hand, while the other came to rest lightly on the silky head buried between his thighs.

Then Gabriel was coming and his mouth was convulsing around Anthony's prick as the milky seed spattered across the black of Gabriel's ill-fitting suit. Anthony reached down and stroked the tip of the other man's cock, capturing a bit of the bitter seed on his finger, bringing it into his mouth.

Gabriel's finger thrust deeply into his body, and the musky taste of the semen pushed him over the edge. His balls tightened almost painfully and he shuddered as his orgasm hit him like the breaking of a dam. His body convulsed, thrusting hard against the welcoming mouth, as an almost agonizing pleasure spasmed from his groin and ass. His ears were ringing and he could hear the music swelling to the tragic conclusion of the opera as Gabriel milked his cock dry, draining every drop of fluid from him, bringing him slowly down. Then the digit eased skillfully from his passage, leaving him shaking and sated.

Tosca had fallen to her death and the applause of the audience echoed in the cavernous hall as Gabriel eased him back into his seat, pulled his clothing up and returned to his seat as the curtain calls continued. Sweat glistened on Gabriel's face, so Anthony took his handkerchief and offered it to the young man. Gabriel mopped his brow and returned the cloth. Anthony made himself presentable, then, smiling in gratitude, dabbed the white linen at the drying stains on the young man's trousers.

"Thank you," he said, though it was inadequate. Gabriel smiled, nodded, and then as the theatre lights slowly came up illuminating his spun-gilt hair like a golden halo, disappeared from the box like a dream slipping away into the night.

West Side

By Jordan Price

I checked the mirror in the alcove by my front door for about the hundredth time that afternoon. My hair was still in place, of course. I just got it cut the day before and used a ton of gel on it when I dried it earlier. And though it felt like I'd grown a ZZ Top beard in the time I'd waited, I was still freshly shaved. My best pair of jeans, a little broken in but perfectly fit in the butt, didn't look like they'd been paced in for the past hour. My snug blue polo didn't look rumpled either. I looked fine. I'd told myself the same thing five minutes before, but I still needed to reassure myself. Me, nervous?

He didn't promise me he'd come, or anything. I mean, maybe he wouldn't. We didn't have any real contact the whole time he'd been gone. I tried to write him a letter once before, the first time he was incarcerated, and I never got a reply. He wasn't much of a letter writer, he'd told me. That's Miguel for you.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying he's stupid, oh no. Just look into those incredible hazel eyes of his and you know he's razor sharp. He just doesn't express himself the same way I do.

We come from two different worlds, even though we share the same turf. I'm a college graduate with a decent job at an art gallery and a car of my own, with a little nest egg I've been putting aside for a condo. I work out enough to keep my jeans looking good, but I'm not vain enough to suffer contact lenses. Don't you dare call me a guppie, though. I don't have that much money and aside from that, my neighborhood on the near west side of Chicago is too run down to be called hip and my car's too ancient to be considered a status symbol by any stretch of the imagination.

I don't know if Miguel thought I was a yuppie or not, the first time he saw me outside the Lavenderia. I'm scared to ask him exactly what he thinks of me, because I know he'll tell me and I'm not quite sure if I'm ready for that. I don't even know if he pegged me as being queer. He just flicked those incredible eyes over me from top to bottom and then looked away, taking a careless drag off his cigarette.

Strangely enough, over the next few days I found all kinds of laundry in my apartment that needed urgent attention. I felt stupid coming back night after night, but I rationalized that the other patrons didn't know I'd just been there the night before unless they were, too, so I was safe. Besides, what was it to them if I was a clean freak?

I was just starting to get bored with washing my towels for the third time when he came back again to use the phone. Yes, I know that the only reason people come to the Lavanderia without any laundry to use the phone is to make drug deals and no, I didn't care. Maybe it even turned me on a little.

He was ten times hotter than I remembered from the first time, maybe because I was finally getting a good look at him. His face was beautiful, almost feminine, really tan with an almost Native American shape to his features. His body was a work of art; chiseled arms and shoulders brown and lean, shown off to perfection in a white stretch tank top. His jeans crept halfway down his ass, maroon-striped boxers displayed proudly above his waistband. He balled his fist and put it on his hip as he spoke to his mysterious contact, making his blackwork tattoos flex and dance before me, a Virgin Mary incongruous above a band of barbed wire.

I must've been staring at him, I mean really staring. His phone conversation was in Spanish, so he probably didn't think I was edging in on his territory or anything. He must've recognized the blank white-boy look of a person who took French in high school. But he noticed me.

He hung up the phone and then turned in my direction, giving me another one of those once-overs with his awesome eyes. "What's your name, Bato?"

The world stood still. He was talking to me! "Steven." There, I'd said it without sounding like a weenie.

He pursed his lips and considered me, and all the while I tried not to hyperventilate and betray my excitement. "Wanna get high?"

I get high about once every three years, so of course I said, "Yeah, sure," cool as can be. He just stood there and waited for me to make the next move, something I've come to know as his trademark caution. Miguel likes to know where he stands before he commits himself to anything.

This is the part where all my friends say I was just setting myself up to be murdered: I got my half-dry towels together and took him to my apartment. I don't care. I knew he wasn't going to do anything to me that I didn't want; I could see it in his eyes and eyes don't have a language barrier.

He didn't even pay much attention to my place, really. My friend Jared says he was probably casing my stereo and my laptop the second my back was turned, but I don't think so. The only time I caught him really looking at something, he was checking out my bookshelf.

I got us each a cold Heinekin, which he seemed to find amusing for some reason, though his telltale smile was really subtle. Believe me, I was looking at him hard enough to see an eyelash fall, so I noticed. Okay, maybe I have guppie tendencies.

"What's your name?" I asked, feeling stupid that I had this guy in my apartment rolling a joint and I hadn't even the balls to ask until I'd gotten half a bottle of beer under my belt.

"Miguel," he said, the half-smile playing about his lips and eyes again as he licked the rolling paper and finished a tight, neat joint.

It's strange that at this point I still hadn't figured out what he wanted from me. I was trying to be realistic and not get my hopes up too much. Maybe he was trying to sell me some drugs, which I would've gladly bought from him and then given away to friends that party more than I do. Maybe he was just, uh, friendly. Okay, there weren't a lot of reasons that he would've been there, but I refused to entertain the notion that he was going to come back and rob my place while I was at work. Even then I knew that couldn't be his motive.

The joint passed back and forth between us and pretty soon I was taking smaller and smaller hits from it, knowing that I was working myself up to the "Did I say that or did I just think it?" stage too fast. I didn't want Miguel to think I was a moron, after all.

"So," he ventured, and I noticed that his eyelids were drooping just a little as he leaned into the bookshelf. I spun off into a mini-fantasy about how he would look just waking up in the morning, his hard angles softened just a little as sleep released him. "You read a lot."

That was about the last thing I'd expected, so of course I had no pithy reply worked out. "Uh, I dunno. I guess."

"You got a lot of books about gay stuff."

Oh yes, the scope of my collection. The only people that see it are my bar buddies, so I'd forgotten they were even there. "That's because I'm gay," I said, before my internal censor could make up some weird and probably stupid explanation for them.

He smiled then, his first real smile, and his teeth looked so perfect and white against his dark complexion. "So, like, what do you think is hot? In a dude?"

Man, that put me on the spot. "Oh, you know. Usual things. Nice face, tight body." Maybe I was speaking in generalities, but my hands seemed to have taken on a life of their own, sketching Miguel as my ideal of male perfection.

Luckily, he didn't seem offended. He sidled over from the bookshelf and stood before me, between the coffee table and couch, nice and close. "So then what do you do?"

"Do?"

"Yeah, if you dig a guy. What do you do?"

"Well," I said, dazed, glancing down at the Heinekin. "You have a drink with him...."

I stopped being coy when he grabbed my hand and pressed it against the front of his pants. Under all that baggy denim and boxer shorts he was hard, rock hard. Even with his blatant invitation I was still scared, frozen with my hand just pressed against him, until he gave his hips a little grind.

With my head spinning from the beer and the pot and the absurdity of the whole situation, I touched him. My hand wrapped around his shaft, learning the position of his erection, finding it pointing up at an angle toward his waistband. His breath hissed in as I went not to the head of his dick, but his balls instead. I slid my thumb around their softness, finding the cleft between and stroking it.

Miguel threw his head back, eyes closed and breathing hard, but then caught himself as if he had to see every moment of it and looked intently at my hands. I tugged and teased his balls through his pants until I saw a tiny indigo circle of precome had seeped through his jeans just beside the pocket. I hadn't realized he was so ready. Then I trailed my thumbs upward, stroking the thick shaft and stopping at the glans to pet the ridge of his cockhead.

"Touch it," he said, his voice thick. I was getting off on teasing him, though, and I took my time, just petting him like that until he was practically squirming. All the teasing made it worth the gasp he gave when I finally unbuttoned his jeans. That seemed to galvanize him into action and pretty soon his pants were around his knees and his hard dick was pointing right at me.

It seemed to my drug-hazed mind that I hadn't seen a prettier dick until that very moment. He was cut, which I wasn't sure he would be, not being familiar with the current Hispanic views on circumcision. His dick was straight and totally hard, a little on the thick side, and flushed nice and dark, the head gleaming with slickness.

My knees wobbled, trying to take over my body and bend me into a throaty blow-job, but I resisted. Something in me told me to take it slow. Instead I ran my thumbs down the underside of his cock, watching him tremble and shudder as I did so. "Put your hands on my shoulders," I whispered. "It'll help you keep standing." Yeah, I'd get his arms around me any way I could.

Miguel seemed content to take guidance from me at that point, draping his tattooed arms around my neck, his hazel eyes wide and a little glazed. I grasped him in a utilitarian hand-job hold then, finally, and Miguel groaned in anticipation.

Not that I'm usually a big talker in bed, but I'll occasionally spice it up with a little remark here and there. Not with Miguel though, not that first time. There was a fragility about the encounter that told me to wait. If he'd never been with a man, he might not appreciate my comments on his hot dick, his perfect ass, or in particular how much I wanted him to kiss me.

I watched Miguel breathe and arch into my hand, finding the perfect rhythm, the perfect pressure. His fingers kneaded my shoulder blades in encouragement as I worked him, slowing just a bit as he reached the brink to draw his orgasm into a beautiful, long release. He grunted as the first spurt of come fountained between us, his hard, red dick pulsing beneath my fingers. Then another stream of semen came, and then another, and Miguel had pressed his forehead into my shoulder, chanting, "Yes, yes, yes...."

I gentled my hand as the come stopped flowing, easing Miguel into a delicious, post-orgasmic shudder. We stood, swaying together, until Miguel's breaths slowed, matching mine.

He shuffled back with his pants around his ankles staring guiltily at the come that had christened my chinos. "Sorry," he mumbled, barely intelligible. "I made a mess."

He left that day without finishing his beer, leaving me to jerk myself off in the shower. A week later though, he was back. And then he was lounging on my doorstep a few days after that when I got home from work. I got my first kiss from him that evening.

After a month, he'd jotted his cell phone number down inside the cover of my day planner. In case I needed anything, he said.

But a couple weeks later, he stopped coming by. Jared told me I should be glad, that it wasn't normal to have a boyfriend that you couldn't make plans with, who didn't want to meet your friends. Sure, it was hard to plan my

life around whether Miguel would show up or not, but what did I really do other than go to Chinatown now and then and maybe the bar on Saturday night? It's not like Miguel inconvenienced me with his visits, forcing passionate lovemaking on me. I mean, shit, would you rather rent a movie or do a hot Latino man?

When one week without Miguel became two, though, I started to worry. I'd planned a casual phone call, even jotted down notes of what I would say so that I didn't sound overly concerned, only to find that his cell phone number was no longer in service. So I got a little worried after that and maybe I did call the Cook County Hospital to see if they had a Miguel Torres there. I wasn't sure what would be worse, if something had happened to him, or if he had left me.

And then, a month and a day after the last time I'd seen him, he was lounging on my doorstep, smoking a Marlboro Red. He'd been in jail, it turned out. He was vague as to the charges, but they'd been dropped for some reason and he was a free man again.

The last time he saw the inside of a jail, he wasn't so lucky. He and a buddy of his got caught stealing a car. I guess if he'd been driving it would've been a lot worse for him. He only got eight months and they paroled him after four for keeping to himself and not giving the prison any trouble.

I got two calls this last time. One curt message on my answering machine telling me where he was a few days after he'd been sent up and then another telling me the day he was being released. I think he might have called when he knew I was at work on purpose, not wanting to explore the implications of being in prison with his sheltered, white boyfriend. I thought he sounded sad though, behind the bravado.

I heard the knock on door at the bottom of my stairwell as I was checking my hair in the foyer mirror again. I buzzed him in without even asking who was there. Of course it was Miguel. My other friends called before they came over.

"Hey, Bato," he said casually as he brushed past me in the hallway. Well, what does one say when one's been in prison for four months, anyway?

He had a kind of short goatee, which made him look really mean, as if he didn't look imposing enough to begin with, even with the natural prettiness of his features. His facial hair came in kind of wispy though, and it looked like it would be soft against my face. His black hair was clipped really close. "I like your goatee," I said, following him into the living room.

"Yeah?" he asked, stroking it. He really preened under compliments. "Maybe I'll keep it for a little bit."

"Are you hungry? I can order a pizza."

Miguel shrugged and wandered into my kitchen. "You got a Pepsi? Stupid thing for me to miss, huh?"

"I have Diet Coke."

"Same thing," he said, getting himself a glass.

I watched him as he poured the soda, wishing that he didn't have a sweatshirt on so that I could see his arms as he moved. I missed him so badly, but how could I tell him that without making him feel defensive about going to prison in the first place?

He caught my eyes as he finished off the glass in one long draught and frowned a bit. "Whatsa matter?"

I shrugged and blinked a lot, telling myself it was absolutely not cool to get weepy on him. "It's good to see you."

Miguel put the glass down on the counter and fit himself up against me, sliding his arms around my waist. "So," he said into my ear, "you waited for me?"

Then it all made sense to me: his overly casual behavior, even for him, the reticence, the lack of contact. He thought I'd found myself another man.

"Always, mi novio."

Then he was on me, his hot tongue in my ear as his hands tried to touch all of me at once, grasping at my shoulders and waist and butt, anything he could get his hands on. "Yes, Steven," he rasped in my ear, popping the buttons from my shirt as he struggled to get it off me. He devoured the side of my neck with love bites as he opened my belt, sliding hands down the front of my jeans impatiently. I was already hard for him and I could tell it turned him on to feel my want for him.

He pressed me against the formica countertop as he worked his hungry mouth lower, tonguing my left nipple in tantalizing circles while he fondled my dick through my briefs. Somehow, I managed to get my hands in there and unzip my pants, working them down as he switched to my right nipple, alternating sucks with flicks of his tongue.

"Yeah, lover, yeah," I murmured as he ran his tongue down my abs, pausing to brush his lips over the little line of hair that went from my navel down to my pubes. "Want you so bad, missed you," I said as he nuzzled my hard dick, caressing it with his goatee. I was right; I did like the feel of it.

Miguel made the most sexy, contented noises as he lapped at the base of my dick, tracing every vein with his tongue as if to savor me like a rare treat. It wasn't so much that he teased me as that he was relishing every last bit of me, but by the time he got to the head I was damn near ready to scream. "Yeah, suck it. Suck it, baby." I panted, running my fingers through his super short hair.

"Yeah, baby," he echoed, a smile in his voice, as he caught the fat drops of precome leaking from my slit with his tongue. He wet the whole head with broad licks, then wet his lips and eased my dick into the hot, wet heaven of his mouth.

I pressed my butt into the countertop to try to keep myself from thrusting into Miguel's mouth, to let him set his own pace and simply lie back and enjoy it. He rewarded me with a rumbling purr of pleasure that sent shockwaves of arousal up and down my spine. "Yes," I gasped, clenching his head though I tried my best not to impale him on my dick. He choked a little, but seemed pretty amused by how into it I was, pulling back a little and chuckling with my dick still in his mouth.

"I'm close," I warned him, wishing I could hold out a little longer, but after four months without him I knew I couldn't.

Miguel gave his palm a long lick and then replaced his mouth on my dick with his hand, stroking me slow, firm and wet. He kissed his way up my body, pausing to send little nibbling shocks through each nipple, then working his way up my throat murmuring God-knows-what in Spanish, but it sounded so sexy I didn't care.

He sighed as his lips fixed on mine, taking my lower lip into his mouth and sucking it gently. His goatee tickled a little, but it was hard to concentrate on any one thing as his hand was taking me higher and higher. "Mi novio," he murmured -- my boyfriend -- as he slid his tongue between my lips and caressed my tongue with his. His hand continued to bring me to a dizzying peak of arousal.

I came against him, clutching him to my chest as he slid his darting tongue within my mouth, my frame quaking against his as the countertop held me up. He kissed me even after I was spent, as my heart stopped pounding, my lips growing tender and sensitive beneath his insatiable mouth. Eventually, though, he sighed contentedly and pressed his cheek against mine.

"That was so good," I breathed.

"Yeah."

"Do you want to, um, go to the bedroom?"

Miguel kissed me again and just looked into my eyes for a moment. "Yeah, in a little bit." He adjusted his dick within his jeans with a quick grab and poured himself another tall Diet Coke, downing that drink in another long swallow.

"So," I said, emboldened by the giddy, post-orgasmic high I was experiencing. "Get any new tattoos?"

Miguel placed the glass back down on the counter and looked at me a little strangely, surprised and pleased, I realize in retrospect. "Yeah, I did."

He raised his sweatshirt and showed me his navel. The letters S J, my initials, had been indelibly scribed below his belly button, in those kind of ornate prison letters they use, fancy but strange and uneven, as they're pounded in with pieces of disassembled ball point pen, or unbent staples if the recipient is lucky to get an instrument that delicate.

"It's beautiful," I said, leaning in for another Diet Coke-flavored kiss.

Dynamite by Twilight

By M. Jones

Dreams follow the dying of sunlight. Dusk knew this was true, for he had been trapped inside of the most beautiful somnolence for the past month and a half, his makeshift heart nearly beating beneath his breast in anticipation. Dreams were for soft, red light and the encroaching darkness. Beauty lay within the bruising and it was only in that brief time before and not after that his world coalesced into a pulsing, energetic whirl of wanting.

Dusk could see the young man through the open window of his second floor apartment, a smooth silhouette in tan skin, his body the perfection of health. Dusk pressed his back against the iron lamppost, the yellow light emitting from its tip warning of the encroaching darkness. He could see his conquest dancing to a song he couldn't hear, the beautiful man's hairbrush a microphone. He had no idea if this man had a beautiful voice or if it was all wishful thinking. He liked to imagine the former.

Dusk's shoulder was nudged, an interruption of his nightly vigil. He half turned to see a good looking man in a suit wink at him, smile lopsided. "Working tonight?" the man asked.

What he really wanted to do was kill this man then and there, leave the body as a shell of paper on the cracked pavement, let the police and a team of forensics try to make science out of an aftereffect of myth. "Give me half an hour and I'll come to you," he said, smiling as sweetly as he could, even giving the punter a kind of shy, reluctant once over. The hook worked, and he could see how the veins in the neck of his admirer throbbed, his green eyes dancing in anticipation.

"Where?"

He pulled out a card, made solely for this purpose. "Go to this address, the door will be unlocked. Wait for me."

It was snatched from his fingers greedily.

"Dusk?" the man in the suit said, as though he didn't quite believe what he was reading. "That's your name?"

"It's the one I use," he replied, and sighed audibly, wishing this distraction was already eradicated.

His customer's shadow lurked, ever so slightly, at Dusk's promise, though the punter eventually did slink away, allowing his evening thrill to take whatever time he needed to get properly in the mood. Dusk frowned, and

pinched his chin with long fingers, his thumb stroking the cold pad of flesh. He had cleaned the apartment of all blood, hadn't he? That last one.... Quite the gorefeast.

He filled his dark eyes with the vision in the picture window, of health and strong muscles over perfectly formed bones. He could see it all, right through the pores and sections of flesh. He was an expert in such fine dining, even on a visual scale. He could understand that this unknowable creature, was as rare as the most elaborate patisserie's prized sweet.

Evening lay inside of promises, a cool understanding that this dream shall pass, the night shall overtake his sight, and the wonderful view of this illusory man will also pass as he retired further into the overtaking darkness, into a world that Dusk simply could never follow. When was it he had first laid his eyes on this dream? It had to have been in the long dark hollow of winter, where he got little, if any, rest, along the cold veins of months that his existence followed.

Yes, it had been then. Dusk remembered. A night full of snow and ice, with branches frozen solid into fingers of glass. November, maybe, or December. Dusk had seen the young man as he had newly awoken, just a little too early for his usual rounds. He'd stumbled into his obsession's time, his eyes burning from the weak light that still held the city captive. It had purely been chance, the fact he had walked down this particular street, cursing the remnants of daylight and the way it burned into his retinas. He had looked up at that exact moment, when he was leaning against the iron lamppost as he was doing right this second, and his gaze took him inside of the world of his obsession.

Inside of his apartment, the young man within was folding laundry. Such a domestic, simple thing, and yet, it held for Dusk all the pleasure of a kiss. The young man's silhouette touched the corners of the clothes with such delicacy, as though he truly loved these few possessions. Not wealthy, but to Dusk who knew the power of owning nothing this was proof of the young man's riches. He was too busy flickering through the few minutes left at the close of the day to collect proof of himself. Time was always so limited and had to be used in careful measuring. Here, he held his life in the reflections of the large, picture window.

He'd seen the shadowy memories of boyfriends as they came and went. They always filled him with sadness. Distinguished, rumpled, they would come into the apartment, heedless of its order and care, and would be careless with the young man's arrangement of his life. A shirt tossed to the floor. The television turned on while he was reading. Kisses stolen in front of the large picture window, full of lust and utterly empty of love.

No, Dusk had known it from the second he'd had that miraculous glance, the world in which he'd never be a part of. The dynamite of twilight as the young man's profile came into contact with the bruise of the sky.

That first night, his memory now filling him to the brim with nostalgia, he watched the young man folding his clothes and remembered the tender way he'd brought the chair from the kitchen to this room. He'd positioned it just right beneath the chandelier light fixture. He'd used a burgundy tie, Dusk recalled. The chair fell with not a whisper of sound, a delicate toppling. His legs swayed and kicked in a kind of gentle rhythm before finally stopping, to lie limp within the confines of the window. A portrait after the perfection of a moment. A shattering of beauty into despair.

He'd wondered, even then, had it been the way this person's voice was ignored that made it so? So many wounds had already been delivered, so many kisses and caresses that were only for the moment, for the smooth touch and then the hollow goodbyes and the ever present, all encompassing loneliness these distinguished and rumpled men left in their wake. Such men who used and discarded others, who wandered into a young man's life promising so much, only to sneak away the second the sun yawned against the horizon...Such men had the worst coming to them.

The young man smoothed a gingham bedsheet, the outline of the fabric's blue pattern visible through the transparency of his palms.

As the sun sank, so did his obsession likewise fade, until all that was left was a black sheet of glass and strangers lurking behind it, with far different lives.

Dusk sighed and, with a heavy heart, began heading toward his own home, where the customer was waiting, his prey unaware he'd be joining the land of spirits and shadows in the impenetrable dark. He'd pluck them all for that young man...He'd cure his sad heart somehow, and find a way to travel inside of twilight for eternity.

Where the sun is tucked into the horizon, he'd find a way to make kisses real and love explode against darkness.

He touched the tips of his dagger-like canines with his tongue. He drew away a droplet of blood. The night would stretch out to infinity before him now, but he had already learned the rules could change -- he'd proven it once, hadn't he, by waking too early -- and he was still here. There was hope, even if it took decades.

They both had plenty of time, unlike the customer who was waiting and waiting for a thrill that would be his last.

Dusk paused, and turned to blow the window a kiss as he left. One day he would have courage enough to beckon his obsession at twilight, and offer that kiss as a genuine promise. But until then he would concentrate on the young man's wish of revenge.

His steps were light as he walked, the sky an inky black that swallowed him inside of itself. Dusk, fading like spilled ink on black cloth.

Against a black picture window, a grey hand poked through and waved goodbye.

Dancing Blind

By Julia Talbot

I learned to two-step from a woman named Deb, in a bar called the Oasis that sat smack dab in the middle of a southern New Mexico town. Deb wore faded Levi's with ropers and a white button down shirt. Tall and lean, she had the ruthlessly short blonde hair and tanned leather skin that a lot of western women used to sport, but had gone out of style sometime in the eighties when I was a teenager. Her chest was as flat as a horned toad that had ventured out into the road too far, but her smile was warm as the late summer night outside and her hands were just as warm on my waist and palm.

Man, could she dance. She swept me around the floor in a dizzying hurry, pushing my ability to let someone else lead, and finally she told me just to close my eyes and trust her.

"You've got pretty hair," she told me and she rubbed her cheek against it as the western swing beat changed to a waltz. I can't remember the song now, but I can remember the tang of beer on her breath and the look of the scars on her throat where the shirt's neckline gaped. When I touched them and asked where they came from she snorted and said she used to drive a really damned fast car. That was explanation enough.

She asked me if I was new in town and it was my turn to snort.

"Just passing through on the way to Cruces," I answered. "And I was lonely and dry and tired of driving."

That got me a grin, not a tame sort of smile, more like cat and canary. "I bet I could make you wet," she said, and as I groaned at the pun she lowered her hand to squeeze my ass. "And a lot less lonely, too."

My heart sped up and I nodded, looking her right in the eye. Deb's eyes were brown, not blue like I might have expected, and hot. Predatory.

Since the idea of leaving with Deb excited more than worried me, I went with it, and when she took my hand and led me to get my purse and her denim jacket, I followed even more easily than I had during the dancing.

We stopped at the liquor place on the way to Deb's trailer, popping one for each of us as I wandered around and looked at western memorabilia and Pendleton blanket furniture. She even had a cowboy boot with flowers in it, just like in a New Mexico magazine spread. There wasn't much of her though, just a few pictures of family and a

racing trophy, and a picture of a sloe eyed, laughing woman who was the obligatory ex, named Lupe, who had run off to Albuquerque with a man named Joe just about a year before.

When I asked her why she kept the picture she toasted me and said, "To remind me how fucking fickle the pretty ones are."

"You're a pretty one," she continued, setting aside the beer and advancing to wrap an arm around me and stroke my hair. "But I know you'll be gone in the morning going in. No surprises."

I swallowed the bad joke about first dates and lesbians, sure she had probably heard it before, and who needed a smart ass remark when you were trying to be romantic? Still, that left me with nothing to say, so I just stared at her and put my hand up to touch her scarred neck and pull her down for a kiss.

Deb two-stepped as well as any man, but her kiss was all woman, sweet and hot and strangely tender. I loved it. She tasted me, there was no other way to think of it. She savored me.

We moved like we were dancing again; she led and I followed, closing my eyes and trusting. Her tongue pushed into my mouth and drew mine into hers. The heat was astounding, the taste of hops and yeast and breath mints strong, and she touched me with such care that I laughed and told her I wouldn't break. She laughed right back and told me softer touches sensitized the skin so the harder ones felt even better. She was right.

I'd never had a woman that had callused hands like hers and the rough feel of Deb's fingertips on my breasts, even through my t-shirt, made me jump and gasp. Deb just grinned and said, "See?" Then she kissed me again. Oh, how happy I was that I'd been too tired to drive and taken a chance on the middle of nowhere.

Lips soft and dry, not sloppy, moved across my cheek and down my neck, stopping only while she removed my clothes, one piece at a time, then resuming the journey to the deep vee between my breasts. I wanted to do the same for her, wanted to see and touch her as she did me. I pulled and tugged and she moved to help and soon we were both completely nude. In the uncertain light of a parchment shaded lamp made in the shape of a covered wagon we stood face to face and I looked at her and she was utterly beautiful.

Lean and long, with a surprisingly lush ass and a dark bush of pubic hair, she stayed right there and let me look my fill, showing not even a hint of the nervousness I felt at being so exposed. She only flinched a little when I reached out and the first thing I touched was the long, raised white scar that ran diagonally from her collarbone to her opposite nipple.

"Seat belt," she said, and I nodded tracing the hard line with first my fingers, then my mouth. Her nipples weren't cherries, or any other cliché; they were pink and ripe and surprisingly large. When I sucked on them she moaned and petted my hair.

"So pretty."

"No, you're the pretty one," she said, and started to touch me harder, with greed. Her hands moved over my shoulders and back, her lips found my temple, and Deb started tracing my freckles, one to another, as if fascinated. We moved then, in dizzying circles, dancing our way to the bedroom, hands and mouths working, and when we tumbled down and when one of her hands pushed between my legs it was so intimate and shocking that I cried out with the feeling.

There was no part of me she didn't touch. Her fingers stroked and circled, spreading me wide to dip inside, pushing deep and shallow in short, sharp thrusts. Her fingers inside worked in time with her thumb outside, a combination that made me crazy, made me thrash. My thighs opened and squeezed together in turn, but Deb pried them open and dipped her head between them to taste me, tongue working from the top of my mound and between my lower lips, pushing in to jab at me.

Before I could even fathom how good it was, it was all over. When I came it was a shuddering, shaking thing that left my skin wet with sweat and Deb's kiss wet with the taste of me.

Deb took my hand and put it on her own skin, her eyes begging me mutely for everything, and I gave it to her. Over and over, all through the night, we gave and took and when it was over I knew her taste and scent and texture better than any lover I'd ever had.

Early the next morning I woke to find Deb sleeping right up at my back but not touching, as if she knew I needed to leave without waking her. I sucked at the awkward goodbye. I picked up my clothes and tip-toed to the living room to get dressed. Lupe the ex smiled at me all the while and I shook my head at her.

"You must be some kind of idiot," I whispered, and let myself out, walking easily to where I left my car. Nothing was far in such a small town. Soon enough I was on my way with a sausage biscuit and fast food coffee, pondering the merits of El Paso versus Las Cruces.

It's been a lot of years since I stopped somewhere between Ruidoso and Alamogordo on my way to wherever, but I've never forgotten Deb. Who could forget the woman who taught them to dance; to simply close your eyes and let someone else lead?

Something Worth Hiding

By Marcel K. Bromius

The tiny chime tingled and the glass door softly closed, announcing a new customer.

I glanced up from what I was doing to see a young, dark-haired man. He nodded to me before his head disappeared among the antique filled shelves.

It had been slow for a Saturday. Normally the tourists and locals fill the store from the moment I open the shop. Most are browsers looking for that rare antique that will make them rich.

It was probably slow because it's been raining all day. I looked outside to confirm it hadn't stopped. *Typical Seattle weather*, I mused.

The white cameo I had been cleaning I placed securely back inside the locked cabinet case, and I went searching for the patron.

I knew the store like the back of my hand. All the twists and turns, dead-ends, junk filled corners, cob-webbed lights, jewelry cabinets, and antiques that filled the store, *Keepsakes...my store*, I told myself and smiled. I had bought it four years ago and filled it to capacity with local heirlooms from the mansions, fishing wharfs, and Native American Indian Reservations.

I found the man in a corner, he held a piece of red art glass, and casually turned it over to inspect the bottom.

"It's Fenton glass," I confirmed.

"Before they started signing their work," The man glanced at me and smiled.

Upon closer inspection, I realized he was older than I originally thought. He was still young, probably in his early twenties, but old enough.

It was his eyes which held me spellbound. I had never seen such clarity. They were crystal green and he could stop a man with one look.

And that was exactly what he did with me.

He turned away to place the glass candy-dish upon the shelf and I felt released from his charms.

For once I found myself tongue-tied and my mind went blank. I'm not sure how I managed to blurt, "Can I help you with something?"

"I'm just looking," he said and brushed past me.

Electric sensations raced up my arm and my breath caught in my throat. I must have gasped because he stopped to look at me and we were mere inches apart.

Suddenly the area became claustrophobic, perspiration beaded my brow. I smelled his Old Spice aftershave, and my hands itched to touch him.

My gaze raked over his body. His pitch black hair fell at odd angles across his eyes, almost giving him that bad boy appearance, but it was his smooth androgynous face that drew me, the full lips that I wanted to kiss.

He wore a leather biker jacket that had seen better days, a white t-shirt and ragged jeans torn at the bottom and over one knee, revealing an alluring bulge.

Neither one of us talked or moved -- I realized later he had been staring at me with the same intensity. He knew the power he held over me and I wished to eradicate it.

It had been a long time since I felt weak in the face of my desire and the feeling didn't settle well.

But what do I say?

What should I do?

My heart thudded loudly in my ears and my mouth felt dry.

The seconds ticked away, but they felt like hours. I feared letting him go, I feared not saying anything, and I feared saying too much.

It was not like in a gay bar where I knew all the men might be interested. No, instead I felt displaced.

And inside my own store! I chided myself.

While these thoughts chased one after another through my mind, the young man closed the distance between us and leaned against my body.

My breath caught in my throat and my hands automatically slipped to his hips, then around to his ass where I grasped him tightly.

He leaned up and gently brushed his lips against mine.

Fireworks.

The moment was over just as quickly as it had begun, but for that split second I saw lights flashing, crashing and dazzling me with their magnificence.

Once, when I had been younger, my friend Tim, commented how it felt the first time he had kissed a boy. I never experienced that sensation, but he said, 'you'll know when you're in love because there will be fireworks.'

Yeah, right...love.

No way. Not me.

Shocked, I stared at him with his sheepish, boyish grin, and those long eyelashes that he peered up through. My heart slammed in my chest.

Chewing his lip, he waited for my reaction and glanced down.

Shy? No not him, he knew what he was doing.

I had to have him.

With my hands still upon his ass, I pulled his groin into my own and then I reached up, cupped his face and leaned down to kiss him intensely.

Those lips tasted like sweet candy heaven and his tongue retreated before my intrusion.

I ravaged his mouth.

His arms circled around my neck as he pulled me closer. He ground his pelvis against my hardened cock and his lean body melted into mine.

I pulled him around and tried to push him against the wall. Instead his body slammed into the shelves and expensive glass relics fell to the floor, crashed into pieces.

"Shit," I broke our kiss a moment to mutter, before resuming in heated passion.

I didn't care.

Instead, I ignored the scattered shards, and still holding him tightly, moved us into the next aisle. This time I pushed him onto the floor and lay on top of him.

He uttered small groans of pleasure and wiggled beneath me, which reinforced my desire to fuck him. I had to feel him moving under me. I knew this as acutely as I knew I needed to breathe; I needed to be inside him.

His hands moved to my jeans and fumbled to get them open. My sex strained to be freed, and I felt his hand close around my flesh. Long shudders shook my body and I thought I would come. His fingers expertly moved up and down my firmness, before he pulled my cock free from its confinement.

"Take your pants off," I said huskily.

Quickly, he complied. Shimmying on the floor, he managed to lose the boots and slide out of his jeans as a snake sheds its skin, until his bare ass lay before me and his long cock pressed proudly against his stomach.

Condom! My mind screamed. Shit! Do I have one?

I had to force myself to pull away from him. I pulled my black billfold out. Rummaging around, I yanked business cards, pieces of paper and money out.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a condom," I said.

"Why didn't you say so?" He reached inside his jacket pocket and plucked out a blue-square foil.

I sighed in relief.

Immediately, I scooped him back into my arms and resumed our kissing. My hands moved over his body, over his ass and under his shirt where I played with his nipples.

I wanted to feel every inch of him.

"You feel so good," he groaned.

I don't know how he did it, but he managed to grab my cock and roll the lubricated condom down over it without looking.

Once sheathed, I wasted no time in pushing his legs apart and lifting them onto my shoulders.

Our hunger and immediacy needed to be quenched.

He helped guide me inside. At first there was a bit of resistance, but then he relaxed and opened for me. I plunged deep and his heat enveloped me.

"Fuck me, please," he begged and I became his pawn.

His cries of, 'harder' and 'faster,' 'no slower,' 'now deeper,' drove me to do his will, and I became his puppet.

I delivered what he wanted, while holding back my impending orgasm. Faster and faster I fucked him, pushing deeper and harder within.

He was insatiable and I had lost my mind.

The way he gripped my shaft when I was inside him and how he released it for me to pull out; I had never felt such heat, or tightness.

Nor heard anything like the way he begged in my ear...

"Make me yours," he cried.

And I pounded him harder. I wanted to please him, as if my very life depended upon it.

Finally, he said, "Please, may I come?"

The magic words that I knew so well.

He asked me for permission and all I could do was grant it.

His dark hair flew across his eyes, his chest arched up, his hands clawed my shoulders, he threw his head back, and his orgasm ripped up his shaft to splash us both.

He screamed his arrival and his body spasmed with each ejaculation. His ass convulsed around my shaft and I quickly followed, unloading my need deep within.

I collapsed on him, while the world spun around us.

We lay spent and wrapped around each other on the cold floor. I imagine what felt like hours were only minutes before I heard the musical chimes over top the entrance door.

"Oh shit!" I jumped and stood, ripping off the condom, shoving it in my pocket and pushing my sex back into my pants before closing them.

His eyes grew wide when he realized someone else had entered the shop and he mouthed the word, 'damn.'

Why hadn't I locked the store? Stupid.

I motioned him to get himself together and I went to greet the customer.

"Mrs. Wiley," I said, "So good to see you."

"Where is everyone?" Mary Wiley replied. She was an older woman in her seventies with a full head of gray hair; she came in every weekend to check out my latest postcard arrivals.

"I guess the rain scared them away."

"Oh nonsense," She said. "A little rain never hurt anyone."

"I guess you'll have to convince them of that." I smiled.

"Joshua, are you well?" She peered at me over her bifocals. "You look flushed. I hope you're not getting sick."

"Actually, I am feeling a bit off." I ran a hand over my forehead. "I was thinking of closing early."

"You know that flu is going around!" Mary shook a finger at me. "You need to take better care of yourself."

"Yes, you're right."

"I'll only be a minute." Mary pushed past me.

"Ah, wait!"

"Yes?"

"Um," I stammered. "My new delivery is at the register. I haven't had a chance to put them out."

"Then let's get to it." Mary grabbed my arm and walked me back towards the front of the store.

Once behind the register, I searched through my papers and bills, acting as if I had misplaced them.

"Ah, thanks." The young dark haired man replied. He headed for the door.

You can't leave yet. I thought.

"So maybe tomorrow I'll have what you need?" I asked him.

He had gotten himself together and had a sloppy grin upon his face. His hair was more disheveled, and his cheeks were rosy pink.

"I think I can find it." He grinned. "Thanks for letting me know about the Underground."

And with that, I watched him vanish out my store.

My heart sank.

What did he mean about what he said? I contemplated. Does that mean I'll see him again, or not?

"Have you found them yet?" Mary asked impatiently.

"You know, I did put them on the back rack, now that I think about it."

"Oh dear, Joshua." Mary frowned. "You must be sick."

I held onto a glimmer of hope that he would return, but days went by and then weeks.

How could I do that? How could I let him walk out of my life without a word? Without a name?

Just as he appeared, he vanished. I would have thought it had been a dream, if I hadn't needed to clean up the broken glass.

My nights were restless and I couldn't stop thinking about him.

Every face I saw on the street, every person I passed, I looked for those compelling eyes and smooth baby face.

Maybe he was a tourist? The thought disheartened me. The realization that I might never see him again slowly materialized and the thought crushed me.

To forget, I met my friends at the local bar on Friday night. I planned to drown my morose mood in hard liquor and forget my troubles listening to other people's problems.

The neon sign shone, illuminating the words *The Cuff*, an historic leather bar, now a dance complex that fancied itself a wannabe S&M hang-out.

Inside, the chairs were metal barrels and it was a synchronicity of black and silver, with a large dance floor in the middle.

Kyle and I waited for Tim on the narrow patio outside called The Dog Run. It was the only place where we could talk in normal voices and still be heard. Inside, the walls vibrated to the pulsating techno beat.

Around us, men wore their finest leather. It seemed to be a one-upmanship with full black regalia or the barest necessity with strips of leather criss-crossing chests and groins.

We were no different.

Kyle wore his leather pants, hat, jacket, boots, and gloves. While I had dressed in my boots, leather pants, black muscle t-shirt, heavy belt, with gauntlets on my arms.

The dark clothes always contrasted with my dirty blond hair and pale Nordic features.

My eyes kept straying to each individual man, again searching the contours of their faces, looking for a familiar shy smile.

"You never said if that guy came back," Kyle pointed out.

"Huh?" I turned my attention back to my friend.

"The guy." Kyle sipped on his beer. "The hot guy who came into your store."

"Yeah, no," I said. "He never came back."

"I still can't believe you did it on the floor during hours! That must have been hot." Kyle laughed. "I can imagine your expression when Mrs. Wiley arrived!"

Mrs. Wiley had become the butt of our jokes. She always tried to mother me and felt I didn't take care of myself properly. I imagined she was lonely, having lost her husband several years ago to a heart attack.

"Where is Tim?" I asked.

As if on cue, Tim appeared through the door and gave us a hearty greeting. He slapped Kyle on the back and squeezed my shoulder.

"There you guys are!" Tim grinned. "Sorry I'm late, but I had a few things to take care of first."

Tim was wearing what he termed his 'severe' ensemble. The hat sat rigidly upon his head, practically covering his eyes, and dark sunglasses hid them. His barbell moustache drooped over his upper lip and his jacket was zipped to his throat. The only flesh showing was his lower face, because the rest of him was covered.

I raised an eyebrow, knowing this look well. He wore it when he played the 'heavy Master' and had a slave to discipline.

"This is Sean." Tim introduced the young man he was with. "The slave I've been telling you about."

My breath caught in my throat because the man who appeared next to Tim was my dark godsend. He hadn't seen me yet because he was looking down at the ground, but I recognized those long eyelashes and beautiful profile.

"So this is the slave you've been talking about for the past year?" Kyle asked.

"Yes." Tim grinned proudly and placed a possessive hand upon Sean's ass. "He's finally graduated from college and has moved here."

My stomach churned and a mix of emotions fell upon me at once.

Oh my God!

The attraction hadn't changed, I wanted to reach out and touch him. Only my cool reserve held me at bay.

My mind turned somersaults and I didn't know what to say. 'Congratulations?'

I've only heard about Sean for eons it seemed. The man Tim met in college who was two years his junior. The one Tim helped to pay his way through college, the one he couldn't wait to have join him again. Tim visited him every holiday and some weekends.

Perhaps I should have said, 'he's the one I fucked in my store.'

I knew Tim well. I felt sickened to know Tim had been sexually unfaithful the whole time they were separated.

'If he's so great then why fuck around?' I wanted to ask.

My heart twisted and I felt guilty for having sex with my friend's partner. Not that Tim and I hadn't shared some men in the past, but I believed this to be different.

Because for once you care, my inner voice responded.

Sean glanced up and when he saw me, our eyes held. So many unspoken words seemed to pass between us and I realized he felt the same way.

Damn this was messed up!

I felt physically ill. My stomach was knotted and cramped, and I thought I would vomit.

"I have to go," I said and excused myself, hastily adding, "I don't feel so well."

As I retreated, I heard Tim ask Kyle, "What's wrong with him?"

"He's still depressed because that guy never came back to his store," Kyle said.

Tim replied, "That's bizarre. It's not like Josh to hold a flame."

A few days later, I found Sean waiting at the door to my shop when I opened. I felt numb and not sure what to think, even though my heart gave a small leap of joy upon seeing him there.

It had been raining all morning and Sean huddled underneath the overhang. Water dripped off him and pooled onto the floor.

I locked the door behind him, keeping my 'closed' sign in the window.

"I'm really sorry," Sean said as soon as he entered. "Honestly I've never done this before, and I had no idea."

I didn't know what to say and moved away from him, fearing I wouldn't be able to control myself if I stood too close.

He followed me deeper into the store. "Thanks for not saying anything."

I still didn't say anything, unsure of my own voice.

"I had no idea you were a Master."

"No, you wouldn't know," I blurted. *Because I'm powerless in your presence.*

"What are you doing with him?" I turned, anger surged through me, and it all came out. "What kind of arrangement do you have? Do you know he fucks around, that he'll never be faithful, and yet you're suppose to be?"

"It's okay," Sean looked down.

"No it's not," I stated. "You deserve better than that."

"Don't say that."

"Why not?"

He gave me that look -- the look that stopped me -- and my anger washed away, hunger replacing it.

Now I understood why Tim never introduced us.

Didn't want to lose him, eh?

"I think you should leave," I said.

"I know I should," Sean smiled sheepishly. "But I don't want to."

Instead Sean closed the distance between us and brushed his wet body against mine.

'Don't do this!' I wanted to scream, but my hands instinctively flexed and soon they slid under his t-shirt and pulled him closer.

Our lips met and our breathing increased. Immediately our cocks pressed together, demanding inside our pants, and our sensual kiss deepened.

We devoured each other, locked tightly as one.

Sean broke our kiss and dropped to his knees. His tantalizing emerald eyes stared at me, almost challenging me, while he unzipped my jeans and withdrew my arousal.

"No," I gasped, although I didn't want him to stop, and I made no move to actually stop him.

He didn't listen.

As soon as I felt his hand wrap around the base of my cock, my head arched back and I closed my eyes. His tongue licked the pre-come oozing from my slit, teasing me, before his mouth engulfed my entire shaft.

My cock slid smoothly down his throat. I couldn't believe he had taken it all and I had to see.

I stared enrapt at the sight.

His lips touched my groin before he slowly slid off. When he reached the head of my cock, he expertly swallowed me again, taking it all the way down.

I had trained men to do this, but they never felt this incredible.

Instinctively, I placed my hand behind his head to guide him and my fingers laced through the silky dark locks.

I shuddered. The warmth and wetness enclosed my cock was as soft and smooth as satin.

Sean's groaning heightened my excitement and I watched him open his own pants to withdraw his own hard dick. He quickly stroked himself and soon he found a rhythm while he deep-throated me.

I knew I wouldn't last long. His divine profile sucking on my cock proved too exquisite.

In and out, in and out, repeatedly we moved until my balls contracted and my orgasm raced up my shaft.

Sean pulled off at the last moment and my come shot all over his perfect face. Not once, not twice, but every single release.

It dribbled down his cheeks and over his lips. I wanted to kiss it away, but restrained myself. His tongue darted out and licked the come. He looked sated and content.

I pushed him away, trying not to care that he hadn't orgasm yet. Instead I tidied myself up, placed my cock back in my pants, and smoothed away the wrinkles.

"This can't happen again," I resolved harshly and made it sound as if I meant it.

I must have succeeded because Sean's face crumpled and he wiped the rest of the come off his face with his leather sleeve.

He scrambled away from me and closed his pants.

"Tim is my best friend," I said, more for my benefit than anything else, trying to reaffirm this.

"I know," Sean stared at the floor. "I'm sorry. He talks about you all the time. I...I...don't know what to say."

The hurt puppy-dog look upon his face broke my resolve.

I felt like shit. How could I say that? *Yeah, grind more glass into the wound, why don't you?*

"I don't know what to say either." I ran a hand through my hair. "I know we barely know each other and I don't understand why I feel this way when I'm around you."

Sean nodded his head in understanding and I thought he would cry.

Damn.

"Come here," I said.

In seconds he wrapped around me, clinging tightly. I didn't want to let him go.

"I'm so confused," Sean confessed. "I owe Tim for everything he's done for me, but I don't feel this way when I'm with him."

I didn't know what to do. I'd known Tim for twelve years, but I knew Sean belonged in my arms -- it felt too right. This attitude-driven, shy, sexy angel belonged to me.

There was no way I could handle seeing Sean with Tim and remain friends.

How much was I willing to give up? Everything?

I churned these thoughts and considerations over until I finally came to a conclusion: I would sacrifice it all, even if that meant losing my friendship with Tim.

"This is going to sound crazy," I said. "How would you like to move away with me?"

"What? Where?"

"I don't know, anywhere" I pulled away slightly and cupped his cheek with my one hand while I stared into those twin gems. "I can sell this store and open another one. New Orleans, San Francisco, New York...You decide."

Honestly, I didn't care. I just knew I had to get Sean far away and hide him.

I thought Sean would reject the idea, telling me how he wanted to be with Tim. Instead, he seriously thought about it.

"New Orleans would be nice." Sean grinned. He looked young and hopeful when he responded. "I've never been there but I hear it's a cool city."

"You'll love Mardi Gras." I kissed him lightly on the lips. "All that wild debauchery, we'll have fun."

The plan formed in my mind. It became clearer as I pondered it through. "We'll fly down and find a place. Then I'll sell Keepsakes and we'll pay Tim for your education. All you need to do is break-up with him."

I couldn't believe this was happening! I had found my soulmate and I refused to let him go. For the first time I felt alive and I wanted to shout it to the whole world.

I kissed Sean vehemently and he molded against me, returning the kiss with a feverish frenzy.

When we parted, he asked, "What do I tell him?"

I thought about it for a moment before responding. "Tell him I finally found my fireworks. Hopefully he'll understand one day."

Someone to Watch Over Me

by BA Tortuga

The ballroom was far more expensive than any place he could have gotten into on his own, a lot swankier than the nickel a dance places he usually frequented, but this was a free ticket, given out to any good little soldier in uniform, his handed to him at the bus station as he was waiting to ship out, and he had all night, didn't he? So why not?

Deep red carpet ate up the sound in the lobby and crimson curtains separated the bar from the ballroom and the ballroom from the private rooms, where girls in low-backed dresses sat with men in white tuxedos, smoking cigarettes and drinking gin, the low babble of voices never rising above the sound of the music, which was slow and easy, something he didn't know.

There were other soldiers, quite a few sprinkled here and there throughout the crowd, but most of them had female companionship. Not exactly what he was looking for, despite him being at what amounted to a fancy dance hall.

He didn't really know what he thought he might find in one night, anyway. Stirring his warming drink, he scanned the room, idly noticing the young lieutenant who sat alone at the bar. Well, that was something worth watching, anyway, and he sat on a low bench with tufted upholstery, spinning a harmless little fantasy in his head about the officer and the sergeant. It would help pass the time.

Fresh-faced and apple-cheeked, the man cut a fine figure in his dress whites, martini glass held loosely in long, slender fingers that had never seen hard work, never held a Garand and rucked across enemy territory. Soon, those fingers would be callused, rower's shoulders covered in damp fatigues, but now? Here? The man was beautiful, untouched.

Pure as gin.

That kind of purity deserved admiration and he ordered a drink, sending it to the fellow with his regards, one soldier to another as he would never have the guts to do where their rank mattered. It wasn't as if he would get into an officer's club to buy the man a drink anyway.

The music came to a crescendo and another song started, slow and rich, making him close his eyes and sway, making the girls come up to him and ask. He turned them all down, suddenly wanting out, because he felt

dishonest, felt like those girls should be giving their attention to someone who was not cataloging the surprise on the face of the young lieutenant, someone who was not warming to the warmth in those cheeks or the smile that stretched those lips.

Eyes as blue as winter skies met his and he was given a nod. A pretty young thing came up, hands sliding on the lieutenant's shoulders, painted lips making an offer that was refused without those eyes leaving his even once. The drink was sipped, long throat working, Adam's apple bobbing over the lieutenant's starched collar.

He swallowed a bit himself, mouth suddenly dry. The latest dancing girl swirled off in a flurry of satin and feathers, leaving him watching, and wishing. Instead of leaving, like he'd planned, the sergeant stayed, having one more drink, those eyes catching him, holding him, making him flush with the pleasure of being the center of one man's attention.

The band started playing a waltz, something slow and sweet and he imagined he could hear the lieutenant humming along, feel the barely-there heat of the man's breath on his jaw, his ear. Those hands would be warm, soft, maybe trembling as they brushed his shoulders.

What a ridiculous thing, to think of it, but it was there, in his head. He could smell the starch of the lieutenant's collar, the blueing he would use to keep the dress whites so perfect. His own brown shoe uniform made him feel dowdy by comparison.

He should go. The sergeant rose, set his drink aside, took one last, long look into those blue eyes, and did the incomprehensible. He nodded toward the back room, asking a question when he should be answering it himself, and with a no at that.

That strong chin dipped in a nod, the martini glass set on the bar, the round hat gathered up. Those eyes watched him as he moved around the edge of the dance floor, waiting for him to try the closed door, slip inside before the lieutenant moved.

Once inside, he waited, wondering if he was losing his mind, thinking of all of the bad ways this could go wrong, about how the music and the gin must have transported him to think it might work. Yet he stood there, watching the door, hoping against hope.

The room was dark, still, the music pouring in along with the hint of lamplight from the curtained windows. When the door opened and closed again, it took a moment for his eyes to focus, to see the crisp, tailored lines of his officer.

His heart speed up a hundredfold, making him almost dizzy for a moment, and beyond the closed door another song started, in three fourths time, and rather than take a chance on breaking the moment, ruining the fantasy, the sergeant reached out, holding his hand out for the lieutenant to decide what they would do, dance or fight.

That hand was soft, warm, slid right into his, the lean body stepping close enough that he could smell soap, pomade, a hint of aftershave and he knew his lieutenant could do the same -- smell the starch and the gin and the hint of sweat from sheer nerves, from hope.

Using the hand he held, the sergeant pulled the other man close, sliding an arm around that trim waist like the boy was one of those dancing girls, holding the other hand up in position to take up the waltz just as the beat turned, moving them in a slow, winding circle.

The breath against his ear was as warm as he'd imagined, the cheek more coarse, the thin hips nestling against his. They moved together awkwardly at first, the lieutenant taking a few beats to learn to follow his lead, to lean into him and shuffle them through the empty room.

Once they found the rhythm though, it was perfect: the rasp of their heavy wool uniforms, the scent of man and gin and cigarette smoke, the quiet ebb and flow of their breathing. All of it lived up to his earlier fantasy. Surpassed it. He began to harden, impossible not to, the way they fit.

The softest moan brushed the hollow beneath his ear, the sound reedy, a muted trumpet from a distance, something meant for him alone, here. The fingers on his shoulder moved, slid to rub slow circles on the nape of his neck, the nerves there tingling, becoming awake, alive.

He started to speak, started to say his name, but got no further than, "I'm," when those fingers came back around to press against his lips. Right. The man had a point. Maybe knowing would ruin it, would throw the reality of it into sharp outline. So instead he used his mouth to kiss those fingers, turning to rub his cheek against them as his own hand found the small of the lieutenant's back and rubbed, fingers pressing.

Their breath sped as their dance steps slowed, the softest brushes of lips against his jaw becoming the wet heat of a soft tongue. It was such a simple thing to turn his head, to press his own mouth against those soft lips, tasting gin and vermouth and maybe just a hint of fear in the heat. Fear he could understand, because tomorrow was an uncertain thing and the solid warmth of their bodies pressed together made it easier to bear.

The music slowed, the piano low and soft, filtering through the walls, the whiskey-soaked voice of the headliner only a murmur, a throaty confidence between lovers. Warm fingers cupped his jaw, held him as the kiss built to its own crescendo.

He wanted so much more, but there was no time and this was no place. Their kiss crested, ebbed, and built again in time, their lazy circle becoming a sway. Feeling very bold, the sergeant let his hand dip, molding to the lieutenant's bottom, feeling firm flesh and warm wool, making him gasp.

The fingers on his jaw tightened, the cry that was muffled between them telling, honeyed, those wide eyes suddenly so young, so needy, almost desperate in the way they watched him.

It made him wonder if the fresh faced young lieutenant had ever done anything like this before, had ever really taken a chance on having a man's hands on him. It made him want to make it good and he reached between them, forgoing the firm bottom for the even more firm front, pressing against the stiff fly of those dress pants.

The lieutenant stepped closer, moving into his hand, into his touch, fingers trapped in between two uniforms -- his softer, older, but as warm, the need rubbing the back of his hand as eager as that against his palm.

His knees went weak and his groan was lost as the music swelled, a fast, jazzy dance number that hid their fevered touches and sounds and breath. He rubbed, wanting to see this man's eyes as they gave each other whatever pleasure they could, wanting something to remember in the long nights that would pass in the trenches. Their breath mingled and he could see himself, watching, moaning, framed in ice-water eyes. Those eyes that caught the lamp light, shining.

The pressure built in his lower body until he couldn't ignore it anymore, and he took another kiss, hips sliding with the beat of the music, losing the ability to be subtle. They moved together, no longer dancing, hands sliding and touching, lips pressing harder, tongues pressing and sliding.

Oh, he wanted. He wanted to see this tender young man nude, wanted to taste his skin, see his eyes when they found pleasure together. But all they could have was now and now he pressed his tongue into a hot mouth, his hand working at the belt of those stiff trousers. The soft lips wrapped about his tongue, sucking, hips moving into his touch, their bodies finding their own beat, their own song.

So fast, too fast, they were pushing against each other, gasping with the power of it, and he could feel it, rising in his spine, that moment that he was trying to hold off until... oh. There. The hardness he'd felt through the cloth was in his hand, hot and full of life.

Those hands stuttered on his shoulders, his lieutenant shuddering, hands frantic on his belt, his buttons, the sounds they made losing all but the most basic music.

They were both in a hurry now, touching, tempting, his tougher skin a fine contrast to the smooth, sweet skin of his lieutenant. Soft words, the first he'd spoken since the cut off introduction, began falling from his lips, curses and pleas, breathless and quiet, but strong for all that.

Their words mixed together between their lips, hips pushing into fingers, his hardness held, stroked, those fingers still smooth, still soft, still gentle. He fought away the sorrow that said it would never be this way again, never be untried again.

Fought it away and concentrated instead on the gratitude that he did not spend this night alone in a bus depot. He put all of his need and hope into their next kiss, their hands moving in time, his hips rolling, his balls pulling up tight, warning him it would be soon.

His lips were filled by a cry, husky and low, desperate and perfect, muted by the velvet curtains, the heavy carpet. Nothing could mute the heat splashing against his fingers, the scent of need that filled the air. The rich, deep smell of a man in pleasure was the last thing he could bear, and he spilled as well, low moans ripped from him, given freely to this man who he would never really know.

They stood together, panting, lips clinging, the world slowly settling in its place upon uniformed shoulders. A soft, white handkerchief was offered to him, another cleaning him with gentle touches. Every good soldier and gentleman should have a clean white handkerchief after all. He helped to clean them, lingering over it, reluctant to move away, drawing out the moment.

One soft thumb brushed over his lips, blue eyes intent. The band started again, the strains of *Someone to Watch Over Me* filling the air. He got a smile, one last, soft kiss, their uniforms straightened.

Right. Time to go. The sergeant took one last, long look, hand coming up to his lips to feel where the lieutenant's had been, and then he turned, walking away without a backward glance.

He didn't need to look back. He would remember that face, and that dance, for as long as he lived.

Wheel

By Moses O'Hara

Point out the Neanderthal in any given room and that's the guy I'm gonna wanna fuck. Don't ask me why. I can just be that way. So I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck and yanked his head forward.

"You are a fuckin' god." He had a broken nose and two different color eyes.

He grinned. And then I sank my tongue into his mouth. Nirvana.

And he wasn't shy either. "Hey. Wanna see my dick?"

"Sure." Why not.

He took a step back and whipped off his towel. "It's a Prince Albert."

"It sure is."

And if thick ugly man dick is your thing, which I have to admit in my case happens to be the case. Well then this guy. Let's call him Medicine Man. Was definitely your thing. And we're talkin' the real McCoy. Big heavy balls and a bush that wouldn't quit. The drum beat started in my ears and I could feel the jism pulsing thru my veins. This guy was a friggin' ape. "Turn around." He turned. And I woulda fuckin' howled if I could've.

"Holy shit, man. What the fuck is that?"

He turned back over his shoulder. "It's a medicine wheel."

There was a fierce red hawk -- with it's wings stretched out across the expanse of his shoulders. And a lizard. Bright yellow. Even through the clouds of steam. And the outline of something else...a buffalo. A work in progress. Apparently, he was still under construction. And his ass. That medicine man had an ass that made you want to fuckin' cry. Big muscular hairy butt. And the most beautiful asshole -- and when he bent over, with his legs ever so slightly spread and the way the back of his balls looked. My dick sprang up. Now I really wanted to fuck him. A huge glob of steamy sweat dripped from the ceiling and ran down my face. I caught it with my tongue.

"Can I fuck you?"

He didn't shave his chest and his nipples were like rock hard. He turned and smiled. "Can I fuck you?"

"Okay." And it was just as simple as that. Comrades.

I like jerkin' off with another guy. Jerking off with a guy can be amazingly intimate -- if you're not afraid to really experience it. I also like fuckin' around in the showers. "Fuck in the shower." Those are my words of wisdom for mankind. It's therapeutic. He stepped back from under the shower head and bent forward letting the water pound the back of his neck. Covered in soap. He slid his hands down his stomach and into his pubic hair and then he wrapped his fingers around the base of his dick and started pumpin' a big foamy mess that eventually swelled into the most gorged and gorgeous schlong I'd ever fuckin' seen. Every throbbing veiny inch of it. I could've worshipped that fuckin' cock. I swear to God. Dumb and hung. Thick. ...the come started droolin' off the end of my dick.

Of course, jackin' off will do that to you.

I pressed my finger against his asshole. A decided pressure. I drew a small circle with my middle finger. Target. Ground zero. The intended. I pushed my soapy fingers in a little deeper and wrapped my other hand around his dick. And I kissed his neck and then I dragged my tongue up under his chin. And his eyes were closed and the way the water was beating down on his face. I was so friggin' hard it blew my mind and I thought. God. God -- fuckin' thank you. Thank you for this. He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Okay."

So I ran my hand slowly up his shaft. Slowly. Truly slowly. I was one with it. And I love to tease the head of a guy's dick. Really spend some time -- and stare into his eyes while I'm doing it. You can be there with him and it's fucking amazing. As a matter of fact, it can be totally fuckin' transcendent. With your hands wrapped around each other's dicks and being there. Together.

And now, if I didn't get into him -- immediately -- I was just plain gonna shoot. And I'm not ashamed to admit it.

"Bend over."

He looked at me.

"I mean it."

Bend over.

My dick came up between his legs and he immediately stood up, which totally pissed me off. Except the pressure of his inner thighs felt awesome with my dick pushin' up against his balls. Which was almost enough to make me blow my load right there. I wrapped my arm around his waist and whispered. Hard. Into the back of his ear. "I wanna come inside you."

He leaned forward, hands outstretched across the tiles. Back arched and his asshole totally exposed. Comfortable. Medicine Man. I grabbed a handful of shampoo. Complimentary. From the squirt bottle. And greased up my ever lovin' full-on wood.

I love the feeling of pushing the head of my dick against a guy's asshole. The idea of it. I slid my hand across his lower abdomen and into his crotch and then pushed his dick down between his legs just to feel the force of it fighting against my grip. And I kept my hand in his pubes while my other hand went exploring. And he responded.

He pushed his ass back in a single motion, totally engulfing my dick. Which was totally unexpected. And again -- I could have shot right then and there. But I didn't. Dumb luck I guess. Dumb. Hung. Luck.

"What is your friggin' deal, man?" I heaved up against his back. "You are a fuckin' trip." And I was absolutely fuckin' aroused and in his ass. And my dick felt like huge. Massive. And my balls. He tightened around me.

I heard him say "Don't come." It was a sorta hoarse command. And he locked down on my dick with all his might. He knew. Then all at once, he fully disengaged. He spun around and we locked eyes.

Three green and one gray.

He grinned. "Nice try."

"What?"

His dick was pokin' into my belly. I looked down. Oh, yeah. That amazing fucking dick. No wonder he bought a piece of jewelry for it. I turned my attention back to his face. And his buzzcut, which was decidedly homemade.

"You weren't gonna let me fuck you." He smiled and then he shook his head.

"Sure I was." I said it in my head again just to hear how it sounded. Amigos. Remember?

Like I said. I love jerkin' off with a guy. It's like shaking hands in dog years. I set my open hand onto the small of his back and pulled him closer. And then I slid my hand down over his ass and then -- magically -- I was right back where I started. I pushed my fingers against his asshole -- only this time I was looking into his eyes, which, as we've already established, is the only fuckin' way to go. And then I sank my tongue into his mouth, again. He was giving me another chance. And when you get the chance -- you gotta fuckin' go for it. I wrapped his hand around my dick and let him loose to do his thing.

Fuck.

I closed my hand around his hand around my dick and pumped into his fist. He was gonna fuckin' come. And I dropped my head just in time to watch him blow spunk all over my side. With a warm splash. Medicine Man. He didn't even have to touch himself.

"Holy shit." And I squeezed his hand as hard as I could. Fuck. And I started comin'. And I came all over his hand. Which only made it better. His tongue washed over my teeth. Brothers under the skin.

And then I felt his energy start to pull away. I opened my eyes.

"Later." He motioned with his head to the unfolding action fifteen feet away.

I looked into his eyes and then I slapped him on the ass, one more time just for luck.

"Thanks."

He grinned. "You're welcome." And then I watched him walk away.

Like I was gonna let him fuck me.

Fringe Benefits

By CB Potts

"Would it be too much to ask that one single solitary person in this whole company even pretend to be doing the job they were hired for?"

I don't know what had set Boss-man off, but he was ripping. Normally pale skin was fire red, all the way from an abnormally tight collar to a blond fuzz hairline.

"I don't know why we have half you people here!" he shouted. He took long strides around the tiny room, the big man circling like an angry lion. He stopped in front of me, blue eyes accusing. "I don't even know who the hell you are!"

"My name is Jeff, Mr. Rounis," I answered calmly, handing over a narrow yellow envelope. "And I'm here to serve you with these court papers. If you have any questions, there's a number at the bottom of page three that you can call."

"Jesus Christ," I heard a secretary whisper. "Tom's really gonna lose it now."

She was right. Tom Rounis let loose with a furious stream of invective that would have done a Romanian sailor proud. He was shaking from head to toe, every muscle taut with anger. Had I had to work for this guy, it might have been impressive. Now, it was kind of funny.

I had to stifle a chuckle as I let myself out of the office. "You have a good day now, Mr. Rounis. Pleasure doing business with you."

To tell the truth, I didn't think much about Tom Rounis after that. After all, most people aren't too pleased to be served. If I remembered every guy who was pissed off at me, I'd run out of memory after three hours.

But the next day there were more papers to bring to his office. Guess Boss-man had a reason to scream at his staff.

"You're here again?" he bellowed. Yesterday his secretary had been a petite blond. Today she was a substantial brunette.

"Yes sir," I replied. "Would you like to make the same speech as yesterday, or just hit the high points?"

The secretary tittered nervously. Rounis reviewed the high points and added a few new syllables.

"Thanks a lot." The door opened easily and I stepped into the hallway. "See you tomorrow."

I wasn't sure what hit the wall next to the doorjamb, but it might have been a phone.

"No shit!" I said, reviewing my morning's delivery list. "And I was just being a smart-ass." In bold type, with three individual claims to serve, was Mr. Tom Rounis.

"You mean about Rounis? Poor bastard - he's really let the shit hit the fan. That's what happens when you trust your partner." All this from my boss Renee, who happened to be married to her partner. "Give them an inch, and they'll steal your money, your business and your wife."

"At least you don't have to worry about that last one, Renee," I joked.

"Are you kidding? If somebody wants Marco, they don't have to steal him. I'll give him away!"

I met Rounis in the elevator.

"I can give you these now, Tom." I smiled at him. "That way you won't have to fire your secretary."

"Already did," Rounis said. He took the envelopes meekly, tucking them inside his jacket. "Don't know if the temp service is going to send another one today."

"Sure they will," I replied. "People will do anything for money."

"Ah, but do I have money to give them? That's the question." He shook his head sadly. "It's the only question."

The next day, Rounis's office was closed. No lights shone under the door and the knob was firmly locked.

He lived in a reasonable part of town -- expensive if identical houses, second cars that cost more than I make in two years. Just about right for the CEO of a mid-size firm.

There was only one car in his driveway and no lights were on. I knocked, only to get a slurred "C'min" in response.

"Mr. Rounis?" I asked, stepping into the dim foyer. "Tom?"

"Ah, it's bad news Bob - no, bad news Jim. John."

"Jeff," I replied, following the voice into the living room. Even in the semi-darkness, I could see the spots where furniture should have been. The hallway was wide enough to accommodate a sideboard, for example.

And Tom was sitting where the couch once was. He was rumpled in a pair of gray slacks, an unbuttoned shirt sliding from his shoulders. No shoes. An empty bottle of Glenfiddich lay next to him and he had a healthy start on the Johnny Walker.

"Read me the bad news, friend." He gestured widely around the empty room. "I'd invite you to have a seat, but the furniture seems to have left with my wife."

"So I'm your friend now?" I asked, leaning cautiously against the wall. Compassion's not my strong suit, but this poor bastard was broken.

"I see you more than I see my friends," he snorted. "So you must be my new best bud." He nodded at the envelope. "Who is it this time? The bank? The mortgage company?"

"Your wife." Gently as possible.

"She didn't waste any time."

"They usually don't."

I didn't go back to Tom's house after that. Renee discovered that she didn't like sharing Marco's attentions with me and booted me out of the firm. My glorious career as a process server was over.

It's not the unemployment that I mind, it's the negative cash flow. So three months later I hauled my sorry butt to a job fair in search of the next steady paycheck.

It was the usual throng of hopeful suits and weary blue collars, circling tables recruiting for minimum wage drudgery or military service. I snagged a few brochures -- in case I found myself reduced to flipping burgers -- and turned to leave.

That's when I bumped smack into Tom Rounis.

He'd lost weight, a lot of weight. His jacket hung loosely on him and the pants were too obviously new. Cheekbones were now prominent above smooth cheeks. The hair was longer, blond curls brushing the tops of his ears.

He looked hungry. And delicious.

"I didn't expect to see you here," I said, stepping backward to get a better view. "Not quite your scene."

"My scene's changed quite a bit lately," he began. There was a glint in his eye, an awareness that hadn't been there during the office uproars. Tom Rounis was seeing me as a man -- and he liked what he saw.

"Really?" I replied. "Exploring new avenues?"

"You could say that." He checked me out. Brazen, like there weren't half a hundred unemployed bums milling around us. "We could go somewhere and talk about it."

There was an empty meeting room down the hall from the job fair and we ducked inside.

"Put a chair under the knob," Tom said. "We don't want to be interrupted."

"You've done this before?" I asked, shifting the furniture into position.

"Once or twice."

Once or twice my ass, I thought as Tom swallowed my cock. This was no novice tongue tracing fire-hot trails up and down the sides of my cock, no amateur nose bumping against my belly. You go down more than a couple of times before you learn to lodge nine inches in your throat with any modicum of grace. Only experience teaches you to tongue furry balls without gagging.

"Oh God," I groaned, twining my fingers through his blond curls. "You're fucking amazing."

Tom responded by sucking harder. Both arms were wrapped round my hips, hugging my crotch to his face. When I came, there was no where to go.

"Holy Shit." My knees buckled and Tom let me go. I sagged into a cushioned chair. "I was not expecting that."

"A wise man once told me that people will do anything for money." He chuckled. "Guess you were right."

"I didn't envision you taking on professional cocksucking." I replied. A thought struck me and I shrugged. "And as for the other question, the answer is no."

"What question is that?"

"If I have money to give you -- I don't."

Tom laughed. "I'm a quick learner. I figured out that you don't pick up paying gigs at the job fair. You're recreational."

"But why?"

"You were there. Now you're here. There's something to that." Tom shrugged. "Maybe I'm supposed to keep running into you."

"You realize that makes no sense whatsoever." I held Tom's gaze. "Not one bit."

"And the problem with this is?" he countered.

My cock was getting hard again. "Nothing at all."

"There's some kind of irony in this," Tom grunted. He was splayed over the conference table, grasping the edge with white knuckles. I'd fed half my cock into his hole, which was as educated as his mouth. "All those times at my office, I thought you were fucking with me, and now you are."

I slid in the rest of the way, sheathing myself deep in Tom's ass. "Ah, but that was my job." He moaned as I began to slowly saw back and forth. "This is recreational."

We'd just gotten into a rhythm -- Tom grunting when I pushed in, me moaning as I pulled out -- when we heard the door rattle.

"Must be locked, Lorraine. Let's go get the key."

"Shit!" I exclaimed. "We better wrap it up."

"No," Tom protested. "Don't stop. I'm too close."

Common sense was demanding that I pull away, but here he was, open and begging for my cock. We kept going, flesh slapping together faster and faster.

"They're gonna catch us," I told him.

"That's ok." Tom squirmed. "My life can't get any worse."

"Mine can," I countered. "I don't want to get busted like this."

"Then give it to me faster. Fuck me hard!"

Now how could I resist that kind of direction? Tom was bringing his hips up to meet every stroke. We ratcheted through three gears until we arrived at flat-out power fucking, giving and taking as much as we could as fast as possible. We forgot to be quiet, forgot about Lorraine returning with the keys, forgot about keeping a good grip on the furniture, forgot about everything except our need to come.

Tom groaned, spasming beneath me as his orgasm hit. His ass gripped me even tighter and I lost my load.

Lorraine must have been puzzled when she returned to find the conference room doors open wide.

That week, I turned down two office positions. My savings will have to hold out until I find a delivery job. They may not pay as well, but the fringe benefits are incredible.

Just Another Pair of Pretty Feet

By Rachel Kramer Bussel

I stroll down the Chelsea street, taking in the sun and displays of flesh around me. It's one of those hot summer days where everything seems perfect, the sun acting as the ultimate balm. I enter the cool salon, immediately feeling larger compared to the average clientele. My tall, male form stands out, but I don't mind.

"A pedicure, please," I request. A woman quickly ushers me to a seat in the busy salon. I settle back and plunge my feet into the warm water. As the attendant massages them, I relax even more.

When I finally open my eyes, I see a man staring at me from across the room. I look up at him, then quickly look away, unnerved. I glance down at the woman crouched at my feet, efficiently scraping off the excess skin, but unable to make them look rounded and lovely like the girls on either side of me. They're still big and bony, but it feels delicious to have her scrape away the tough, painful patches of dead skin. That's the best part of the procedure, the ultimate pampering as my feet are restored to their naturally clean state. I close my eyes again for a moment, trying to simply enjoy the sensation, occasionally squirming as the razor tickles uncomfortably.

I ease back when she reaches a less sensitive area. When I look up, the guy is still staring, seeming oblivious to what's going on below him. His eyes roam up and down my body, clearly looking, cruising me amidst this surfeit of femininity. I look back at this stranger, not smiling, but calm. He's cute, at least from afar. The pedicurist asks a question at that moment, breaking the spell of our gazes. I decline the priciest option, complete with slimy blue cream smeared all over my legs, in favor of the simple maintenance required to combat the summer heat. I glance back up and see that he's getting ready to leave. I let her skip the last buffing step, content with the smooth pinkness of my feet, intrigued by my mystery man. I gather my shoes and try to catch up with him without being too obvious about it, tossing my payment and tip onto the counter and sliding towards the exit

He lets me trail him out the door, studiously ignoring me, but I know that he knows I'm following him. Finally, he stops at the corner to wait for a light and turns around, raising his eyebrows. I return his nonverbal greeting, giving him a very obvious once over, my eyes traveling crudely and deliberately from his face down to his newly scrubbed and polished toes. It's easier to flirt out here in the open air. He still doesn't speak, but when the light changes, jerks his head to indicate I should keep following him. As if he could stop me. We've only gone two blocks when he turns the corner, takes out his keys, and opens the door to a small but well-preserved building. I hurriedly sneak in, afraid he'll change his mind. Only when he's closed the door to his first floor apartment does he speak.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Carl." He leads me inside. "Can I get you a drink?"

"A beer, if you have one." He brings us each a beer and we settle onto his couch. "So, how often do you visit the salon? It's quite a place, isn't it?"

"Usually every two weeks, or more often in the summer if I'm feeling in the mood. I could sit there all day soaking my feet."

"Really? Very interesting." There's a hint of amusement in his voice. He sets down his beer and surveys me. "You have very pretty feet, you know. Very elegant. May I?" he asks, gesturing towards them, and I smile. He takes them in his hands, squeezing them, massaging, and it feels nothing like the woman at the salon. His touch relaxes me until I'm slumped into the couch. Nobody's ever touched my feet this way and certainly not with such a wicked look on their face.

"I've been wanting to touch them ever since I saw you today," he says, not looking at my face but still staring at the wonders he holds in his hands. He leans forward and takes my big toe in his mouth. My first instinct is to close my eyes, but the sight of him giving my toe a blowjob, for that's certainly what this is, is too intense. My cock is now hard as I watch him tenderly minister to each toe, looking like he's in heaven. He picks them both up and moves from one to the other, his tongue darting between my toes, occasionally running up and down the bottom of my foot.

He brings my left foot towards his crotch, pressing it against his cock. It feels pretty big, though I've never had to judge with my feet before. He slides down his shorts so my foot is pressed directly against his hardness. I push down, teasing him, as I bring my hand to my own cock. He pulls his shorts off and lies down in front of me, and I bring both feet together so they surround his cock. I'd suggest lube but he's already almost there, frantically pressing my feet against his prick. He thrusts fast and hard and my feet tickle a little, but I'm so turned I don't even notice. I work myself at the same pace and in no time, spurt all over my ankles and feet. He's right behind me, the sight of my come on my feet too much for him. He screams as he releases. My feet are now covered and he rubs them along his skin.

After we clean up, there's nothing much left to say or do, so I head out.

"Maybe I'll see you next time at the salon," he says casually, already turning on the television.

Maybe.

Lifeline

By Erastes

"Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;"

H.W. Longfellow

"When will we be in New York darling?"

"You'll see the harbor lights on Tuesday night without fail."

"That seems incredible!"

"She's the fastest there is. She'll revolutionize sea travel, you'll see."

The couple saunter past me in the gathering dusk as I watch, leaning against the railings of the huge boat deck. I gaze after them, admiring their casual intimacy, the way his arm winds around her waist proprietarily, the loving trusting way her head rests against his shoulder. I love these tiny snapshots into people's lives. They sound so young, so wrapped up in the words of each other and I regret I did not see their faces. It would have added a dimension to the memory, something clean to cling to.

The dolphins at the prow veer off as the sky darkens and the ship ploughs on into the cool evening and, for all the passengers promenading, for all the excitement of the past few days, it is surprisingly quiet, just the distant strain of the orchestra from below. Truly a wine-dark sea. A portentous sea, soon to be full of the tales of men and their heroism. But that is to come and by then my life would be on a new route.

I must have mistimed it, for I am sure he is late, even though I knew that I could not be wrong. He stands next to me on the railing, staring toward the stern with a look of pain on his handsome face. I light a cigarette and offer him one in companionable silence. As he takes it I let my fingers brush his knuckles and we both feel the spark between us. His cheekbones, high and impossibly beautiful, shimmer in the silver evening, and his hair, golden on the pier in Queenstown, has turned to liquid moonlight.

"Problems?" I say, leaning back on the rail, letting my obvious arousal show through my tight, high waisted trousers. He looks up at me, those beautiful eyes filled with an English mistrust of strange men who speak without introduction.

"I'm sorry..." he starts, but I cut across him.

"I only meant that I saw you, in Queenstown, in the telegraph office, and you looked worried then, and you look worried now." I touch his arm in a conciliatory manner and my eyes darken at the encumbrance of cloth between my hand and his skin. "I think I know what it is you are worried about. I can help." I am pleased to see he doesn't pull away for all of his stiff upper lip demeanor. His eyes flicker, in reflex-like movements to my crotch, the heat rising from him in waves, and as he stands in the split second of indecision, I close the gap and clasp his slowness to me. He struggles slightly, but my mouth is on his ear, reassuring him, in the darkness.

"I know what it is you fear," I murmur to him. My hand slides between his legs and he whimpers childishly like the man -- unknown-to-men -- I believe him to be. All he does is tremble in my arms. "I know what it is that you have been hiding." My hand slips upwards, over his groin and I feel, to my utter delight, the life surging beneath the serge and I step back, into the shadow of the lifeboat, pulling him with me, thrilling to the sudden acquiescence of him, swaying and pliant in my arms, as if hypnotized by my unprovoked attack on his person and senses. "I know what it is that you need." I wrap one arm around his back and bend him at the waist, pulling him tight against me. I push one leg between his and grind my hardness against his, now fully erect and hot as a furnace.

He tries to push me away, but I see the conflict in his face.

"I..." he manages. "I don't..." my mouth plunders his, claiming him as my own and he submits to me utterly, like I knew he would.

His mouth is sweet with brandy and sour with tobacco, his teeth perfect, his tongue languid as if waiting for a call to arms. My own coils around it, wakes it from its dormancy and he gives a soft wordless whimper as he explores my own mouth with a simple naivety that sends me to paradise. Then his hands join in and he's fumbling at my jacket buttons, wrenching them from their holes and pulling my shirt free from my trousers with an impatience which shows he's been holding onto his repression for far too long.

"That's right," I sigh in his ear. "Let it flow from you, be what you want to be." I cast a look up the deck; the young couple are making their way back toward us, together with the late night prowlers. Only one place to hide

and we stumble towards the lifeboat, both of the same mind, shirts untucked and mouths melded, my fingers popping open the buttons of his fly, certain of the prize within.

We scramble, undignified, up into the boat and I slit the canvas, we slip and slide in, giggling like schoolboys. He hits the damp planks first and his restraint, in the seclusion of this musty sea-scented cave, melts away. The moonlight pours through the rip in the canvas and he lets me unclip his braces, pull his trousers and underclothes over his pale hips. He hisses in surprise and pleasure as my mouth sinks to the soft skin under his navel and follows the trail of gold down, down, down to my reward.

As soon as I suck him into my mouth, he spurts hot, thick streams of seed and he groans in embarrassment, flinging one arm over his face. I swallow all he has to give in grateful greediness and slide up, pulling his arm away. I stroke his soft curls and his brow with gentle fingers and kiss his eyelids, his soft cheeks, his bruised and pouting lips.

"I'm so sorry," he says, almost to himself. I make reassuring shushing noises, like I would to a child, and begin to deliberately and carefully divest him of every stitch of clothing, not satisfied until he is pale and trembling in the chilly April night. I tear my own clothes from my body and then finally we are flesh to flesh. Every instinct I have wants to turn him over and plunge deep into his body, but I content myself with stroking his thighs gently and kissing him deeper and deeper feeling myself falling hopelessly under his spell like I knew I would.

Hesitantly, like a child unsure if such treasure can really be for him, his hands begin to explore my aching body and I whisper words of encouragement, gratified beyond reason that he's so eager, so quickly. I lie flat beside him and allow him to take a little control. He raises himself on his elbow and runs his hands down my chest and touches a hardened nipple, his face beautiful in a soft gaze of wonderment, his eyes aroused but sweetly unsure. He leans forward and kisses the pointed nub and I groan as his cool tongue flickers over it. He looks at me amazed.

"You like that?"

"God, yes. Kiss me, kiss me anywhere, everywhere." I writhe, possibly more than I would do normally, to show how much I appreciate his attentions, to encourage him to experiment and he obliges me. I feel his lips on my rib cage, my hip bones, my thighs, and it's all I can do not to tangle my fingers into his hair and force his head over my weeping cock. I feel his hesitation and I decide to flatter his ego still further.

"Please..." I whimper. "Please..." He little knows how he is being manipulated, but like a trained seal he takes my cock in his soft, cool, beautiful hands and kisses the tender weeping tip of it. His eyes are on my face, gauging my

every reaction to his work. His tongue flicks and drags across the head and soon all pretence of begging is dropping away from me as I push my hips forward longing to bury my length in that delicate mouth. His next words startle me.

"What do you want me to do?"

My control is lost; the ingenuousness of his voice, his sweet naivety destroys me and I growl as quietly as I can, strangled with lust. "Suck me, or fuck me, whatever you damn well please, but do it now."

"I want to fuck you," he says as calmly as if he was asking for half an ounce of tobacco. "May I?"

Realizing that this would be easier to manage than for me to breach a virgin in this confined space, I swarm up and kiss him, showing him with my lips and tongue and fingers how much his suggestion pleases me, my mind races as I consider positions, his tongue deep in my mouth, his resurfacing cock blossoming in my hand,

"Like this," I say, shifting to all fours, finding myself absurdly excited at this unexpected turn of events. I had thought that he would be submissive and eager to be taken instead of active, hard as a rock in minutes and wantonly desperate, his hands and lips frantically brushing over every inch of my shoulders and back as I position myself for him to take me. I spread my legs, turn my face for his kisses and let him work it out for himself. He's clumsy at first, pushes in just the wrong place and I muffle a cry, take a deep breath and shift slightly so his next shot goes true and he's pushing into my ass so hard sparks flash in front of my eyes.

"Oh Jesus," he sounds like he's crying, his voice hitched and ragged. "Jesus, I never dreamed..."

He clutches me as if for balance, his cock twitching deep within me. I can feel his golden pubic hair scratchy and delicious on my buttocks, and I wriggle backwards, clenching my ass muscles, giving him a taste of the delights to come. He sobs softly again and begins a steady rhythm, his cock, longer than mine, slim and probing, riveting me with his lust and need. As I relax into his happy fucking, he falls forward in grateful passion, kissing my back, nipping my neck, his hips never stopping, now beginning to drive into me, harder and yet still harder.

"Do you want me to touch you?" he groans against my ear, and I shake my head, delighted that even now, he can think of my pleasure, thrilled for the anticipation of the life we will have together if he is this thoughtful on his first time.

I want to wait; I want to fuck him so badly I can feel his ass around my cock but I relish the anticipation of lying face to face with him, watching his perfect face spasm and his seed shoot over his body. I can wait. He straightens

and grabs both my hips, pulling my body to his so that he pleasures himself in my tightness, our skin slapping together -- he learns fast. I tighten round him again, stay clenched for his enjoyment and mine and he cries out, "fuck, oh yes," the last words a mere hiss as heat explodes into my innards and he falls onto my back for support, his cock slipping from me.

I slide around and hold him as he recovers, damp and panting, kissing the perspiration from his forehead, rubbing my unrequited hardness gently against his hip while he rests.

Grateful lips lift to mine and I can see by his eyes that all doubt and confusion has gone from him. He knows who he is, and he's as eager to give pleasure as I thought he would be. Hesitation gone, he slides down my body and suckes my prick, dripping with pre-come. He has a virgin's mouth, all speed and teeth and no finesse; nothing but an eager boy, longing to please.

I guide his hands round to my buttocks, encourage him to pull me deeper into his throat, whisper instructions to suck my balls, to lap his tongue teasingly between my thighs -- all of which he does with such sweet tenderness that the next time my prick is pulled into his mouth I feel the pressure and the thrumming in my groin. I arch up toward him crying his name, which he didn't know I knew, as I tip over the precipice and over the edge of the world into the inky depths of the abyss.

The tide recedes in sweet throbbing waves and I clasp him close to me before asking him the question that will affect both of our lives.

"What if I told you that I know the future and could change yours right now? Could take you off the ship this minute and you'd never have to go back?"

He lies motionless beneath me and I kiss his sweat-dampened brow, dipping my tongue into that pretty mouth, tasting the meld of us, smoky and iridescent.

His voice is husky and guarded. "It's bad enough we did what we did and now I find out you are out of your head, or maybe I am." He goes to move and I hold him close and he doesn't struggle, not really, but groans softly as my hands slide down his flanks.

"But what if I were to prove it? If I were to tell you that there was going to be a terrible accident and most of the men on board would be killed? Would you come with me then? What are your choices? A wife who will never understand and a society that will ostracize you, or taking a risk, trusting a stranger and having a life of pleasure -- with me."

"You are mad."

"Give me 20 seconds to prove it to you." I lean down and kiss him again, feel him relax and accept me and I wait for the terrible screaming of ice on metal.

The woman sobbing at the desk was in danger of collapse. The officer was sympathetic but he had seen so much grief over the past few days, this was just another crying wife.

"But he telegraphed me!" she wept. "From Queenstown! He said he had something important to tell me!"

"I can only repeat what I have said ma'am, that your husband was not on board before or after Ireland. He did not even embark at Southampton. He is not on the passenger list. Perhaps," his voice dropped to a low murmur not wishing the whole hall to hear. "He has left you, ma'am."

Certainty Of Chance

By Catharine Bell Wetteroth

On a normal six-sided die, every number has a one in six chance of coming out on top on each roll. It also has a one in six chance of coming out on bottom on each roll. The numbers opposite each other are arranged so that they always add up to seven. One and six; two and five; three and four; they are all matched sets. If you roll two dice at once, seven is the most likely total number to come out. Seven is not six. It is also not two.

I was in the library, in a secluded corner on one of the top floors. I was supposed to be doing research on the way that population changes in predators and prey affect each other, but instead I was reading a book on probability and gambling. It was very quiet up there and I was quite engrossed in the information, and in my own semi-related thoughts.

My head jerked up as a girl's voice cut through the silence, reciting poetry in clear and ringing tones, the words hanging in the air sweetly. She was reciting Sappho. I set my book down, stood up, and wended through the stacks to find her and ask her to be quiet. I came out at the end of the aisle and saw her there in one of the carrels, and I stopped and stared at her.

She didn't notice me. She was bent down over the book, an expression of rapt fascination on her face, half obscured by her auburn hair, which was sliding down over her shoulder and hanging across her breasts. Her entire body was tensed, as if she were pushing the words out past her lips with every muscle. She was wearing jeans and a little black t-shirt and silver rings on most of her fingers.

My elbow brushed against the spines of the nearest books, and she cut off in the middle of a word, looking up at me.

Her eyes were deep green, framed with long lashes, and she had high cheekbones, a delicate chin, and the most perfectly formed lips, hanging open as if she still had rolling poetic syllables lying on her tongue, waiting to be spoken. I could almost see them there, dark and bloody against the white of her teeth, dripping with juice like bitten fruit.

"Oh." Oh, she said, and the poem faded away, its beauty dissipated. "I didn't realize anyone else was in the room. I... I didn't mean to disturb you."

"It's... it's okay." I said, even though it hadn't been.

"I'll go." As soon as she said it, even before she was done pronouncing the sounds, she was standing. She gathered up the book and fled, a blur of motion, a receding back heading down the hallway towards the elevators.

There are some moments that break time, that disrupt and shatter. Say you're engaged in an intense conversation and then the phone rings and suddenly you've plunged out of one moment and into the next, a shock, and the mood is gone, the feeling can no longer be recaptured. It's gone, replaced by something else, something different and new. The shattered fragments of the old moment are lying around your feet, broken shards of expectations, replaced by the sudden and unforeseen.

Many of these moments aren't even experienced as they happen. There's no transition, no during, just a before and an after.

Then there are the moments that seem to last forever, like the time I spent standing there just staring down the hall to where she had last been, long after she had disappeared.

And then there are the moments where everything changes and you know it'll always be like this forevermore, like the first time someone called me a dyke.

Everything is random; everything is chance. Even the meetings that people argue make sense don't actually do so. So you're in the same class, or you go to the same college. So what? Chance that you took that class. Chance that you went to that college. Chance that you were both born at the right time to be the same age. Chance that you were even born at all. Chance that you sat next to each other, chance that you spoke to each other. Chance that the laws of physics allowed for the creation of stars and planets and organic life.

There is no such thing as fate. This moment is not inevitable. You have not been moving toward it all your life. It was created by, arose out of, all the past events in your life, yes, but when you made those choices and took those actions, you were not heading toward this moment. It was certainly not the one and only possible outcome, and most definitely not the necessary outcome.

You cannot say that anything was meant to be. Nothing is meant to be. Things just happen.

The probability of two events happening in combination is the probability of the first event's occurrence multiplied by the probability of the second event's occurrence. There is no such thing as an original idea.

A few months later, at the end of the year, after the last papers were turned in and the last exams were taken, I went to a party the night before heading home for vacation. Most of my friends had left already, so I didn't really

have anyone to spend time with, and I figured that getting drunk with strangers was as good a way to wash away the stress of academic work as anything else might be. The law of averages is more accurate for experiments involving large numbers and, even though many of them had gone away, there are a lot of students at this university.

Then I saw her, standing on the other side of the room, leaning in a corner, wearing what could have been the same outfit but didn't have to be, given the standard interchangeability of blue denim and black cotton. She was holding a plastic cup, just like the one I was holding, staring at it with the same fixity she had given the book of Sappho, some invisible wall forming around her, built from her solitary and determined nursing of this drink, from her hair pulled down around her face. She didn't seem to notice me staring at her.

Quantum events are measured in probabilities. There's a theory that the universe branches off at each probability, each event, going both ways in different worlds, creating ever splitting alternate universes. Everything is true, everything happens, somewhere.

I walked toward her across the crowded floor, slipping through the other bodies in their milling, unpredictable yet so familiar patterns.

She looked up at me as I approached and leaned against the wall next to her, facing her. There was no recognition in her eyes. Had I expected that there would be?

"Read any good poetry lately?" I asked. She stared at me with an expression of polite incomprehension, polite enough to border on disdain. "Like, in the library?"

At that, a spark of memory must have lit up, because she gave me a weak smile. "Dylan Thomas, recently." Her voice was husky, low and warm. It seemed to slide across my skin on its way to my ear.

"Isn't he rather morbid?" I asked, unable to think what to say next after my not so very witty opening line.

She shrugged, then took another sip of her drink.

The heat death of the universe has actually already happened and most everything is neutrinos, ghostly and nigh undetectable, totally removed from anything in our sensory existence, or dark matter and dark energy, inexplicable and theoretical. Eventually the entire universe will dissipate like last night's dream, like the steam from your morning coffee. There may be conservation of energy, but the heat equations are vectors.

I needed to say something else, or I would just slip away, and she would remain forever a distant galaxy, receding subjectively faster than the speed of light. The pale glow from the cloth-draped lightbulbs in the room picked out a rainbow in her hair, glints of green and red and blue shimmering on each strand. She smelled faintly of something floral, but I couldn't identify what it was.

"What's your name? I'm Jos. That's short for Josephine."

She gazed up at me, her green eyes dark below her lashes. "Anna." There was something in her voice that made me think she might be lying. I paused. There's some joke about how 75% of all statistics are made up on the spot. She took another sip from her cup. I didn't know what to say; I didn't know what to do. The tip of her tongue flickered out and traced the corner of her lip, licking up a drop that had caught there. I could still see the ancient lyric syllables on that pink softness.

Electrons and photons behave like both particles and waves. Schrodinger's cat, both living and dead, both napping and eating pizza. How will you ever know until you open the box and collapse the waveforms and learn which probability you're living in? Until you take the chance and discover what it is that random motions have brought to you?

I leaned forward and kissed the harp's curves of her lips, flavored with pomegranates and dates, apples and plums and grapes, cinnamon and myrrh when she kissed back. No one had ever tasted so sweet so fast. My empty hand stroked over the curve of her waist and hip. I felt her fingers running along the side of my neck and my jaw, nails trickling over my skin.

I heard a noise behind me, something intrusive, and turned to see two guys leering at us. I glared back at them, grabbed her hand, and pulled her out of there. She followed me easily. We walked back to my room, somehow, not talking, our plastic cups abandoned in a trash can somewhere along the way.

I've always loved the phrase 'standard deviation.'

My room was neat and tidy for once, because practically everything had already been packed. She glanced around the room briefly, then turned back to me. She reached up and pulled her shirt off over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her small, lovely breasts quivered slightly as she lowered her arms and dropped the dark cloth to my floor. Little freckles and tiny moles were scattered across her pale skin like stars in the night sky.

I stepped toward her, ran my hands over her bare stomach, up to cradle her breasts. She moved in to me, pressing close, her teeth nipping at my earlobe. I had no idea who she was, or what she might be thinking, and at this point

I wasn't really going to try to find out. What we were doing was all I needed to know. Mystery and chaos had gotten us to this point and mystery and chaos would get us past it.

Does time pass? Does the past disappear? Does it cease to exist? Or are the past and future fixed? If each moment is always fully real, strung like a set of beads on a necklace, so that from the outside it could all be looked at, gazed upon by some omniscient God, then you never lose anything. All of it always remains. No moment is present at any other, just as no place is present at any other, but all moments are present in themselves. The passage of time is an illusion caused by the fixed exclusion of moments.

There were moments when her fingers were unbuttoning and unzipping my jeans; moments when she was kissing my shoulder; moments when I was twining my fingers through the curly hairs between her legs, losing myself in the heat and wet of her, feeling I could stay there forever. I was pressed against the wall; I was staring up at my ceiling; I was leaning down over her body. There were moments when she rubbed her nipple against my clit; moments when I sucked on her fingers; long and endless moments when I could feel the poetry on her tongue sparking through every nerve of my body.

I licked the curve of her jaw, the swell of her breast, the bump of her hipbone. Her fingernails grazed my back, dug into my flesh. Her hair swept down across my thighs. Her eyelids closed slowly over green eyes, hazy with sensation, lashes feathering against her cheeks, over the dark circles worn away in the delicate skin from too many nights spent... I didn't know how spent.

She gasped, moaning and writhing, her breath coming in sharply, her throat creating rough half-sounds. The barren walls of my room, stripped of all decoration, loomed over us, harsh and alien, exacerbating the fact that she was the only thing to focus on here.

The only thing, and such a full and complete thing. Her auburn hair spread over my pillow, her delicate skin spread over my sheets, her fingers spread over me. Her chest rising and falling with each breath as she tensed, arched her back, building like the curve of a wave, a curve approaching a line, infinite possibility building to certainty, until, unlike Zeno's arrow, the wall of pleasure is met and the moment slips away, tunneled to the other side. She whispered something I couldn't understand.

Eventually I fell asleep, my arm around her slender waist.

When I woke up the next morning she was gone without a trace.

Redneck Longnecks

By Dallas Coleman and Jessamy Falcon

He watched the banjo player out of the corner of his eye. The guy was big. Looked like he could pull the plow for the tractor without any help. And his hands moved so fast they were a blur on the strings. Billy shifted a little, letting the Levi's thick seams rub against his crotch and tried not to imagine too hard what those hands could do to him in the darkness and hay at the back of the stage.

The dark t-shirt pulled across the wide shoulders and sweat was starting to show around the thick bull neck. The band was tight, speeding in time, and, damn...

Okay, so tapping the foot was doing nice things for that big-ass thigh.

Taking one last sip of the piss-warm beer, he threw it in the direction of the overflowing trashcan and started angling toward the stage. His momma had told him a thousand times 'never know until you try, boy'. Mentally he rearranged where the comma went in that sentence and grinned. He liked boys well enough but men. Mmm. He licked at the sweat on his upper lip and ran a hand through his hair.

The banjo player leaned in, mustache just brushing the microphone as he sang harmony. From this distance, the eyes were just dark and the hair could be blond or gray under the big black hat, but the smile was pure sex.

And pure sex meant that he stood a better than even chance of going home bowlegged and happier than a pig in shit. Singing along with the lyrics he worked his way through the crowd until he could stand right in front of the banjo player and started moving his hips, bouncing and rocking with the beat.

The first look he got, he figured out those eyes were green. The second look, that the man had a jute necklace with a charm just resting in the hollow of that throat. The third look, Mr. Bojangles there licked his lips and nodded. Hooboy.

Mm. Mmm. Mm. Goodie. He twitched his hips a few more times for effect and then settled down to enjoy the rest of the show from the front row. The show going on inside that t-shirt and those pants that is. The music barely registered except as something to dance to. His dick was working its way all the way up to hard by the time they started the encore. The encore had those huge square hands working a mandolin, making the little instrument purr. As the final few bars faded into applause, those eyes were on him, one eyebrow cocked.

He tilted his head towards the beer tent and held up his cupped hand in the universal redneck gesture of 'want a drink? I'm buying'.

He got a nod and a grin, the big hands gathering up instruments and following the rest of the band off-stage.

He sprung for two of the still icy longnecks and meandered to the edge of the stage, resting one hip on it. The crowd was mostly gone, headed for the next stage or off into the night and their pickup trucks. He took a pull from one of the longnecks and watched as Bojangles bent over to put the mandolin into its case. Well, nice to see the back axle held up to the front-end assessment.

The guy stood and moseyed over, slow and easy, legs leading that cowboy butt right on over. Well, the chassis checked out, time to see if the motor was well-tuned.

He was given a slow tip of the hat and a deep 'howdy', voice rumbling like a pair of glass-packs on a '67 'vette.

He handed across a bottle and tried very hard not to be jealous when the lip got sucked on before a swallow was taken. Clearing his throat, he took a swallow of his own. "Hiya. Nice set you have there. I mean, had."

"Thanks. It's a good gig." Another long swallow was taken, throat working, then one of those hands was held out. "Trace. Trace Reneau. Thanks for the beer. 's thirsty damned work up there in the lights."

He shook the big paw firmly. "Billy Trace and no problem. I was working up a sweat just watching ya'll play tonight. It was some sweet stuff. Haven't heard mandolin like that in a long time."

"Yeah, you looked like you were having a fine time." He got a honey in the summer sun smile, the look long and lingering. "It's mighty nice, having someone to appreciate good music."

Nodding he took another long look of his own. "What's the point of coming if you aren't going to have a good time?" He grinned and pointed the butt end of his beer bottle towards the tree end of the field. "Wanna walk and let the breeze dry the sweat out?"

"I could handle a walk, loosen up the tight bits."

He did his best not to choke on that statement but the twinkle in Trace's eyes made it okay. "Right. No cows in the field this season so no landmines to watch out for."

"Hell, dry as its been lately, I'm supposed they're not shitting dust." He got a wicked grin and Trace started walking, hips swaying nice and easy.

He watched for three strides then caught up, looking at Trace out of the corner of his eye. "That's what beer is for. Lubrication."

Oh, now. That laugh? Peaches soaked in Daddy's finest bourbon. Damn. "There's something to be said for the right type of lubrication, Billy, that's the truth."

He grinned. "Bet you could show me a couple then, huh?"

"I reckon. I've been told I've got a good hand with it."

He let the back of his hand brush against Trace's. "Sure does look like it." He looked away at the moon. "Sorry. Been a while and I'm outta practice at the flirting thing."

"Flirting's for them that don't know what they want. Appears to be that we've got that figured out."

He nodded, quick and fast. "True enough. Beyond short guys with brown hair you got a preference?"

"Like the way you went for what you wanted. The rest? We'll have to play together, see what harmonizes." He got a grin and one hip bumped against him. "Already like your taste in music."

"Should invite you over to check out my record collection sometime." Damn, was he blushing? Blessing the fact it was full night, he took another swallow of his beer.

He got another one of those low chuckles. "I'd like that. First though, I believe we've got some slow dancing to do."

Trace moved with him behind a big assed cottonwood, the music from the festival just audible. One hand landed on his shoulder, the other took his hand, big body moving, nice and easy.

Oh, that was nice. He stepped in closer and let Trace lead.

They moved together, slow and easy, the man sliding them together like a tongue-in-groove board, a low hum filling the air.

"I'd say we harmonize okay," he said softly as they did a small two-step further around the tree. The last of the artificial lights were blocked out by the tree and he could feel Trace's beer bottle knocking against his hip.

"Mm-hmm. Not bad at all."

Trace's hand left his shoulder, the straw hat landing at the foot of the tree. He got a long, slow smile as that hand settled back. "Damned hard to steal a kiss when your hats are wrestling."

He chuckled. "True enough." He leaned in and settled his lips on Trace's. Beer, salt and, somewhere under it all. red-blooded male. Damn fine male.

The mustache tickled, just there enough to be a constant sensation, brushing his lip. Trace kept it light, easy, then there was a touch to his bottom lip, wet and hot, tongue slipping out to steal a taste. He welcomed it in, sucking a little and giving chase with his own tongue. Billy let his hands grip the shirtsleeves, wet cotton rucking up under his fingers.

A low moan slid right into him, one of Trace's hands sliding down to cup his ass, thumb hooking in his back pocket. Pushing forward with one leg, he leaned his weight into Trace and freed up one hand long enough to pull the t-shirt out of his jeans. The five o'clock shadow on Trace's jaw scratched up against his own giving him a sandpaper buzzing across his skin. Perfect.

Trace rocked them together, hips moving with their own rhythm now, music sort of lost in moans and heavy breathing and the rasp of denim on denim. He hooked his fingers on Trace's belt loops, then pulled on Trace until his own back was resting up against the tree. Hell, this was the best music he'd heard tonight, the one they were making right here, teeth clicking together as he went down into the kiss again.

Trace snuggled right in, that hard bulge sliding right into the curve of his belly, hot through their clothes. The wood at his back was a fine contrast with the heavy body in front of him. He liked that, he liked it a lot. "Yeah," he muttered as the kiss finally broke long enough to grab air. "More of that."

Trace's chuckle was deep, all sandpaper and gravel and one of those long hands wrapped around his hip, fingers cupping his ass and squeezing. "I can do more."

With a grin he reached in and popped the top button Trace's jeans. "Of that sir, I had no doubt."

That got him a chuckle and a nod, those lips sliding down to tickle his throat, the sensation of stubble fighting with the liquid heat of tongue and sending lightning down through his boots. Sweeter than Momma's blackberry jam and all the spice of good chili. He took advantage of the looser waistband and pulled on Trace's t-shirt, untucking it. One hand slipped inside the jeans, feeling the curve of Trace's back and the muscles that jumped under his touch. It wasn't a matter of if, it was a matter of when. God damn Trace's kisses were good.

"Shit, Marthy, you've a fine touch." Trace's hand tightened for a heartbeat, then loosened to slide around to his belt buckle, thumb stroking his cock. "Turnabout's fair play 'n all."

Hissing in surprise he bucked up into those quick fingers. "Your hands are good at a lot things, 'parently."

"Everybody's got a talent." His zipper went south with the rest of the blood in his brain as hot, callused fingers fished out his cock -- sure as white on rice.

"Oh god," he muttered or at least he hoped he'd muttered it as he fumbled with Trace's jeans.

"Shit, yeah, cowboy. This is a fine dance." They struggled and shifted until. Oh. Oh, yeah. There. Trace went one way and he slipped a little and there they clicked, just like hand in glove. As close as peas in a pod but not as incestuous as kissing cousins, which was good since his cousins were butt-ugly. He rocked his hips forward and then back, bark scraping up his skin in counterpoint.

They moved faster, neither of them taking the time to figure who was leading the damned beat, just going with it. Well, going with it until Trace's damned hand wrapped around both of them and started pulling, playing him like nothing going.

Then the world disappeared in a haze, like summer afternoon thunderstorms and all he could hear was the roar in his ears and Trace's hoarse. One rough thumb dragged over the tip of his prick, the sensation sharp, insistent, both of them grunting in a lust-driven harmony.

He clenched his hands tight onto Trace's ass and fought not to come. "Close. Real close, baby."

"Yeah. Yeah..." His breath whooshed right out of him as they pressed harder, Trace's cry ringing past his ear, heat splashing against him.

Good. Perfect even. The evening stubble on both their cheeks rasped together, burning his face even as his balls tightened up. He came, burying his face in Trace's neck. "Good God almighty, thank you."

Trace rumbled, the sound happy and tickled and sex all in one. "Amen, brother."

He chuckled. "Guess that Sunday school thing stuck more than I thought."

"Yessir. All that talk about being thankful and seeing heaven. I get you." Trace leaned back, lips brushing his in a slow kiss. "I reckon we made us some mighty fine music, Billy. "

"Yeah." He smiled a little and gave in to the urge to push the sweaty hair off of Trace's forehead. "You wanna try for another set? Or is this a one time gig?"

"I'm thinking there's got to be a soft spot for two cowboys to do a little more dancing..." He got a slow wink. "And a little more praying in."

He let go with a belly laugh as he yanked up his jeans and pulled on the zip. "Old time gospel. Halleluiah and pass the lube."

Trace fetched his hat and nodded, giving him that pure sex smile again. "Easy as 'Come to Jesus' in whole notes."

"Aw, you just made a funny." He tipped his hat back and wiped his hands off on his jeans. "Couple more beers then?"

"Yeah. They're still cold enough to be worth it and I'm still thirsty." A bandana came out and Trace cleaned up a little, both of them starting to walk. "This music making's sweaty business."

"Sweaty but so worth it for the after-party. And the beer is colder at my place." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the parking lot. "Grab your stuff and I'll take you home and show you my etchings."

Trace nodded and chuckled. "I've always been interested in a well-made etching..." Another wink, another bump of one broad shoulder. "Give me five to gather up and I'll meet you back here."

Billy nodded and dug the keys out of his pocket. Damn fine music and a player to boot. Yep, that summed up his night right well.

"See you in a few."

The Great Outdoors

By Eumenides

It was a glorious day, the first real day of summer. Warm, but not hot, sunny, but not blinding. The water, as it slid down my paddle and into my lap, was cool, but not frigid. I was damned glad I'd decided to take my kayak out for the day.

As the sleek fiberglass cut through the still water of the canal, driven onward by the powerful stroking of my arms on the two-headed paddle, I listened to the sounds of the birds, egrets and water fowl nesting nearby, the occasional pop as a fish broke water. It was heaven on earth.

I secured my paddle for a brief second and stripped off my shirt, wanting to get a start on the season's tan. I'd built up a good steam, so my craft continued through the water, straight as an arrow while I drifted, exhilarating in the feel of the sun on my chest for the first time since September. I was horribly pale -- I'd have to spend a lot of time outdoors to be fit for the beach. What a shame, I thought, to have to spend more time on the water.

I'd been paddling for about two hours, had set off from the dock with the intention of going until I was tired, stopping along the banks to eat the lunch I'd stowed in my dry hatch, then heading back. There was no current to speak of in the canal, which had been built in the early 19th century to transport lumber from the forest to the developing towns, so coming home would be as easy as going out.

My stomach rumbled and I started looking for a place to stop. The ruins of old docks were littered on both sides of the canal, but most didn't look safe enough to hold my weight. Not that I was heavy, but I kept myself in fairly good shape, and that meant muscle mass. As a last resort I figured I could just sit on the grass, but I wasn't ready to give up on the idea of a nice flat dock where I could lie down and rest after eating.

The paddle flicked through the water, left, then right, down then up, as I stretched my pecs, feeling the power of my own body. Rowing made me horny, there was no question about it, and today was no exception. Maybe the dock would be secluded enough for me to jerk off. Thinking about that stimulated more than just my prick and my pace increased.

In the distance, I saw what looked like a well constructed dock, driven into the water on good solid pilings. Perfect. It was surrounded on the land side by pines and cypress, completely private. Using the paddle as a rudder and brake at the same time, I slowed, easing towards the right side of the canal.

Hang on, there was something, or someone, already there. I had a pair of binoculars stowed in front of me which I used for bird-watching. Pulling them out, I took a good look. There was a light shape silhouetted against the dark weathered boards. Gliding closer, I saw that it was a man, and he appeared to be sunbathing.

One of the great things about kayaks is their silence. My paddles made only the slightest splash as they dipped into the water and the boat itself was mute. I was almost to the dock when I realized he was not only sunbathing, but he was nude, with only a tiny cloth to protect his cock and balls from overexposure to the sun.

His hair was dark and shoulder length, falling behind him to brush against the wood of the dock. I couldn't see his eyes, as they were closed, but his lashes were full and dark, and his body was sex on legs. Toned chest, with just a smattering of dark hair brushing across it and down in a v to his navel and below, flat stomach, well shaped thighs and calves. This was an athlete.

It was only then I noticed, pulled up on the bank, a beautiful kayak, a fairly new and incredibly expensive model, the paddle stowed carefully, a life preserved thrown down beside it. I wasn't the only one who'd marked this isolated dock as a good place for a break. It was a damned shame he was probably straight.

Oh well, I thought, nothing ventured and all that. I let the nose of my kayak bump against one of the pilings, shaking the dock slightly. He stretched, arms reaching over his head and, as he twisted, the cloth fell away and I got a look at his prick. He had to have been slightly hard, that was the only explanation for the impressive size of it. It would fill my hand. The thought of that brought me to full erection and I cursed the fact that I'd chosen to wear a Speedo instead of more spacious shorts.

"Hey, nice boat," he remarked, sitting up and adjusting the towel.

"Thanks." I pulled up to the dock. "Mind if I join you?"

"Plenty of room here - I'll warn you, though, it's not mine, so theoretically we're trespassing."

I smiled, steadied myself on the dock and prepared to lift myself out of my cockpit. Dropping the towel, my companion stood and gave me a hand, pulling me easily from the kayak, which threatened to slip out of reach, so I grabbed it and beached it.

"Thanks! I've got some sandwiches if you're hungry," I offered.

"I'm good," he answered, "I hope you don't mind my lack of clothes. My tan is pathetic."

"Mine too." I pulled out a bottle of water and sandwich. "You sure I can't tempt you?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Not with a sandwich." He lazily reached down over the side of the dock and pulled up two long necked bottles of beer and tossed one to me.

"Thanks, again." I popped the top and took a long drink. "Imported. Good stuff."

He took a drink as well, maintaining eye contact as he raised the bottle to his lips and the long neck slid in suggestively. What incredible eyes -- dazzling sapphire blue, almost black. "I never touch American beer -- you know they say it's like sex in a canoe."

"Fucking close to water," I capped, laughing, but I thought about what it would be like to fuck in a boat, bodies locked together, rocking with the waves. The beer had apparently been chilling in the water for a while; it tasted wonderful.

We sat in companionable silence, then he turned to me apologetically. "I hate to be a bother, but would you mind doing me? I mean doing my back, sorry." But he smiled again, holding out the tanning oil, and I was acutely aware of my erection filling my tight swimsuit.

He spread out the towel and arranged himself face down on the dock, arms spread above him and I straddled him, drizzling oil across his back and onto my hands. Only a thin layer of nylon separated my prick from his amazing ass - sweat was breaking out on my forehead as I fought the temptation to angle downward and grind against him.

The oil was slicking his back as I rubbed lazy circular motions across his shoulder blades, down his sides, pressing into the small of his back as he sighed contentedly.

"Nice," he commented. God, what an understatement. "If you don't mind, could you oil up my ass? Don't want to burn."

"Don't mind." The oil glistened on his rounded ass as I cupped his cheeks, daring to slide my hand over the crack. He had to be interested -- there was no doubt in my mind. The signals were unmistakable. Only one way to be sure, though. Reaching up to his shoulders, I leaned down thrusting my hard cock against his ass.

"God, yes, thought you'd never do that." He groaned and arched up into me. I lifted and he rolled, facing me now. His prick was engorged; thick and leaking, just perfect, and I slid down his body and tasted the tip, lapping up the moisture I found there, sucking at him eagerly.

I love giving head, especially to someone so incredibly responsive. He moaned, thrusting up to meet my mouth's assault, resting one hand lightly on my head, though not, thankfully, forcing my movements. His scent and taste dominated my senses, clean, with a hint of musk and sweat from his earlier exertions, utterly masculine. I adjusted my position, bringing my own prick, still encased in the tight bathing suit, to rub against his leg. He purred contentedly, like a great cat lying in the sun.

Wait, that wasn't a purr. Shit! I pulled off him and sat bolt upright and sure enough, a fairly good sized pontoon boat was making straight for us. My companion rolled sideways, reached down into his kayak and pulled out a pair of cut off jeans which he pulled on, carefully positioning his prick away from the zipper, I noted. I sat cross legged, leaning forward to hide my hard on.

The pontoon was full of what looked like college kids and, judging by the sounds they were making, they'd been drinking heavily.

"Hi there," I called, breathing deeply and fighting for control. "Hope you don't mind us taking a rest on your dock."

"No, man, it's fine. We're just going up to Derek's dad's cabin." They were tying up the pontoon, the girls giving longing looks at both me and my companion, but his eyes stayed fixed on me.

"Cabin, eh, that sounds nice. How far a walk is that?" Miles away, I hope, I added silently.

A red head, Derek maybe, responded. "Only about a quarter mile or so. Just beyond those trees." He pointed through the cypress and the horde of kids grabbed their cooler and their boombox and started up the slight hill.

I stood up to watch them as they disappeared through the trees, then turned to my companion. "Where were we?"

He smiled, "You were giving me some excellent head and I was about to reciprocate."

My legs went weak, as though I'd run a marathon as he knelt in front of me and peeled the skin tight suit down over my still-erect cock, pulling it down my legs and helping me to step out of it.

"Gorgeous," he said, nuzzling into my crotch, his breath warming me like the summer sun. Hands cupped my balls, rolling them between long fingers, then, starting at the tip, his mouth slid over me inch by agonizing inch. He hummed deep in his throat as he swallowed my prick to the root.

My legs spread a bit, not only for access but to keep my balance. Jesus, he was good, I was fucking his mouth, hands now behind me, digging into my ass cheeks, pulling them apart as his fingers sought my hole.

"Oh fuck, yeah." I gasped and spread wider. His finger, slick with the oil hesitated on the cusp of my pucker. I whimpered, unable to help myself as he grazed the ridge of my dick with his teeth and breached my hole, sliding his finger forward to brush my prostate. "Gonna come, oh holy fuck, more," I moaned.

Then his digit was gone; his mouth was pulling away as I became aware of the sound of voices coming down the hill. Those damned kids had forgotten something and were coming back to their boat.

"Behind the trees, now!" he ordered and, dragging me by the hand, he pulled me into the pine thicket. The dead needles made a soft though prickly bed and he laid the towel down for me, then slid over top of me, our cocks dueling like swords for a minute before he slid lower, sucking and biting at my nipples, his tongue trailing a fiery path down my chest and belly.

The kids were on the dock, a boy and a girl, and they were kissing, judging by the sounds which came clearly through the silence of the canal. They'd be able to hear us just as well and I bit back the soft cries that were spilling from me as his mouth hesitated over my groin, teeth playing in my curling pubic hair.

He looked up at me and God, those eyes could have melted glass. "I want to fuck you."

My breathing was coming in ragged gasps as his hand clamped down on my prick. "Yes, God, yes, please, fuck me, fill me up!" I hadn't asked about protection, stupidly didn't care, but my companion was clearly a man of the world and he pulled a small packet from the pocket of his discarded shorts.

"Turn over for me," he ordered and I complied, pushing my ass high into the air trembling and eager, looking back to watch as he slowly unrolled the condom over his stiff prick.

The noises coming from the dock had gone beyond kissing now and I was glad. They weren't likely to stop their activities to check out odd sounds. My companion's cock was nudging at my hole. Then, without hesitation, he

rammed home and I felt his balls slapping against my ass. So fucking wonderful, I thought, reveling in that marvelous edge of pleasure/pain that anal penetration gave me.

God, he was big, bigger than my usual partners, and every thrust seemed to open me further and further, hitting just the right spot to send waves of delight coursing through my body. I started to reach down to touch myself, but his hand was there first. The rhythmic thrusts in my ass and on my cock were like the dipping of my paddle into the water had been earlier, regular and strong and hard, bringing me closer and closer.

I clenched my ass around his prick and he groaned; it was as though I'd flipped a switch and he slammed against me hard, losing all semblance of control. So was I, God, I could feel my release building in my balls, my orgasm was inevitable now and I rocked against him, battering against his hand and cock and his prick was spasming within my ass and he was coming, screaming out his climax without regard for silence or secrecy.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck yes, split me, God, please," I begged and his hand worked over me like lightning and I was spilling over him, over the towel as I convulsed against him.

I felt him withdraw carefully, then I let my shaking thighs collapse down onto the towel, sinking into the bed of pine. In the silence, I could plainly hear the high pitched keening of a girl in ecstasy. So I wasn't the only one who'd been fucked and, apparently, fucked well on the banks of the canal that day.

My companion was sitting beside me on the towel, pulling on his shorts. "That was incredible, just so damned good," he said. I rolled over, allowing the cool breeze from the water to wash over my sweating body and prick.

"Yeah, it was. Thanks." The sounds below us were showing no sign of abating. "Looks like we're stuck here for a bit longer," I commented, smiling lazily up at him, my fingers stroking up his legs to slide under his shorts.

"What a fucking shame," he said, smiling back.

Fair Trade

By Mira Katzman

The party came complete with a live jazz band, catered buffet, and easily a hundred and fifty people he had no particular interest in getting to know better. Richard sipped his drink and watched Nora happily chat up the other side of the room. She was in her element, naturally; this was her party after all. The ground floor of the house was full of her friends and generous donors to her charitable trust of the week. The wine gracing his glass was an import from Europe, selected earlier in the summer at the same time she had chosen her dress. Both had been imported with delicate secrecy, the first to avoid irritating Prohibition laws, the second to prevent any aspiring socialites from stealing Nora's thunder on her most important night of the season. Needless to say, both additions to the party were a definite success. Richard felt a moment of pride at being able to assist her even if only in the smallest ways.

He couldn't really complain about his situation tonight. She had attended her fair share of dinners for his firm, smiling and greeting perfect strangers for hours on end while he chatted with his clients. It wasn't even that the party was uncommonly dull, quite the opposite in fact. He had arrived to find he was an unexpected celebrity. Men and women whom he had never met before in his life had been coming up to him all night and congratulating him for his success in adding a new and insanely expensive diamond ring to Nora's pretty little finger. Really, he found it rather unnerving.

Nora had mentioned wanting to tell her closest friends, he just hadn't counted on them telling everyone else. Richard had vaguely hoped things would stay quiet until the inevitable announcement in the paper. Now it was pretty much futile. At random, groups of well-wishers would pounce on him to share their unsolicited opinion on the glories of marriage. It was all he could do to smile and nod, wondering what their connection to Nora was. If he got one more 'I'm sure you'll be very happy together' from a complete stranger, he was going to bolt to the back garden with a bottle of scotch and to hell with being happy about the upcoming Blythe-Kimball alliance. It was a pity eloping just wasn't an option.

Richard slipped through the crowd until he found an unpopulated corner of the lounge and leaned against a convenient pillar to rest. He'd get scolded for hiding later, but it would be worth it for a moment or two of quiet. A buffet table lined the far wall, piled high with fruits, little cakes, and several cut crystal punchbowls that could double as bathtubs in a pinch. He wondered if Nora owned them and then wondered if he cared.

Richard was just guessing how much each of the monster-bowls must have weighed when a flash of vibrant red caught his eye. Moving like a cardinal among a flock of starlings, someone was energetically darting past

bystanders in order to skim the array of food. Several other people turned to watch as well, whispering questions to each other as they tried to fathom the anomaly.

Early spring wasn't a good season for red. Most of the society types were happily trotting around in boring pastels and florals. It only made the contrast more striking. Richard leaned a little to the side, trying to get a better view past a flock of men in formal black. He wanted another peek at the individualist who dared to wear red, engaged or not, he had to admit he was intrigued by any woman who demonstrated such stubborn spirit. Two couples moved towards the door and he was blasted by the color again, this time noticing something he had missed before. It wasn't a dress, but a suit.

The 'lady in red' was undoubtedly a man.

Richard hid his smirk in his drink, entertained for the first time all night. No wonder the parental-types were scandalized. For a woman, the out-of-season color was faux pas, for a man it was positively unheard of. Looking down at his own sedate gray, he had to admit the stranger had balls. He was also blessed with looks enough to pull it off well.

Dark haired, fair skinned, and even at a distance, clearly possessing ego a-plenty, the young man would have been striking with or without his bold fashion choice. Coolly ignoring the stares, he took his time picking amongst the snacks and claiming his drink. He smiled handsomely as he nodded at a few random people he seemed to know and, as suddenly as he had arrived, vanished again into the crowd.

Sighing over opportunities lost, Richard finished his drink and headed back into the fray. Usually doing his duty by Nora wasn't so tedious. This time, however, he just couldn't find the will to put his heart into it like he should have. Richard found himself scanning the crowds even as he shook hands and smiled, hoping despite the futility of it all, to catch another glimpse of the unusual stranger. Eventually even his well-meaning patience found its limit and he retreated onto the patio to get a breath of fresh air.

Entirely alone for the first time in hours, he picked his way through the shadows to one of the ornamental metal chairs and collapsed into it with a sigh. Glancing back at the crowded dining room, he noted that no one was looking his way and, weighing his options, realized he was willing to add smoking to his list of potential crimes for the night. Richard produced a cigarette and matches from his case, thoroughly anticipating a short but satisfying wallow in vulgarity.

"Well well, someone looks relaxed."

The words were spoken almost into his left ear, catching Richard entirely by surprise. Cool and satin dark as the night air itself, he felt a shiver down his spine, unconsciously reacting to the undertones. Before he could get more than his chin around, Richard was caught by the shoulders and drawn smoothly back into his chair. He felt another tingle, this time at the assured strength he felt in the hands sliding over his shoulders. They settled at the base of his neck, squeezing carefully, fingers daring to slide upwards ever so, just enough to brush the bare skin above his collar. Richard sat perfectly still, riveted by the simple touch.

"Ooooh don't tense up, darling. I didn't mean to startle you." Amused, seductive, the purr came again. This time warm breath tickled the skin of his neck.

"Who are you?"

"A secret admirer."

Richard tried to tilt his head to catch a glance but found himself thwarted. His captor bent out of view and then deliberately nuzzled against the back of his neck, forcing him to face forwards under the playful assault. Just as he was rationalizing the strange caress it shifted, playfulness forgotten. Lips followed the base of his hairline, teasing the skin they found there. Richard bit his lip, taken by surprise once again at how quickly his body responded to his strange encounter. He had been reasonably calm when he had sat down, tired, frustrated, but calm. Richard shifted, knowing he wasn't being terribly subtle about alleviating the discomfort of his sudden and powerful hard-on.

"You'll have to tell me what cologne you're wearing later. I may want to buy a bottle."

The low murmur only added to his pleasure, the undeniable masculinity of the person kissing his neck increased the amount of trouble he would get into if found. They were still within view of the large French doors. Someone might look up from their platter of pastry, see him allowing himself to be groped by a random man in public, and raise unholy hell at any moment. Nora herself, might come along, absently fix a drape, and see something to convince her that their engagement was a terrible mistake.

He was certain he didn't want that.

He was fairly certain.

A tongue as smooth and silky as the voice had been moments before grazed the edge of his ear.

He was willing to consider his options.

Richard clung to the arms of his chair, trying to keep himself from flying apart as the wicked mouth dared trespass further, sucking daintily along the edge of the unassuming cartilage. His own mouth had no such pleasant task to engage it, and so had to resort to responding inanely. "Ummm. Well, I'm sure I smell better than I taste?"

He received a chuckle for his weak effort. "I highly doubt that."

Leaning back into the knowledgeable grip of the hands kneading his tired shoulders, he decided that maybe he didn't care. "Have we met before?" Richard got another low laugh. He hadn't thought his question funny.

"No. No, I think not. But I know who you are, if that's what you're trying to ask." A wet kiss was placed just behind his ear. Richard squirmed again in his chair, wondering at his instant reactions, and whether he dared try to rearrange himself and make his plight obvious. His cock was getting more ready by the moment, leaving him to wonder if the scenario alone would be enough to get him off. He wasn't keen on making a fool out of himself like a sixteen year old, but if hands and whispering mouth continued their present course he might end up doing just that.

"I hear you're to be congratulated. She's a lovely girl. You'll both be very happy, I'm sure."

The simple words should have taken the edge off the mood. The way they were delivered however, only seemed to add to the strange tension in the air. Still, it was a reminder of just what he was doing, and where. Richard shook off the helping hands and leaned forward slightly to put a safe distance between them. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage."

"From what I've heard, you possess every sort of advantage." The chuckle hit him again, warming him to the bone and adding to the burning heat between his legs.

"What sort of advantages are these?" Finally free to confront his admirer Richard did so, turning in his chair. He was both shocked and not to recognize the muted flash of red, still brilliant in spite of the shadows. Lounging against the back of his chair, his own bench not more than a foot behind, the man in red flipped his bangs back, and let them fall forward again in a boyish gesture.

"Well just look at you. You've got money, education, power, looks. You're supposed to be a fine sportsman, have obvious good taste, a gorgeous apartment downtown, another in London, and friends in high places in any city I

could name." On the receiving end of one for the first time, Richard realized his new acquaintance's smiles were lethally charismatic.

The man went on, obviously enjoying being stared at. "And from what I hear, you've never had any problem luring *anyone* to your bed. So add to this that you've just this week proposed and been accepted by one of the most eligible women in the Hamptons and you tell me, what isn't there to admire about you?"

Richard blinked, wondering just how much gossip there was going around about him and who was the source. The way the man had said 'anyone' implied more than just the usual fodder from the rumor mill. Some things he was more discrete about than others. Schooling his face into his usual disinterested look, he found his voice. "Some of that is hardly common knowledge."

"I might have exaggerated a point or two." The man smiled coyly, at ease with the subtle dare he had set forth.

"Who are you?" Richard tried again, both amused and alarmed that he had no idea who his companion was.

"A friend of Nora's." His companion grinned, his mouth both wicked and inviting. "You can call me Jay. As for you, you're Richard. As you can see I've all heard *all* about you."

"I'm surprised."

"That you're gossiped about?" Jay asked artfully.

"That Nora would have a friend like you," Richard replied dryly, deliberately looking over the scarlet suit. "You don't exactly seem her sort of people."

"Nora's sort of people includes anyone rich enough and idle enough to be in the same clubs she's in." Jay waved his hand dismissively. "She's very inclusive like that."

"And you fall into this category?" Richard raised his eyebrows in disbelief. Somehow he couldn't picture Jay being the sort to spend his Saturdays at church socials or mount campaigns to raise awareness of the plight of orphans, or third-world nations. His subconscious latched onto the word 'mount' and reminded him forcibly that he was more than ready for a little sexual relief.

Jay smiled again, seeming to read his doubt and his mood, with ease. "Oh I might be rich compared to some, but I'm certainly never idle. I usually avoid these parties like the plague. I was coerced into coming to this one, but I

admit I was secretly looking forward to it. I was tempted by the guest list." Jay raised his glass. "And the food, of course."

"Of course." Richard agreed mildly.

The more he watched Jay, the more definite his desire became. It had been a long time since a man had managed to turn his head. Several years since his last encounter, in fact. Jay's mix of glamour, ego and raw sensuality was absolutely captivating. It had been ages since he had met someone so obviously willing who didn't turn him off immediately. Being hunted wasn't his usual style. With Jay he was willing to make an exception. Dark eyes studied him through thick lashes. Richard pretended not to notice, enjoying the heat building in his blood.

Jay's expressive lips were a thing of beauty. They could completely change his look with just a smile or a pout. The subtle way he leaned closer when he talked was a clear invitation. Richard wondered if he dared to reach out and comb his fingers through the artfully tousled hair. It looked silky, but without touching it he couldn't be certain. The only question in his mind was why the man was flirting in the first place. Charity dinners were hardly the ideal location for any sort of encounter, especially with his own newly engaged status being the talk of the night. He wondered if this was some sort of final 'test' Nora had found for him. Maybe she had gotten wind of one of his unpublicized affairs and wanted to make sure of things before tying the knot.

Richard frowned, not wanting to believe Nora could be so petty. It didn't match the rest of her personality, but it wasn't like they knew each other all that intimately. They worked well together socially, slept together at the appropriate intervals and he would occasionally let her pick out his ties, but other than that they each had their own lives to lead. Jay continued to watch him, boldly encouraging with his eyes as he swayed a little to the distant music. Watching him move, Richard made up his mind.

Reaching out he caught the young man gently by the cheek, sliding curious fingers over the smooth shaved jaw and up to pet the loose hair. It felt exactly as it looked, making him smile despite himself. Jay tilted his head and hummed a little in appreciation, eyes half lidded as they continued to watch his every move. Richard slid his hand down again until he could stroke his thumb over the tempting lower lip. "Does Nora know what you're up to?"

"Dear lord, I hope not. She'd pitch a fit." Jay reached up casually, covering Richard's hand with his. "Were you worried I'd kiss and tell?"

"Want to go talk somewhere more private?" Richard found himself caught, his hand guided forward until it rested against Jay's lips. The man only smirked again, deliberately blowing gently over and then mouthing his captive

thumb. Richard wondered how many more obvious invitations he would be able to ignore before losing all ability to refuse. His dress slacks were already uncomfortably tight.

"How much do you have on you right now?"

"What?" He blinked. It was hard to concentrate with the lush mouth and tongue sliding over his fingers. His brain was more than happy to substitute other, eager, parts of anatomy for the job. Jay's mouth was incredibly soft. It was all Richard could do to stifle the moan when his forefinger was sucked in deeper, surrounded completely by the wet heat. Jay worked his tongue over his prize a moment before stepping back, putting a teasing distance between them.

"How much? You've got your wallet, don't you? Or did you leave it upstairs in your room?"

"Um." Richard blinked, still trying to get his brain to process the unexpected question. "I have it. You're serious?"

"Oh yes." Jay smirked. "Like I said. Rich, not idle. I'll give you a fair trade. How much have you got?"

Richard counted bills in the near darkness. "Not much, looks like thirty three dollars or so."

"Thirty will be fine." Jay held out his hand. "Give it to me?"

"In exchange for what?" Curious, Richard pulled out the money, but didn't turn it over quite yet. The word 'trade' stuck in his head the way the word 'mount' had moments before. Everything about their conversation was so sexually loaded he wasn't sure what either of them was actually saying anymore. The idea that Jay was some sort of professional seemed to make a great deal of sense in a twisted way. He had never heard of an escort casing out a party like this unattached, but obviously, here he was.

More than ever he was curious how Nora knew Jay at all. Maybe she was a former client inviting him out as a last gesture? Maybe Jay was still meeting with her behind his back. Richard frowned, realizing the idea made him jealous. The idea of his fiancé willingly taking someone like Jay to bed while she barely tolerated his own perfectly acceptable romancing was strange. Jay's wild energy was exactly the antithesis of everything Nora represented. Even now he seemed to be almost begging to be fucked, exuding a sort of pure carnality that Nora would find barbaric.

Jay simply reached up and claimed the small fold of bills, tucking it into a pocket of his coat. "You give me cab-fare and I give you something nice. It's a fair trade, isn't it darling?"

Tugging him a little further into the shadows, Jay led him off the patio and around the side of the house. "Now, I think you were mentioning somewhere a little more private, yes? The library, I once discovered, has a couch perfectly suited for what I have in mind, and the benefit of being both accessible from the lawn and positioned on the other side of the house."

"How do you know that?" Richard smiled and followed obediently, half torn between worry that he was doing something incredibly stupid and half reassured that his suspicion had been correct. If Nora had been a former client, maybe she wasn't as uninterested in sex as she seemed to be. It had certainly been unremarkable up until now. He wondered if she was waiting for him to make the first move.

"I've been here before, of course. Now let's see if they still keep a spare key in the planter."

Jay led him around a corner and up a set of steps he was only vaguely familiar with, moving through the shadowy back entrance with calm certainty. A moment later they were through the French doors and surrounded by the comfortable quiet of the empty library. Jay wasted no time, turning to catch him by the shoulders, tugging him down for a hard kiss.

Unprepared for the move, at first Richard could only try to catch his balance. By the time he was certain he had his feet under him, he found Jay had somehow managed to tug his jacket off and toss it aside, moving on to his belt. Dexterous fingers teased his erection through the front of his trousers, not content to wait until the belt was loose. Catching Jay's face between his hands, Richard retaliated by paying close attention to his kiss, letting it be as rough and hot as Jay seemed to want it, exploring all the man had to offer. Tangling his tongue around Jay's, he was please to hear a wanton moan in reply. Jay cupped his hand over Richard's shaft a second time, chafing it through the layers of cloth in playful revenge. Richard surrendered, tilting his head back to gasp for breath, rocking against the sweet pressure.

"Sit down before you fall down, darling." Jay coaxed him backwards and down onto a couch he hadn't even noticed until he bumped into it. No sooner had he sunk into the leather seat than he was pinned. Jay straddled his lap to resume kissing, touching, undoing his fly to reach underneath. Exploring fingers stroked the final layer of fabric that separated them. "Well well, and here I had you figured for a briefs sort of man."

"Sorry, no." Richard gasped as he was taken in hand, his shaft carefully guided free of the confining waistband and stroked appreciatively.

"A genuine stud. I'm surprised Nora knows what to do with this," Jay critiqued with a low whistle. His gawking lasted only a moment before he returned to nipping along Richard's jaw line. He teased the tip of Richard aching erection with his thumb, seeming to delight in the slippery fluid welling up from within.

Richard felt his breath forced out of him with every skilled stroke across the sensitive skin, wanting to reach down and make the man stop playing around, but enjoying the uninhibited lust too much to want it to end soon. Another touch and he bucked his hips a little in response, liking the feel of Jay's thighs over his own, wanting more, wanting to feel him grinding against him, heat to heat. Richard reached down, trying to find Jay's belt and fly in the near darkness only to have his questing fingers batted away.

"No no, that won't do. It won't be a fair trade if you do that, too."

"I want you." Richard leaned forwards and caught Jay's mouth, distracting them both for a minute with his demanding kiss. "I want you."

"I'd noticed." Jay chuckled in response. "So sit back, and enjoy it, ok?"

"It?" There was no room for questions however, just mind blowing sensation. Jay slid off his lap, slipping onto the floor between his legs, pulling his pants and boxers down over his thighs part way in order to make room to work. Richard hissed and forced himself to watch, something about the half-light only making it more erotic as first the tip and then the entire top half of his dick was taken into the welcoming heat of Jay's mouth.

The man moaned a little as he started to suck, seeming more than happy to bend to his task, sending brain melting vibrations traveling down Richard's cock and straight through his balls. He gasped as Jay sucked harder, giving him the best head Richard had received in recent memory. The man's mouth was a marvel, teasing, licking, taking him shallowly then going deep. It was never the same trick for more than a moment or two, changing just as he found his rhythm each time, preventing him from catching his breath. Jay's fingers worked what his tongue didn't. They circled the base of Richard's dick, rubbing saliva back into his skin, before sliding down to tease the short hairs of his groin. It was a rich counterpoint to the skill of the wicked mouth torturing the rest of him.

Richard reached down to run his hands through Jay's hair, marveling again at its unstyled softness. Jay moaned at his touch, the raw sound almost making him lose it. Wanting more, Richard dropped his other hand onto Jay's hair, touching, petting and, ever so gently, guiding. He didn't want to teach the man his business, obviously Jay needed no tutorials, but Richard loved the illusion of control it gave him, easily slipping into a favorite fantasy. He almost thought it had to be a dream when a hand reached up to cover his own, encouraging him to tangle his

fingers tighter into Jay's hair while at the same time Jay's other hand wormed its way under his hips coaxing him to thrust harder.

He gasped and looked down to see the dark eyes watching him, silently daring him to do as he hadn't done in years. Only once had he ever found a partner willing to let him do as he wished and that had been far too long ago. The idea of someone eagerly wanting the sort of rough sex he yearned for was enough to get him off without actually going through with the act itself.

Richard fought to form a few short coherent words. "You sure?"

He was sure if Jay could have smirked, he would have. Instead Jay swallowed, relaxing his throat and pulling Richard's hips up at the same time, demanding.

"Oh god yes."

He wasn't going to ask twice. Holding Jay's head firmly between his legs, Richard began thrusting into Jay's mouth in earnest, crying out at the pleasure it brought. It was **good**. His cock registered nothing but the essentials, the heat and wet, the silky smooth slide in and utterly sinful friction on the way out.

Richard heard a faint pleading and wondered at the sound. It had to be him, Jay's throat was entirely too full for such noises. The man's eyes were half lidded once more, glittering with lust as he urged Richard to fuck his mouth with hard strokes. Richard sighed as he braced his shoulders against the couch for leverage. He wasn't at any risk of holding back. It was just what he wanted, what he had been craving for months. For Nora to even consider such coarse handling, with her mouth or any other part of her, was unthinkable.

Somehow the momentary vision of her offended expression only made him thrust harder, gladly taking all that was offered as he gripped Jay's skull, hammering the willing throat as hands kneaded and squeezed his ass to goad him on. Jay's hair was hopelessly tangled around his fingers and his only half-undone trousers cut off circulation to his legs, but he didn't -- couldn't -- care. Need pounded along his straining muscles, almost painful as it built higher but frustratingly never high enough. The suction surrounding his dick was irresistible and yet still he couldn't come. Pounding and grinding and wanting more with every thrust it was enough to make him beg for the mercy of release.

His body capitulated, catching him by surprise. Muscle freezing energy sizzled from deep within in his groin, spilling forth with a breathtaking surge.

Richard arched and collapsed back against the couch with a gasp, suddenly powerless. His hands felt like putty as they gave up their hold on Jay's head and fell limply to his sides. His brain skittered and spun, leaving him glazed and confused as his blood thrummed happily from the exertion.

Staring up at the ceiling stupidly as he felt the heat slowly fade, Richard quietly re-ranked all his previous sexual encounters to take the current one into account. His cock tingled and throbbed as Jay licked it clean, unable to cope with the added sensation so soon after the frantic climax. Eventually there was nothing more to lap up and Jay settled for nuzzling Richard's tired shaft playfully with his nose as it softened, kissing it and the small portions of skin exposed along his thighs and stomach.

Richard swallowed and realized his throat was hoarse. He swallowed again and tried his voice. The best he could manage was a weak, "That was incredible."

"I was certainly impressed. Much more and you might have outlasted me." Jay chuckled, cheek pillowed along his thigh. Lifting a hand to explore, Jay ran an appreciative finger down Richard's exhausted cock. "Mmmm, long and thick; like a proper stallion should be. How did Nora ever acquire a quality stud like you?"

"The Peterson's dinner party. Last October. I was lonely, she was young, beautiful, and modestly witty. She talked me into funding her civic renewal project for the west side. I was impressed by her forthright attitude. We went out to dinner, then to Bermuda for a weekend; then shared fundraising duties for the governor-elect. Next thing I know she has an overnight bag tucked in my closet for one weekend a month and I'd taken to keeping a supply of shaving lotion in her bathroom cabinet. It seemed silly not to propose after that."

"She approached you?" Jay stretched and sprawled comfortably against his leg. "If so, I'm impressed, usually she has rotten taste in men."

"Have you known her long?" Richard forced his head up, afraid that if he didn't he'd doze off in an ungentlemanly manner. It felt strange to be talking about the woman he was about to marry with the man he'd just paid to suck him off. It felt right, too. He blamed his exhaustion.

Jay certainly didn't seem to have a problem with it, leaning against his leg with a lazy smile. "Forever, it seems. We played together as kids."

"Ah. That would explain how you've stayed close despite your current differences."

"Well naturally, we've grown apart a little since then." Jay agreed. "I don't claim to know all her secrets and she certainly doesn't know mine."

"She's never to know about this." Richard sighed, ruffling the man's hair. "You know that right?"

"I know. Like I said, she'd be rather unhappy with me as well, if she found out."

"Right." He reached out to caress the dark hair again, coaxing the man up off the floor and into his lap. Jay curled against him like a cat, smelling of sweat and sex through the fabric of his suit.

Richard petted Jay a while as he gathered his thoughts, laughing when he realized that the man was still fully dressed. He moved to reciprocate at least in part, hand lazily caressing along Jay's hip and settling in his groin. A still sizable bulge was tenting the stylish red trousers and Richard rubbed it, feeling its heat. Arms twisted around his neck as Jay curled closer, rocking eagerly into his hand.

Richard was more than happy to indulge Jay, the idea of Jay sprawled in his lap, thrusting between his fingers, legs spread wide as he begged for more, was pleasing in an almost physical way. He didn't think he had it in him to get hard again after the amazing blowjob he'd been given the moment before, but he still felt a coil of desire curl between his legs at the pictures his imagination painted. Pressing harder against the smooth scarlet fabric, he squeezed and chaffed the solid erection.

Bucking and groaning like the professional he was, Jay rode his touch with abandon for a moment, then, strangely, stopped.

"Mmmm, as lovely as that is. I think our time is up." Jay pushed Richard's hand away with a sigh and made to stand up.

Richard blinked at the sudden change, reaching out and taking hold of the man's waist to hold him in place. "Stay with me."

"I can't." Jay patted him sympathetically. "I've already taken all your money."

"I'll get more." Richard was surprised at himself, and yet not. He had never wanted anyone so wholly as he did at this one moment. "Name your price."

"No price. I told you, I just wanted cab fare. I spent all mine stupidly earlier this evening." Jay stood up and stretched, then started tidying his suit and tie. "Besides, if you don't go back soon Nora will wonder where you wandered off to."

"Hell with that." Richard frowned, reaching up to catch one of Jay's hands to make him wait again. "I want you."

"You are tempting, stud. But I can't stay. I'll find you again some time, ok?"

"Jay, wait." Before he could get a word in edgewise or even remember to ask for a last name, the man had slipped his grasp and disappeared.

Lingering pleasure faded into a sort of stunned numbness as he looked around the empty room and finally down at his wrinkled, half-opened clothes. A few minutes of work had him looking vaguely presentable. A stop over in a bathroom along the way had him almost back to normal. He couldn't help looking a little flushed, a little wild. Hopefully he could use it to pretend illness and escape back to his apartment for the night. Nora would understand or at least she would pretend to. So long as appearances were maintained and his problems didn't distract from her party, she would take it all in stride. Since he felt exactly the same about things in general, he was confident that they would manage a marriage together fairly well if only he didn't botch their engagement.

He found her near the kitchen by pure chance; talking to one of the caterers as they prepared to pack up. Kissing her cheek in greeting, he let her chat herself out about random party related trivia before making his play for freedom, "I hate to do this to you, Nora, but would you mind if I slip out in a few minutes? I think something I had for lunch this afternoon is trying to get the better of me."

"You do look a little feverish, Rich. You don't think it was anything you ate tonight, do you?"

Richard shook his head, not wanting to set her into a panic over the quality of the food. "No, I barely ate anything here, so I'm almost certain it was the junk food I had at lunch. It serves me right for eating on the run like I do." He smiled. "You'll forgive me, if I don't stay till the end?"

"Of course!" Nora patted his cheek, "You're welcome to rest upstairs, but if you're more comfortable at home then that's where you should be."

"Thank you." Richard kissed her lightly, unable to help comparing the chaste peck to the hungry clashes he had engaged in with Jay. He was so busy comparing the two in fact that he almost missed what she said in reply. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said that it's a pity you're leaving. My older brother, James, actually came down from the city for the day, but he's been playing hard-to-find all night." She sighed, the sound frustrated. "I barely lay eyes on him for a year, than he comes to my tonight party wearing the loudest suit imaginable and being as strange as ever. Mother used to claim that he was actually a changeling child swapped for her 'good son' by fairies when a baby."

"Your brother?" Richard blinked, suddenly feeling chill.

"Yes. I really wanted you to meet him before the wedding, just to sort-of fore-warn you, but it'll have to wait until another time, I guess."

Choosing his words carefully, he tried to get confirmation of his fears. "Now that you mention it, I did meet someone tonight wearing a colorful suit, but only very briefly."

"Colorful? It was bright *red*, Rich. You couldn't have missed it if you wanted to." Nora threw up a hand in exasperation. "I told him to introduce himself to you if he had the chance, but he probably forgot."

"No, no I definitely met him. I just didn't make the connection." Richard shook his head, not having to feign the weariness he felt. "He said something about calling a cab I think."

"Damn the man." She sighed. "Well it can't be helped. He's just like that some times."

"Don't let it get you down, Nora." Richard rubbed her back briefly. "I'll call you tomorrow, alright? Don't make plans for dinner. I'll take you down to the club."

"If you insist." She walked with him to the side door. "I'll call someone to bring one of my cars around? You shouldn't be driving the roadster if you don't feel well."

"No, I suppose that wouldn't be wise." He agreed, wishing his cock wouldn't stir oddly at the idea of getting a ride.

"Pity James couldn't have stayed a little longer. I really wanted to introduce the two of you before you both fled the party." Her pout was entirely artificial, but rather charming because of it. Whatever her current irritation level with her brother, Nora showed no hard feelings about his own early retreat. She waived down a servant to pass the instruction along and hooked her hand over his arm supportively. "I had heard the prospect of marriage made some men weak in the knees, Richard, but really."

He chuckled at the gentle tease. "Well, what can I say, one look at you and I'm knocked off my feet."

"Charmer." Nora opened the door and paused, "Oh, but look, Anthony is already here."

Richard peered around her, equally confused by the sight of the sleek black Benz that Nora usually rode in already pulling out of the garage. For a stunned moment he was certain he had been 'caught', but a glance at his fiancé's perplexed expression as she waived down the driver told him she wasn't the source of the unusually timely arrival. Brushing off the old man's hesitant explanations, she opened the door and ushered Richard in. "There now. You be good tonight, alright? I talk to you tomorrow, only don't call too early as I predict I'll have a beastly headache until lunch."

Turning to the driver, she cut him off yet again to issue her instructions. "Take him home right away, Anthony, he's not feeling well."

"Yes Miss Blythe." Her servant winced.

Smiling sweetly, she allowed him to kiss her chastely before shutting the door and waving him off. Richard sat back against the plush seat with a sigh and stretched his legs out in the generous space between the seats. He desperately needed the quiet, the time to process the strange feelings that his encounter with Jay had left behind. Learning the man's real name only compounded the questions he had thought of as he had cleaned himself up in the bathroom. Confusion was a rare state to be in after a night at Nora's. The fact that he had enjoyed himself immensely, with someone who was definitely not his fiancé seemed the principle cause. Given that Jay was actually James, Nora's brother,, a fact which he still had a hard time believing, didn't help at all. Guilt didn't make the memory of the man's mouth any less sweet.

Richard scrubbed his hair in irritation, trying to drive the chaotic thoughts from his head. It felt good to upset his traditionally well-groomed style, liberating. Sighing he loosened his tie as well, relaxing his guard now that he was safely out of everyone's sight. His actions brought a soft chuckle from the shadows -- there was a man sitting across from him. "You shouldn't do that, you hair looks a mess."

"What the-" Richard opened his eyes and noted for the first time that he wasn't alone. Tucked into the seat across from him was a very familiar man in a red suit with a similarly loosened tie. Jay had one knee tucked up under his chin, a relaxed pose that contrasted with his hesitantly pleased expression.

"Well, this is certainly awkward." Jay offered him a tentative smile.

Closing his eyes, Richard could only nod his head in agreement.

Mustang

by Tulsa Brown

"I collect orphans," he said.

I nodded blankly and smiled, eyes darting, looking for escape. Fruitcake. Nutcase. These events always brought the crazies out of the woodwork, disguised as would-be writers or gushing author groupies, convinced that pumping your arm brought them one step closer to fucking John Grisham. Or Hemingway.

But the man wasn't shaking my hand, he simply held it, clenched my bear's paw in his cool, knobby grip. He wasn't *overtly* scary: thirty-ish, in a bad brown suit, long and thin as an afternoon shadow, dark hair that should have been cut a month ago. Harmless.

Except for the eyes. They were watery-blue, slightly magnified by the large lenses of his glasses and rimmed red with passion. I'd been to enough 'Meet the Author!' nights to know the worst danger wasn't the tin-tasting salmon canapés.

"Well, it was nice to meet you but I really should be --"

"I have almost 300 of yours," he blurted.

"Pardon?"

"Your orphans. Mostly remaindered copies, but some I found in second-hand bookstores or at garage sales. I hit the jackpot at the hospital fundraiser -- a whole cardboard box of Jack Vigoreaux! I got it for a song. I was the only bidder."

Knife wound. I remembered giving the hospital those copies for their library, the fluttery, chirping gratitude of the old hens. *Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. Vigoreaux.*

The man's eyes were luminous at the remembered triumph. My intestines threatened to spill onto the carpet. I wriggled out of his grip, my voice like chalk.

"I'm very...flattered to meet such a fan." I was still murmuring my excuses, pulling away when lightning struck and spun me. "Any copies of *Every Little Kiss*?"

"Sixty-seven."

"That many! The print run was less than a thousand."

"Three-Legged Press," he recited proudly. "I was so sorry when they went under in '96." Then his face softened. For an instant he was beautiful, reverent eyes and ruddy, velvet mouth. "*Kiss* is my favorite book."

"Mine, too," I croaked. A terrible faux pas. An author never admits he *has* a favorite book, let alone his own. Or his first. In that instant we were the only two people in the room, bridged by a secret, shameful love of the imperfect.

I'd squandered my own copies, passed them out with reckless abandon to men I loved or lusted after, anyone I'd wanted to impress. It was my resume, my calling card, a cocky hello or lacerated, bleeding goodbye. Now, twelve years and three novels later, the only copy left for me was in my mother's sunroom, pristine, unopened, wedged between the Bible and *Funk & Wagnalls*.

"Are any of them autographed?"

He nodded. "More than half."

I reeled, dizzy with fresh pain. *Thanks, Jack! I'm honored. I'll never forget you.*

"Do you want to see them?"

See the betrayal in black and white, written by my own hand? Know for certain the names of men who'd discarded me, probably before the sheets were cold?

"Yes."

We slipped out of the bookstore. I wouldn't be missed in the ensemble: the bug-eyed children's author, the screechy poetess, the blustery ex-captain who'd built an entire writing career around the battle of Vimy Ridge. Local authors. We knew each other's shtick like second-string Vaudevillians.

The collector's name was Laurence. With an ancient sheepskin bomber over his suit he looked younger, a careless, dreamy Perpetual Student. Ironical, because I was in my 'professor' uniform, tweed and turtleneck, autumn

beard. I hailed a cab and we crawled into the close darkness of the back seat, the ancient springs giving way to slide us together, thigh to thigh. The firm length of his muscular leg was a pleasant surprise. He smelled nice, too, unpretentious soap and the warm, animal musk of his wooly collar. It was like huddling beside a friendly llama.

We started the journey in silence. I was still shell-shocked but the first blaze of treachery had burned off. Spider-fingers of a different grief stole into my clothes.

There is no book like your first. It's what you write when you don't know any better, raw and clumsy, painfully real. Other novels are just ideas you lasso and reel in, polish up with a thesaurus and send out to trot in the ring. Trick ponies.

Every Little Kiss had been the mustang of my body, bucking, snorting, pawing at the dirt for thirty years before it broke the traces and thundered out. It was *my* story, the lean, hungry sinews of sex and desire, my bare flank turned bravely to a ravenous unknown. That book told the world I was gay, in stilted, stiff-legged prose that shamed me now.

It was also the truest thing I would ever write. The gust was ferocious, possessive. I wanted them back, all sixty-seven, signed or not.

"...it started. With his copy."

I flinched, awake and guilty. "Oh," I said pleasantly.

The cab pulled onto a narrow street, traveled past a long row of boxy war-time houses. It stopped at one that zigzagged in front, the strange toothy grin of a wheelchair ramp.

Laurence smiled as we trudged up the slope. "I know it's an eyesore -- sure makes it easy to get a dolly into the house, though."

A dolly! How many books did he have?

Walls full. I stood in the doorway and gazed at the tiny living and dining rooms, each paneled floor to ceiling in a colorful patchwork of spines. I was agog.

"I finished my Masters in England." Laurence shrugged off his bomber and suit jacket in one quick thrust. "Lived down the street from a rare book store. Didn't come back with a dime," he said cheerfully. "Here, this is your section."

Can you be prepared to see a whole wall of yourself? Your name queued up in row after row? My face prickled and my stomach swayed, queasy with sudden embarrassment. It was as if my writer's secret jerk-off fantasy had materialized for the scrutiny of the world.

But there -- the shelf of narrow blue spines. *Kiss*. I pulled one out, heart thumping. I was startled by the condition: torn cover, dog-eared pages, soft with wear. This book had been *read*. Devoured. I kept flipping through in wonder, avoiding the frontpiece, where I would have signed. Whoever had owned this copy, I forgave him.

Laurence slipped in beside me. He'd tugged off his tie and unbuttoned the collar of his white shirt. His bare neck was ruddy by contrast, a naked thigh in the sheets.

"This isn't all of them," he said. "Some are on loan to Harbor Lights."

He noticed my quizzical look. "The hospice. They were so good to us."

Us. My eyes touched down carefully, surreptitiously around the room for the first time. Photographs. A handsome, scholarly man fading by degrees, the continuation of the story I should have been listening to in the cab. I realized this six-shelf tribute wasn't to me, but to someone who'd enjoyed me. A memorial.

"How long?"

"Four years ago." Laurence smiled ruefully. "Long enough that I should've torn down that ramp."

"But you need it for the book dolly."

He laughed, we both did. I was suddenly light with relief, effervescent, a marble statue returned to flesh.

Laurence tilted his head, shy eyes smoldering blue. "Do you know which scene is my favorite? The bus station."

"Funny - I hardly remember it."

He reached for the tattered book in my hands. "I'll show you."

"Why don't you read it to me?"

Laurence was a wonderful reader. Sitting together on the couch, he entranced me with the spare, famished voice of my younger self.

"I wanted to smell him in the blunt, probing animal way a dog wound around into the tail of another. I wanted to lap up the sour days on his skin just to shock my mouth."

I pressed my knuckles against the side of Laurence's leg. He clasped my hand and moved it on top of his thigh. Long, thrilling muscles. I stroked him hard, polyester crackling, threatening to ignite. His breath thickened, the story slowed. I crept into his crotch, teased the tight plum of his balls gathered by the fabric, cleaved by the seam.

"Oh." He put the book down and *Kiss* became the real thing. Our mouths twisted like grappling wrestlers, tongues plunging; my beard bristled against his late-night stubble. I rose up and straddled him awkwardly on my knees, my erection straining in its cramped quarters. Laurence unzipped me and my pants opened in a hot fissure. He groped me through my underwear, murmuring happily, then pulled away, lips gleaming, glasses smudged and tilted.

"Let's do 'the bus station.'"

The sweet shorthand tingled with wickedness; my life had become someone's fantasy. He hadn't finished reading the scene but it came back to me now in a hot stripe of memory and lust. Only this time I wouldn't be me.

"All right. But you have to take your clothes off."

The drapes were already closed. The living room lamp gave an intimate yellow cast to the room, not the stark, blue-edged glare of fluorescent, but it would do. I pulled off my sweater and left my pants on, unzipped, as if I'd just stepped away from a urinal.

Laurence's naked body was austere, swirled with a layer of dark hair. He had the stretched, unfinished look of a much younger man, knobby at the wrists and knees, meaty between his legs. There the helmet of his cockhead bobbed, trembling. Had I looked so alluring twenty years ago?

I remembered the words. "You want it, boy? Come on."

He stepped close and leaned his face into my wooly chest, rubbed one cheek against it, then the other. I closed my fist in the back of his thick hair and he inhaled sharply, ready. I forced him to his knees and pressed his face against the tent of me. The pressure and sight of him sent me sailing. I smelled that day again: acrid, unapologetic sex, raw current flowing without wires. Or strings.

Laurence began to gnaw me through my underwear, a leisurely, drunken mouthing that blew hot swells against my balls. I ground against his teeth, riding the knife-edged pleasure. Oh, damn -- too good, and it had been too long. I brought him to his feet.

"Lube?" I asked.

He leaned forward, bracing himself against the back of the couch while I oiled him. Each of my hands was in love with a different landscape: one caressed his firm, fleshy pillar, the other luxuriated in his scalding crevice. My erection bumped his thigh impatiently like the muzzle of a fractious horse. Mustang.

He moaned softly when I entered him. For an instant I was transfixed by the velvet squeeze, pulsing in sweetness that latex couldn't dim. Then instinct seized my loins. I began to buck, mindless, plunging strokes and slapping flesh. I fumbled beneath our bodies and gripped him, let him thrust into my hand. But all the world was my own cock and the bent-over burn of my rutting, the unstoppable drive into his core, the center of animal triumph.

Winning, I brayed.

It was almost 2 a.m. when I called the cab. Dressed again, my clothes nettled me, the chafe of civilization. Laurence wore a burgundy bathrobe, his wiry, masculine frame overwhelmed by the rich folds. He looked like an orphan, bundled for rescue.

He gestured at his collection of me. "Do you want any of them?"

I hesitated. The sight of the tall shelf was strange now, like discovering one of my old suits in the closet, the one with the wide lapels and shiny weave. It was a dead thing and I was alive. Stirring.

I kissed his cheek, then his lips. "They're better off with you, even if you give them away. Besides, you could always read to me."

Laurence smiled. I slipped out into the early morning feeling light, quick, in the mood to run.

Mean Spirit

By J. Present

Helmut Ziegler was a wonderful actor, but he had a spirit so mean beneath his art that it could hardly be imagined. He was a man heavy and dour with the knowledge of sin. He was so lacking in empathy for others that his life, just to look normal, was a constant exercise of manipulations. And though many wanted him to work in their plays or to direct him, the consensus was a skeeviness no one spoke of; nobody spoke of it because it seemed to be something no words could describe. You might be wondering how someone like this could be good at emulating others in theatre. But Helmut knew what feelings looked like and he was a master of disguise. Therefore when he roamed the night after rehearsals he would transform himself into a lovely woman of means.

Lavishly dressed, but in the best of style, Helmut prowled the clubs, seducing, cajoling and murdering victims. Of course who would have suspected such deviousness from a man labeled genius in his field? Periodically victims would be found, but with little evidence, except for the developing MO. One stocking around the neck, one around the waist, evidence of possible sexual molestation, and death by strangulation was the usual scenario. If the victim were a man his socks tied together would do the trick. It appeared to the police that this monster preferred neither male nor female, both were fair game.

The rave reviews Helmut received only made the idea of him as a killer seem all the more farfetched. Added to that, performing in two shows at one time, where would he ever get the time?

For many years he was not suspect, but when he performed the roll of Agatha Charles in "Trumpets Blow" a certain detective just happened to be in the audience. This detective had followed the murders from the very beginning, which started with the Alice Sangoro slaying in West Park. He could not help remarking how similar the murder in the play was to the random killings happening for the past five years. This Detective Jordan was a young fellow in the prime of his career and finding a killer of this magnitude would do him fine in promotions.

So as he sat watching the play his mind drifted to the apprehension of this murderer. When the show was over he posed as a fan and admirer waiting at the back door. He asked to have his playbill signed like the other backdoor Johnnys then struck up a conversation with Helmut about how similar the crime was to the killings of the past five years. "Yes," replied Helmut, "there certainly is a similarity.

Detective Jordan waited around on that night and followed the actor home. He waited outside Helmut's window and watched from below. Shortly after Helmut returning home, a beautiful woman came out of Helmut's building.

She was dressed in a most becoming blue taffeta gown and around her shoulders she wore a black fur cape. The detective noticed that her walk held a resemblance to that of Helmut Ziegler.

He followed the cab the woman hailed to the Blue Hydrangea, an uptown, after-hours club. Standing at the bar he observed the woman's behavior, the acceptance of drinks from men and her charming banter with them. He slowly approached the woman and asked if she would like a drink. Helmut showed no sign of recognizing the Detective, even though the actor had signed his playbill earlier in the evening. Jordan figured the actor had done it so many times he hardly noticed his suitors at this point.

Luckily he was right. After friendly chatter the woman asked the detective back to her house and the two of them left. Helmut hailed a cab but did not give his own address. Jordan wondered where he would be taken, but acted nonchalant so as to continue charming the woman that Helmut had become. As he gazed into the actor's eyes he could sense the man fully believed his new gender and Jordan silently observed Helmut's psychopathic nature. The detective realized this was the real Helmut Zeigler he was looking at.

The other, the talented actor, was just a shell that stored this woman of the night. Now that he saw this, Jordan knew he had to be very smart to escape death. His heart beat so hard as his fear of demise intensified that he thought it could be heard in the taxi,. The woman tried to steal a kiss and Jordan quickly pulled away. He felt he should play coy, but finally decided he would play the aggressor to stay in control of the situation. If he must kiss her, then he must. Grabbing the woman around the shoulders he kissed her full on the mouth. He forced his mind into thinking he was romancing a woman and an attractive woman at that.

The cab stopped in front of The Hotel Belvedere and the woman paid the fare. Together they walked into the Hotel and it became quite apparent that Helmut was a regular visitor there by the camaraderie he had with the employees. Helmut, now called Gilda, made pleasantries and flirtatious remarks with the man at the front desk. It seemed sure now that many a man or woman had been a guest of this woman of means, but several may not have left alive.

As she opened the room door, Jordan knew he was on his own and would have to deal with whatever was to happen. Mentally he tried to prepare himself. Gilda slowly took off her earrings and rings and threw back her long blond hair in a sensual way to entice him and then laid across the king-sized bed.

Jordan found himself attracted to the form upon the bed and for a moment he felt as if he could not keep his manner cool. He lay down next to the enticing creature and brought her body to him. Her breath was warm and sensuous against his neck and he felt aroused, but quickly tried to maintain composure in his mind. For now, it was mind over matter to solve this crime and the situation he found himself in.

Gilda began to undress herself and Jordan wondered how she would hide her manhood. But to his amazement the breasts were real and the lipstick-covered nipples attracted him. He felt himself become excited by this oddity with a swollen phallus. Soon he found he could no longer control his body's reactions to this living entity's seductive powers, he had to succumb.

Jordan's breathing got harder and harder and soon he was enveloped in this strange organism's warmth. He entered the cavern to its soul, merging with its spirit, and he felt hell, but it felt so good. His body got hotter and hotter until he thought he would suffocate unless he could inhale another breath.

Helmut-Gilda took off Jordan's socks and placed one tightly around his neck, he began to pull it tight. This caused Jordan the most erotic ejaculation he had ever encountered. Still, he struggled to breathe in order to save his life, though he wished he could just let go and surrender to the exquisite sensations his body was enjoying.

The only difference between Jordan and the other victims was the fact that he knew what could happen. And yet he had been mesmerized by Helmut Zeigler's female character. A well-developed character; only an actor with immense talent could have pulled off with such capacity. For it was obvious now that Helmut Zeigler, well-known professional actor, was a hermaphrodite. A murderous one none the less.

With all the knowledge detective Jordan had, it was still hard for him to regain his ability to fight for his life and throw the woman off the bed to the floor. He was able to fight off her clawing and fists till he could bring both her arms behind her and quickly tie them together with the sock around his own neck. He showed his badge and placed Gilda-Helmut under arrest.

He called the police from the hotel and asked for a police car to escort the actor to the Station house. While he waited for the police his mind retraced what had happened to him and the feelings that were unleashed, feelings he had never encountered before.

Jordan would never tell what had happened between Gilda and himself. He was embarrassed about how turned on he had become and how he had almost succumbed to death because of it. This he would carry to the grave with him.

By the time they stepped out of the hotel, newspaper reporters had already arrived. They were there in time to see the great Helmut Zeigler dressed as a woman, gracefully taken to the police station. Bulbs flashed as pictures were taken of the greatest scene ever played by Helmut Zeigler, actor extraordinaire.

Lime

By Kathleen Dale

Melly blew her bangs out of her eyes and placed the last tray of fruit out on the table. It was hot for the beginning of May and she'd left the fruit until the street and the little park at the end of it had started to fill up, people wandering over for food, to put out the fresh vegetables and fruit. Her business was starting to pick up, word of mouth bringing her more business like this block party in a nice neighbourhood and the last thing she needed was a bad review because the heat had taken the bloom off her strawberries.

At least it wasn't raining.

The park was mostly green grass with a few trees and a small sandy area holding two tire swings and a short slide, though so far she'd seen more dogs than kids.

She made sure the plates, utensils, cups and napkins were easily accessible at both ends of the long tables, put her supplies under the last table, under cover of the table cloths and went over to lock up the van. She wouldn't really be needed again until four when she was scheduled to clean up, but she liked to stay fairly close so she could keep the tables neat, top things up on a regular basis and just generally make sure everything was running smoothly. It was such a nice day today though, she thought she just might go for a bit of a walk. She pocketed her cell-phone and keys to the van, retied the heavy tail at the back of her neck and put on her sunglasses. With her jeans and t-shirt, she'd pretty much fit in with the partiers.

She'd listened to one mediocre local band, caught a stray volleyball and grabbed a cheap margarita in a plastic cup, when she saw the little gaggle of people near a giant live oak tree. She wandered over, grinning at the sign that said, "psychic artist -- \$10".

Oh, now this could be entertaining. She checked her back pocket, checking to see if she had enough. Still grinning as she pulled out two fives and several ones, she got into the little queue.

The girls in front of her were chattering, giggling. "Col did a reading for me at the New Age fair two weekends ago. I framed the picture. Too cool."

"Yeah? What was it like?"

The little blond pushed her hair back off her shoulder. "She had these chalky colors and she held my hands and then she started talking about opening my third chakra and letting things out. Then the drawing was all blue and swirling and cool."

She bit back her chuckle. Third chakra indeed. Still, it did sound like a fun way to kill some time. Just because she was practical and realistic and believed you made your own luck, didn't mean she couldn't have a little fun. Maybe she'd frame the results herself and then she could invite dates back to see her third chakra.

By the time the two girls stepped behind the suns and moons shower curtain tied between two trees, her margarita was finished and she was more than a little grateful for the big fans blowing over the front of the line, cooling her down. When the two girls slipped out, still laughing, she went in, blinking at the dimmed light. The shower curtains did a fine job with the sunlight and the fans and bowls of ice in the corners made the little makeshift room comfortable.

"Come on in, honey. Sit." The voice -- low and husky and southern -- came from a pile of pillows behind a ground easel, a pad of paper leaned against it. The girl the voice belonged to looked...

Well...

If they're had been such a thing as a punk magical woodland creature? She'd be it. Short-short hair in varied pinks and blues, rings in eyebrow, ears, nose, and lip -- those were enough to distract from the tank top and cut-off jeans exposing about a yard of inked skin.

Melly sat down, thinking if she hadn't come out she would have missed this. She didn't know what to look at first, the tattoos, the piercings, the hair... she settled on looking into the girl's face.

"Hi. I'm Colleen. Thanks for waiting." The girl's eyes were the color of limes, happy and laughing and Melly could smell roses and the hint of clove cigarettes. One thin hand was offered over, a daisy chain inked around the wrist. "Do you have any questions?"

She shook her head, not wanting to even give away the sound of her voice. What kind of picture would this girl draw with so few clues?

"Okay then, I'm just going to hold your hand for a second, sort of groove on your vibe." Those eyes twinkled as Colleen winked. "It won't hurt, I promise."

Groove on her vibe? Oh, this was going to fuel her story telling at the Prancing Poodle for weeks, maybe even months.

The girl's eyes closed, giving Melly a chance to look. The tattoos were stunning -- a kaleidoscope of colors and patterns -- suns and moons and birds and rainbows and fairies. There was a pixie on her neck, pansies on one arm, a baby dragon peering from the edge of tank top, leaning on one breast.

Melly was struck by the sudden desire to see them all, to trace them with her tongue, taste the bottom of that dragon...

Those eyes opened, stared into hers. "You're sensual -- tasting, touching, smelling. You laugh a lot. You're looking for magic, but you pretend you're not." Her lips twitched, but she kept her chuckle to herself. Presumptuous youngster. She was too old for magic. "You think you're old, too, and jaded, but you're faking it. You need more kisses from strangers and letters written in magical ink."

She almost pulled her hand away, but realised it would be easy to guess her age, to guess that an older woman without a companion present, without a wedding band, might be lonely. She kept her cool, she watched Colleen's amazing eyes.

Colleen released her hand, picked up a fuchsia chalk, a deep green, started drawing. "You want long kisses and someone to hold you in the shower, wash you. You dream about wine-flavored kisses and sharp-toothed lovers and someone dancing naked for you in the full moon."

Heat bloomed in her belly, the words close enough to her late-night fantasies to arouse. Coincidence, she told herself, the girl reading her body-language rather than her mind.

"Someone to dip their hands in oil and slide them over your skin, anoint you, make you shine and need. You dream at night of being someone else, some heavy-skirted and powdered woman with a wanton serving girl desperate for you." The air was heavy, one chalk exchanged for another, Colleen's voice rough, skin flushed. "Or perhaps you are a priestess, strong and dressed in white, called to serve your goddess."

Melly found she was breathing heavily, the atmosphere charged by Colleen's words, the images the girl was drawing between them.

"You want someone to treat your body as a banquet -- slide berries over your skin, tiny drops of honey on your folds, a hungry, decadent tongue to lap them up."

She gasped at that, the words 'how dare you!' on her lips, but something held her back from saying them.

A navy chalk was chosen. "Love letters, too. Pages and pages of desire scribbled in colored ink and sealed with wax, tied with satin ribbons -- all bound together and scented with a memory's perfume. You have a rich spirit, a curious one."

"Who are you?" she finally asked, the final image too close to the wrapped letters in her bottom drawer, missives never sent to her heart's first desire.

"Just a girl who listens." Those eyes met hers, held her. "It's a talent. Do you want to hear more?"

No. Yes. She nodded.

"Someone lied to you. Told you you dreamed too much, that you needed to grow up, quit believing in magic and fairies and lovers with dancing eyes and you did, so they fill your dreams up, your fantasies. You used to collect magical things -- dragons? Gargoyles?"

"Unicorns. Like every other little girl." Like every other little girl. This wasn't magic. This girl wasn't a reader of minds, she just knew people.

"Mine was pegasi. I like wings." Colleen stopped, looked over. "I didn't mean to make you angry."

"I just find it hard to believe you know these things just from holding my hand." She wasn't angry, not really. Well, not at this girl.

Colleen nodded, the sunlight catching on the pink in her hair. "I hear that a lot."

The paper was torn free, carefully slid into a large envelope. "There's your picture. Ten dollars, please."

"Just like that we're done?" She didn't know why she was surprised, why she suddenly felt gypped -- this was exactly what she *had* expected from the experience.

"I don't have anything to say that you want to hear. Entertainment only, right? That's what the sign says. I'll stop knowing things I'm not supposed to." If she didn't know better, she'd say those eyes were hurt, shuttered somehow.

"I'm sorry." Why was she apologizing? She handed over the two fives, taking her envelope, confused, by this girl and her own behavior. Magic wasn't real, she knew that, so why was she upset?

Colleen's fingers trailed over her hand, almost tingling. "It's all good, lady. All good."

"Thank you." She stood reluctantly, watching the strange green eyes before turning and leaving.

The sunshine was bright, almost blinding as she left the makeshift tent and she stumbled, clutching the envelope to her.

She got another margarita and went to rest in the shade by her van, after checking the tables, straightening the trays. When she got settled, she pulled out the picture. It was a nude woman with auburn hair, curvy and pale, luscious, hands sliding over her own skin. Over her shoulder watched a pair of lime-green eyes.

Burns Night

By Edith Walker

Donald held his fiddle in his lap and listened to the pipers getting organized down the hall. He was thrilled that he'd been invited to Aileen's Burns Night party. All the musicians at the *Fekkin' Divil* had told him what a good time it was. Every year Aileen and her husband invited all the session players from the pub to come play for their little party. Donald hadn't been able to attend last year but after hearing the tales from the others, made sure to make it this year.

He chatted with the woman next to him who had been alternately playing a penny whistle and a guitar. The party was definitely something to write home about. The food was good home cooking, the alcohol flowing freely, the music stirring and the company interesting. He knew most of the musicians from the pub sessions, but there were quite a few other people he'd never met. Some he'd like to get to know a bit better.

Finally Aileen came out and signaled them all to stand. The pipes screeched their warm up note and then *Scotland the Brave* rang throughout the house as the pipers made their entry. The cook followed them with the haggis on a silver tray and another man carried a tray with a bottle of whisky and several small glasses. Donald smiled thinking that perhaps six pipers were a bit of overkill but definitely improved the scenery. The cook presented his tray to tonight's honored reader and the audience sat back down. When the reader began the poem in an indecipherable Scottish burr, Donald tuned him out and let his gaze wander to the set of bare legs just about half way around the circle of pipers.

God, but that man had great legs. The calves encased in white knee socks ended in lickable knees, lightly dusted with hair. He thanked the heavens for giving the Scott's kilts. He'd surreptitiously watched this man, Ross he'd been told, all night. Ross' hair was that color you didn't know whether to call dark blond or light brown. His eyes were a soft hazel and his smile was infectious. Unfortunately his wife was lovely. Donald took a deep breath and let his eyes continue their journey upwards.

The kilt covered far too much for Donald's liking and he had to resign himself to wondering what lay behind that sporran. Perhaps Ross was going 'regimental' underneath, his balls hanging free, his prick feeling the wool kilt swish against it every time he moved. Donald shifted in his chair as his jeans started become a bit uncomfortable. He imagined a flat stomach and well formed chest beneath Ross' loose white shirt. The hands holding the pipes looked strong and Donald imagined them grasping his shoulders in a moment of passion. Ross' open shirt-collar made Donald salivate. Oh, how he'd love to kiss the hollow of that throat, along that jaw line, on those delectable lips, look into those soft eyes... which were looking right back at him.

Donald startled and felt himself blush to the roots of his hair. To his surprise, Ross simply raised an eyebrow and quirked the edge of his mouth into an almost smile. That was interesting. Donald gave an apologetic smile in return.

Ross glanced around the group and wrapped his fingers loosely around the chanter of his pipes. He ran his hand slowly down, then up them in an unmistakable gesture.

Donald looked back into those eyes, lounged in his chair and let his arm fall onto his thigh. He dropped his hand so that it cupped his crotch. When Ross looked back up, Donald parted his lips and ran his tongue slowly across them.

Then the whiskey bearer passed around the drams to the pipers and everyone toasted the haggis. Donald watched Ross swallow and downed his own bit of Scotch. He tried not to stare as the pipers left the room. Soon he, along with the rest of the musicians, were playing their instruments and some of the girls began to dance. He wasn't paying much attention to the girls, though. He was too busy wondering if he could find a way to be alone with Ross before the night was over.

After about an hour of playing, Donald took a much-needed break. He went to the kitchen, got himself a Guinness and checked to see if he had a condom in his pocket. He hadn't expected to run into anyone tonight. Luckily, he was wearing the same pair of jeans, complete with pocket containing a condom, he'd worn clubbing a couple of nights ago. As he headed to the door that led out into the tiny backyard, he managed to catch Ross' eye.

It was a cool, clear Texas night. Donald took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. He couldn't see any stars, just the glow from nearby streetlights. It wasn't long before Ross casually walked out the back door to join him. Donald smiled as he leaned against the fence and looked Ross up and down. Ross glanced over his shoulder towards the house, then grinned back and approached.

Donald took a swig of his drink and reached out to run a hand up and down Ross' arm. It was nice and firm. They both glanced at the house again to see if anyone was coming outside. The music was going strong and they could see people dancing and milling around. Donald thought he'd be able to see anyone heading for the door. He sat his glass down on a nearby planter and grasped Ross' hip.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"My wife might decide to come look for me. She's a bit possessive," Ross replied nervously.

"Hmm, I can see why," Donald said as he leered. "Don't worry, I can see anyone heading towards the door." He didn't push further.

Ross also sat his glass down on the planter and stepped in closer and ran his hands over Donald's broad shoulders.

Donald slipped his hand up behind the kilted man's head and pulled him in close for a kiss. Ross relaxed and parted his lips. They groaned as their tongues met in a short battle for dominance. One tongue would slip into a mouth and be sucked on before retreating to make way for the other. Donald realized his eyes had slipped closed and he snapped them open to look towards the door. No one was coming but they probably didn't have much longer alone. He pulled back from Ross and looked the other man in the eye.

"Not much time," he said as his hand inched up under the other man's kilt.

Ross' breath hitched but he didn't stop Donald's hand. Instead he groaned and looked back over his shoulder. Donald stroked Ross' thigh up to his bare hip. He grinned and quit playing coy, just reached in front and took Ross' cock in his hand. It was already half hard. Ross bit his lip and gripped Donald's shoulders tight. Donald shoved his other hand underneath the kilt, too. He fondled Ross' heavy balls and gave a couple of strokes to the thick cock, causing Ross to pump his hips a bit.

Donald sighed in relief as Ross unzipped his jeans and released his straining erection. He had to clench his jaw to keep quiet as Ross dropped to his knees and began to suck with no prelude. He held onto Ross' head and carefully fucked the man's mouth a few times.

"Wanna fuck you," Donald growled. Ross hummed around his dick before standing up.

"Hurry," Ross begged, looking back over his shoulder again. The people inside still seemed oblivious to what was happening in the yard.

Donald reached into his pocket and pulled out the condom. He used his teeth to rip open the packet. Ross' eyes widened and followed the action. When the packet was open, Ross took it from him and rolled the lubricated condom over Donald's hard cock before turning around and bracing himself on the fence. Donald lifted the man's kilt and ran his hands over the firm cheeks in front of him. He glanced at the house again as he reached his hand around to Ross' face.

"Get them wet," he ordered. Ross sucked in the two proffered fingers and laved them with his tongue. It sent a thrill straight to Donald's groin. When they were good and wet, Donald spread Ross' ass cheeks and slowly shoved the two fingers inside. Ross groaned and pushed back on them.

"Oh yeah," Ross whispered hoarsely when Donald twisted his fingers, moving in and out.

Donald pulled his fingers out and set the tip of his cock in Ross' opening. He gave a little shove. Ross lowered his head and pressed back, impaling himself. They paused to catch their breath and then Donald pulled out just slightly. Ross hissed in complaint and Donald thrust back in. He grabbed Ross' hips and began fucking Ross at a steady pace. The fence squeaked horribly, but he couldn't worry as it felt incredible thrusting in and out of Ross' ass. The fact that there were dozens of people just a few feet away added to the thrill. Ross seemed as lost in the sensation as he, until an unusually loud laugh from inside the house startled them both. They froze and Donald saw Ross looking toward the door, biting his lip.

Realizing they were in no immediate danger, Donald pulled back and slammed into Ross causing the man to almost fall into the fence.

"God, yes," Ross groaned and shoved back. The kilt was flapping around their knees and Donald laughed to himself about fucking a man in a skirt. He licked his palm and reached around to jerk Ross off. One of Ross' hands wrapped around his and they pumped together. All too soon Donald felt Ross' ass squeeze and his prick pulse. Then he was coming himself and everything got a bit hazy. He braced himself on Ross' back for a minute, just gasping for breath, before pulling out and taking off the condom. Ross winced at the withdrawal and stood up unsteadily. Donald quietly groaned as the kilt dropped down to cover that lovely ass he'd just been balls deep in.

They got themselves straightened out, clothes in order, fingers run through hair and headed back to the house. Ross opened the door and a giggling young woman stumbled out followed by a grinning man.

"Oh, sorry," she said as she looked back at the man following her.

"No problem," Ross answered.

He and Donald shared a knowing look and with secret smiles, made their way into room. It looked like Aileen's back yard was going to see quite a bit of action tonight.

Tempus

By Emily Veinglory

There is a saying that if a horse has more than three white socks it should be shot. Tempus was white all over and should have been shot at birth. He was well-built, very beautiful and immaculately witless. The moment thunder clapped, he pricked his shapely ears and started to stamp within his stall.

I rose from my bed and fumbled on my tunic and breeches. The cloth felt too soft and clean beneath my hands after so many years on crusade. It had been months since my return, long enough to regain my proper weight and health, to slough off the assorted vermin of combat quarters... and become most thoroughly bored.

Don't mistake me, I was pleased to leave behind the disease of campaign, the massacres, the arid foreign hills and hard gazes of an occupied city. But I found myself fleeing back to a tranquility I could no longer bear, a purposeless and pampered life I hardly recognized. Perhaps war had driven me mad, I knew the folk of the keep and the town whispered about my ways. When it was hot I wore the robes I had brought back, when damsels were trotted out to simper winningly before me I could hardly keep from yawning, and when there was a storm... I rode.

As I stepped out into the yard, George had Tempus tacked up and literally rearing to go. Tempus dragged at the bit and pulled the poor groom in circles. Then he saw me and whickered, standing still at last. He gave me just long enough to sling my leg over before he bolted.

"Take care, M'Lord!" George called after me as I sailed out though the gates.

Tempus's gait was not smooth; his temperament was flighty and he bucked and bounded at any slight excuse. That was exactly why I rode him -- just for a moment to recover that thrill of the cavalry charge, the cut and thrust of battle, staring death in the eye.

Rather to my disappointment, I had stuck to him each time; three different jaunts into the autumn squalls so far. This time he raised himself to new levels. It was dark almost to dusk as he charged down the steep track into the meadows. Each time his forefeet struck the ground, he twisted from side to side in zigzag bounds. Rain bore down in stinging sheets and I clung to Tempus's back as he bolted into the mist and gloom. In the darkness I could hardly see the uneven ground and each stride resounded upon the sodden earth.

I lost the left stirrup on the turn towards the woods and gave up on holding the reins to cling onto the pommel instead. Branches whipped me in passing; a branch broke across my brow with a stunning snap. I swayed back in the saddle and barely kept my grip. As Tempus weaved in and out of the forest track, I bent low on his neck. A loud crack of lightning almost over head drove him into a wild leap. I felt his hind hoof skid on some uncertain slope. There was just long enough to commend my soul to God before Tempus came down.

Time can almost freeze when the blood is high, or it can, as it did now, skate by with uncanny swiftness. I was lying amongst the bracken and untangling vague memories of a thump, a crushing wrench on my right leg, the ground slapping my shoulder and temple, and Tempus already no more than a pallid tail vanishing between the trees. I lay there for a while and let the rain fall on me in big, tree-sieved droplets. But it was too cold to lie around like a stunned fish on the bank. I was already shaking and could see little beyond the fog of my breath.

I laughed and pulled myself up to a sitting position. I could feel my legs, hands and teeth were all still there and I could move myself out of this atrocious weather. Which, by the look of the old pale I could see twisting through the underbrush, might just be possible. My right leg ached like hell and I would wear the bruises of it, but my luck had held. I looked around and saw the ground sloped down to a clearing which looked like the one the old chapel was in. I could just see the bowed grasses tossing in the rain under the light of a restless, cloud-tossed moon.

My mother had insisted that I have the gloomy chapel repaired, but I had left my sister and chatelaine to deal with the details. No doubt it would still be the half-roofed shell I remembered from our childhood. I dreaded seeing it finished, threatening me with wedding bonds and christenings to come -- I limped towards it, regardless. There was no way I would make the miles back on foot in the dark and it would offer some shelter at least. As I skidded out into the open I could see a glint in the window. I frowned, some workman must be there already...

Strange how that made me feel less inclined to go on. No matter how lonely I became for the company of other men, when I attained it I felt even worse. It was never what I yearned for, quite. I mentally clothed myself in my office as knight and Baronet and had just enough sense to go on.

I pounded on the door to the small vestry and it abruptly opened. The man beyond was as tall and broad as I had always wished to be. It irked me somewhat to have to look up at him in his rough spun clothes. He had a Saxon look to him for all his stature, near-blond with pale skin and fine features. That might explain why he did not have the deferential mien I would expect in a man of a humble trade.

"I was thrown from my horse," I said.

He stepped aside to let me in. There was a good fire burning in the hearth, no need to skimp in the midst of a wood. The small room was unsanctified and so he had every right to live in it while he worked. I saw stone blocks and tools strewn about, the chisel and mallet of the stone-mason -- not such a humble trade after all, though hardly noble. He had a pallet laid next to the fire, with only room to place his boots between the two.

I went and stood in that small space of floor and stretched my hands out to the fire in that futile way that chilled men do. My sodden clothes clung to me and I pulled my tunic off to let my skin dry in the tepid air. The stone-mason watched me from beside the door. His eyes moved insolently up and down my body and his eyebrow arched in mute commentary.

I turned back to the flames, feeling water dripping from my tangled hair. I was slight in build and not tall. My coloring was a prime example of unremarkable Norman stock, ruddy skin, long brown hair and muddy brown eyes more fitting for a tiller of the soil than a ruler of men. No wonder the quiet giant was unimpressed.

His feet scuffed the stone flags as he approached. I watched from the corner of my eye as he lifted a clean cover from his pallet. He stood behind me and ruffled my hair gently to dry it. I began to wonder if I had taken his expression awry. He draped the sheet about my shoulders and came round to before me. He had to stand on the hearthstone to do it and the extra inch meant I was looking him pretty much in the throat. I was rather doubtful of what was happening but there were few enough possible reasons for what occurred next.

Broad rough fingers trailed down my damp chest and pulled impatiently at the drawstring of my breeches. I was startled enough to sway backwards and my heel caught on the edge of the pallet. I swayed and his left hand reached around to steady me. My mind, and a few other bodily parts, carried out some rapid calculations. God had seen fit to appoint my manor's chapel with a comely man who apparently found me not too hideous to bed; who was I to question divine fate?

He leaned forward and deposited me on the rough bed, the bracken mattress cracked beneath me but I would certainly have not traded it for all the silk in China in that moment. I lay on my back as he straddled me and watched as he impatiently pulled his long tunic up over his shoulders. The muscles formed by his arduous trade rippled like river currents beneath strangely creamy skin. My hands grasped his thighs as he knelt over me, moving slowly upwards to his tight buttocks. My eyes naturally came to rest upon his cock. It was shapely as such organs go, not skewed or over-veined, and I experienced an impulse that I had not previously been much given to.

I leaned forward and wrapped my lips around its tip and he for his part was unsurprisingly agreeable. He leaned forward onto his hands so that his cock slid by slow degrees into my mouth. My most unfortunate imagination

wondered what mother would make of this, me all but smothered by a hulking laborer with my pants tangled around my ankles.

I set the tip of my tongue against the tip of his cock and ease the length of him into my mouth as far as I dared. Some men are said to swallow swords, but I could not encompass more than half his length with comfort. I held the base with finger and thumb and stroked him gently with my lips, teasing him with my flickering tongue. He made no sound but shuddered at my touch. I had not had time to get bored with this game when he pulled back.

He wrenched off my breeches, socks and boots in one. I cried out in protest as my right leg complained of its ill treatment this night, but I was undeterred as the sight of my rough hewn Adonis backlit by the guttering fire far out-weighed any discomfort.

He ran his hand most tenderly along the outside of my legs, contriving now to kneel between them in a posture of most eloquent intent. I reached forward to him, fingers straight and tense to urge him on. My right hand wrested upon the subtle striation of his rib-cage, my left caught in his sandy hair, long and freshly combed.

He cupped my thigh, already clouded with the crimson beginnings of most magnificent bruises and he urged me to raise my thighs which I most easily did. His wide waist fit between them as naturally as the barrel of a well-bred horse. His questing thumb located the portal he desired, his member, damp with my own spit, was eager. I was not quite a virgin but in the Christ-infested fumbleings with fellow soldiers things had rarely progressed so far or with such certainty, yet the anatomy of the matter was clear enough.

I arched my back and he drove forward. The very head of his cock touched me damply, pushing with gentle insistence. I felt my naive body yield once and twice in distinct rings of flesh. The sensation of being entered was without compare, like surrendering to some force of nature, like riding in the storm. I gasped as he pushed on and on, the entire length of the man buried within me. He leaned forward, his hot breath on my cheek and his hair falling as a soft curtain that tickled my neck. I could not bring myself to meet his eyes and closed mine tight. Sensations other than sight were the sweeter for it.

He worked on me in hard stokes, his fingers roaming upon my torso. He rode me with mastery, a shifting rhythm sometimes soft and close-leaning, sometimes rough and short. I clung to him, meeting his thrusts, my cock rising painfully hard between us, rubbing on the sweat slicked expanse of his belly. Passion boiled in me like the sea on a rocky shore, frothing and building. Finally it broke, I called out as my body jerked in climax.

I leaned back, my hands grasping the rough blankets, his thrusts became more urgent and his fist wound in my unkempt hair. He pressed down hard upon me and I clasped him tightly with my thighs as he came in strangely muted pushes, his balls tight against my buttocks. I could hardly breathe, yet did not care at all.

He rolled aside, yet gathered me in to lie against his side. Between our bodies the sweat was hot, salty upon my lips which I pressed against his cushioning shoulder. His hand was firm against my shoulder-blades, pulling me into his embrace as I faded into sleep.

Morning found me with itchy wool pulled about my shoulders in an otherwise empty bed. I shifted slightly and winced. My bruised leg had stiffened in the night, my shoulder ached as did a few... other parts. I rolled to my side and looked about the patently empty room.

It took long moments to kneel and stand. A loud thump startled me; I did not really want to explain my current state. I hobbled to the door and peered out through the narrow window at its side. Tempus was standing in the meadow by the chapel wall, staring stupidly at a fallen shovel. I cursed and hopped as I pulled on my muddy, still damp clothes.

As I creaked open the door, Tempus started and seemed to consider fleeing in disingenuous flight. However, with a rein tangled through his forelegs, saddle askew and drenched through, he apparently decided a return to the stables was due. He stood as I limped out, cursing, to capture him. I tethered him at the gate and went back to the chapel proper. It was empty also, except for the new blocks in the crumbling wall and the carving that had been begun over the altar. Even my untutored eye saw how fine it was, saints and angels combined with star, garlands, green men and beasts of the forest. Brother Randolph would rant long and hard about the pagan elements in this cornucopia, but it was beautiful.

Apparently, I had been deserted to find my own way home. I shrugged. I had to use the wall as a mounted block and threatened Tempus with an impromptu gelding if he gave me any trouble homeward bound. Fortunately, he was a chastened creature after a cold night in the woods, typical of him to lack even the sense to know his way home.

I returned with the dawn, sore and sodden to a mixed welcome. The servants called out and my mother and sister emerged from the main doors.

"Callous boy," my mother wailed. "Why do you hate me so to leave me alone all night not knowing whether you lived or broke your neck riding that demon animal."

My sister merely took one look at me and Tempus, and laughed long and hard. It was she who ordered a bath be drawn and escorted me to its steaming brim.

"I sheltered in the chapel," I explained. "The stone-mason was good enough to take me in."

"Was he," she said. "Did you not find him strange?"

"Strange, no... why?"

"In that he is mute, dear brother. Did you not notice?"

"Oh, that," I replied lamely, and I fancy I blushed but the heat of the steam filled room might have offered me enough excuse.

"Masons are hard to find, I hesitated to take him."

"Why not, his work his fine."

"I did tell you, but as usual, you were not listening to me. He is from a bastard line of the Saxons that once ruled here, before our ancestors massacred them."

"Won this land by conquest, you mean," I said as I wrenched off my ruined tunic.

"Yes, I suppose I must," she murmured as she took her leave.

I eased myself into the near scalding water. I was battered and bemused, but my impulsive storm-baiting rides had finally served their purpose; I was most certainly no longer bored.

Past Tense

by Lawrence Schimel

I was feeling claustrophobic, so I went to the baths. This is not exactly the best mindframe to be in while there -- at least for me. I found myself too nervous and distracted to enjoy the sexy (or not-so-sexy) men in towels prowling the halls with me. I'd look at them, they'd look at me, I'd even be half-heartedly interested sometimes, but I couldn't seem to connect with anyone.

I'd run into three ex-lovers that afternoon, one after another. They were men I wasn't particularly keen to see again, or at least didn't want to let back into my life, for a variety of reasons. So I was wondering what was up (cosmically) that they suddenly turned up again, and all at once.

I ran into Sean first and he was the least awkward of the encounters.

Sean and I had had a brief fling about eight months ago, in the early fall, that ended because I couldn't deal with the fact that he is HIV-positive and I am not. We met at the Chelsea Gym and fooled around in the steam room. He's maybe two inches shorter than I am, with a nice chest and arms. His cock wasn't especially long, but it was thick; it had a nice heft to it and I enjoyed just holding it in my palm, squeezing its swollen girth. He was a good kisser -- something most men aren't even willing to do while fooling around in the steam room. It crosses some intimacy barrier that makes this sort of anonymous sex suddenly less...innocent? But I was glad to cross that barrier. To me it made him fun to play with, so we exchanged numbers later, after we were showered, toweled off, and dressed.

He brought me flowers when he showed up for our first "date" -- bright orange and yellow tiger lilies. I guess I never learned to appreciate flowers the right way -- the whole idea seems a little wasteful since they die so quickly, and the lilies turned out to be messy because they dripped pollen all over my desk before I realized what was happening. But I thought the gesture touching and sweet. Especially since the "date" wasn't even a whole dinner-and-a-movie-before-sex kind of date; we were getting together just to fuck.

I live in a tiny Manhattan studio, so my apartment is kind of set up for such encounters. I don't have enough space for a couch, so guests have to sit on the bed -- even if we don't plan on getting into it together. I sat down next to Sean and we started to kiss and stroke and pet each other, and soon we were rolling around naked, pressing our bodies together and still kissing. We took a brief break to catch our breath.

"How does it feel to be in bed with someone who's HIV-positive?" Sean asked me.

The question really floored me. I was grateful for his honesty. I was really glad he'd told me. It was just the way he'd told me -- and at this point -- that made me feel uncomfortable.

At the same time, I started arguing with myself over what I do in bed. I thought I had sex with the assumption that my partners were HIV-positive, because I couldn't ever know that they weren't -- they might not even know. So everything I did was stuff I was comfortable with as being low-risk -- oral sex but not if there was lots of precome, and not letting them come in my mouth; anal sex only with a condom, etc.

Therefore, knowing that the person I was having sex with was HIV-positive shouldn't change what I did in bed, right?

I wasn't so sure. It certainly felt different. I suddenly doubted how much we truly understood about this virus and its transmission. But I bravely tried not to show how utterly fazed I was by his honest confidence. I think partly I was so touched by his telling me -- something that had never happened before -- that I didn't feel comfortable letting myself freak out and decide not to go through with the encounter.

Sean didn't have any precome that I could notice, so I did take his dick in my mouth for a little while, but mostly I sucked on his balls, and his tits, and we otherwise frothed the night away, jerking each other off as we had done during our first encounter together. We didn't have anal play of any sort and I let myself come fairly quickly, so he would feel obliged to come quickly, too. Our next encounter was the same, but then I decided that the difference between not knowing if one's partner was or wasn't positive and conclusively knowing was just too difficult for me and I called things off.

I always regretted that I wasn't as honest with him as he had been with me, but I didn't have the stomach for it. I said things just weren't working out and when he called a week later, that I had started to see someone else. He let it go after that and I hadn't seen him since. His landlord doubled his rent when his lease ran out and he'd moved out to Astoria where the rents were still cheap and switched to a gym there, so I didn't even run into him at the Chelsea any longer. That streak ended today.

I stopped off at a chic little boutique on Hudson Street a little after five. I was selling ad space for a gay travel guide to New York that was being published in London and I was picking up the finished artwork for their ad. It turned out that Sean's roommate, Pierre, was working behind the counter, and Sean had dropped by on his way home from work to gossip. He'd bleached his hair blond -- it looked awful, reinforcing my feeling that it was the right decision to break up with him -- and had gotten a starburst tattoo on his shoulder.

We said "Hey" and "Long time no see" but kept it casual. Didn't inquire too much into personal stuff. Mostly I explained things to Pierre, whom I'd never met before but had spoken to on the phone a couple times about the ads. When Sean and I would make a comment to each other we then made one to Pierre, as if we felt we had to fill him in on details, or make a point to include him in our conversation to compensate for our previous intimacy.

What a small world, I thought, as I walked to the next client. We three each had such different relationships with one another, so it was funny that we all connected -- by chance -- in the same place at the same time and saw how our lives overlapped.

It seemed an isolated, ironic encounter. But the day was still young.

Running into Dennis was the most awkward of the encounters, if only because I always wondered if breaking up with him had been the stupidest thing I've ever done. Dennis sometimes shared this thought. And the erotic tension between us was still fierce. We've talked about it before -- we call each other up every six or seven months -- and we both pretty much agree that we were perfect for each other, except for the fact that our lives were going in such different directions. And the fact that, living together, we drive each other crazy because we're too alike in all of our worst traits -- competitive, territorial, jealous, etc. These conflicts tore us apart every time we got back together, which we proceeded to do for almost two years before we called it quits for good.

I was standing on the subway platform, waiting for the uptown 1/9 train, when I realized that the man waiting two pillars down the platform was Dennis. I approached and he turned and recognized me, too. We kissed hello -- the quick peck on the lips that is the standard fag greeting these days -- and made small talk, discussing where we were each going, how long the wait between trains always seemed, and so on. I didn't mention that I had just run into another ex of mine, although inwardly I laughed at the odd streak of luck, if that's what it was. Only in New York, I thought, can these sort of coincidences be so commonplace.

I didn't want to mention my encounter with Sean because to compare that brief fling to what Dennis and I shared, despite our many ups and downs, seemed wrong. Also, I think we were both surprised to be seeing each other face to face like this, standing mere inches apart on the platform, without any advance warning as usually happened when we saw each other, when one of us called after a few months and suggested a get-together. Now we were caught unprepared and it was like stumbling across each other in the middle of some act we found distasteful but were going to politely ignore. This was merely the rude shock of realizing that we have lives apart from each other, so we kept to neutral subjects as we boarded the train together and only chatted on a very surface level. I jumped up and ran off the train when I realized we'd arrived at my stop, putting an abrupt, if understandable, end to our encounter.

Drew I ran into outside the Big Cup coffee shop, smoking a cigarette. One of the things I'd always hated when we were sleeping together regularly was his smoking habit. Drew is a wannabe jazz musician, pretty in a blond sort of way -- but not at all my usual type. He gave me his phone number one day when I was in the Big Cup and we got together a few days later. The first date seemed endlessly dull -- we had absolutely nothing in common. We disagreed about almost everything politically, he had no awareness of anything cultural outside of jazz music (which I don't really follow), and after a very short while we discovered we had nothing we could safely talk about that interested us both.

Drew was also so straight, in many ways. He hadn't been out of the closet for very long and the world he moved in -- jazz music -- is almost exclusively het. One reason he took the job at the Big Cup was to put himself in a gay environment where he could meet other gay guys.

Anyway, despite the fact that our first date was going so badly, we couldn't seem to end on a good note of resolution, so we hung out in Tompkins Square Park after dinner trying to find some sort of common ground or a polite reason to go our separate ways. I guess neither of us had anyplace better to go, or else we kept hoping -- despite the obvious -- that things would work out after all. Drew smoked what seemed like half a pack of cigarettes and I kept petulantly switching sides on the bench because the breeze kept blowing the smoke directly at me.

Somehow, probably because I figured that after suffering through such an interminable evening I at least deserved to have my ashes hauled for my effort, we wound up back at his place. And the sex turned out to be lots of fun. He was remarkably uninhibited about his body and about anything we might do. He was four years younger than me, barely twenty-two, but he was solid in a middle-aged sort of way, with a growing beer-gut. He had that...earnestness that I associate with straight guys' attitudes and attentions toward women, which I found intoxicating. That intentness, focused on you, can be heady. Gay men are often much more self-centered in their sex, wanting to be the center of attention, everything focused on their cock -- or their ass -- and their race toward their own orgasm.

Drew had what I thought was the perfectly shaped cock, big enough to flirt with my gag reflex without setting it off. His skin was so smooth and had a sweet taste to it that drove me crazy, whereas some men's cock and balls can be salty or acidic and really turn me off. I loved to lie on my back, head propped on a pillow, and have him straddle my chest and fuck my face. It was my favorite way to come with Drew. (His was to come while fucking me, which I let him do if he double-condomed.)

So even though I didn't exactly like Drew, we wound up seeing each other pretty regularly, in a low-key sort of

way, and I grew to be kind of fond of him. It all just sort of fizzled out when I took a three-week road trip through New England selling ads and when I came back he had fallen in love with this drummer from a punk rock band.

I'd pretty much stopped going to the Big Cup since then and I wasn't on my way there today. I was just walking past it when I ran into him standing outside. We chatted for a bit. He told me he was single again. He asked about me. I equivocated, but I didn't have the heart to lie to him, so I admitted cautiously, "I'm not really seeing anyone full-time at the moment." He told me he had a new band and they were playing next Thursday night. I had agreed to let my sister try and fix me up with the new gay man at her office next Thursday; my sister regularly got crushes on gay men at work and tried to live them out vicariously through me. I didn't agree with her taste in men, but it was a free meal, so I'd said yes to the three of us getting together. I told Drew -- who I'd never gone to listen to play while we were sleeping together -- that maybe I'd swing by, depending on how late dinner with my sister ran. He let the matter drop and I excused myself, saying that I had to meet a friend (which wasn't true -- I was heading to the CVS to buy shaving cream since I'd run out) and continued on my way up Eighth Avenue.

At this point, I was feeling decidedly uncomfortable by the way so many of my ex-lovers were showing up in my life again, in such rapid succession. I began to worry who might be next.

In an effort to stave off any more such encounters and looking for the ease of anonymous sex, I went to the West Side Club. I sought the physical release of fucking without any of the emotional foreplay and baggage that come with even a one-night stand, with its possibility of something more.

With all these memories crowding my head, it was no surprise that I wasn't connecting with any of the ready-and-willing guys before me. My libido was hard-wired to the past. I kept comparing the men before me to my exes -- all of them, not just the three I ran into today.

A man standing with his arms crossed at one intersection of hallways had Emilio's eyes. Another had Jonathan's pouty lips. And one guy standing in a darkened corner looked exactly like Dennis. He smiled when he saw me looking at him and I felt an echo of the sexual tension I'd felt earlier today, when I ran into Dennis and found that the link between us -- at least physically -- was still strong. This, I thought, was what I'd come here for, a chance to relive this memory -- even though nothing would live up to the real thing, and certainly not to my memories of it, edited over the years so that all I remembered were the highlights. What could compare with that?

But I smiled back and moved closer, and that's when I realized it wasn't just someone who looked like Dennis, it was Dennis.

"Well, well," he said, reaching out to put a hand on my chest as if we were any two strangers making our first

contact. He pinched my left nipple, rolling it between his fingers as he continued to talk. "Twice in one day, after - how long? What can this mean?"

I couldn't remember how long it had been. I could hardly think about what he was saying, almost didn't register that he was asking a question, even rhetorically. His hand felt so good, I didn't want him to stop, but at the same time a part of my brain was shouting that this was a bad idea, that things would be so messy and painful, emotionally, if I let him continue.

But I let him continue. I couldn't help myself, even if I'd wanted to. I was shocked.

First, simply the fact of running into someone I know at the baths always throws me for a loop. I experience a moment of utter embarrassment -- a literal "caught with your pants down" feeling -- even though whoever it is and I are obviously both here for the same reason. (So, what's the harm, really? But I still can't help wanting to blush scarlet each time it happens.)

But to run into Dennis here, after our curious encounter this afternoon, after months of silence since our last meeting.... And for him to ask the very same question -- what can this mean? -- that I'd been asking myself was almost uncanny. It was as if he'd orchestrated the entire day's events. Or someone had.

As I stood there with Dennis, naked save for a towel, in a place where men go to have sex -- pure and sweaty, strings-free sex -- I had to question my lack of belief in a higher order. Sometimes it was so much more comforting to believe that the things that happened to me were coordinated by some grand design and not just caprice.

Dennis' hand on my tit was like an anchor pulling my mind out of the past and into the present. His fingers pinched, rubbing the nub between their tips, until my nipples were hard little points and a current was running from Dennis and our sexually-charged past through my nipple and down to my cock.

So even as my mind rebelled at the thought of getting involved with Dennis again, I smiled at him and leaned into his hand a little more. He smiled back and reached out with his other hand to grab my cock through my towel. Dennis sort of purred -- Mmmmm -- as his hand closed around my dick through the terrycloth. My body had always been responsive to Dennis and he has always known how to work me. No matter how tired I was or how many times I'd already come, he always managed to coax a new erection out of me if he wanted to.

"Wanna come back to my room?" he asked, giving my dick a tug.

I hesitated and I hated myself for that because he could tell I hesitated. My body was suddenly stiff with tension as I deliberated and I took a deep breath to try and relax. What would it mean to go back with him? I wondered. Can we do this without getting entangled once again? Can we have anonymous sex together like the sex club is meant for, despite our past? How would this change our relationship?

Dennis gave my dick another tug and I knew that right now my body would follow him anywhere he wanted to lead me.

I don't know what it is -- we did the same things I do when I have sex with other guys: we put our dicks in each other's mouths and asses, we kissed, our hands and lips roamed over various and sundry body parts until no skin had been left uncaressed or licked. In short, the usual activities of sex.

But something was different when Dennis and I fucked. Our chemistry. Our energy. Our sexual passion combined with our inability to stand each other for any sustained length of time. Something made our encounters and our connecting so much more intense.

That night in the bathhouse I gave myself over to Dennis without any worrying about what it meant for us to be fucking again. As his tongue explored my mouth while he inserted a third finger up my ass, I did not wonder if he expected me to call him later in the week or if we would see each other again; I just lived the sensations of tongue and hand and body and heart. There was no score-keeping of who had come how many times and in what positions. I sucked his cock until I was breathless and we rested, lying sweaty in a tangle of arms and legs and cocks pressed between our bodies. If he didn't suck me in turn when our rest became sex again, but instead I resumed sucking him off, for once our competitive natures seemed at peace. As long as our bodies touched, it hardly mattered what we did to and with each other.

The desk clerk called my locker number when I went over my time limit, but I ignored him. For the moment, my world was this tiny closet with a mattress and a pile of condoms and packets of lube -- most of which we'd already used. No, my world, for this brief while, was the man who shared it with me.

Later, happily exhausted and spent, we showered together, washing each other's backs, rubbing soapy hands over genitals that were tired and raw but trying to grow erect nonetheless. Passersby came to look at us frolicking under the spray, envious or contemptuous of our intimacy in public. I felt like we were young teenagers in love for the first time, innocently believing it would last forever.

I knew it wouldn't last beyond the doors of the club and to my surprise I wasn't angry about the situation. I

remembered all too well our fights when we lived together, even as I remembered, the pleasurable times as well -- not just the wild and exuberant sex, but romantic gestures and moments we'd shared.

"Penny for your thoughts," Dennis said as we stood toweling ourselves dry in the locker room.

I smiled at him, knowing I had a dreamy expression on my face that was half-nostalgia and half the pure physical bliss of having fucked and been fucked for the past five hours straight. I leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips, before continuing to towel my body dry.

"I was just thinking about us," I said.

Dennis got a big smile on his face, understanding, and leaned forward to kiss me. Then he went back to his tiny room to put his clothes on.

Outside on the street, the night was chill and calm and almost over. The city was quiet in a way that we normally didn't see it -- like the lull before a storm, or better yet, like the anticipation in a theater just before a performance begins.

Dennis and I held each other for a long moment, hugging and rubbing our faces against each other's necks, really feeling our bodies close together.

Then we kissed, a long slow kiss full of sexual longing and tenderness and lots of tongue. I could feel my dick begin to stir, half resentfully, in my pants.

When the kiss ended, we smiled and said goodnight and each walked off in opposite directions, sharing the same sweet memories.

Birds of a Feather

By Vincent Diamond

Miguel was just the Laundry Guy until the winter day the seagull got hit by a truck out on Cypress Street, cawing and screeching so loudly that even Angelo put down his tools to see what happened. The gull fluttered out in the street, one wing flat on the asphalt, its yellow beak opening and closing as it panted. Reynaldo DeSalvo looked up at the now red light on the corner and figured the gull had about twenty to seconds to live until the light turned green and Tampa's morning rush-hour traffic rolled over it.

But Miguel Santana ran out into the street, tore off his uniform shirt, and threw it over the gull. Rey saw the shirt-lump rise and fall as the gull tried to fly away. Miguel stood with his arms raised, stopping southbound traffic and then deftly scooping up the shirt, twisting it with the gull in it, and running back into the garage.

"You have a box we can put him in? Something small and dark to calm him down?" Miguel's voice was calm but urgent. He puffed a little from the run and Reynaldo got a whiff of minty mouthwash.

Miguel's nipples were black and hard in the February morning air. Reynaldo eyed Miguel's lean torso and had to make himself think. *Boxes, boxes, where do I have boxes?*

The gull screeched again from inside the gray shirt and flapped. Miguel tugged the bird close and cooed to it. "It's all right, little guy, it's all right. We're gonna get you settled in a safe place. Quiet, little one."

"How about a case box? From oil?" Rey stepped past the work bays over to a stock shelf. He rearranged a half dozen oil containers to get a box down from the shelf. "This is pretty small."

"Sure, that's fine, thanks. Can we take him to a backroom, someplace quiet?" Miguel's accent was soft, not Cuban exactly, smoother. Someone who'd learned English from a Spanish speaking native -- he recognized the comforting cadence of his father's speech in Miguel's voice.

Rey led the way through the parts room into his small office behind the customer area. It was shabby but neat: a few old Chilton's manuals still sat on the shelves, five years worth of service station monthly magazines were in cardboard organizers next to them. A battered leather loveseat was pushed against one wall; oxblood once, it was dirty brown now.

The office had heat and Rey noticed that Miguel's nipples returned to normal in the warmth. Miguel's eyes were black, darker than his own, and his eyelashes were thick.

Why the hell am I noticing his eyelashes?

Rey shook himself.

"Can I make a phone call here? To the seabird sanctuary?" Miguel asked. He put the box on the loveseat, then waited for permission.

"Sure, help yourself. How about a shirt?" Rey pawed in a desk drawer where he kept a change of clothes. He handed Miguel one of his own clean undershirts.

Miguel smiled and tugged it on. "Thanks. I'll get some towels from the truck, to keep him warm." The shirt sagged off Miguel's slender shoulders; he looked delicate in it, almost frail.

"I've got towels in the laundry bag."

Miguel put one hand on Rey's arm. His fingers were cool. "No, they have to be clean. He can't be breathing oil and gas fumes. I'll get some from my truck, it's okay."

"Sure." Rey sat down and half-listened to Miguel on the phone. He bent down to hear for the gull's breathing and kept his gaze on Miguel, not wanting to, but he couldn't make himself leave the office. He noticed Miguel's precisely shaved neck -- he must have just had a haircut -- the smoothness of his skin, the soft black hair on his slim arms. Miguel was about five-six and probably didn't weigh much more than one-forty.

Easy enough to carry up the stairs to his bed.

The moment gave him a pang. It had been over a year since Jason had left him, long months since having a steady lover. There had been a few quick grapplings down at the beach with faceless men and a one-week fling with a customer who had him fix his truck's transmission. That one bittersweet weekend after old man Russo had died when Jason came back, but such cold comfort that he was there with his wife's permission.

Rey wasn't a bar type, wasn't a classroom type and he sure as hell didn't race cars anymore, so most nights he

went home alone. Plus, turning thirty had calmed him down. As he got older the piercing fire of youthful horniness had waned. He still wanted sex, but he wanted something more to go with it now.

Something like what he'd had -- and lost.

Miguel hung up the phone. "They can take him in this afternoon. I have to make these next three stops this morning, but the others can be a little late. Do you mind if I leave him here 'til later?"

"I don't have a clue about how to nurse a sick bird. Will he be okay?" Rey asked.

"I'll poke some air holes in the top here and make him warm as I can. That's about all we can do. I'd like him to have a chance, though."

"Sure, then, come back when you're ready. I'll keep out of the office so he can have some peace and quiet."

Rey spent the day replacing the engine in a '72 Mustang. His was one of the few shops around who did replacements; most of the chain stores subbed them out. He even got some business from the chains once in a while for the older models. Working the old cars was simpler than the modern stuff that he worked on everyday with their damned computers and motherboards and online updates. As he dropped in the Mustang's spunky 302 V-8, he was looking forward to the test drive. When Miguel popped up around the car, Rey was startled for a second.

"I forgot all about him -- sorry," Rey said.

"It's okay, let's see if he's still alive," Miguel answered.

Rey went to the utility sink and cleaned off his hands and arms. They walked to the office. Miguel stepped in first but left the light off and Rey bumped into him in the dimness.

"Sorry 'bout that," he said.

Not all that sorry.

"I want to leave the light off to check him." Miguel sat with care on the loveseat then bent to listen at the box. He frowned. "I can't hear him breathing. Shit."

He lifted the box lid. The seconds stretched out. "Go ahead, turn the light on."

Rey flipped the switch and saw the broken gull in its box -- dead, mouth slightly open, the battered wing twisted at the wrong angle in front of him. The musty whiff of closed-in bird drifted through the office -- that feather-y smell unpleasant now with death in the room.

"I'm sorry, Miguel." He wanted to give Miguel a hug of affection, of camaraderie after the defeat, but he stopped himself. He settled for one palm on Miguel's arm. "At least you tried. A lot of people would have just left him in the road."

"Yeah, well." Miguel kept his head down as he wrapped the towel over the bird's body. Rey knew Miguel wasn't crying, but he had drawn in on himself like a kicked puppy. Miguel stood up. "I guess I'll take him home and bury him."

I would have just thrown him in the dumpster. What a nice kid.

"Are you okay?"

Miguel shrugged. "Sure. I was just hoping...."

Rey pulled Miguel's chin up. Miguel's eyes were so soft, his cheeks flushed -- with what emotion Rey couldn't tell -- and Miguel stepped closer.

"I'm sorry," Rey said. "Do you want to come here?" He wrapped his arms around Miguel's slender waist, smelled a touch Miguel's sweat, the fabric softener on his uniform shirt and then, beneath it all, Miguel's real skin smell. Rey's cock stirred, thickening, moving left, and he didn't try to hide it, didn't pull away.

Miguel's kiss was like a spider's touch, soft and feathery over Rey's lips. He groaned and pulled Miguel closer, nipping at Miguel's lips, wanting more. Needing more. Miguel's dry kisses made him harder; his cock lifted up against his pants and the fire in his belly made him groan. He thumbed Miguel's mouth open and thrust in with his own tongue. Miguel sucked on him, the small sounds of passion loud in the quiet of the office.

Miguel pulled away, stroked Rey's face with two gentle fingers, eyes full and questioning. "I wanna see you. Show me." His eyes were wolf-dark.

Rey tugged off his uniform shirt, the undershirt beneath clung to his broad chest. He leaned back against the desk, arms behind him, belly thrust out. Miguel's fingertips delicately traced his belly where Rey's shirt and pants met. Rey let his eyes close and he shivered. Touch again. Real touch, not the furtive grappling of the gay beach, but a real caress. Rey's cock filled with blood and pressed against his pants, throbbing. He groaned.

Miguel smiled and, using only his finger beneath Rey's shirt, tracked up Rey's chest to his nipples. Miguel circled them, made the small buds sharp and hard and then traced back down to Rey's belly button. "An outie. How cute."

"You're cute, come here." Rey reached for him, put his hands on Miguel's waist and held him between his own legs. He stroked up Miguel's chest, watched Miguel shiver at his touch. His fingers wrapped on either side of Miguel's face and he gazed down.

Miguel looked back at him, the smallest smile on his lips. His pupils were huge and his skin was pinkened. Miguel surged up against Rey, their lips met, deeper, lips pillowing against one another; he felt the pressure of Miguel's teeth, tasted him.

Now, Miguel's cock grew hard against his belly and they both moaned to feel it.

He wanted to lift Miguel onto the desk, feel those slender legs wrap around his own waist and bury himself in this sweetness. He started to pump his hips -- he was so hard that he knew he could finish in less than a minute. Miguel moaned and thrust back against him then pulled away.

"Will you fuck me?" Miguel asked.

"Yes. God, yes."

"I've got a condom."

Rey moved to the office door, thumbed the light off and was ready to close the mini-blinds when Miguel stopped him. "Oh, no, I wanna see you fuck me. Leave the lights on."

The hum of traffic buzzed through the closed window and Rey heard voices from the shop. He flipped the light back on, left the blinds open.

Miguel draped his shirt over the loveseat and held Rey's gaze as he undressed. Shirt, belt, shoes, socks and pants came off, Rey couldn't look away. His cock throbbed, piercing as a wound but the near-pain was exhilarating.

Miguel pulled off his white briefs and his cock arced upwards as Rey watched. Miguel raised his arms. "Come here and fuck me."

Rey stalked to him, fast enough for Miguel's eyes to widen. He lifted Miguel up, felt the thin legs wrap around him as he walked them over to the desk. He wanted to go slow, wanted to lick down Miguel's belly and taste his cock, but Miguel whispered in his ear, guttural words in Spanish and English, more street than Jason had ever used, and Rey's cock, his belly, his body and soul ached to join this man.

Miguel unzipped him, pulled his hardness out. "Look at us."

Their cocks were the same dark tone, brown-skinned and hard, bobbing between them. Miguel wasn't cut and his foreskin creased back to reveal an enticing wine-ish brown color, the veins of his cock purple and blue. The cap of Rey's mushroom head glistened; his cock moved on its own, straining. Rey's balls ached, a good ache.

Miguel tore open the condom, slicked it over him and positioned Rey. He lay back on the desk, pushing off bills and invoices and pens, his knees up and spread. The thought of undressing completely whispered through Rey's mind but Miguel's heat and taut face made him ache to thrust inside, not wanting to wait, not wanting to stop. "How about some lube?" Rey whispered, but Miguel shook his head.

"It's okay, the condom's got enough on it. Fuck me, Reynaldo. Put your cock in me and fuck me right now!"

He used his finger first, pressing inside Miguel. Miguel cried out, eyes closed, thrusting with his hips. "More."

Rey slid inside, smooth, wet, all the way, nothing to stop him. Heat and tightness grasped him and the skin on his own belly quivered. His balls rested against Miguel's ass and Miguel held him still, eyes full. "Inside me, Reynaldo, oh, inside me now."

Rey thrust in, starting slow as he'd always done with Jason. Miguel shook his head, eyes closed. "More!" he cried out. "Rey, fuck me more. Please!"

Rey stopped thinking, stopped being careful, stopped holding back. He plunged into Miguel with no focus other than the heat around him, his cock swelling, harder. He thrust in deep, Miguel's gasps a whisper in his ear, feeling nothing but the pleasurable burn of his own passion and need. They slid across the desk as Rey worked, until Miguel was backed against the wall. They were crunched beneath the shelf over the desk and in a small part of Rey's brain, he was aware of the heavy books above him, aware that the desk banged against the wall, vibrating the shelf.

But Miguel was beneath him, his slender legs spread wide apart, his mouth open.

Miguel cried out. "Rey, now, come in me now, I need you to, oh Rey!" He felt Miguel's fingers between their bellies, Miguel wrenching his own cock and Rey cried out again, spurting, wet, his face tight with the agonizing pleasure. Miguel tightened around him, legs, anus, arms and Rey came, gushing inside Miguel, lungs so spent that he couldn't cry out at all.

Rey laid his head on Miguel's shoulder. They lay still for some minutes until Miguel groaned. "My legs are cramping; we have to move."

Rey rose up too quickly and banged his head on the bookshelf; it wobbled but stayed in place. When he tried to pull out, Miguel stopped him. "It's okay, just let me straighten out a little. Stay inside me."

Rey tugged them both backward and Miguel stretched beneath him, easing his legs down. Rey stayed nestled between them. His cock was soft inside Miguel, still contained.

"Better?" Rey asked.

"More comfortable. Nothing's better than you coming in me like that." Miguel smiled and stroked Rey's face with soft fingers.

"I'm sorry about your bird," Rey said.

"I am too, but I'm not sorry about this."

They grinned at each other. Miguel put his legs back around Rey's waist and they stayed connected for a long time, kissing and nuzzling one another in the afternoon's light. Together. Taken.

Encounter at Sea

By Sean Michael

Benedict was surprised to be alive.

Mind you, he didn't imagine it would last. Eventually there would be another storm that would pull him under. Or the monstrous fishes that lived this far in the ocean would get him. If he was lucky. He didn't fancy starving to death.

They'd walked him off the plank that morning, his fellow sailors shocked, supposedly, to learn that he was a buggerer. They'd all been laughing and joking together and when his fellows had realized he wasn't joking about some things, they'd turned on him like a pack of rabid dogs and left him for dead in the waves.

The sun had been merciless until just now, beating down on him, singeing his skin, making the harsh kiss of the salt water burn. He floated easily now, watching the sky turn to splendorous color as the sun set far off on the horizon where the sea appeared to meet the sky in an eternal embrace.

He shivered. Oh. He could add freezing to the list of possible ways this inhospitable ocean could take him.

It was as he watched the setting sun that he imagined he saw a face bobbing in the water some yards away, features obscured by distances and falling darkness. Well this was a nice turn of events. It had been his understanding that hallucinations were the bailiwick of the insane, or those near death -- perhaps he was closer to the end than he realized. It would be nice to have some company to make the night seem shorter, even if it was all just a product of his imagination. The man, illusion, messenger from the gods who protect fallen sailors, seemed to disappear beneath the waves, a distant splash sounding.

"Oh, don't go..." He reached out to the growing darkness and let his hand fall back into the water, shivering.

The head appeared again, close enough that he could see long, dark hair, strong shoulders bobbing in the water, eyes bright, clever, curious. Oh. So real. He reached out again. A soft sound, almost a sigh, but sweeter, happier, bubbled across the water, the man swimming closer, hair making patterns on the surface of the water. He'd never seen anyone so beautiful.

"Are you real?" he asked, though he supposed a figment of his imagination wouldn't say no.

"R...r...real?" The whisper floated over to him, the man -- for it was a man, solid and real, the water rippling around him -- coming closer.

The sound of another's voice made him shiver, though not from cold. "Alive. Here. Can I touch you?"

The man tilted his hand, cool, wet fingers sliding out to stroke against his. He gasped, hand jerking. He hadn't expected that, hadn't expected this to be really happening. The man backed away, eyes wide, water splashing.

"Oh, sorry. Sorry. You surprised me. Please." Don't go. Don't leave me all alone.

"Oh. Please." A soft chuckle sounded, the man floating closer, fingers dancing over the water. He reached for the man, almost gasping again as their fingers touched. The man moved closer, seeming to float effortlessly, water moving beneath them.

"Who are you?" he asked, wondering how there could be another man out here with him. This was a stranger, not someone from his vessel and there had been no other boats as far as the eye could see. He got a smile and the wind began to blow, stealing the soft sounds from the man's mouth, pushing him against a solid chest.

"Oh... warm..." So warm compared to the cold water around them.

"Warm..." Breath brushed against his lips, his cheeks.

Oh yes, so warm, making him forget his sunburned skin and his tired muscles. The touches seemed to heal him, seemed to stop the constant pull of the depths on his legs. He took a deep breath, looking into eyes that seemed black in the moonlight.

The hands on him slid beneath his clothes, stroked his skin, arousal seeming to come from nowhere, to be carried on the air by the musical sighs the stranger gave. He slid his own hands over the strong, bare shoulders. The man's skin shone like pearls. The water seemed to buoy him up, the man's skin incredibly smooth. Soft.

He wanted to take a kiss, but felt it would be stolen if this beautiful man didn't offer it first. And why he should worry now that he was lost at sea he didn't know.

"Not lost." Those eyes were so green, so bright, seeming to pull the thoughts from his head.

"I'm not?" Strangely enough, he didn't feel lost at the moment. Not at all.

"I have found you." Soft lips brushed his own.

"Oh..." How could this man make all the bad just disappear? "Not lost."

"Yes." He should be scared -- he had joined the merchant's vessel over a year ago, leaving home for fortune and glory. He had seen monsters and squalls, sharks and eels. Beasts with eyes as big as a man. Yet? He was at peace.

He wanted another kiss, a longer one, more, so he pressed their lips together again, sighing as the simple touch warmed him straight through. The man opened to him, tongue soft and salty on his own, sliding into his mouth. Everything else disappeared, where he was, how cold he should have been, how tired, and all he knew was that lovely mouth and the flavor. Those hands moved around him, stroking, petting, a sweet song filling his head. He pressed close, drawn to that warmth, to the source of the song. His legs were drawn around a strong waist, his pants and tunic torn away by clawed fingers.

Clawed fingers? But almost as soon as it occurred to him to question it, his thoughts were stolen away again by the strong muscles beneath his thighs, the warmth of this man's body and the lips that stole his breath.

"Sweet man." The words were breathed into him, a promise. It was magic and wonderful and he didn't care if he was dying, drowning, he just wanted this to continue. They sank into the water for a long moment, the action surprisingly easy, those arms keeping him safe. He trusted in them and let his breath flow into this man, this stranger, this life saver.

They began to spin, the night growing darker and darker, his heartbeat pounding. He was hot, burning up as he pressed close to the man. His hips rocked against the smooth skin, shaft harder than he ever imagined, those hands holding him close, as if he were a precious thing. He whimpered lightly. In the past, his encounters had been quick, frantic couplings. This was soft and slow and wonderful. His sounds were swallowed by that hungry mouth, the water sliding past his skin.

The sensations built in him slowly, surely, making him hot, making him feel as if he were flying. It was as if he was moving, gliding through the water, moving as the kisses made him dizzy. The moon seemed huge, a vast jewel in the night sky. He was so close, pleasure shooting through him, doubling and trebling wherever he and his beautiful stranger touched.

The stranger's song filled his mind, his heart, his soul, spinning and soaring through him like a hymn he'd heard as a child. He cried out, his voice like an echo of the song as he came, pleasure flooding through him, flowing from him.

The water splashed, the sound huge, a strange comfort. He clung to the warm muscles. He was moving through the water, his lax legs nudging something large, warm. He frowned, looking down, trying to see through the water by the light of the moon. "What are you?"

"What?" The words seemed lined with laughter.

"You have a... a tail? No legs?" Unbelievable. Amazing.

"A tail." They spun again, moving faster. A merman. He'd heard stories, every sailor had, but he'd believed to be tall tales invented by men driven mad by the monotony of the sea. But here was his very own merman.

He laughed as they spun, feeling light and free.

"Oh!" The merman threw his head back, hair flying. "Again!"

He did laugh again, delighted, light and free, buoyed by the water that had so recently sought to pull him into its depths. He was saved.

A Day in New York

by Gabrielle Chevalier

May 3rd, 1944

9:30 a.m.

The view from up here was incredible.

The tallest buildings he'd ever been in were in Omaha, and -- well -- the buildings in Omaha weren't that tall. Not like this. He knew his jaw was hanging open, knew he looked like a hick, a hayseed, a tourist. But then, the only other people standing around on the observation deck of the Empire State Building were probably tourists themselves, so what did it matter?

And besides that, he *was* a hick and a hayseed. Enough guys had nicknamed him "Tom Mix" and "Cowboy" in Basic for him to know he seemed different to them.

That didn't matter either, because he'd always seemed different to himself.

A girl in a knee-length pink dress moved away from the crowded ledge, and he strode forward to claim her place. Before him, Manhattan Island jutted forth into the ocean like the prow of a great ship, with the Statue of Liberty as her figurehead.

Turning, he contemplated the wide, flat area he knew from his Traveler's Aid map had to be Brooklyn and Queens. As he squinted toward the place where land met ocean, he thought he could make out a Ferris wheel turning lazily, but the unseasonable heat made distant objects a shimmering illusion and he couldn't be sure.

"Nothin' to see over there, soldier."

He started at the sound of clipped urban vowels spoken in a gravel-rough voice, words formed with brisk efficiency. Turning, he faced the man and was immediately struck dumb, the green in the other's eyes like no green that ever waved in a field of wheat or burst forth in spring from a rain soaked ravine.

After an eternity of looking he found his voice. "I was looking for Coney Island."

The green gaze flickered over him, appraising him, and suddenly he remembered the x-ray they gave him during his medical exam. They told him he wouldn't feel anything, but when the nurse instructed him to hold still he'd experienced the sensation of a million unseen arrows piercing his flesh. He felt the same thing now and resisted the urge to shiver with it.

"Were you?" the other man said, his voice suddenly lazier, and it was a mockery of his own soft, slow accent, he knew that, but it didn't anger him the way it should have. "Well, that's a coincidence, because I was lookin' for something too." The stranger paused, and then *leaned* closer, one surprisingly graceful hand rising to the ledge and molding to its shape. "I think maybe I found it."

And he might be a hick and a hayseed, Tom Mix the cowboy, but he knew what this man meant, he knew even though no one had ever said anything like that to him, no one had ever looked at him the way this man was doing now. He knew he should say 'no' and he knew he should walk away and God, what would his mother think?

But he also knew that tomorrow he was boarding a ship for England and not long after that he was probably going to die. And what his mother didn't know wouldn't hurt her, while the weight of the truth about himself pressed at his heart every night in the darkness until he was sure it would burst.

And that was why he stepped away from the ledge, squared his shoulders and tugged his uniform jacket straight, and nodded, once. "Maybe you have," he said, his voice brisk and clipped, and the man stared at him for a moment before moving to follow him.

What does it matter? he asked himself, as the elevator doors closed behind them and the car began its long descent to earth.

The thought repeated itself in his head as he watched the needle count down the floors, over and over, a comforting litany to ease the pressure on his ribcage.

9:45 a.m.

They walked down the street for a while in silence, their paces matched perfectly, their strides eating up the pavement. He'd never seen so much concrete in his life, never mind brick and marble and glass, all molded and shaped into this perfectly right-angled landscape. As they walked in the shadows of artificial giants, Manhattan seemed as far from home as the surface of the moon.

Now that he could think again, his brain catalogued other facts about the man walking beside him: the fact that he wasn't wearing a uniform but a dark blue work shirt and a jacket that fit snugly about his hips, the fact that his nose was hooked and his hair was black and he had to be at least thirty because there were lines around those eyes, that his skin was dark from too much sun and that his mouth was too full for his face. He wasn't a handsome man, but he was -- *striking*, his high school English teacher would have said. He had the kind of face that didn't belong on anyone in Nebraska.

"Where are we going?"

"Subway," the other man said, nodding his head at a place down the street where a low wrought-iron structure jutted up from the sidewalk.

And before he knew it he was descending again, descending into darkness, and then he was plunged into a stream of rushing humanity, bumping and jostling its way to the next job, the next meeting, the next assignation.

Assignation. That was another English-teacher word, when they read *The Scarlet Letter* and she was trying to use a word that would not sound too harsh, or too truthful.

Strong fingers encircled his arm, and he was being tugged away from the platform, away from the other people and down an even darker corridor. It took him several seconds after the door closed behind him to realize he was in a public toilet, which was silly, really, considering the smell should have given it away instantly.

It took him another two or three seconds to understand what was going on.

There were men here, together. Two of them stood over in a corner, kissing one another as though their lives depended on it. One was wearing a plain grey business suit, the other a Navy uniform. As he watched, the civilian trailed a hand down the sailor's chest, then pressed the palm against the front of his trousers. The sailor threw his head back and moaned, and his hips pistoned helplessly, like an animal in rut.

Other sounds reached his ears. They were coming from the stalls.

Dear Lord.

The dark-haired man was tugging him forward, pulling him into an open stall, and he thought of running, begged his legs to obey him, but they had turned to jelly.

Not like this. Not like this.

With the door closed the air was stifling; he turned wild, pleading eyes on the man standing before him, but the other man was already leaning in. He jerked as he felt those too-full lips glide the length of his throat.

“Please,” he said, but the words emerged as a whisper and were drowned out by the moans and grunts of the men around them.

The lips were at his ear now. “What do you do?” A hand strayed to his hip, brushed across his belly, and his heart threatened to explode from his chest. He screwed his eyes shut and pressed his mouth closed and told himself he would not cry, only babies cried, but dear sweet Jesus he was so *lonely* and if this was all he would ever have it would be beyond bearing...

A harsh curse assaulted his ears and the oppressive heat of the other man’s body deserted him. He opened his eyes and realized he was shaking, that every part of him was shaking.

The other man was staring at him with a combination of horror and revulsion. “Fuck,” he spat again, the word a rifle shot. “How old are you?”

He opened his mouth, but his throat was dry and he had to close it in order to swallow. “Eighteen,” he said finally, trying for defiance and failing miserably. It was hard to be defiant when you were trembling like a girl.

“Fuck,” the other man said, softly this time, leaning back against the other side of the marble stall. “I -- ” he waved a hand “ -- you look older.”

“Everyone says that,” he murmured, grateful for this small oasis of the familiar inside this vast strangeness. *Growing up just like his daddy*, his mother’s relatives always said in hushed tones, as if it were bad luck to speak it aloud.

The other man snorted. “They didn’t say not to go into subway bathrooms with strangers, though,” he muttered. “The Army don’t have no training film for that, huh?”

He thought back to Tuesday nights in the mess tent, remembering Private Snafu cartoons and boring lectures on the perils of venereal disease. He shook his head.

“Well, consider this a free service provided by the residents of New York,” the black-haired man said, his full lips curving in a sardonic smile. Touching two fingers to the side of his forehead, he added, “Anything for our boys in uniform.”

And then he opened the stall door and disappeared.

“Wait!” The word surprised him with its vehemence. In the corner, the sailor and the civilian looked up briefly from what they were doing, then resumed their activities. The older man spun around, a scowl hardening his features. He jabbed a finger at the exit.

“Look, you just go outside, down the hallway, and the stairs are right in front of you. Then you can be on your way and forget you were ever here.”

“I don’t want -- ” He trailed off, helpless to name either what he didn’t want or what he did. He knew he didn’t want a quick coupling against a wall. But what if that was all there was to be had, and he woke up the next morning with nothing? What if this were his only chance to ease the loneliness? What if --

“Hey, kid. Breathe, willya? I’m not scrapin’ you off this floor.”

“I’m not a kid!” He winced at the almost-squeak in his voice and clenched his hands into fists at the curl of amusement in the other man’s lip. “I have -- I have a day. Only a day. And I want -- a hundred things. A thousand. And I don’t have enough time -- ”

The older man’s frown softened suddenly at that, his unnatural green gaze turning inward for a moment. “Who does?” he said quietly.

After a breathless pause, he shook himself like a dog. “Come on,” he muttered, heading for the exit. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

11:21 a.m.

“Walter. They named you *Walter*?”

“Walt,” he said irritably, the full effect of his indignation ruined by a huge mouthful of scrambled eggs. He chewed and swallowed quickly. “And what’s wrong with Walter? It’s my grandfather’s name.”

The other man held up his hands as if to ward off a blow, but his eyes danced. “Nothing. You just don’t look like a Walter.”

“What do I look like?”

One corner of that sensual mouth jerked. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Walt felt his face heat, and brought the steaming cup of coffee to his lips to hide it. The coffee was the strongest he’d ever had, and that was saying something because his mother cooked for ten ranch hands and they liked it as powerful as turpentine and thick as mud. He said as much aloud.

“Best Automat jav in town,” the other man agreed, nodding toward the kitchen. “My buddy works in the kitchen - he makes *espresso* when he’s on the night shift.”

Walt didn’t ask what that was, only smiled faintly and bit off a hunk of toast. “So what’s *your* name?”

“Marco!” Walt turned his head in the direction of the excited shout and saw a tall man in a loud green suit advancing on their table.

The other man -- *Marco*, he thought, rolling the name around in his brain like a pebble -- rose from his seat and Walt was surprised by the smile that lit his face. It wasn’t ironic or carnal or faintly cruel like all the other ones Walt had seen today. It was open and guileless and melted ten years off him, straightened the grim hunch in his shoulders, eased the lines around his eyes.

Walt caught his breath. Marco was -- *beautiful*. How could he walk around with that much beauty banked down inside him and not explode with it, or at least not have it constantly oozing out of his fingers and toes and skin?

The two men caught each other in a bone-crushing hug and Walt surreptitiously glanced at the other patrons, most of whom were ignoring them. One woman’s eyes went wide as dinner plates, and Walt jerked his gaze back to the men, only to find that Green Suit had Marco’s face in both hands and was planting a hard, bruising kiss on his mouth.

“God,” the tall man said, after their lips had parted with a loud smack. “I thought you were dead.”

The smile disappeared then. “I am,” Marco said, voice soft. “You’re seeing a ghost.”

Walt sucked in a breath that was painfully loud to his own ears but neither of the other men seemed to notice.

Green Suit frowned, then gave Marco's shoulders a last squeeze before releasing him. "Well, you sure don't feel like a ghost," he said, his frown turning to a leer. He made shooing motions as he eased into the booth and Walt scooted over in his seat, shoving his plate along the tabletop with a little more force than necessary. "How long have you been in town?"

Marco swallowed a mouthful of hash browns. "Nearly two weeks."

"Two *weeks*?" The tall man squealed indignantly. "You heartless bastard! You haven't been to see me!"

Marco shrugged. "Haven't been to see a lot of people."

"Then where have you *been*?" He shot a venomous look at Walt, and Walt realized this man thought *he* was the reason Marco hadn't visited his friends. He felt a strange sense of pride that someone could believe him to be that powerful a distraction.

"Around," Marco offered vaguely. "Harlem, mostly."

"I've been in Harlem every other night," the tall man sniffed. "You might have called me."

"I might've," Marco agreed, his eyes gone flinty and hard now, as though he'd pulled his soul back from them.

Green Suit opened his mouth to speak, then wisely shut it again. After a few moments, he said quietly, "You leaving again soon?"

Marco studied his coffee cup. "Tomorrow."

The other man tensed beside him. "They didn't give you very long. I thought they gave you longer when -- "

"They don't have enough men." Marco's voice was sharp-edged. "They never did, and by now..." He cut himself off this time, one finger caressing the sturdy white rim of the cup.

Green Suit said nothing to this. Walt studied the other man's big hands where they lay on the table and it occurred to him that those hands were too white and clean and puffy to belong to someone who understood Marco, who knew what it felt like to be a ghost walking among the living.

Walt looked down at his own hands, which were brown and rough, still callused from the last time he'd held a horse's reins, from the abrasion of leather against the outer skin of his index fingers. He'd ridden since he was six years old; a few months in the Army weren't enough to erase evidence that strong.

If he died soon, the marks would still be on him. It was an oddly comforting thought.

By the time he looked up again, Green Suit was gone and Marco was staring at him openly. He flushed under that too-observant gaze, as though somehow the other man could see inside his head.

After a long silence, Marco tore his gaze away and dug in his pocket for money. Throwing a dollar -- a whole dollar! -- on the table, he jerked his head in the direction of the door once again. Walt nodded and rose to follow, no longer worried about their destination; he knew now that the places Marco would lead him were the places he needed to be led.

12:38 p.m.

Walt watched as Marco passed another precious dollar to the aging man standing on the other side of the counter.

"Size thirty-four, I believe," the little man said, his gaze flicking over Walt in a heartbeat. "I only have brown and ah -- green."

"Brown," Walt said decisively and the man scurried away into the racks stretching away behind the counter.

Marco leaned back against one wall, the wallpaper at his back dingy and yellowed with age. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm not supposed to be out without my uniform on," Walt answered.

"Uh-huh," Marco replied, unconcerned. "That's why it costs twice as much to rent a suit from this guy as it does from anyone else. Trust me, you'll have a lot more fun without it."

"Do you?" Walt blurted.

Marco studied him like a bug under glass. "Do I what?"

“I mean, are you -- ” Walt waved a hand to encompass Marco’s clothing “ -- in the service?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Walt tried to halt the words, but couldn’t. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about what Marco had said in the restaurant. “It’s just that -- you said -- and I thought maybe -- ” God, he was babbling like a fool, a silly, hick fool.

“I’m in the Merchant Marines,” Marco bit out. “I been in three years. Last month my ship was torpedoed and I was one of the fourteen guys who didn’t drown. As a reward they gave me a whole two fucking weeks off. So I been spending it -- fucking. Are we done now?”

“Yeah. I -- yeah,” Walt stammered, cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

Marco tipped his head back against the dingy wallpaper and sighed. “Look, I don’t want to get into our life stories here, okay? It’s -- I dunno, you deserve a chance to see the town, to get a few of those thousand things knocked off your list. And the first thing you should do is find yourself a nice guy and get yourself...” He trailed off, a twisted smile curling his lip, and something in Walt snapped at his cool, unflappable New York exterior.

And so he tilted his head and finished Marco’s sentence. “Fucked?” he asked, proud when his voice didn’t crack.

Marco’s eyes snapped back to Walt’s face.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Walt said calmly, meeting his gaze without flinching. “It’s not like I’ve never -- done things.”

He nearly withered under the force of that stare, but held firm. In Basic, at Fort Oglethorpe, there were rumors about guys who snuck out into the woods together after lights out, crude tales and jokes that left nothing to the imagination. And on the way here on the train, they put two men in every bottom berth, and late last night when he’d left the top bunk for the bathroom, he’d glanced through the crack in the curtain and seen the men beneath him rubbing up against one another under the covers, their pants and sighs drowned out by the engine. It wasn’t such a stretch to imagine those things happening to him instead. There were times when he’d even thought about what it would be like to --

“Hey! Buck Rogers! Come down from the moon, willya?”

Walt blinked and focused on Marco's face, which was wearing an expression he fancied was fond amusement. He brightened at that, until he remembered his mother looked at the dog that way when it chased its own tail.

The other man jerked a thumb in the direction of the counter, where the little storekeeper was waiting with a suit and an unequivocally bored expression. Walt snatched the hanger out of his waiting hands and stomped off toward the changing rooms.

1:15 p.m.

"Go in already. You know you want to."

Walt shook his head. "It's corny."

"So you're corny. It works."

Sighing, Walt peered up at the sign that advertised its wares in unashamedly patriotic lettering:

-Voice of Victory Records-

Send YOUR VOICE home to MOTHER

-Special Discount for Servicemen-

"Come on," Marco said. "Don't you know every G.I. sends a present home to Mom before he ships out?"

"She'd say it was a waste of money," Walt murmured.

"So it's your twenty-one bucks a month to waste. What else you gonna spend it on?"

Walt's jaw clenched. "Nothing."

"So -- "

"I'll do it," Walt said shortly, yanking open the door and walking into the shop.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged with three and a half minutes of himself pressed into a flat black disc. Halfway through it, he'd wondered if this were Marco's way of getting rid of him, but the black-haired man was still standing outside, smoking a cigarette and observing the parade of humanity pass by. As Walt watched, Marco's gaze lighted on and stuck to the retreating form of a sailor in an indecently tight uniform.

"I'm done!" Walt announced cheerfully, stepping directly in front of the other man.

Marco frowned for a moment, then took another lazy drag on his cigarette. "What'd you tell Ma?" he said, drawing out the last word into *Mawwww*.

"That I'd been at the top of the tallest building in the world," Walt said. "That I was fine, and that I was leaving tomorrow. That I'd write her, and that she shouldn't worry," he concluded.

Marco's eyes were mocking and it occurred to Walt that this was probably the same inane stuff everyone told their mothers in letters or postcards or Voice of Victory Records. Thousands of mothers whose sons were never coming home sitting in their living rooms playing the records over and over until the voice faded to a faint, crackling hiss, until there was nothing left to remember them by. Was this all he would leave her of himself, all the evidence of his presence that would exist until the grooves were worn smooth?

He had a sudden urge to smash the thing against the brick wall in front of him, because that would be more real than anything he'd just ranted on about.

He could send her the broken pieces with a note: *This was your son*.

"What do you want from me?" he heard himself snap, the words pouring out of him in a torrent. "I am a hick, a kid, a rube, a God damned cowboy. If you think you owe me anything, you don't. If you think I'm going to end up in a gutter somewhere, I won't. I've fought men bigger than you and tougher than you, and I've won. I can take care of myself; I have been for a long time." Of their own accord, his hands shaped themselves into fists. He took a step forward, then another, until they were inches apart. The stream of pedestrians flowed around them like water around a pair of weathered river stones.

Marco's expression registered something resembling interest. "So you can take care of yourself, huh?" he countered.

Walt took deep, ragged breaths as rage, frustration and an annoying knot of hope fought one another in his gut. Finally, he nodded and took a step back, breaking the connection between them.

The older man looked him over appraisingly one last time, then nodded himself. "Okay, then. Enough tourist shit. Let's mail your souvenir and get to the important stuff."

2:00 p.m.

Walt was beginning to believe that New York City was a vast hive, because there seemed to be no place in the city that wasn't swarming with people. Even at this time of day, the Astor Bar was packed, most of the customers men in expensively tailored suits. He looked down at his own rented outfit and winced slightly.

"Don't worry," Marco said, as if reading his thoughts again. "They're not gonna be looking at your clothes. For long."

Walt hesitated in the doorway, taking in the long, curving bar with row upon row of gleaming bottles arranged on the wall. White-coated men, their uniforms perfectly pressed, moved efficiently behind the bar, pouring and mixing drinks, wiping down the bar with immaculate cotton towels.

"What are we doing here?"

Marco snorted. "Well, I figure it like this. You only got a limited amount of time. And you're not the kind of guy who'd be satisfied with a quickie in a subway bathroom -- " his mouth curled sardonically " -- so your best bet is the Astor. This is where the high-rent crowd comes to get laid -- businessmen from out of town, high-ranking officers, theater types -- and they all have swanky apartments nearby or hotel rooms upstairs. Class and convenience, rolled up into one neat package."

Walt frowned. "You mean -- "

Marco nodded toward the bar. "Straights on one side, queers on the other. I'll let you figure out which side is which." He slapped Walt companionably on the back, startling him into taking a step forward. "Have fun, but don't look too obvious. The management doesn't like it when we start feeling each other up in the middle of the bar."

Walt spun around, a chill settling over him as he watched Marco retreat. "You're leaving?"

The other man spread his expressive hands in the way Walt was already becoming accustomed to. "I'm not exactly dressed for the place," he said. "And I have other fish to fry."

"In Harlem?" Walt asked, though the volume made it sound less like a question and more like an accusation.

Marco's eyes narrowed dangerously. "So what if I am?"

Walt shrugged, trying not to betray his wildly hammering heart. "It's just that -- you told the fella in the Automat that that's what you'd *been* doing," he managed. "Isn't there -- something special you want to do on your last day in New York?"

Those unfathomable green eyes grew shadowed for a moment, then cleared. "No."

And Walt felt an electric thrill then, because for an instant he'd seen something Marco didn't want anyone to see, and if he only knew how to push, how to pry him open, Walt suspected there might be something wonderful waiting for him inside. But the thrill faded when he remembered that *he* was living inside this eighteen-year-old hick boy who didn't have the first idea how to pry anyone open.

Still, he had to try, so he blundered forward desperately with the first thought that entered his mind. "What about your mother?" he asked. "She lives around here, doesn't she? Have you been to see her?"

Like the sudden onslaught of a summer thunderstorm, Marco's entire face darkened with menace. "That's none of your God damned business," he said, his voice low and threatening.

Walt should have quit then, but he knew this was his last chance to keep Marco close to him, and he had no idea why that should have become so necessary to him in the past handful of hours, but that didn't make it any less true. "It *is* my business," he countered, stepping closer, "because I *know*, just like you. I know I'm not going to survive the war. I know I'm probably not going to survive the next two months." He took a deep breath, launched his final assault. "We're the same."

Marco's eyes widened, disbelief warring with astonishment in his features. Finally, he shook his head violently. "No," he rasped, almost to himself, as though he were denying himself something he wanted very much. Walt knew what that felt like, too.

"Isn't there someplace we could go -- together?" Walt insisted, taking another step closer. If he took a deep breath, their chests would be brushing against one another; as it was, he could feel the heat of Marco's body, smell the almost spicy scent of his olive skin. "Somewhere where it'd be just the two of us? This place is so -- crowded. I want -- "

“Hey.”

Walt turned in the direction of the irritated voice and saw one of the white-coated bartenders scowling at them.

“I don’t think this is your kind of place,” he said sharply, his eyes never leaving Marco. Beside him, Walt felt the other man tense and instinctively placed a hand on his chest.

The bartender’s scowl deepened. “You’re not at the Pink Elephant, you know.”

Marco treated the other man to a dismissive perusal. “Yeah, and you’d know all about the Pink Elephant,” he sneered, his body restless under Walt’s hand. Then he turned to Walt and held his gaze. “It’s been real, kid,” he murmured, touching his forehead once more in that two-fingered salute. He took a step backward --

-- and Walt’s fingers curled into the material of his jacket and held fast.

“No,” Walt said softly. And then several things happened at once.

Marco stared down at the place where Walt’s hand was twisted against his chest, over his heart. When he looked up, his face was finally, *finally* open and surprised, and God, there was so much there that Walt knew it would take a hundred years to figure it all out. It wasn’t fair he only had one damned day.

The bartender made a noise that might have been speech, but Walt was beyond caring because within a few seconds the bartender and everyone else in the Astor seemed to fade away until he was alone with Marco, who was beautiful and dying and ornery as a wild mustang.

He’d tamed one before. He could do it again.

And then Walt leaned forward and kissed him.

He’d only kissed one other person before who wasn’t related to him and that was Jenny Samson back behind the grain elevator when he was twelve and pretty sure that everything about him was just plain wrong. Once he did, he knew he was going to Hell because every boy in the school wanted to kiss Jenny and he was doing it and he wanted to be somewhere else the whole time.

But there had never been anything in his life so right as kissing Marco; he knew that like he knew his own name. Marco's mouth was hot and sweet and his lips were soft and made for kissing, and somewhere in the middle of it all Walt's hand came up and rested on Marco's cheek, which was rough and smooth at the same time.

He nearly cried out in disappointment when Marco wrenched his mouth away, but thankfully he didn't go far, resting his forehead against Walt's and staring at him. Walt went a little cross-eyed looking at him that close up.

"What do you want from me?" Marco demanded, flinging Walt's earlier question back in his face.

That caught him off guard and he drew back slightly, though he didn't let go of Marco's jacket. "I don't know," he admitted finally. He ran a hand through his hair, knowing he was making a mess of it.

I do know, he thought. I want something to remember when I die. I want one moment I can look back on and say, I was myself. I was Walt.

To his surprise, Marco's hand rose and stroked Walt's hair back into place. "Makes two of us," he said.

Walt squeezed his eyes shut as he savored the sensation of those fingers against his scalp, branding him, marking him.

And then the world slammed back into place around them and Walt felt the crushing weight of dozens of angry stares on every part of him. He tried to take a breath, but his lungs couldn't expand under the pressure.

Just when he thought he might not ever breathe again, Marco grabbed his hand and tugged him forward, out of the Astor Bar, out into the sunlight and open space.

2:48 p.m.

"Yo, Sal! Where you headed?"

The burly man in denim coveralls cupped his hands around his mouth to be heard above the sound of the tugboat's engine. "Goin' to the Narrows to meet a broke-down tanker," he yelled. "You want a lift?"

"Yeah, to the Prospect Pier," Marco called back.

"Hop on!" Sal shouted, gesturing with a broad sweep of his arm.

Soon they were crossing the Upper Bay, chugging past Governors Island and the Erie Basin, the horn sounding occasionally as they passed freighters and warships and other tugs. In the distant haze, Walt picked out the shimmering form of the Statue of Liberty, standing proudly amidst the bustle of ship traffic.

“You can take the ferry over there in the morning, before you go,” Marco said against his ear. They stood in the prow of the boat, close but not touching.

Walt turned his head and his lips inadvertently brushed against Marco’s cheek, and all at once the memory of what he’d done came flooding back to him and he felt dizzyier than a sparrow in a tornado. “I have to report by eight,” he replied when he could trust his voice again. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. It’s better from a distance.”

He didn’t add that he never thought much about the Statue of Liberty; freedom had always been an abstract concept for him, too far removed from his own life to be grasped. The coyotes and mustangs and deer were free. People weren’t.

Marco didn’t answer him, merely stood at his back, and it was enough. Together, they stood on the deck of the tug while Walt felt the hum of the powerful engine shudder through his bones and the occasional spray of salt water on his face.

4:20 p.m.

The buildings here were almost as tightly packed as the ones in Manhattan, but here there were trees and grass and room to *breathe*.

“Welcome to the city of homes and churches,” Marco said, and there was a faint sort of pride in his voice that Walt didn’t think he’d ever admit to. They walked for blocks, moving deeper and deeper inland. As they turned onto a commercial street Walt noticed the signs above the shops were as likely to be in Italian as English. They passed fruit and vegetable markets with carts full of apples and potatoes and cabbages heaped to overflowing, butchers with their cuts of meat priced not in dollars but in ration points, and tiny restaurants whose tantalizing scents clung to Walt’s nose as he walked by.

“You grew up here?” Walt asked, figuring it was safe to risk a question. Crossing the water as they had, it seemed that they had done more than simply traveled from one part of the city to another.

“Since I was six and we moved from the East Side,” Marco replied, his eyes roaming over the street as though he hadn’t seen it in years. And then it occurred to Walt that perhaps he hadn’t. He knew he’d have to carefully ration his questions, though, so he kept that one to himself. Instead he asked safer ones about the smells and sights and sounds of this strange yet familiar place. And the more they talked, the younger Marco looked, until the lines of experience and living on his face were eased. Walt was pleased with his handiwork.

Suddenly, Marco stopped, and all those carefully erased lines reappeared. “This is it,” he breathed, and Walt looked up to see that they were standing outside a bakery. The heavenly smell of fresh bread wafted from the open door and daintily iced cakes and chocolate-covered pastries were neatly arranged in the window displays. Walt could see Marco gathering himself, as if for a battle. For the first time since the Astor, he felt unsure, concerned that maybe he’d pushed too hard.

“You don’t have to -- ” he began, but Marco shook his head, cutting him off.

“No, ‘s a good idea,” the older man said softly. A dry chuckle sounded from his throat. “Last rites and all, huh?”

Walt shivered as Marco stepped inside the shop, then moved to follow him.

The interior of the bakery was stiflingly hot and the customers waiting for their orders to be filled appeared wilted, like cut daisies left in the sun. One, an old man wearing a black fedora, turned when they entered; as Marco’s name escaped his lips, the two women behind the long glass case looked up in astonishment.

Marco stood like one of the marble statues Walt once saw in a book, features cold and hard, as the older woman slowly walked out from behind the case and approached him. Walt noticed that her hands seemed to have aged faster than the rest of her, as though she had stored up her life in them.

When she was within a foot of Marco she stopped and said his name in a whisper that seemed to echo off the walls. She raised one of those hands and Marco finally moved then, flinching as though expecting a blow.

Her hand landed on his cheek soft as a feather, making contact, and then she drew it back and stared at it like she couldn’t believe where it had just been.

She whispered something else, low and fast in Italian, and Walt was stunned to see the statue standing in front of her crumble. His arms went around her and squeezed her tightly, so tightly, and he was whispering too, the same words over and over. And suddenly, the younger woman was there and was hugging the both of them and crying and hanging around Marco’s neck.

Walt stood there beside the old man in the fedora and tried to figure out where to look. He finally decided on a white cake ringed with tiny blue roses, his gaze tracing the path of the endless, graceful circle.

4:41 p.m.

The basement was surprisingly cool in spite of the huge brick oven still radiating heat from one side of the room. Windows opening into the back yard of the building let in fresh air and sunlight as Marco wandered among the low wooden tables and huge cloth bags of flour. Walt leaned against a pillar, watching him, always watching him. They'd been banished from the shop while Mrs. Angelucci and Loretta -- he knew their names now, too -- finished up in the bakery before supper.

"I used to make bread here with my Pop when I was a kid," Marco said softly. He trailed one hand along a tabletop made smooth by decades of flour and dough and skilful hands. "Right -- here," he added, patting a spot near the end. "I'd make the *biove* because I liked the shape."

"What does it look like?" Walt asked, stepping away from the pillar and moving to stand beside the other man.

"Kind of -- " Marco's hands described an elliptical shape, fingers gathering to a point at each end. "Small. Tough crust, but soft inside." His hands began to move in a kneading motion. "Yeah. I remember lots of mornings we were up before dawn, me and Pop. Baking the bread."

"Why didn't you stay?" The question was loosed before Walt could stop it and he tensed for an explosion. But Marco only shook his head.

"Couldn't. I couldn't live my whole life as a lie." He chuckled. "Ma already had a girl picked out."

"Was she pretty?" Walt queried, a smile curving his lips.

"Yeah," Marco said, green gaze rising from the table to settle on Walt's face. "Never let it be said my Ma don't have taste."

"Does your Ma like me?" Walt teased.

"She's gonna feed you, isn't she?" Marco grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Italian women only feed people they like."

Walt felt himself being pulled by that smile, by those eyes, by this man, like puny iron filings helpless before an electromagnet. "What did you tell your Ma about me?" he murmured, leaning closer. "You spoke in Italian. I don't know what you said to her."

"I told her you were from my ship." Marco's voice was husky, his mouth brushing against Walt's, then retreating. "I told her we were leaving tomorrow. Together."

Walt's heart leapt into his throat. "Why did you tell her that?" he demanded harshly. "Why?"

Marco frowned and drew back. "I couldn't exactly tell her I picked you up at the Empire State Building and tried to fuck you in a subway bathroom, could I?" he snapped.

Walt swallowed. "It's just --" he began, one hand reaching up to stroke Marco's chest. "It's just that -- God, I wish that was the truth. I wish I was going with --"

"Shut up," Marco growled and then his mouth was pressing hard against Walt's, and his hands were in Walt's hair, holding him fast, holding him captive, and Walt had never felt anything so wonderful in his life. Marco's tongue glided along the seam of Walt's lips and Walt gasped and opened to him, opened to the strong silky plunge, the first invasion.

The second invasion came moments later, when Walt dimly felt his suit jacket being pushed off his shoulders, then his tie being loosened and his shirt buttons --

Panting, he broke away from the kiss. "We can't --" he began, but Marco was all around him, surrounding him, pushing him backward until he was sitting on the low table. He groaned as Marco ran possessive hands up his thighs, gripped his hips briefly, then returned to his shirt.

"They're not comin' down here," Marco whispered against his ear, tongue flicking out to tickle the lobe. "We're alone. We're safe. Just you and me, like you wanted."

"Oh, God," Walt breathed, hands reaching to pull Marco closer. "Oh, *please*," he begged, not knowing what he wanted, but hoping whatever it was would happen soon, because there was so little time.

Marco's smile was feral as he took off Walt's shirt and helped him with his undershirt until he sat bare-chested and shivering on the tabletop. Reaching to one side of the table, Marco pressed his flattened palm into an open

sack of flour.

“There was this movie serial I saw when I was a kid,” Marco said. “Western. They showed the Indians painting their horses with war-paint. They’d take a handful of paint and mark them, like this -- ”

-- his palm rose and flattened itself to Walt’s chest, directly over his heart. Walt gasped at the contact and looked down to see Marco’s dark hand, dusted with flour, against his pale skin.

This mark won’t last, he thought wildly.

Mark me. Make me remember.

And as if reading his mind, Marco attacked Walt’s trousers next, reaching in just far enough to --

-- *oh yes* --

-- free him at last and the cool air caressed him right before Marco’s clean hand closed around him, wrapping him in heat --

-- *God* --

-- bake oven heat, blast furnace heat --

-- *please, do it, I want, I need* --

-- fist pumping him in a maddeningly slow rhythm until Walt gripped the edge of the table and bucked up into Marco's hand, hungry for it now --

-- *now, now* --

-- and he gasped and shuddered as Marco parted Walt’s legs and dropped to his knees, and Walt wanted to stop him because the guys on the base had made this seem dirty and wrong, but then Marco raised his green eyes to Walt’s face and opened his mouth and --

-- *this can’t be real this can’t be* --

-- took him in and it was beautiful, not dirty at all, how could it be when the touch of that warm, wet mouth seemed to answer every question he'd lain awake at night wondering since he was old enough to wonder about anything? How could it be wrong to accept this gift, this incredible opportunity to take and be taken at the same time?

Because it was so beautiful (and because he was only eighteen) Walt only managed about a minute of careening, gasping bliss before he was picked up like a rag doll and flung skyward. Biting his lip savagely to contain his scream, he felt every muscle in his body convulse as he poured himself down Marco's welcoming throat.

His hands massaging Walt's legs reassuringly, Marco eased his descent with slow, soft licks and gentle kisses, then worked his way gradually up Walt's body until he reached Walt's mouth. Without hesitation, Walt flung his arms around the sturdy shoulders and boldly sought his own flavor in the taste of the other. After a few moments of heat, wetness and salt, Marco took Walt's hand and pressed it against the front of his own trousers. Walt shuddered and closed his eyes at the feel of that almost savage hardness, primed and ready.

"Did you learn your lesson, little boy?" Marco grinned widely against Walt's kiss-swollen lips.

Walt's answer was a rough shove that brought Marco's back in contact with the brick pillar and forced startled air from his lungs.

The weight of that green gaze pushed him to his knees, but it was the groan that flew into the air above his head that made him hard again.

10:38 p.m.

Supper was loud and joyous and crazy and more like a festival than any Fourth of July picnic Walt had ever seen. It was a credit to the food and the wine and the ocean of people gathered to welcome Marco home that he missed an hour somewhere between seven thirty and eight thirty. Marco sat across the table from him while a pretty girl - *the* girl, Walt was certain -- sat hopefully to Marco's left. Walt shot murderous glances at the girl, who didn't deserve them, and longing glances at Marco, who did.

To distract himself from both of them, he took in the faces of the other people, all dark-haired and olive-skinned like Marco. There was one place at the head of the table that stayed empty, even though Marco's mother put food there. One time, she was passing by the chair as she served the dessert and her hand brushed over the curve of the wooden back, caressing it. Walt's eyes went wide with comprehension and he felt a sudden surge of anger and regret at the thought that no one would ever do that for him.

The emotion contained in the small apartment over the bakery surprised him; at times it seemed as though they were all bubbling together like the *spaghetti* in the pot earlier, rolling over and over one another yet never getting tangled. There was a fierce love among these people, uncles and aunts and cousins and grandparents, and it was expressed openly, in a way that Walt's own family could never do. Walt remembered his mother receding in the distance the day he shipped out, remembered how she took a couple of halting steps forward when the train lurched forward, then stopped, as if even that was too much of an exhibition. He imagined she went home and cried later in her small room over the kitchen, grateful that the other servants' quarters were deserted in the wintertime, and that the Wainwrights' rooms were way down the hall and on the other side of a thick oaken door, even though he knew she never made a sound when she cried.

And all through it, even though he was the fifth wheel (or was that the fifteenth?) they never made him feel left out or unwelcome. The first thing Mrs. Angelucci did was say a prayer for Marco and Walt and the other boys on their ship, and Walt felt a little like a heel at that but it didn't really matter, prayers were good even if they were based on a lie. And the other guys on Marco's ship could probably do with them.

They fed him and poured him glass after glass of wine, not in fancy glasses like he'd seen in movies but in small glasses like the ones his mother used for lemonade, only these had a picture of FDR on the sides. He smiled and laughed and ate and drank and tried to soak it up through his pores like sunlight, because this felt important too, as important as getting to touch more of Marco's skin before time ran out.

And eventually that last priority began to take shape and pride of place in Walt's thoughts, despite the good food and the good people and the warmth surrounding him, until his whole world focused down to a pair of green eyes, soft hair, a firm, compact body. He looked up as he finished the last of his *espresso* -- he knew what that was now -- and was caught by that gaze, which he now recognized as the color of northern oceans. The face containing it was stone, but that gaze hid nothing, and Walt knew that whatever might happen after this night didn't matter quite as much as it had yesterday.

And so it was that after many toasts and stories and prayers and tears, Walt and Marco slipped away from the crowd and onto the fire escape, where they climbed like cat burglars to the roof. The black tar gave up what it had stolen of the sun's heat and shared it with them, warming the blankets Marco spread over the hard surface. Walt watched him making his preparations in the soft moonlight that peeked through the high clouds and felt too small for his own skin. He squatted down behind Marco and took a deep breath.

"That was your dad's place at the table, wasn't it?"

Walt watched Marco's back stiffen at the question. "Yeah," the other man admitted warily. "He died while I was away."

"I'm sorry," Walt said, because it was the thing to do. Then, after a short silence, he added in a rush, "I don't remember my dad. He hung himself when I was little -- in the barn. The bank was taking his land, see, and he couldn't handle it, I guess. His family owned that ranch a hundred years."

Marco's back was still turned. "Listen, I -- "

"That's all I was going to say, I swear," Walt finished hastily. "I just -- needed to tell you something. About me."

Marco did turn then, a sardonic smile on his face. "You sure pick the happy stories, don't you, kid?"

Walt felt foolish and awkward again and made to rise but was stopped by a powerful hand wrapping around his wrist. "Why'd you tell me that?" Marco demanded.

"Because..." Walt started, searching for the reason himself. "Because I don't belong anywhere, but I felt like I belonged down *there* tonight. And I wish someone would set a place for me, too, when I -- "

"You're not gonna die," Marco murmured, shaking his head. "Not for a long time."

"Everybody dies," Walt whispered.

The fingers on his wrist tightened. "Do you want to die?"

"No," Walt said and was shocked to realize it was the truth. "Not any more."

And there was just enough moonlight for Walt to see Marco's face, which meant that Marco could see his, too, see what he was sure was written on it plain as day.

"Jesus," Marco hissed after a moment. "You wanted to -- "

"Didn't you?" Walt breathed.

Marco didn't answer, but Walt was beginning to understand his silences, so he didn't mind. There was one that meant *too close* and another that meant *not close enough*, and if he only had a few more days he might be able to

discover other ones, but his time was nearly up and this scant knowledge would have to be enough.

He would have to make do. Americans these days were expected to make do, clip ration coupons and grow victory gardens and keep their old jalopy running one more year.

“It’s *not* enough,” Walt protested, right at the same time that Marco reached for him, so his words were crushed against those soft lips and died there.

11:12 p.m.

“oh -- ”

“Tell me if it hurts. Does it hurt?”

“Not -- really. It’s -- oh, God! That’s so -- ”

“Better?”

“yes -- oh, more -- ”

“Gonna make it good for you. Lift up.”

“No, no, shhh, wait. Don’t come yet.”

“*Please* -- don’t stop -- ”

“Lift up, I said. On your knees. Yeah. Little wider. That’s it.”

“This is gonna hurt some. Don’t tense up. Just let it happen.”

“Nngh -- ”

“Shhh, shhh. I’ll go slow, I’ll go slow. Oh, sweet Christ, you’re -- ”

“Mmm -- ”

“You feel -- I got no words for you. You’re like -- silk.”

“Aaah!”

“No, wait! Don’t push -- ”

“Can’t -- wait. No -- time.”

“Don’t wanna rush your first -- ”

“ -- Do it harder. I need it -- ”

“Shhh, no, just wait -- ”

“*Fuck me. Mark me --* ”

“That’s -- oh -- yes! I want -- to remember -- ”

“You will, damn you. You -- will. Remember. Me.”

“*Yes!*”

“Never forget me. Never.”

4:47 a.m.

Walt was dreaming, predictably, of the two of them together. They were on a boat again, but this time they were sailing the open ocean and the deck tilted under their feet and the salt coated their bodies until their clothes were stiff with it. Walt looked down at his white-flecked pea jacket and laughed, then raised his eyes to Marco.

Marco’s clothes were covered in salt, too, but it was the salt of his own blood. It was pooling under his feet and Walt tried to move toward him but he was trapped inside the prison of his own salt-encrusted clothes and he opened his mouth to scream but it was full of blood, Marco’s blood --

His eyes flew open, but found only more darkness.

“Time to make the bread, kid,” Marco whispered, lips moving tenderly on his forehead as Marco rocked him protectively in strong arms. Just like a lover.

Dear God. He had a lover.

Suddenly wracked by helpless sobs, Walt buried his face against Marco’s neck and let the tears fall.

For a minute, he dreamed that Marco joined him.

7:52 a.m.

Down they went, down through the silent house and out the door, down past the silent milkman and his horse drawn wagon, along the tree-lined streets, walking side by side, in perfectly matched cadence. Over the water again, this time on the ferry, the dimmed-out skyline of Manhattan just beginning to take shape in the predawn light. North on the IRT to Times Square to exchange the suit for Walt’s uniform. And then Walt looked up and saw the sign above the gate of the 58th Street Army Base and stopped dead in his tracks.

A warm hand made soothing circles on his back. “You only got a few minutes,” Marco murmured.

Walt nodded violently. “I know. I know that. But I have to say it.”

The hand halted its motion. “Don’t,” Marco said tightly, but Walt was already dragging him away from the gate and behind the brick wall of a warehouse, beyond the spying gaze of the sentries. He pushed Marco against the wall and licked his way into Marco’s mouth the way Marco had taught him, and Marco groaned and surrendered with an eagerness that terrified him.

Breaking away from the kiss, he held Marco’s head between his hands and stared into his eyes. “I love you,” he blurted. “I’ve never loved anyone, but I know I love you. Don’t ask me how. I’m not just being a kid, I swear it.”

Walt expected a sarcastic comment or a twist of the lip, but Marco only returned his solemn gaze. Walt’s heart constricted in his chest. Finally, Marco touched Walt’s mouth with one gentle finger and said, “Thanks.”

Walt screwed his eyes shut to fight back the tears. “You want to thank me?” he murmured fervently. “Be here when I come back.”

When he opened his eyes again, Marco had vanished like a ghost in the light of dawn.

“You hear me? I’m not setting a place for you, ever!” Walt yelled to the empty air.

August 26th, 1946

8:06 a.m.

The air was warm and smelled like summer as he strode along the tree-lined street. He was conscious of the length of his gait and the beat of his heart and the calluses on his hands, which were no longer formed by the leather of a horse’s reins but by the wood and metal of a rifle.

The neighborhood was still much as he’d remembered it, but now seemed more vibrant than before, as though it had given itself permission to be proud again. Italian flags flapped serenely beside the Stars and Stripes in the slow morning breeze. As he passed the tiny restaurant, the scent of strong coffee and the strains of Caruso wafted from the open windows.

Walt stood in front of the bakery for so long that a couple of customers walked in ahead of him, darting curious glances his way before opening the freshly painted screen door. Finally, he squared his shoulders, tugged at his tie to straighten it, and went inside.

Loretta was there behind the counter, picking *cannoli* (he knew what those were now, too; he’d eaten all kinds of strange food he knew the names for) out of the glass cabinet and placing them in a box. As she straightened, she placed a hand on the small of her back, then brought it around to rest on her growing belly.

He watched her move, her graceful carriage and her sea-green eyes so much like her brother’s that he ached. When she finally saw him, she blinked with the struggle to remember, and then a wide, joyous smile split her handsome features.

“Marco’s friend!” she enthused, stepping out from behind the display to clasp his hand in hers. “I’m sorry, I forget your name.”

“Walt,” he said, surprised by the lack of contrast of her olive skin against his own; he was darkened by the days spent mostly on the deck of the troop ship, watching the ocean and feeling the occasional spray of salt on his face.

“Walt,” she said, and he was startled to feel a tremor go through her. “Walt. Of course.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “How have you been? Are you still in the Merchant Marine?”

"I, uh -- no," he stammered, surprised she remembered the old lie. "I'm starting at New York University in a couple of weeks. I'm going to become a teacher."

"That's wonderful," she said warmly, squeezing his hand once more before releasing him, then returning her own hand to her gently curving abdomen. "Maybe one day you teach this little one, hmm?"

"Maybe," he answered, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. He opened his mouth to ask the question, but couldn't force the air from his lungs. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists and forced out, "Can you tell me -"

At that moment, the door to the back of the shop swung wide and a black-haired man emerged with a huge black tray held in his hands. The powerful smell of freshly-baked bread slammed into him at the same time Walt's eyes flew open and the blow of recognition turned his knees to water.

"Hey, Loretta, can you give me a hand with..."

Loretta's smile was fond as she turned it on her brother. "Somebody here to see you," she said, her eyes alight with merriment.

Marco was here.

Marco was here, right in front of him. All Walt had to do was take a few steps, reach out a hand, and he could prove to himself that Marco was real, that Walt wasn't dreaming him like he had the other million times--

Marco stared at him for a few moments, then frowned and shook his head.

"Never seen him before in my life," Marco said shortly, his face carved from stone.

The words echoed in Walt's head over and over the way they had when he was a kid and he used to stand in the bottom of the ravine and scream out his anger and shame.

Never seen.

Never.

Never forget.

God. He'd *fought* to stay alive for this. For this chance. And now...

Face burning with humiliation, he turned slowly and forced his feet to carry him to the door.

He was halfway down the block before he heard Loretta's voice calling to him. He slowed his pace to a stop, then concentrated on pasting a convincing lie to his face. By the time she caught up with him, he had almost managed it.

"Walt, I'm sorry," she said. "He's been like this since he got back. Other people have come to see him, and he's treated them all the same."

"Then why did you think -- " Walt began angrily, then stopped himself. It wasn't her fault.

But Loretta seemed to know exactly what he had been about to ask. "Because when I used to visit him in the hospital and he lay there half out of his mind with the pain, he used to say your name," she told him flatly.

Overwhelmed by the implications of her words, Walt stammered, "H-hospital? What -- "

"His right leg," she said. "Just below the knee." She snorted and crossed her arms over her belly. "Doctors told Ma and me he was lucky."

Walt opened his mouth, then closed it. Loretta's green gaze softened and she leaned closer.

"Listen," she said quietly. "Ma died last October and Sal and I moved out in May. He's alone now and he never stopped hurting. He's had a tough life and he never asked nothing from nobody. He never will. You want him, you gotta hold on and show him you're not gonna let go."

Walt stared at her while he struggled to maintain his balance. Suddenly, it seemed that everything had just tilted on its ear.

"I'll tell you something else and then I'm done. Don't believe a word he says. He tells you he don't remember you, he tells you to go, he tells you he hates you, turn it around and see the truth." She laid a hand on his arm, briefly. "Now come on back with me."

Walt shook his head. "What -- why are you -- ?" he babbled, unwilling to believe that everything he'd been dreaming about for the last two years might finally be within his grasp, might finally be possible and not some

cruel trick played on him by a vengeful God.

Once more, she read his mind in a way that reminded him eerily of Marco. “Because I think you saved his life,” she said, voice husky, “and I’m never gonna stop thanking you for that.”

Armed Forces Day, 1976

9:20 a.m.

“Is my tie straight?”

The silver-haired man arched his eyebrows but said nothing. He took another sip of his *espresso* and regarded his *Times*.

Walt sighed and turned back to the mirror. “I wish you were marching beside me,” he murmured.

“I don’t believe in causes any more,” Marco said tightly. His green gaze rose over the newspaper and appraised Walt. “Although I have to say that uniform looks damned good on you.”

Walt smiled faintly. “Horny old bastard.”

“You could do worse, kid.”

Walt’s smile became a grin. “I thought you were going to stop calling me ‘kid’ when I turned fifty.”

Marco shook his head. “You’ll always be the kid to me,” he murmured. Rising from his chair, he slowly made his way to stand by Walt’s side.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Marco,” Walt breathed, staring at their reflections in the mirror. “I could lose my job if someone recognizes me. Twenty-six years shot to hell.”

“You think a few dozen gay vets marching in the Village is gonna make Walter Cronkite?” Marco snorted.

“I don’t know. Maybe *I’m* just not ready for it.”

“Then don’t do it,” Marco told him flatly, hands rising to Walt’s brown-clad shoulders. “March down Fifth Avenue in the official parade with the rest of your unit.”

Walt took a deep breath, considering, then finally shook his head. “No. I can’t. I want to do this.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m sick of being invisible,” Walt blurted.

Marco stroked Walt’s hair back from his forehead. “I thought visibility was your problem,” he countered.

Walt’s mouth curved at the irony. “I’m sick of being easy, too.”

“Now that’s a *real* disappointment,” Marco drawled. Walt chuckled.

And then Marco’s hands tightened on Walt’s shoulders and tugged at him until they were face to face.

“Will you still love me when I’m an unemployed old queer?” Walt asked, leaning forward to touch his forehead to Marco’s.

“I think I can manage that,” Marco murmured, capturing his mouth in a soft kiss that Walt returned with matching tenderness.

“Now come on,” Marco told him, “call us a taxi.”

Walt drew back. ““Us?””

“Yeah,” Marco agreed. “I haven’t been to the Village since Murray’s birthday. And I always wanted to be somebody’s cheering section.”

Walt blinked back sudden tears and pulled Marco to him in a fierce hug.

“Thank you,” he whispered when they parted.

Marco’s green eyes danced as he touched two fingers to his forehead. “Anything for our boys in uniform.”

Biographies

Catharine Bell Wetteroth

Catharine Bell Wetteroth recently graduated from Hampshire College, where she concentrated in comparative religion and the philosophy of science. Since then, she has been trying to decide what to do with her life and filling up her quota of random jobs for use in future author's bios. She has had work published in school literary magazines and online, but this anthology is her first professional appearance.

Steve Berman

Steve Berman may not own a Ouija board but that does not mean he's not familiar with them. Or writing fiction. He has published over fifty short stories and articles, most recently in *The Big Book of Erotic Ghost Stories* (Venus) and *The Faery Reel* (Viking Press). His story collection, *Trysts*, contains more queer and weird work. He has been nominated four times for the Gaylactic Spectrum Award. He currently lives in New Jersey.

Marcel K. Bromius

Marcel K. Bromius, (who also writes as M.K. Bowes) is the published author of several short stories in the anthologies, "Just the Sex," "Raging Hormones," "New Voices in Horror," "Demons and Shadows 2," and "Erotic Tales of Paranormal." Marcel also writes a bimonthly, non-fiction column at New Camp Horror, and will be editing the anthology, "Dark Sins and Desires Unveiled." Visit the author's website at:

<http://www.mkbowes.com>

Tulsa Brown

Tulsa Brown is a Canadian novelist who ran away to join the erotica circus in 2003, and is having way too fun much to go back. In 2004 Tulsa's work will appear in almost a dozen anthologies and magazines including: *Wet Nightmares*, *Wet Dreams*, *Bearotica 2*, *Men and Ink: Hot Tattoo Tales*, and *Best S/M Erotica 2*.

Gabrielle Chevalier

Gabrielle Chevalier is an author whose experience encompasses both fiction and non-fiction. She has lived in Ottawa, Toronto, Quebec City, and Montreal, but currently resides in Nova Scotia with her partner of eleven years. Her interests include history, political activism and photography.

Dallas Coleman

Dallas Coleman grew up in Deep East Texas. She survived. She escaped. She has, thus far, resisted her daddy's attempts to reclaim her. She writes because it's cheaper than therapy.

Kathleen Dale

Kathleen Dale is isn't quite straight, she isn't narrow or rich or skinny or stupid or blond. She is a work in progress. Lime is her first publishing credit, but hopefully not her last.

Vincent Diamond

Vincent Diamond is the pseudonym for a writer living near Tampa, Florida whose first novel about an escaped tiger is agented and being marketed to publishers. Work on its sequel is underway in addition to more short stories. Alyson Publication's Best Gay Stories selected Diamond's Deep Trouble Undercover for its 2005 anthology. Time away from the keyboard is spent riding horses and gardening.

Erastes

Erastes lives in London and freely admits he spends too much time on his PC. When he can be dragged, kicking and screaming persuaded away from it he likes classical music, noisy clubs, walks by the Thames and cheese. Not necessarily in that order. He likes his smut to be like his men, full of life, a little edgy and as literary as possible without being too wordy. He believes in the GDM, tries to base his dubious morality on Heinlein's "Intermissions," and has an iguana called Neville.

Eumenides

Eumenides lives on the east coast of the United States, where he enjoys kayaking, camping and taking long walks on the beach with his three dogs. His passions include history, music and dark haired men.

Jessamy Falcon

A writer and photographer, Jessamy pulls from her southern upbringing and vast experience in herding cats. The cover photograph was taken on the Oakland side of the San Francisco bay where she makes her home.

M. Jones

Editor and creator of Bloodletters, M. Jones has also been published in Dark Fire Fiction, Darkfiction.org, Bleeding Sky, Waywardbooks.com, Dreampassage.com, MAS-Zine and several other ezines. The author's main website can be found here: <http://authormjones.cjb.net> . The site also has a number of updates and a weblog tracking new works by M. Jones and updates to Bloodletters.

Mira Katzman

Mira Katzman has 'started over' so many times in the past three years that she wonders whether she'll ever bother unpacking again. Given a comfy bed, her trusty laptop, and an attentive audience of cats, she's never lonely however, and if her stories are a little off color some days, her cats are nice enough to not complain.

Rachel Kramer Bussel

Rachel Kramer Bussel's books include *The Lesbian Sex Book*, *Up All Night: Adventures in Lesbian Sex*, the forthcoming *Glamour Girls: Femme/Femme Erotica* and two anthologies on spanking. Her writing appears in over 30 erotic anthologies including *Best Lesbian Erotica 2001 & 2004*, *Best Women's Erotica 2003 & 2004*, *Best American Erotica 2004*, *Quickies 3*, *Tough Girls*, *Faster Pussycats*, as well as numerous publications including *AVN*, *Bust*, *Cleansheets.com*, *Curve*, *Diva*, *Girlfriends*, *Gay City News*, *New York Blade*, *On Our Backs*, *Playgirl*, *Velvet Park*, *The Village Voice* and *Zink*. Visit her at <http://www.rachelkramerbussel.com>

Sean Michael

Often referred to as "Space Cowboy" and "Gangsta of Love" while still striving for the moniker of "Maurice," Sean Michael spends his days surfing, smutting, organizing his immense gourd collection and fantasizing about one day retiring on a small secluded island peopled entirely by horseshoe crabs. A long-time writer of complicated haiku, currently Sean is attempting to learn the advanced arts of plate spinning and soap carving sex toys. Barring any of that? He'll stick with writing his stories, thanks, and rubbing pretty bodies together to see if they spark

Moses O'Hara

After abandoning any early aspirations of sainthood and having been turned out of most of the better homes in Boston - somewhere between misunderstood and a felon, Moses O'Hara began wending his way across America, eventually landing smack dab in the middle of the Miracle Mile, City of Angels. Therefore achieving his original goal. Kinda. You can read more about him in books like *The Wildest Ones* and *Out of Control* from STARbooks - 2004.

Jodi Payne

Jodi has been writing in one form or another since high school, whether it be erotica, SF/fantasy, editorials or political rants. She frequently writes lesbian erotica that's heavy on characterization as a passtime and entertainment, and shares it with like-minded friends. Whether it's erotica or mainstream fiction, Jodi prefers to read about real women with real flaws living real lives. After tirelessly searching for lesbian erotica that suited her tastes, Jodi finally gave up and decided that if she was going to find what she was looking for, she was going to have to struggle through writing it herself.

CB Potts

CB Potts is a freelance writer living in Upstate NY. You can read Potts' work in *Option*, *Indulge*, *BlackFire*, and the recent *Alyson Anthology*, *Friction Seven*.

J. Present

J Present's background is in art and theatre. While resident playwright at The American Renaissance Theatre Company in NYC, J had several plays produced. J now lives in the boonies of PA, just outside Hancock NY, the trout capital of the world, working for a small town newspaper, part time. J is President of a theatre company, Theatricks by Starlight, does custom framing of fine art work and make glass jewelry. Publishing credits include short stories in The Cedar Review, New Authors Journal, Potato Eyes, River Voices I & II, Raven Chronicles, Zero Hour and A.R.T., Publisher's Writer of Canada.

Jordan Price

Jordan Price graced Chicago's mean streets for 15 years before transplanting to rural Wisconsin. A professional artist, Jordan still scrapes together time in which to write fiction.

M. Rode

M. Rode loves winter, being a canuck and watching boys of all sorts rub together. Chance Encounters is the second anthology M. Rode has edited.

Lorne Rodman

Lorne Rodman's characters tend to reflect the wide array of personality traits possessed by the author; from shy and squeaky to bold and arrogant, they represent the best and worst of Lorne's life. Humor and hot sex are trademarks of Lorne's stories, as is pushing the envelope of what is proper and acceptable. Lorne's hobbies range from searching for the ultimate gay porn story to attempting needlework with his toes. Silent Need is his first published story.

Lawrence Schimel

Lawrence Schimel (b. 1971, New York) is a full-time author and anthologist, who's published over 60 books, including THE DRAG QUEEN OF ELFLAND, HIS TONGUE, SWITCH HITTERS, KOSHER MEAT, and VACATION IN IBIZA, among others. His PoMoSEXUALS: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUALITY (with Carol Queen) won a Lambda Literary Award and his titles have also been finalists for the Firecracker Alternative Book Award, Small Press Book Award, and Spectrum Award. His work has been widely anthologized. His writings have been published abroad in numerous translations, including Basque, Croatian, French, German, Greek, Japanese, Russian, and Swedish. He currently lives in Madrid, Spain.

Julia Talbot

Julia Talbot resides in the Southwest of the United States with her dog, several houseplants, and has not quit her day job. She has a penchant for blank books, gay porn, and big, ugly hats. She can most often be found in coffee shops and restaurants, scribbling in her notebook and entertaining other diners with her mutterings. Julia cut her

reading and writing teeth on purple-prosed romance novels, and as a result decided that boys were much more interesting with boys. Intense study of her subject and as much firsthand research as possible figure heavily in her writing adventures.

BA Tortuga

B. A. Tortuga enjoys indulging in the shallow side of life, with hobbies that include collecting margarita recipes, hot tub dips, and ogling hot guys at the beach. A connoisseur of the perverse and esoteric, BA's days are spent among dusty tomes of ancient knowledge, or, conversely, surfing porn sites in the name of research. Mixing the natural born southern propensity for sarcasm and the environmental western straight-shooting sensibility, BA manages to produce mainstream fiction, literary erotica, and fine works of pure, unadulterated smut.

BA's latest projects include ongoing work on a novel set in the old west.

Emily Veinglory

Emily Veinglory is a occasional freelance writer and illustrator. Torquere Press also distribute her fantasy novel 'Broken Sword' and her Arthurian novellas are available from Angelwings Press. You can keep up to date with all things Veinglorious at veinglory.com – and Emily is always happy to hear from readers (veingloria@lycos.com).

Edith Walker

Edith Walker lives in a small Texas town whose residents have no idea that she writes. It's better that way. Her pets don't mind and her family is amused.