

REEL THREE

I Know I'll Never Love This Way Again

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Everyone showed at the openings of the Fey-Way Gallery South of Market.

“Not *Fay Wray*,” Robert Opel said, “*Fey-Way*.” Ryan had interviewed Opel for a freelance spread on the opening of the gallery March 1978 in *California Art Currents*. He called the tall, thin gallery owner “the most naked man in the world.”

Before Opel had moved to the City from El Lay, he had stripped buck-naked and hid himself inside the scenery of the 1974 Oscar ceremony. At the very instant when David Niven was introducing Elizabeth Taylor, Opel broke free of the scenery and streaked past Niven and Taylor. Millions of startled satellite viewers saw Robert Opel naked for an instant. No one remembers what stars won the Academy Award that year; but everyone remembers the man who mooned the whole wide world.

The opening of Opel’s Fey-Way Gallery at 1287 Howard Street, South of Market, lit the light industrial area with strobes and music and San Francisco stars. Ryan and Kick attended by special invitation.

Kick had not been hurt in the accident that nearly destroyed the Corvette. With his car undergoing full restoration, he was happier than ever to be alive. In a note dated a week after the collision, Kick wrote another in the series of letters each took delight in posting on their refrigerator for the other.

Ry! My mind continues to overflow with thoughts of you. Never before have I experienced feelings that I have experienced since knowing you. Never before have I known total absorbency without consumption. I think we have

something more going on here than even we first believed. The world sees us, but is the world ready for us the way we know ourselves to be separately and together?

Daily we learn love. My own definition of love has certainly changed in the last two years. Never has it been so exercised. Never has it been so strong and healthy. I've never known love by such purely masculine definition. Have I told you lately that I love you? Well, fucker, I'm telling you now.

What I want to be is what I am: a man.

What I want to do is love you.

Amid all our being and doing, I'm finding my want fulfilled. Please don't let me take advantage of you in any way. You've been nothing but supportive of me, of us, in every way. I want only to return that support to you. Never, not ever, did I once expect to find the reality that is you, Ry. A man couldn't ask for better than the totally unselfish love you've given me, I love your ass! If repetition can drive home a point, then let me say over and over: I love you, Ryan Steven O'Hara!

"All I hear," Robert Opel said, "is Ryan and Kick, Kick and Ryan. Rickety rack. Down the track." Opel wanted them for his opening. "I want to show you off together." Opel sat in Ryan's kitchen. "You've both spent a great deal of time creating your relationship." He spoke close to Ryan's ear. "I know what you're doing."

Ryan was amused. "What are we doing?"

"He's your greatest creation. You may be Pygmalion. You may be Frankenstein. You may be the Black Lagoon."

"He's my lover," Ryan said.

"He's a bodybuilder."

"He's a man."

"He is art." Opel was intense. "He's a performance artist."

"Who isn't? This is San Francisco," Ryan said. "Everybody's a star."

“He’s an ideal.” Opel grasped Ryan’s hand. “I have a theory that some men bloom early, some men late, some never bloom at all, and some lucky few go in and out of bloom.”

“So what do you want?”

“I must show you both off in my performance art gallery.”

“Both?” Ryan asked. “Kick? And me?” He spread his forefinger and thumb from the bridge of his nose outward across his closed eyelids. He looked up at Opel. “You want *bloom*? Kick’s in bloom. I’m only the gardener.”

“Don’t shit me,” Opel was relentless. “Love’s in bloom. *Maneuvers* is in bloom. Even your silly *Manifesto* is in bloom. What a send-up! What a perfect joke! It makes people crazy! Selling it in tabloid on street corners is the perfect trashy touch. It’s *so Enquirer!*”

“Inquiring minds want to know,” Ryan said.

Opel projected a crazy charm. He was planning to start a new-wave erotic magazine called *Cocksucker*. The week before, he had bought from Ryan for the upcoming first issue a piece called “Muscleman Sex.” Something clicked.

“I want you to read from your story while Kick poses on the platform next to you. Sort of a ‘Physique Reading.’ Our crowd will love it.”

The crowd that night, in fact, called out for more. Kick posed and Ryan read. Actually Ryan’s lips moved while the crowd cheered Kick’s display, bulk-posing first in flannel shirt and jeans, then slow-motion stripping away the heavy cotton shirt, posing in white tee shirt, flexing his arms, finally pulling off his tee shirt, displaying his tanned upper body front and back, then dropping his jeans, stepping out of them without missing a beat, looking huge in his posing briefs, moving through a slower, more sensual version of his posing exhibition than he dared on a contest stage. Never once as he stripped from his shirts and jeans did he cross over the bump-and-grind line with which male dancers make a burlesque of themselves. He was not a stripper. He was a bodybuilder revealing the layers of his Look. Kick got the whole room off.

Kweenie appreciated the commotion. Kick was a star. She knew exactly what Ryan saw in him: Kick was larger than life. She was grateful to him. He had cured Ryan’s blues. Before Kick, the only thing Ryan had recognized as larger than life was Death.

Kweenie flushed with the heat of lust she had felt since first she had laid eyes on Kick. She wanted him for herself alone. Who didn't?

"Keep sweating that old, boring depression out of him," she told Kick. "You're his exorcist." In her heart of hearts, she felt so like her brother that she had grown up anguishing that his ups and downs were bad sneak previews of her own emotional life when she got to be his age. But not to worry. Ryan would always be there. Besides, she had made a certain name for herself. After Sharon McKnight she was the crisp toast of gay cabaret society. She was a genuine San Francisco star.

"At least," Ryan told me, "Kweenie didn't grow up to be one of those dykes who wear Bella Abzug hats and smoke long brown cigarettes."

Ryan and Kweenie were quite a show that night at Opel's. Not everyone knew they were brother and sister. They seemed more like loving rivals: each a mirror of the other, and both taking one step toward, then two steps back, in the tangled tango of the hardly restrained feeling they always shared. Even though fear of guilt kept them from coupling, I sometimes thought them the same being, divided by age and sex, and wondered if the sexual tension of their feeling was more narcissistic than incestuous. They were often exactly alike. They had the same taste in men. Kweenie, after her own fashion, was Ryan in drag.

For her brother's sake Kweenie tried to regard Kick without sexual jealousy. She cupped her hands under her breasts, pushed them up into place, and worked her way through the Fey-Way crowd toward Kick, standing resplendent in his posing briefs next to Ryan who held his clothes. She swept up to the two men. She became very grand.

"You were wonderful," she said. "Both of you."

She leaned in and kissed Kick on the cheek. The sweet smell of his body was too much. She affected a thick southern drawl. "Southern men," she said. "Ah want you-all to know, Cap'n Butler, that this Miss O'Hara simply adores southern men."

She turned to kiss Ryan. "A girl," she whispered, "just doesn't take away her brother's boyfriend. No matter how much she might want to sing 'Stars Fell on Alabama.'"

Ryan laughed. He failed to notice she was lying through her teeth.

"I liked your act," she said to Kick. "I've always wanted to see you pose. When Ryan reads, you move so well to his rhythms. Or is it the other way around?"

Kick took her hand in his. "Ryan has the rhythms," he said. "I have the moves."

"A perfect relationship," Kweenie said. "Mr. Yin and Mr. Yang."

"More than you know." He kept hold of her hand. He turned his blue eyes long and hard on Kweenie's face. He recognized something in the eyes of the sister that he loved in the brother.

In the long silence between them, Kweenie's nipples hardened.

"So," Kweenie said, "I'm really glad you weren't hurt in the accident." She pulled her hand from his. "And your car's all fixed."

The stereo speakers in the gallery moved into the violin pickup of "Over the Rainbow." Something immediately expanded in the room. A quick silence. A short burst of laughter. The conversation resumed. For an instant, everyone in the gallery had perked up like a patriot recognizing the gay national anthem.

Opel whispered over my shoulder. "Did you catch that?" he asked. "Come over here with me, please."

"Catch what?"

"That moment of silent homage to Judy? Ah, Judy! Judy! Judy! What Marilyn is to the silver screen and the silkscreen, Judy is to our ears." He moved around and confronted me. "Magnus Bishop, isn't it? You're here as a critic," he said.

"I'm here as a friend," I said.

"Whatever," he said. "You're welcome. We're both in the same business."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Icons. I make them. I merchandise them. I enjoy them. You, one step behind, like Inspector Hound baying at the arts, critique them. And me. And the people like Kweenie and Ry and Kick who make things happen."

"I suppose you're right." I could hardly deny my interest in this man about whom the quick-witted David Niven, laying his

finger aside his noses aid, “Isn’t it amazing that this man has gotten the biggest laugh he’ll ever get in his life by exposing his shortcomings?” Opel’s performance that memorable Oscar night was the one breath of real life that year in what everyone agrees the morning after is the longest, most boring tribal ritual that one billion people consent to endure every spring.

Even naked, Opel wore a fine edge of gay rage. He had a talent for gaining media attention for his politics. My clearest image of him, five years after the Academy Awards, was the front-page photo of him standing in the sun outside San Francisco City Hall. He was costumed like “Gay Justice.” Nothing overturns a verdict like a gun. Opel pointed his pistol loaded with blanks at a fellow actor dressed as the assassin, “Dan White.” In a ritual skit, Opel shot “Dan White” down in the very Civic Center plaza where, forty-eight hours before, the White Night Riot had erupted when thousands of gays, protesting the court’s verdict, began a candlelight protest march from Castro Street, down Market, to City Hall. Almost ten years exactly after Stonewall, the crowd, growing outraged at the light sentence given to Dan White, turned angry. The mob roared up, conjuring the birth of aggressive gay power, and attacked City Hall, setting fire to police cars that burned with huge flames that lit up the dark evening thick with smoke.

The riotous 1979 night began on *a MAYDAY! MAYDAY!* May Day afternoon, the 21st, when at 5:30 the jury found Supervisor White guilty of two counts of manslaughter (one could hear the man’s laughter) in the shooting of Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. Rush-hour radio news mixed with Happy Hour outrage. Runners, alerted by activist leader, Cleve Jones, crisscrossed the Castro calling lesbian women and gay men from their apartments. “Out of the bars and into the streets!” Dan White had gotten away with murder. “No Justice! No Peace!” His ultimate fag bashing merited only a slap on the wrist. “MURDER! Not manslaughter!”

What began that twilight as a peaceful march from Castro Street to City Hall escalated to a determined walk to a fast trot to a running righteousness when the angry citizens reached City Hall to find hundreds of police in full riot gear cordoning off the Civic Center Plaza. It isn’t very pretty what a City without pity can do. Very quickly the situation became primitive. The seventies

resurrected the radical sixties. By midnight the protest turned into a hard-fought, running street fight between gays and baton-wielding cops. The screaming crowd chanted "Avenge Harvey Milk!" On the steps of the same City Hall where, six months earlier, mourners, on the night of the murders, had held gently flickering candles, this night they stormed the doors of City Hall, rushing up the stairs, tearing the wrought iron from the doors and smashing it through the glass, throwing uprooted burning bushes into the marble halls. They lit copies of the evening *Examiner* with its bold headlines of the verdict and ran down the sidewalk torching nine of the police cars parked at the curb. The black-and-whites sat in a long blazing line, flames and smoke circling their revolving red lights, their sirens moaning like dying beasts.

Dianne Feinstein, throughout the siege, held her ground in the very office where a bullet had killed Moscone and made her mayor. Supervisor Carol Ruth Silver appeared on a second floor balcony holding a single candle. She was a vision. She tried to speak, but was struck in the mouth by a flying rock. Her voice was lost in the roar. She withdrew. Demonstrators kicked over the row of a dozen newspaper vending machines, including Ryan's rack selling *Maneuvers*. They tossed the heavy stands across the concrete moat surrounding the basement level of windows through which White had crawled to enter the building to shoot Moscone and Milk.

Even as the City Hall battle raged, other cop droids, goon squads, anonymous, with badges removed, headed for 18th and Castro. The cops launched a baton-wielding assault on the Elephant Walk bar, wreaking revenge, randomly bludgeoning employees and beating customers. San Francisco went into meltdown. Human blood ran in the gutters.

It was dawn before the police regained City Hall.

Rubble, strewn from Turk Street to Market Street, let the City know that hell hath no fury like faggots scorned. If the legendary Stonewall Riot had let New York and the world know that gay liberation was born, the White Night Riot let the City and the world know that gay liberation had come of age equal to any in a world of violence and terrorism.

“Gays,” a wounded demonstrator, doing Peter Finch in *Network*, screamed into a Live Eye TV camera, “are mad as hell. And we’re not going to take it anymore!”

The next morning, Milk’s successor, gay Supervisor Harry Britt, declared to the press with calm dignity: “Harvey Milk’s people do not have anything to apologize for.”

Opel took my arm and happily surveyed his crowded gallery. “We are,” Opel said, “a charmed circle.” He led me toward Ry standing next to Kick.

“Vettes are muscle cars,” Kick was saying. “Men look good in a Vette.”

“Let me tell you,” Ryan was still *on*. “You have to understand the emotional importance of bodybuilders’ affection for Corvettes. They’re meat wagons.” Wine. Cheese. Gallery small talk. “They’re designed to show off the hulk climbing out of the cockpit. There’s a whole Corvette mystique.”

“I never knew that,” a man in pressed jeans and a designer sweater said. “How, really, thank you, interesting.”

“Bullshit,” I whispered through my smile into Ryan’s ear.

He was determined to finish. “When two guys in Vettes pass each other, they wave forearm up and fist rampant. ‘Yo!’”

Kick made the motion that Ryan described. Anyone could see how they played bravura off each other. Ryan’s words gave Kick easy reason to display his arms to the surrounding crowd. Kick’s moves made Ryan’s cocktail pontificating all the more enjoyable. It was easy to figure the mutual rap-and-flex sex they enjoyed. Ryan talked the scene while Kick powered it out.

“Aren’t they a pair,” I said to Opel. “One on the ground. One in midair.”

“A pair,” Opel said, “in the Great Tradition of Pairs: Mickey and Judy, Tracy and Hepburn, Jack and Jackie, Liz and Dick, Sid and Nancy, Daedalus and Icarus.” He gestured across the gallery. “When I set up the lighting for their performance tonight,” Opel said, “I thought if I was ever going to hit a man with ‘Old Master’ lighting, Kick is certainly a subject to soak up the watts!”

Kweenie swooped by us. She pulled us tighter into the circle around Ryan and Kick. On her arm she escorted a short gay clone with a black moustache. He was her old roommate, Evan-Eddie,

who had cruised Ryan on the steps up to his sister's apartment. He wore a tux. He looked like a singing waiter in a Cole Porter musical. He couldn't take his eyes off Kick. Ryan stood amused, watching the muscle-lust rise in the slender gay boy's face.

"Those arms of yours!" Evan-Eddie unabashedly reached out to touch Kick's biceps. "I'd do anything to have arms like that."

"Even work out?" Ryan shot the line across the circle.

Undaunted, Evan-Eddie said, "But can he talk?"

"He doesn't have to," Ryan said.

Kick smiled his silent smile, a gentleman down to his perfect white teeth.

"At least," Evan-Eddie said to Kick, "when you lose your mind you've got a great body to fall back on."

"Thanks," Kick said. His southern drawl was low and gracious.

"Oh, my dear," Evan-Eddie said. "You have a nutcracking voice. So many of you great big delicious bodybuilders open your mouths and out fly six yards of lavender chiffon!"

"How would you like a mouthful of bloody Chicklets?" Ryan was irritated. Gay wit was too often sleazy putdown rather than satiric send-up. Dish queens filled him with distaste. They seemed part of a rude conspiracy to hack virility from other men's bodies, to destroy pure masculine idealism. They bought latex goods shaped and molded to the heroic size and quality of potent men and inserted them for their unreachable fantasies.

Ryan repeated his offer in clearer terms. "How would you like your teeth rearranged?"

Undaunted as a queen can be, Evan-Eddie flashed his caps and turned to Kick. "What do you see in this bozo?" He pointed to Ryan.

"I'm very rich," Ryan said. "I drive a fast car. I have a ten-inch dick."

"And I have an eye," Kick drawled, "for the proper stranger."

"You won't find anyone stranger than him." Evan-Eddie was on speed. "Let's make a deal." He poked at Kick's pecs and biceps like Hansel and Gretel's hungry witch. "I have a hundred and eighty dollars on me. Enough to rent a piece of meat like you for an hour. A buck a pound."

“Who’s working security?” Ryan asked. “I told Robert Opel this gallery needs security. Why aren’t Hell’s Angels working security?”

“Secure this.” Evan-Eddie tapped Kick’s crotch.

“That’s it,” Kick said. He extended his hand to fend off the insults. “Back off. We’re nice guys. You’re maybe a nice guy. Let’s all take two steps back.”

“And, doh-see-doh.” Evan-Eddie twirled in a circle.

“Come on, E-E.” Kweenie tugged at Evan-Eddie’s arm. “Let’s go.” She looked at Kick. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Ignore him. His idea of exercise is swimming laps through cheap cologne.”

“I’m not leaving,” Evan-Eddie said. “I’ve watched this prick-tease for too long. All those afternoons, darling. Your languor! Standing in front of Donuts & Things on Castro, holding court with the special few who are hot enough for you, Let me tell you something for sure, darlings, for sure. You’re living up to your press releases. I know exactly what kind of macho fascists you musclerama fags are.”

“Forgive me,” Ryan said. “I was beginning to think we knew you too. As it happens, we only recognize your type.”

“Why, thank you, Miss Scarlett.”

“Shut up,” Kick said. “No one calls him that.”

“Not to his face.” Evan-Eddie stood firm. Kweenie held his arm. He was fuming in the steam of his own lust and rejection, like a train in a 1940s movie standing in its own steam while lovers kiss.

Ryan always loved that bittersweet cliché: one lover with hand pressed against the train window; the other lover standing alone on the boarding platform, both receding into the distance of time and space.

How often had he left Annie Laurie and Charley-Pop that way when they put him on the train at the end of each summer to return to Misericordia. Somehow somebody’s always saying good-bye. Funny. It was always his father’s face, not his mother’s, that he last glimpsed dissolving in the steam.

Evan-Eddie took one last shot at Kick. “I’ll dance,” he said, “a gay fandango on your grave. You...You...steroid meatball! Let your hack write about that!”

"I'm going to kill him!" Ryan said.

"Passion! Wonderful!" Opel said. "Art happens NOW!"

"I guarantee," Evan-Eddie said to Kick, "that you won't live long."

"*Wunderbar!*" Opel shouted. "The evil eye!"

"And you," Evan-Eddie said to Ryan, "will live too long."

"Thank you, Vampira," Kweenie said.

Opel led the applause. "Isn't Evan-Eddie's act buffo?" His punch line dissolved the tension to guffaws.

"It isn't an act," Kweenie said. "It's his way of being!"

Opel turned from his little happening, then charged back into the ring of laughter pulling a woman dressed in black jersey. The energy changed directions. "Everyone," he said. "This is January Guggenheim."

"And the answer," January said, "is *no*."

"No what?" Kweenie asked.

"No, she's not," Opel said, "one of *those* Guggenheims."

"I'm one of *these* Guggenheims," she said. She planted her hand firmly in Kick's crotch.

Just as firmly, Kick removed her hand. "Thank you, Ma'am," he drawled, "for the compliment."

"Darling," she said. "Darling Kick. I've heard so much about you and Ryan. Now we meet." She offered her hand to Ryan. "Your performance was divine."

Opel put his arm around the woman. "January has the green light for a network documentary on the New Homosexuals."

"You are the new ones, aren't you?" January asked. "God knows, I'm bored with the old ones."

"Without fags," Evan-Eddie snapped a look at January up and down, "how could you ever be the rich fag hag you so obviously are?"

January, dripping syrup, put her hand on Kick's arm. "Kick, darling, could you use your great big muscles and punch the lights out of this tidbit boy before I bite off what's left of his balls?"

"Punching and biting! Oh my!" Evan-Eddie imitated Dorothy's terror on the road to Oz. He wrapped both hands around Kweenie's arm. "Punching and biting! Oh my!" Then he switched movies. This boy felt clever only through quotes. "Stella, my sister!"

He looked deep into Kweenie's eyes. "There has been some progress made since the days of punching and biting." His schtick was on a roll. He gestured around the gallery. "Such things as art, as poetry and music. Such kinds of new light have come into the world since then." He tugged on Kweenie's arm. "Don't hang back with the beasts!"

"Applause for the clowns," January said.

"Evan-Eddie," Kweenie said. "Get lost."

"I've heard about your new homosexual *Manifesto*," January said. "I've wanted to interview you ever since my Robert Opel told me about you." She turned to Kick, bumping and grinding her words like Mae West. "Now...that I see...you, I want to...use you... as my main...image."

"You mean...mmmh...." Kweenie hated January's bad imitation of what she herself did so much better. "As the...mmmh...main attraction, don't you, dearie?"

Kick felt surrounded. Women unnerved him. The night was not what Ryan had said it would be. "Ladies," Kick said. "I don't know." He took a refuge in Ryan he really didn't need. "Ry's my only photographer."

"I've never seen a body like yours," January said. "I've never seen a face like yours."

Kick put his arm around Ryan's shoulder. "And you've never seen a mind like his."

"I want you both," she said. "Of course, both of you." She grinned. "I simply adore package deals."

"You're beautiful," Opel said to January, "when you're fawning."

"But I do, I do, I do want them both."

"Who doesn't?" Kweenie said. "Like they're a collectably Famous Couple."

"Thank you, dear," January tried to push Kweenie back. "I understand fame. I'm from El Lay."

"That's no credential in San Francisco." Kweenie held her own.

January sized her up. "Who are you?" she asked. "Who do you pretend to be?"

"I'm the Queen of Sheba," she said. "I'm Kweenasheba. I am who I am. I also happen to be Ry's sister."

"We're all his sisters," Evan-Eddie said. "Like it or not."

"I'm his blood sister. His real sister."

"You sing, or something, don't you?" January said, adjusting her Attitude. "Perhaps I can use you."

"Be my guest," Kweenie said.

"I love your spunk," January said. "We'll have a super time working together." She improvised. The *Manifesto* had caught her attention; but Kick held her interest. She thought him spectacular. "I'm surprised Bruce Weber or Robert Mapplethorpe haven't shot you."

"I'm surprised," Evan-Eddie said, "that I haven't shot them both."

"Ryan," January said, "if you can write a two-minute narrative, we can feature you reading it. You know: a voice-over as we show a long, lingering close-up study of Kick's face and then! MUSIC UP. The camera pulls back revealing all that...muscle...and power...and virility!"

January paused, overcome with the possibilities. "My God! With that face alone we'll destroy the myth of the effeminate homosexual!" She knifed her steely gaze at Evan-Eddie. "One look at Kick's face, his body! The world at large will know! Nielsen families will race to their sets! Fathers will accept their sons! Straight brothers will embrace their gay siblings!"

She pointed one stern scarlet-nailed finger at Evan-Eddie. "You!" she announced. "Evolution has passed you sissy boys bye-bye!"

She began to unfold with expansive gestures. She was like a rose blooming in time-lapse cinematography. She opened her showy self to play the group the way she figured they needed to be played. She knew she needed them. She needed their angle. She needed them to need her.

"Kick will pose for me?" she asked Ryan.

"Don't ask me," Ryan said.

"Ask the blond bubblebutt himself." Evan-Eddie tried for the jugular. "You know the truth about steroids. If he paws the ground once with his foot, it's *yes*. Twice is *no*."

“Goodbye, E-E.” Kweenie pushed him away.

“Beasts!” Evan-Eddie shoved off to the perimeter of talk. “They have a name for guys like you,” he shouted back over his shoulder to Kick. “You...you...you...Sports Homo!”

Kweenie rolled her eyes back in her head. “I hate his retro-fits.”

“Don’t ask me,” Ryan repeated. “Ask Kick. I’m not his keeper.”

Opel relished the melee.

“Have you done any modeling? Any TV?”

“Once, back in Alabama,” Kick said, “I posed for a little six-o’clock news show. A double-biceps shot filmed with lasers.”

“A double-biceps shot? Show me,” January insisted. “I’m a show-me kind of girl.”

“Like this.” Kick leaned smiling into the pose. “It really wasn’t much. Only a quick five-second clip edited in with other sports shots. Kind of a high-energy promo to introduce the evening news, weather, and sports.”

“Kick turned down a print ad for Winston cigarettes,” Ryan said. “He won’t promote something he doesn’t believe in.”

“Of course,” January said. “You don’t smoke. I’m sure neither of you does, or ever has, or ever will. On the other hand, I...”

Her words faded under to a low voice-over. Ryan’s eyes turned from her face. In that instant he had spotted Teddy’s entrance through the gallery door. He stopped to sign the guest register. He looked up, feeling, I think, Ry’s strong stare. Then Teddy caught a full shot of Kick’s luminous blond presence. Before Ryan tossed off half a wave, Teddy turned tail, dragging behind him a leatherman who looked more than a bit the same type as Ryan. Teddy wanted a second chance to love Ryan all over again, but a muscleman he couldn’t compete with had taken his place. He didn’t need Mr. Universe rubbed in his face. San Francisco was, as he had predicted, the place where you go to lose a lover.

The instamatic moment stopped January dead in her tracks. Something like sorrow glazed Ryan’s face. January raised her tweezed eyebrows. She was about to ask paparazzi questions.

The naked needed cover.

“Not to change the subject,” I said, “Solly Blue should be here.”

“Who’s Solly Blue?” January asked. “Is he important?”

“If you’re filming the New Homosexuality, he is,” Ry said.

“Solly’s radical,” Kweenie said. “He takes these faggots back to the roots of what they came out for.”

“What’s that?” January asked.

“Straight men,” Kweenie said.

“No,” Ryan said. “Not necessarily straight men. But always, gay or straight, masculine men.”

“Last week,” Kweenie said, “a queen I know asked me to help him go straight. He wanted to know if I knew any straight guys he could date.”

Ryan reached out and grabbed Kweenie’s hand. “Some women are educable,” he said. “We’re still working on this one.”

“Bastard!”

“Bitch!”

“Boys and girls!” Opel said.

“You mean,” January asked, “that gay men don’t want to fuck with gay men?” She looked puzzled. “How utterly droll!”

“Not if they can help it,” Kick said.

“They?” January said.

“All gay men are homosexuals,” Opel said, “but not all homosexuals are gay.”

“We’re men who prefer other men who are men,” Ryan said. “I don’t think any of us know where the subspecies of gay men came from exactly. Probably from the city of Lacoste on the planet Faberge.”

“Homomale men,” Kweenie singsonged the line, “have more in common with heteromale men than they do with gay men.”

“Wait just a minute,” January said. “You’re confusing me. I don’t like to be confused by rhetoric.”

“This isn’t rhetoric,” Ryan said. “It’s a concept lesson.”

“What you see here before you,” Robert Opel said, “are homomale men.”

“Except for me.” Evan-Eddie inserted himself back into the circle. “This is such unmitigated semantic bullshit.”

“Does that mean,” January said, looking hopefully to Kick, “that you sometimes fuck women?”

“I’d sooner fuck a woman,” Kick said, “than fuck an effeminate gay man.”

January got the vapors. She reached into her clutch and pulled out a small snifter. She took a hit up both nostrils and handed the coke to Kweenie.

“Help yourself, darlings.” Her intensity deepened. “Don’t bullshit me,” she said. “I didn’t come all the way up here from El Lay to eat your San Francisco Attitude. If you’re onto something, I want to hear it. But don’t bullshit me. I’m serious, boys and girls! I’ve got the budget for this TV thing. My prediction? If we do it right? Big. BIG! Kick’s face and physique! Appealing not repelling! Showing up the sexiness of you...what is the term?...homomasculine men. I love it! Socko! High Concept! I think I’ve got it. Premise: conflict of homomasculine men and gay men! The uncivil war! The revelation of a new way to be male! Poignant! Political! Esthetic! Sexy!”

Kweenie stepped into January’s face. “Don’t forget the Ryanites,” she said.

“Kweenie!” Ryan tried to silence her. “Don’t!”

“What are Ryanites?” January looked entranced. “I’ll believe anything tonight.”

“Ryanites are guys who worship the one published picture of Kick and take every word of the *Masculinist Manifesto* to be gospel. They hate militant feminist separatists.” She decided to toy with January’s push-and-shove. “They keep white sheets in their closets with little eye holes.”

January’s face turned quizzical.

Kweenie put her finger to her own lips. “Don’t ask!”

Kweenie had hit upon the arm’s length they all found necessary to deal with January Guggenheim. Ryan recognized almost immediately that January’s network deal could afford the *Manifesto* a wider forum. It was time for post-gay masculinism to come out of the erotic underground press. It was time for masculinism to cross over to the straight media. Masculinism deserved as wide a media coverage as feminism. Ryan prepared himself to put up with whatever Attitude January put out.

"I know!" Kweenie said. "We'll all put on a show and save the town."

"My dear," January said, "you're getting the idea."

"Come with me, January," Opel said. "You must meet everybody!"

"Kiss-Kiss," January said. "Let's do lunch. Soon."

"Later," Ryan said. "Whatever." He waved her off. "I intend to use her," he said, "as much as she intends to use us to make her documentary. You don't mind, do you, Kick? You're the way we're going to turn her preconceived notions upside down."

"Whatever you say, coach."

"I'm leaving," Kweenie said. "Are you leaving?"

"We'll walk you to the door," Kick said.

"Actually," Kweenie took Kick's big blond hand into hers, "I have to talk to Ry. Okay?"

"Come on, Kweenie," Ryan said. "Kick's in on everything."

"No offense," she said. "But this is private. You know. Family stuff."

"That's my cue to get lost," Evan-Eddie said.

"It's okay," Kick said. "Go ahead."

Ryan and Kweenie walked out to the sidewalk lit by the bright lights of the gallery. The leather crowd milled around them.

"Okay," Ryan said, "what is it?"

"I'm pregnant."

"You're pregnant?"

"I'm pregnant."

"For God's sake why?"

"For the usual reason."

"You're in-love."

"No. I fucked."

He could not believe that his precious little sister for all her wildness could have betrayed the feeling they had always recognized between them. Kweenie knew that if Ryan were ever to make love to any woman it would be her. She wanted him. Sometimes. Other times she wanted what she wanted.

"Who's the father?"

"Wouldn't you just like to know."

"As a matter of fact, I would."

“I can’t tell you. Not now. Maybe never.”

“Are you trying to make me jealous?” Ryan asked.

“Yes,” she said. “And no. I know we’ll never do it. Because you won’t do it. But I had my reasons.”

“I suppose you want to experience motherhood.”

“I thought about it. At first. Now what I really want to experience is abortion.”

“Aw, jeez!”

2

“It’s time,” Kick said, “to make a certain commitment.”

“To each other,” Ryan said.

“And to muscle.” Kick held Ryan in his arms. This happened their second Christmas together. They lay naked on the ancient iron bed Ryan had set up in his studio in the barn at Rancho Bar Nada. The fire in the wood stove was the only light.

“I’ve got to know,” Kick said, “everything about muscle. I want you and me, coach, to take muscle and push it as far as it will go.”

“I want to push us as far as we can go,” Ryan said. He meant to push the Energy sired by sex between them. He was cautious. He was jealous of their privacy. Going public could be dangerous. The physique contests were one thing. January’s TV special was another. Ryan feared agents and contracts and cameras that stole souls away. “I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to lose what happens at night between us. I don’t want us to lose track of each other.”

Kick pulled Ryan into the hard mounds of his pecs. “This is me,” he said. “This is you. No matter what happens.” He repeated Ryan’s own words back to him. “Remember the home team.”

“That’s you and me, kid,” Ryan said.

“It ain’t nobody else.”

“I want you to have everything,” Ryan said.

“All I want is muscle. Big. Huge. Massive. Muscle,” Kick said. “I want more guys to learn about muscle. I want guys to hear what you write. That January? She’s using us. She can’t play a good old southern boy. We’ll turn her special into a display of male power that’ll blow the old TV tubes right out.”

“We want to do the right thing,” Ryan said, “for the right reason.”

“I understand,” Kick said, “what we’re doing in the short and long run.” He was expert at protecting himself in public. “Trust me. I’m your blond...bodybuilder...musclebeast.”

Later that warm Christmas night, they carried a down-filled sleeping bag out to the drained bed made by the empty cement saucer of an old goose pond. The dark sky over the empty valley around Ryan’s ranch glowed with squadrons of stars never seen in the City. Orion hung low and steady amid the shower of shooting stars.

“Orion is my constellation,” Ryan said.

“I only know the North Star,” Kick said.

“Then you’ll never be lost,” Ryan said. He pointed at Ursa Major. “You know that one?” he asked.

“The Big Dipper,” Kick said.

“See. You know more than you thought.”

“Everyone knows it.”

“But not everyone knows it as Ursa Major.” One thing was meaning two things again. “The Big Dipper is also the Big Bear.” Ryan pointed to the sky. “See, how if you look at it differently...” He nuzzled his face close into Kick’s neck. “You are the Bear,” Ryan said. “The Big Bear.”

Kick laughed. “And you’re Ryan-Orion. Tell me about you, Ryan-Orion. Read me the sky.”

Ryan lay down with his head in Kick’s lap. “I was Orion, a great giant and hunter. I chased the silly Pleiades.”

“What are the Pleiades?”

“They’re stars now, too. Back then they were the seven daughters of Atlas.”

“So you chased women.”

“With a sword. Look! Make a wish! I hounded them until I was killed by Artemis.”

“No wonder you’re a writer. This sounds like the plot of a Steve Reeves movie.”

“Artemis was a woman. A virgin huntress.”

“A lady with a gun?”

“She was the sister of Apollo, the god of light and poetry and manly beauty.”

“Apollo couldn’t save you?”

“He never tried.”

“Why not?”

“I might ask you.”

“Why me?”

“Because, if I’m Ryan-Orion, you are Kick-Apollo.”

“You’re joking,” Kick said. He paused. “You’re not joking.”

“I’m on to you,” Ryan said. “I know you’ve come here from another star.”

Kick thrust his thick blond hands into Ryan’s ribs, tickling him, making him scream in the tangle of the sleeping bag. “You must stop saying that,” Kick said. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s true!”

Kick rolled full-body on top of Ryan and placed the palm of his hand over Ryan’s mouth. He looked directly down into Ryan’s eyes. “It’s not true,” he whispered. He repeated the phrase staring down into Ryan’s eyes. “It’s not true. I’m going to take my hand away and I want you to say it’s not true.”

Ryan gasped for air. Kick’s serious muscle weighed heavy on him. He looked directly up into Kick’s eyes, his face, his halo of blond hair, the sky full of stars behind him.

“Say it,” Kick said.

“It’s...not...true,” Ryan said.

“I’ll kiss you to prove it.” Kick lowered his face, grazing noses, brushing moustaches, touching lips, tangling tongues.

Omigod, Ryan thought. *He’s lying. I’m lying. We’re both lying.*

They wrestled and necked and stopped short of cuming, finally burrowing in together, cuddling and laughing and wishing on every falling star. With their arms wrapped tight around each other, Ryan wondered why they didn’t, couldn’t, break the bounds of gravity. They were in bondage together, trapped here on this mundane planet, like two visitors unsure they wanted to stay. Ryan had fought his way from the burbscape of Peoria to Misericordia to Chicago to the Castro to the country. He had fought his way over thousands of men’s bodies to the safe harbor of Kick’s body. He wanted nothing more in life but more of the same.

“Let’s take it,” Ryan whispered, and he meant muscle, and he meant love, “to the limit.”

In answer, Kick pulled Ryan’s face to his own.

Through their moustaches their lips met and parted. Their tongues found lodging. Kick’s hand on the back of Ryan’s head pulled them closer.”

As far as we can take it,” Kick said.

He held the kiss so long his sweet breath became Ryan’s life-giving oxygen. Ryan was no longer kissing Kick. Kick was kissing Ryan.

Ryan knew, under those shooting Christmas stars up in the country, that this was the kiss against which he’d measure every other kiss in his life.

Later, in bed with Kick, Ryan no longer minded his sleeplessness. That night, back in the iron bed in the barn, with Thom and Sandy’s wild family asleep up in the main house, a gay sense of well-being filled Ryan’s soul. They had made love again. Kick had fallen into an easy sleep. The bedside lantern dropped soft light across their spent and naked bodies. Nothing this good, Ryan thought, can last forever. He pushed on the moment the way a small boy’s tongue plays a loose baby tooth that hurts so good.

“Be here now,” he cautioned himself. He thought of Francie in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*; she looked at everything as if it were the last time she’d see it. He had never forgotten the line he had read twenty years before in a seminary English class.

He studied Kick’s sleeping guileless face, and realized that he trusted this man more totally than he had ever trusted anyone, and his wonder was that he had not surrendered any of himself. The light rhythms of his best friend’s breathing soothed him. Even if they continued on forever, every moment of all of it he wanted to remember. Ryan felt he had everything in the world a man could ask for. He smiled about his health and his writing and his ranch and the love he received and gave. He had, he knew, miles to go before he would ever really sleep. He could brave that kind of existential insomnia. He knew in life he already had more than most people ever know is available if only you’re attentive enough. He had everything. He was certain that the only thing he now wanted was truly more of the same.

Kick had said everything that Ryan ever wanted to hear from him: “You’re the only man I want to keep on keeping on with.” Then Kick had said those words that Christmas night, “I love you, Ry.”

Ryan pulled his arm from beneath Kick’s sleeping blond head. His face was even more handsome in sleep. His naked body, all his fine muscles in repose, looked sculpted by angels. Ryan knelt up in their bed. His left hand moved slowly, lightly over the hairy bodybuilder’s shoulders and chest and washboard belly. His right hand took hold of himself, and with the palm of his left hand resting lightly on the sleeping man’s gently rising pecs, with the feel of Christmas all around them, awake for them both, solitary no more, Ryan made love a third time that night to the perfect sleeping man.

“I know,” he whispered, “you’ve come from another star.”

3

Ryan would not apologize for being a masculinist anymore than for being a homosexual. Kick fortified him. “We’re not really homosexual,” Kick said. “We’re sexually sophisticated.” Ryan’s writing became more resolute. No longer wrestling alone against the tag team of depression and despair, Ryan changed when Kick came to his rescue. Kick climbed through the ropes into the ring. The crowds cheered. The golden man of bodybuilding tackled Ryan’s dark depression and deep despair the way an All-American champion pins two fat and ugly wrestlers to the sweaty mat. Kick’s mighty arms held open the ropes and Ryan escaped from the ring of sadness.

Suddenly life seemed more possible than Death.

The angel Ryan had prayed for to beat his dark anxiety had arrived on golden wings. Ryan became a daredevil. He liked wising off in print. He liked the largeness, the exaggeration, the metaphor that is the essence of all writing.

Maneuvers remained erotic entertainment without a breath of controversy. Each cover promised: “What you’re looking for is looking for you.” The magazine gave good head. Solid smut. Sleazy pix.

All nasty leather S&M. A new network of personal ads written by readers and answered by phone or mail. Circulation grew. *Maneuvers*' only competition broke into a sweat.

The rival mag, *Leather Man*, ran middle-of-the-road S&M stories, not-too-dirty photos, and campy copy. Silly cartoon balloons of queenly dialog deflated *Leather Man*'s hardly hot pix of clonish young gay boys wearing leather chaps and chrome armbands available through the mag's 800-number shop. Slender pages of fiction and drawings were a fat-cat publisher's thin come-on to get readers to subscribe to a monthly magazine that was a glorified mail-order catalog to sell leather toys and poppers and his lover's disco records. In the first rise of gay magazines, it was fast-buck publishing. For guys not knowing the difference, *Leather Man* passed as the real thing.

"Lips that touch Naugahyde," Ryan said, shaking his head at his competition's latest issue, "shall never touch mine."

The *Manifesto* made masculinism a theory. *Maneuvers* made it a fashion. *A Different Drum* reviewed the tempest with sympathetic amusement. *Leather Man* didn't get it at all. Ryan was prick-teasing everyone, even his own kind, and having a wonderful time doing it.

"Homomasculinism," he said to January Guggenheim, "is homosexuality theorized, idealized, and applied man-to-man." He showed her the collection of his incoming mail. She aimed her video camera at the envelopes. Men from all across the country had begun to write to him in ways less salacious than before. One of them was straight. They joined him in their resistance against, "not women and feminism per se," he said, "but against the predatory version of radical separatist feminism."

Solly Blue sat bemused across Ryan's living room, listening to the bullshit roll, and rather enjoying one of his excursions from his penthouse.

Ryan found himself in an ironic situation.

"So," January said. "At first your tongue was planted in your cheek." She had set up her Panasonic video camera on wide angle to record the interview. The big cameras and crew would come later. Little did any of them realize the video would end up in my piles of research. "Where is your tongue planted now?" She fanned the

stack of mail Ryan had given her to read. "I mean now that quite a few men, judging by these letters, have responded to your masculinist position?" She wanted him to hang himself. "Queer theory? What is it, darling? Really..."

Solly turned to Ryan. "She wants your talking head on a plate."

"We're in the second phase of sexual liberation," Ryan said. "These aren't the good old days on Folsom or the early days on Castro."

"It was simpler then," Solly said. "You blew your mind with drugs and fucked your brains out. Hardly a period for intellectuals. But there they all were, all these college professors on sabbatical, snorkeling at the bottom of a pig pile at the Barracks researching gay pop culture."

"First we had to prove we were strong in numbers."

"Because," Solly tweaked, "we had all been in solitary confinement in our own little closets."

"Then we had to prove we could do anything we wanted sexually."

"The only really good gay sex is public sex."

"What's that mean?" January asked.

"Do it in the street," Solly gestured grandly, "and scare the horses."

"There's more," Ryan said, "to homosexuality than fucking. There is, and I believe this with all my heart, a code."

"Something," January said, "like the Code of the West?"

"That's what he called it in the *Manifesto*, Miss January."

"Thank you, Mr. Bluestein."

Solly raised his Coke glass with his index finger pointing at January. "Ryan didn't bed down with nine thousand guys and not crawl out without some kind of insight into human nature."

"You've had nine thousand sex partners?" January's jaw dropped."

I didn't cum with them all," Ryan said.

Solly gulped.

"Nine thousand. Give or take a few," Ryan said. "It's only a lifetime estimate."

January looked shocked. "I thought I was a whore," she said. "No offense."

"Steinbeck said," Ryan deflected the conversation from himself, "that with a three-day drunk and a night in a whorehouse he could write anything."

"How very literary," January said. "You've used your sex experiences. You think about them."

"He obsesses," Solly said. "He makes his living writing about them. He makes his lovers sign releases. He makes me listen to him on the phone."

"*Porno, ergo sum*. I live it up to write it down," Ryan said.

"I like that," January said.

"It's Kick's."

"I thought it was Descartes,'" Solly said.

"It's cute," she said.

"Ryan's nothing if not cute," Solly said.

An alarm rang in Ryan's head. Kick had warned him that TV people like January trivialized everything. He pulled her back on track. "What we're talking here is a new concept in male bonding."

"That's not cute," Solly said.

"That's grand," she said.

"Don't use the word *grand*," Solly said. "Ryan hates the thought of being grand. Only queens are grand."

"It seems to me," January had an edge of acid on her tongue, "I must be very careful of my semantics with you fellows."

"Don't call us *fellows*." Solly sounded like Bert Lahr playing the Cowardly Lion. "On the outside we look the same as men, but on the inside..."

"Proust," January said. "*Remembrances*. Badly quoted."

"Actually," Solly said, "nicely misquoted."

"This is more than semantics," Ryan said. "Different species of gays exist within generic homosexuality."

"I could make a fortune," Solly said, "selling designer videos of a Generic Gay Man. He'd sell like the Neanderthal Man or the Cro-Magnon Man. He could be the 'I. Magnin Man.'"

"Get serious," Ryan said.

“You’re too serious,” Solly said. “In ancient Rome, when somebody started taking himself too seriously, a slave stood behind him and whispered, ‘Remember thou art only a man.’”

“You’ve brought,” January looked at her notes, “something more than abstract masculinism out of the closet. You write about rimming, fisting, water sports, and even scatology as political acts. Do you think your writing has given men permission to do some rather sleazy things they’d never dare do if you hadn’t glamorized them?”

“You mean,” Solly said, “can a reader sue Ryan if the reader goes out one night and ends up with clap and a colostomy?”

“Solly!” Ryan said. He had wanted Solly present for more than a send-up of January Guggenheim. “There is no blame,” Ryan turned up his intensity, “for what goes on in the baths and bedrooms of San Francisco. I learn far more from other men than I dream up myself. My friend here,” and he shot Solly a glance meant to corral his mouth, “says that the ultimate political act is being able to do ultimate things with your own personal body.”

“Am I on? Is the video running? I’m never on this side of the camera.” Solly sat up and pontificated. “Good sex is a combination of mutually exclusive things all performed at the same time...”

“Omigod.” Ryan said.

“...each one progressively more disgusting than the last.”

“He’s on a roll,” Ryan said.

“Take notes, lady,” Solly Blue said. Leaving his apartment made Solly aggressive out of self-defense. “I’m the queen *dujour!*”

“Your friend Solly is a veritable sage. He should write fortune cookies.”

“Lady,” Solly said, “if you want *Tales of the City*, go interview Armi Maupin. He’s perfectly commercial at what he peddles. He gives you people, and I mean *you people*, like the straight public, the comfortable image they expect of faggots. We’re not talking musical comedy here.”

“Forgive me.” January, who had never in her life asked for forgiveness and meant it, turned to her purse. Archly conciliatory, she reached for her small snifter. “Would you care for,” she spoke directly to Solly, “some real coke?”

Ryan jumped back in. “Men need wildness,” he said. “In these permissive, feminist times, men need to be radically tough with each other. We need to be warriors. We need to get our balls back.”

“Whatever for?” January said between toots.

“I’ll tell you what for,” Solly said. “Men can’t get much physical intensity from women who expect them to be gentle. You women have only yourselves to blame. If women were more wild and adventurous in bed, men, some men, some basically straight men, wouldn’t turn to other men.”

“Oh?” January said. “You mean women are the cause of homosexuality?”

“I mean,” Solly said, “if all a man wants is kids, women suffice as breeders.”

“Breeders!” The word shocked January.

Solly was relentless. “Breeders.” He repeated it with emphasis. “For when men want procreation sex. When a man wants recreation sex, if his wife can’t be levitated out of the passive missionary position, he turns to other women, or to hookers, and when he can’t afford hookers, he turns to other guys.”

Ryan, the ringmaster, grinned.

“If most dutiful wives,” Solly said, “could tune into the fantasies in their fucking husbands’ fucking heads they’d run straight out the bedroom door. Women think sex is all candlelight and fireplaces. Men think it’s fourth down and inches to go.”

“You certainly have strong opinions,” January said. “For a pornographer.”

“And all of them,” Solly said, “subject to whim.”

Ryan liked the intensity of their disdain for one another. He had always wanted his Victorian to be a sort of intellectual salon, but one more butch than the Hula Palace. He enjoyed reading biographies with lines like: “In certain Right Bank Beaux-Arts buildings in Paris, the experience of sitting in a drawing room in late afternoon is enhanced by the quality of fading pinkish daylight.” He admired the talented ensemble that Robert Opel entertained in his gallery salon: singers like Sylvester and Camille O’Grady, artists like Rex and Tom of Finland, photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe, and writers like Pat Califia, who, ever the macho slut, waltzed through Opel’s openings. Califia, raised a Mormon, had, to save her family

from the shaming of her possible public excommunication, *aka-ed* herself for the independent Bear Goddess who gave California its name. Ryan, himself identified with Orion, the Bear constellation, respected women, truly talented women like Califia and O'Grady as much as Kweenasheba. They held an almost enshrined place in his old Catholic heart. They seemed all the more fully women for having transcended radical feminism with the feminist humanism of their art. They were women who had performed the impossible the way Mary became a Madonna through virgin birth. Now that was the first truly, and maybe world's only, feminist act. About January Guggenheim, Ryan was still reserving his judgment.

"Love," Ryan said, "has an element of worship."

"Worship?" January repeated.

"The only problem with worship," Ryan said, "is that so few people are willing to let you do it." A smile flashed across his face.

In an instant, he remembered the first night he had parted Kick's hairy cheeks and dug his tongue down to lick his sweet blond buttohole in the ultimate act of worship. Other men could cheer and worship Kick's public display of muscle in physique contests, but only Ryan could lay him out flat and kiss and tongue the privacy of Kick's inviolate pucker. Their private rituals were secret. They flaunted each other on Castro. Ryan handled their public relations. Kick remained aloof, mysterious, above it all. They were apiary, all right, hanging out in the afternoon sun.

Ryan was studstruck.

Writing cabaret material for Kweenie, Ryan jotted paraphrase lyrics to "The Girl from Ipanema."

"Muscled and bulked and tanned and handsome, the man from Alabama goes walking, and when he passes, each one he passes, he just doesn't see. Massive arms and blond and smiling, the man from Alabama goes walking, and when he passes each one he passes, goes, 'Ah.'"

Kick was an object of worship.

He was the lord of the Castro.

He was men's most secret dreams.

He was Desire.

"Worship," January said, "sounds so, well, Catholic." She jotted a note. "Of course, that's the priest in you coming through."

“Kick is a case in point,” Ryan said.

“Ah,” January said.

“Ah,” Solly said, “the meat of the matter.”

“He’s a perfect drop-dead blond,” January said. “Worship of him, I can understand. I’d certainly get down on my knees. I mean, I’m an expert on men. I’d never suspect he was, uh, homosexual.” She ran the tip of her small finger around her lips. “So tell me about him, darling. I mean I’m really interested. Does he hold up? Sir Larry Olivier, you know him, don’t you, Ryan? He was Scarlett’s husband in real life. I remember Larry saying he’d dallied with one male and found it not loathsome.”

“I do,” Solly said, “so love British understatement.”

“Cut to the chase,” Ryan said.

“The point, dear heart,” January said, “is Larry’s observation that every athletic champion proves a big disappointment once you pull down his jockstrap.”

“Kick holds up,” Ryan said. “I’ll bet Sir Larry never removed the posing trunks of a physique champion.”

“Then it’s not true,” January went straight to the question, “that bodybuilding is overcompensation for being, well, undercompensated in the meat department?”

Ryan laid it on. “Kick’s posing trunks have to be specially tailored. His waist is a medium.” He didn’t lie. “His pouch is an extra large.”

“Of course,” January said. “He’s complete. What else? Do you have any idea how much we straight women envy you men? Anymore, every good-looking hunk is gay. And I suppose some of them are homomasculine.” She smiled. “You see, I am learning your lingo.”

“It’s not lingo,” Ryan said. “It’s not semantics.”

“It’s not even Catholicism,” Solly said, “that makes Ryan write. He’s driven more to lead the literary life than the religious. It has,” Solly looked straight at Ryan, “its ups and downs. Living around a writer is like sharing a house with an alcoholic. I’ve watched him suffer in total despair over his writing. And for his writing. Isn’t despair a wonderful cliché? God knows, the Muse is a bitch.”

Solly was not far from wrong. Ryan was bent on the literary life. I saw his liaison with Kick, with this unfathomable perfect stranger,

as the same sort of grand passion D. H. shared with Frieda Weekley, around whom Lawrence spun his peculiar, feverish theories about eroticism.

Ryan's rooms expressed and explained, perhaps even better than he knew, what he himself was all about. To understand a man's space is to understand him. Ryan's life, even as a writer, was a visual art. That's why Kick fit in so well. He was the ultimate art object collected in Ryan's gallery. Ryan's Victorian was a kind of movie set providing not only comfort but inspiration to the erotic writer and, well, yes, somewhat theatrical lover that he was with his sex playroom filled with mirrors, track lights, chains, and sling.

When Kick moved in, the tracklight spots were already in place. He was not the first bodybuilder Ryan had met, but he was the best. Ryan was ready for him. His life had been lived in a way to prepare him to meet Kick, the way John the Baptist, who lost his head finally, was born to prepare the way for his cousin.

Ryan's house was something an anti-vivisectionist would torch. The walls were hung with the heads of deer and mountain goats hunted at flea markets. A lady's shoulder-fox hung from its lower lip. Edward Parente sculptures of animal skulls adorned with leather and feathers shared book-shelves with volumes by Emerson and Mishima and Didion. Pictures of Kick and Teddy and other less-involving lovers hung everywhere. Orion, the hunter, liked his trophies. They were his remembrances of things past.

"You're obviously a totemist," January said. She gestured at the array about her. "Your collecting is like your writing. It's a very male way of preserving something. Collectors are like hunters. You kill something and then preserve it, and the whole process is your ritual of self-preservation."

"Oh, Dr. Freud," Solly said, "how I wish you were otherwise employed."

"Don't take my zoo too seriously," Ryan said. "It's a collection."

January rose up from the couch. "This is a beautiful picture of Kick," she said. "Did you shoot him?"

"Yes."

She put her index finger on the glass directly touching Kick's crotch. She could see herself reflected over his body like a double

exposure. “Some tribes,” she said in a matter-of-fact voice, “sacrifice blonds to the sun.” Her eyes focused on some far-off moment in her own past. “We eat the gods that first we worship.” She turned back to Ryan. “Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Frankly, I thought it was more El Lay,” Solly said. “Today’s star is tomorrow’s Kleenex.”

January turned to Solly, “First thing tomorrow, darling, do go see your therapist.”

“My therapist—I should say my once-and-former therapist—told me,” Solly said, “that sometimes we think we’re in the throes of some deep spiritual yearning, but actually we’re just horny.” He paused a beat. “I think that’s why he killed himself.”

“Kick is a wizard,” Ryan said. “All us faggots are wizards, you know.”

“No, I don’t know.” January rearranged herself on the couch, folding calf under thigh.

“I mean we’re all wizards, descendants of the Druid priests of the old phallic religions that predate the goddess religions of virgin-mothers.”

“I’ve read that chapter,” January said. She meant the *Manifesto*, Chapter Three, “Magic: Homomascularity as the Old Religion.”

“I raised you,” Annie Laurie told Ryan, “to be independent.” She had taught him to cook and to sew and to clean, so that he would not marry some poor girl to have someone take care of him. “No one should marry forth wrong reasons. Besides,” she said, “if you grow up to be poor, you’ll know how to do all these things for yourself, and if you grow up to be rich, you’ll know how to manage the servants.”

Her infusion of radical Irish independence knocked Ryan’s worldview off the straight and literal and gave him a parallax, metaphorical vision. As much as Misericordia had been his upwardly mobile way out of the corn-fields of Peoria, his acquired independence lacquered his inborn homosexuality and gave him fast and rebellious exit from the Midwest standard of a nine-to-five life, a split-level wife, and 2.3 children stuffed in a two-car garage.

His homomascularity was his declaration of independence from the norm. He wrote in a letter to me, dated Friday, August 26, 1977:

I despise what is normal. It's too expected. I choose to be homomale. I could have shut my eyes, bitten my tongue, denied my preference, and managed a wife and children; but I chose the harder path: to make love to men. I need certain men the way certain men need me. Some men need to be loved more than women can love them. Few people ever realize that men can dry up and die for lack of love from other men.

No one knows what causes homosexuality anymore than they know what causes a boy to answer to a religious vocation to the priesthood. No one ever asks what causes heterosexuality. Both are their own special calling. Neither is better than the other. Merely different. Some people are called sexually to procreate. Some are called to recreate. If I had children, I could not truly live the creative, intellectual life. If Fundamentalists are having personal relationships with Jesus whispering in their ears, then they have to accept that Jesus, or whatever the Primal Force is named this time, can call me too. When a muscular, sweaty, young carpenter blows in my ear, I'll follow him anywhere.

If I could choose, and I did not choose, I would choose to be exactly as I am. Homosexuals are forced to choose—not what they already are by birth—but how they are to stand four-square with some dignity against the national religious standard of what is sexually “correct.” That is our perversity. We reject the very essence so dear to the hearts of the residents of Straight Street who require everyone to be like they are. “Like seeks like” is okay for them; why is “like seeks like” not okay for us? When we choose to reject the way they are, we call their own standards for themselves in doubt. We make them think about the way they are. When spouses are angry and children are unruly, we are their visions of otherness. They envy us for our freedom from their trap. Their envy turns to hate. They know nothing about our trap while we ironically know everything about theirs.

I have chosen to celebrate manhood, not fatherhood, not husbandry, not anything defined in relation to women and children. My vocation is not to the Church. It is not to homosexual politics. It is only to the fraternity of men.

I suck dick because it smells, tastes, feels, sounds, and looks good.

I suck dick to scare people.

So fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.

Ryan had that edge of inborn gay rage to live up to his identity. That intensity was his virtue. Against all odds, maybe his vice. Teddy could not withstand Ryan's passion. Kick was reveling in it. That was the difference between lover Number One and lover Number Two. Ryan's fervor lay in his pagan nature, rebelling against his Catholicism. Even so, he sought Gemini balance. His strict self-discipline, drilled into him by Monsignor Linotti at Misericordia, led to the peculiar rarefication of his soul that only ordained priests, totally committed to their faith, pagan or not, can understand.

"For some comic relief," Solly said to January, "why don't you ask me about my Brand-X homosexuality. I'm very content with my boys. Plural. Ry wants only one extraordinary bodybuilder god."

"What's so great about your street hustlers," Ryan said. "Twenty-five cents a pound."

January sprang to attention. She moved closer to Solly.

"My boys earn their money because they're men." He was determined to be grand with January to get even with Ryan shoveling his hip-deep bull. "In America, money is the only way of keeping score. My boys are hustlers the way everybody is a hustler. They're entrepreneurs. They're meat on the hoof, and they have the confidence that comes from getting paid for what they are." He shot a look around the room. "When was the last time either of you ever got paid for being what you are?"

"I live quite handsomely, thank you," January said.

"Listen, lady," Solly said, "A Jew knows a Jew. You've got *princess* engraved all over you."

"Ignore him," Ryan said. "He's on a sugar rush."

Solly took a pot shot at Kick. "Gay muscle queens kill me."

Ryan hoped Solly might tip his hand to January about the real cause of his dislike for Kick. More than anything, it was the secret Ryan wanted to know.

“I like blue-collar, working-class muscle,” Solly said. “I despise these mondo steroid freaks. You want some facts and figures for your documentary? Five gyms compete for business in the Castro. All filled to capacity. All gay as shit. The boys can’t even keep the names of the gyms straight.”

“Tell every negative thing you know,” Ryan said. He wanted January to focus on the upside of the emerging new Castro.

Solly sipped his Coca-Cola. “Miss January here should see both sides of this gay muscle, forgive me, homomuscular, trip.”

“Body maintenance has become important. The new gays are into health. The gyms give balance to drugs and bars.” Ryan tried to correct Solly’s direction, but Solly was one person he could never control.

“I’m fascinated,” January said. “I love antagonism.”

“For instance,” Solly said, “there’s the gym called *The Muscle System*. The pump-and-pearl girls call that *The Muscle Sisters*. *The City Athletic Club is The Sissy Athletic Club*. *The Pump Room* satirizes its own name. Not everyone who is homosexual, you see, is as taken with muscle as is Ryan. But then he sees a twenty-inch bicep not only for what it is, but for what it symbolizes.”

“You’re such a fundamentalist,” Ryan said.

“No pain, no gain,” Solly shot back.

“Please, go on,” January said.

“I shall,” Solly said. “That interior design shop on Castro, next to Cliff’s Variety, called *Work Wonders?* That’s the perfect name for a gay gym. All you guys who all failed gym class, huffing and puffing like the straight guys you desired. Trying to keep your pecs pumped up for Saturday night. If it wasn’t so tiring, you’d be funny. Gays could be national heroes. We could solve the energy crisis if we hooked your Nautilus machines to a generator.”

He threw a wink at Ryan. He wanted in his own way to play devil’s advocate with January. “Is it true that ninety percent of all gay boys mount their Nautilus machines sidesaddle?”

“I love it,” January said. “Who was Nautilus anyway?”

“He’s the ancient Greek god of expensive spas,” Solly said.

“Darling,” January said.

“I think,” Solly said, “we’re beginning to understand each other.”

“Don’t forget,” Ryan said. “All us bodybuilders...”

“Oh,” Solly said. “Himself is now one of *all us bodybuilders*.”

Ryan cocked a bicep bigger than he’d ever had before. “All us bodybuilders trade recipes and decorating ideas and hot tips on real estate.”

“That Attitude,” Solly pronounced, “is precisely why I don’t go out anymore. In restaurants, if you faggots were forbidden to talk about sex, drugs, gyms, and real estate, you’d be mute.”

“Sometimes some of us like to spend a couple of hours on a weekend afternoon...”

“What a waste of precious time,” Solly said.

“...soaking up the sun standing around the neighborhood.”

“Castro isn’t a neighborhood. It’s a happy hunting ground.”

“At least it’s happy.”

“In neighborhoods, people say *hello* and mean it for what it is.”

“A good *hello* on Castro is what it is.”

“A *hello* on Castro...” Solly looked at January. “Are you sure your video is running? A *hello* on Castro only means you’re sexually interested and available. Most of the guys who’ve slept together the night before pretend they don’t recognize each other on the street the next day. It’s always: ‘Onto New Meat!’ That’s the Code of the West!”

“So that’s what a *hello* on Castro is,” Ryan said. “It fits perfectly your definition of anything and everything: what is, is. Besides, you lifted my line for your last mail-order brochure. ‘What you’re looking for is looking for you.’ If that’s so, then Castro, with all its faults, is still the only place where you’ll find it.”

“What I’m looking for,” Solly said, “isn’t looking for me on Castro. What’s looking for me is going to have to work hard to try and find me.”

“I must use you,” January said to Solly. “I think you’re terribly fascinating. You’ll make a great bit in the special.”

“Only if I wear a mask.” Solly played Groucho. “On second thought, only if you wear a mask.”

“Darling,” January said, “whatever turns you on.”

“Okay,” Solly said. “You can tape me, but let me give you the scenario. Here’s something,” he aimed at Ryan, “for you and Kick and all your homomuscular buddies to think about. For Jan’s TV special—I can call you *Jan*, can’t I? Good! For Jan’s special, catch this, I walk into that gym where you and Kick workout and shout: ‘What insecurity brings you here?’ I could shrivel those muscleheads down so far to their real size the camera would need a macro-lens to find them.”

“That’s a specious argument,” Ryan said.

“Is it?”

“You could walk in any place where people are trying to improve themselves and shout that. Compensation isn’t the only motivation guys have for working out.”

“Compensation is what the world is all about,” January said.

“So, tell me, Jan, what are you compensating for?” Solly said. She turned to Solly. “I like you,” she said “I like you a lot.”

“Terrific,” Ryan said.

“Robert Opel promised me,” January said, “that I’d find strange bedfellows on this assignment.”

Ryan looked at Solly who looked back at Ryan. They burst out laughing.

“Oh, poo,” January said. As she walked up to the lens of her camera, she actually put her pinkie into her mouth and bit its nail with her front teeth. “I’m running out of tape.”

4

That night, searching for the right muscle Look, Kick’s dick hardened. He picked around in his closet in Ryan’s bedroom. All his shirts, even the tee shirts, hung on hangers.

“I love my shirts,” he said. He wrapped one of his king-sized, baby-blue plaid Pendletons around Ryan and squeezed him tight.

“They’re such beautiful shirts,” Ryan said.

“Check this out.” Kick held up a soft gray cotton tee shirt. He stood stripped to the waist. He was between contests and his torso was unshaven. His hair pattern was classic: thick across his

shoulders, coming down his big pecs, spilling spun-golden over them and on down his washboard abs. ALABAMA was stenciled in crimson block letters across the gray tee shirt's chest. He shot each arm through the tight sleeves and pulled the neck on over his carefully groomed blond hair. He palmed ALA first on one bulging pec and then BAMA on the other.

"The old Crimson Tide," he said. He adjusted the tight band of the short sleeves around his baseball biceps. He ran his hand down the cotton over his tight belly. The shirt fit like a second skin. "This is the right one tonight," he said. Kick had form fitting cotton tee shirts, not all in one size, but in all the several sizes of his arms and chest to accommodate precisely his heft: in contest shape, bulked, or trimmed down between competitions.

"In anyone else," Ryan wrote in his *Journal*, "this could be vanity; but I understand what is in his heart and my heart, and our heart, when it comes to the fetish of his shirts."

Kick turned and hit a pose for no more reason than to delight Ryan. The athletic gray tee shirt transformed his Look from bodybuilder to more of a husky college jock. That was one of the wonders of Billy Ray Sorensen. Most bodybuilders always looked like bodybuilders. Kick defied categorization. Almost more than a bodybuilder, he was an artist, maybe even in the sacred sense of a priest, who could transform himself with mind control, transubstantiate himself with body control.

Ryan, more than once in their bedroom, had seen Kick metamorphose from Kick into almost anything a body artist could conjure on his basic handsome and husky Look. Kick was as believable a college jock as he was a bodybuilder, or, one of their favorite impersonations, a blond, moustached California Highway Patrolman uniformed in blue-and-gold-striped motor breeches and boots, black-leather gloves and jacket, golden helmet, and tan military shirt with short sleeves almost ripped apart from the straining pressure of his huge biceps.

Ryan ran his hand down the belly of the tee shirt. He felt the soft gray cotton over the mat of dirty-blond belly fur. He felt Kick crunch his wash-board muscle to ultimate definition for his pleasure. In the palm of his left hand, Ryan was memorizing Kick's body.

“You have,” Ryan said, sounding for all the world like Daisy Buchanan adoring the golden Jay Gatsby, “such beautiful...beautiful...beautiful...shirts.”

Kick put his hands on his tight waist, arms akimbo, the way football jocks stand around between scrimmages, “Tonight,” he said, “we’re gonna get into pud. Pecs and pud. Varsity football pecs and pud.”

Kick was too good to be true.

Ryan wondered sometimes if he were hallucinating. Was he losing his mind, imagining this phantasm of masculinity who filled in all the blanks of everything he thought a man should be? For twenty-three months they had gone at each other nonstop. They were lovers, and more than lovers, they were friends together. He had made up his mind to ride along with this man whatever way mutuality took them. Even if they should eventually decide to go different ways, no one, not even the beautifully handsome physique champion, could take away from him the wonder of their time together.

Kick was a good lover. He clarified Ryan’s life. Kick had pared down his own life to an almost Thoreauvian simplicity. He had pared his body down to transparent skin, hairy and tanned, with no subcutaneous layer of fat, revealing only the cordage of vascularity, of veins wrapped like cables around the defined bulk of his muscle.

Their nighttime lust matched their daytime discipline.

Kick had always called Ryan *coach*. “I know what else you want,” Kick said. “You want muscle. Not only mine. Yours.” He handed Ryan a training schedule. “I want you to be my official workout partner.”

“You’ll give me muscle?”

“You can have anything you want.”

“Can you make me blond?”

Six days a week, with Kick on split routines, they pumped through their workouts. Kick popped caffeine pills to up his energy. Ryan followed suit. “Whatever works,” he said. They ate omelets and broiled skinless chicken. They drank eggs whipped with bananas in the blender. When guys asked Kick about his diet, he described

their basic drink. “Put a can of tuna packed in spring water in your blender. Add another can of water. Whip it and drink it.”

“The first one,” Ryan said, “is the worst one. It tastes like whipped baby shit.”

Guys stood gagging on the corner of 18th and Castro.

“You really drink that?”

Kick flashed a single-biceps shot. “You betcha,” he said.

The fans looked somewhat dismayed, but the *do-fer*, as Kick called the questions guys asked when they’d say, “What do you do for your arms,” they took totally to heart.

There is no lore as esoteric as bodybuilding lore. If a big, impressive bodybuilder said he got his build from drinking blenderized baby shit, in ten minutes every aspiring bodybuilder within earshot would be out trying to score used Pampers from the nearest child care facility.

Bodybuilding is a sport where genes will out. Bodybuilding is also the sport where every aspirant plays three-card draw to improve on the hand dealt him by his genetic code. When the muscle-genes are there, a man pumping iron cannot help but push on out to the limit of his potential. When the genes, as Ryan’s were, are more ectomorph than mesomorph, hope springs eternal. And snake oil reigns supreme.

If gossip gets around a gym that Mr. Physique over there, benching 450, with twenty-inch arms, drinks whipped tuna from a blender once a day and swallows 30 mg of anabolic steroids, every muscle-crazed man in the place will figure if one can of tuna and 30 mg of Dianabol does that for him, then they’ll catch up and even pass him by drinking three cans of tuna and popping 90 mg of steroids.

“That’s why half of them are crazy,” Kick said. “They believe anything. They think bodybuilding is witchcraft. If they could only find the right ingredient, the right pill, the right coach, they’d be Mr. America.”

With the gay gyms came the steroids. Dianabol was as popular on Castro as cocaine and MDA. Ryan wanted nineteen-inch arms like the two husky dealers who drove up from El Lay to peddle their little blue pills on Castro. He wanted to beef up for Kick. He

fantasized they could lock together in mutual musclesex. His heart pounded in fascination of the potential.

Steroids were Eden's apple.

"They're poison," Ryan said. He spoke out against his own temptation.

"These days for a competition bodybuilder," Kick said, "there's no other way."

Kick was telling him something.

"You mean you have to start?" Ryan asked.

"There's no other way," Kick said.

"You've done okay so far without them."

"We want to take muscle as far as it will go."

Ryan tried to adjust his Attitude. He read too much. Steroids lower the immune system, cause cancer, turn the liver to pudding. "You're sure," he said.

"We can visualize every night, but there's only so much muscle mass we can conjure." Kick was confident. "I know this doctor in El Lay. He's into sports medicine. Steroids are okay under medical supervision. He'll monitor me. I'll drive down there once a month. He works with professional bodybuilders. He knows what he's doing. I know what I'm doing. I want you to know everything that's going on."

"I'm not sure," Ryan said.

"You want us to win, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then it's muscle as far as it goes."

"I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Trust me," Kick said.

"I've always trusted you," Ryan said.

Ryan wondered about his own motives. If he held Kick back, then all the nights they had played sexually with muscle fantasies, about Kick's championship physique, would be a lie. He had to keep on keeping on.

"I'm not saying it's right because everyone takes steroids," Kick said. "I'm saying that because everyone does take them, I have to take them to be competitive."

"You always said you liked communication more than competition."

“I do. But to communicate on an even more impressive level, I first have to compete to win that credibility.”

“I want,” Ryan said, and he dissembled a bit, torn between his love for Kick and his love for Kick’s muscles, “whatever you want. I can’t say *no* to you. You’ve said only *yes* to me. All along. I want...”

“Yes?” Kick pulled Ryan on into his sweat-sweet armpit, hugging his head into the deep valley where his massive arm tied into his broad shoulder, his deep back, and his full pecs.

Ryan was lost and found in this contradiction of a man. Who was he to stop Kick from going all the way with his lifelong dream which was so like his own?

“Let’s,” Ryan said, his voice muffled against Kick’s hairy chest, “take it to the limit.”

Ryan wrote in his *Journal*,

Super Bowl Sunday, January 21, 1979: I know him now, but very soon everyone will know him. This thing with January is turning into a big deal. Television turns everything into Something. She’ll be taping Kick training for his next contest. Attention is being paid to him. I wasn’t wrong when I knew from the start what he could do. What we could do together.

Kick’s at the beginning of some great recognition. I like that. I like the verification from expert physique judges that I’ve been really correct in encouraging him on to competition. Not competition really. Comparison. Communication through muscle. I want to watch other men enjoy what I have enjoyed so intimately. No jealousy in that.

The looks and lust of other men are validation that once in my life, we two have met equally and are creating what we want more than anything. Energy comes from both sides. He calls me his coach. He flatters me. I love him for it. I think he could do alone what we do; but if he could, why has he stayed so long and pleased me so much?

He has the genes I wish I had. I eat his sperm. I drink his saliva. I swallow his sweat. I feast on his sweet butt. I want to become him. I want to be him. What sane man doesn’t want to become his fantasy?

He says I have a great soul. (Would that my soul had biceps and pecs.) He says I do him better than anyone. Does he know how much at night I am him? When we swing out on our muscle and bondage trips, does he know that I stop existing because my anxiety stops existing and I fly free. I become him.

A note from two nights ago: Kick was in El Lay for his pre-steroid liver-panel workup. So I watched a TV movie, *The Jericho Mile* about a track coach and a runner who was a convict in Folsom Prison. When the runner-con asked the coach what he was getting out of his coaching, the coach said: "I could run fast. I know how to run fast. But I can't run fast and float free like you. But I know how to teach it. I've waited all my life for someone like you to come along."

For godsake, who cries at TV movies? But tears filled my eyes, because all my life I've been in pursuit of the perfect man in the perfect body, because all my life I've wanted to have a body built to match on the outside the soulbuilder I've been raised, for good or ill, to be inside. I want more than anything in the world to have muscles, and if I can only be realized through Kick, then I'll be satisfied.

Isn't that what love is?

Even settling for his muscles rather than mine is hardly half a loaf. He's complete. All my life, ever since I sat on my daddy's lap, I've waited to match up with a man who was enough his own man to be able to be a part of my life. I've always been the sun in all my relationships. For once I want to feel like the moon. I want my cold aerobic body to be warmed by his muscular heat. I want to lose myself in his light. He can do no wrong. I trust him. He can lead me where he wants. He can do with me what he wants.

Coaching Kick kept Ryan clean. The days were serious training. The nights, serious sex. Ryan stayed three issues ahead on *Maneuvers*. Then two. He was overjoyed. Play was more fun than work. He left the saving of the world to priests, who, unlike him, were not spoiled priests. His vocation was not the world. His vocation

was Kick. Other than the *Manifesto*, Kick eighty-sixed Ryan's old social concerns about civil rights and the homeless and Central America.

"They only depress you," Kick said. "I never want you to be depressed."

If the golden man of bodybuilding could train the depression out of him, then for all the Energy Ryan put into him; they would be more than even.

"If you don't think about certain things," Kick said, "They don't exist."

"That's the vice of the versa?" Ryan said.

"Exactly," Kick said. "The more we think about muscle when we play together at night, the more muscle we cause to exist."

"What kind of rebels are you southern boys?"

"The kind that tells you northern boys you think too much." Kick's every intention was good. To be a bodybuilder takes incredibly dedicated single-mindedness. "If you're depressed, Ry, we can't get on with all the Energy we need to do what we can only do if we do it together. Your depression over Vietnam didn't save Saigon. It won't save El Salvador. You can't help anyone but us. Your depression is a no-win situation. We're winners! I want us to win!"

"Kick was so sisboombah," Solly said much later. "He was always up. Like a one-man pep rally for a school that never existed."

"Let's hear it for the home team," Ryan said.

Kick's southern aloofness from all social concerns only made Ryan love him more. Kick's view was consciously simple and he was happy. Ryan was more complicated and he had always been unhappy. He wanted to learn Kick's upbeat lesson. He reached for Kick's hand. "You're every inch a man," Ryan said.

Kick was Ryan's shelter from the rain. Their night games held back Ryan's priestly pain. That was not enough for Kick. He wanted more. He wanted to stop Ryan's acquired pain.

"You don't have to save the world," Kick said. "Save yourself."

"I have so much to learn from you."

"Wrong," Kick said. His steely blue eyes were intense. "You're the coach."

The Look in Kick's face was silent command never to be down. Ryan locked the Look away and denied his sadness. "I'll be happy,"

he said to himself. "I'll make myself happy. Molly Brown hated the word *down*. She loved the word *up*. *Up* means *hope*."

"Why do we want everything all the time?" Ryan asked.

"Because," Kick said, "we're worth it."

"Then I'll do whatever it takes."

Ryan as a child had believed by clapping his hands he had made Tinker Bell live. Then he grew up to be Tinker Bell, and he had to keep lovers loving, readers reading, people clapping. Or he knew he'd die.

He turned all his attention to keep Kick kicking.

Solly was skeptical. "I think differently from Kick. No matter how massive his muscle, he'll die. You'll die. We'll all die. The universe will die. Eventually the expanding universe will reach, how can I put it so you'll understand, its muscular extreme, and then collapse in on itself not at the same rate it expanded, but faster, cataclysmically faster."

"Stop playing *When Worlds Collide*." Ryan felt a certain triangular tension.

Kick.

Himself.

Solly.

He'd think about it later.

The Dianabol worked. Their visualizations worked. Kick grew. His arms pumped bigger. His veins read like road maps around his muscle. His penis hung thicker and longer. His sexual appetite was insatiable. He was wearing even Ryan out.

"I wanted more," Ryan told Solly, "and now I'm getting it."

"Spare me," Solly said.

Bodybuilding is the sport of evolving gods. That is the romance of bodybuilding. That is its hubris. Ask Yukio Mishima. Mortal men lift weights against gravity's downward pull, using earth's gravity to build muscle that will make them like the immortal gods themselves. Bodybuilding is a rebellious, Faustian, Luciferian act. To achieve the golden bridge to immortality, anything is permitted.

"How you use your body," Solly repeated, "is the ultimate political act. I may not be fond of Kick, but I can appreciate, maybe more than he can, what he is doing."

“What’s he doing?” Ryan asked. “I’m supposed to be the activist. Not him.”

“Believe it or not,” Solly said, “I’ve always loved bodybuilders in general, if not Kick in particular. There comes a point in size and power and Look when they transcend themselves. They go over the edge. They become gods of their kind. They achieve Universal Appeal. Kick, consciously or subconsciously, has become the man you idealized in your *Manifesto*. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you should get down on your knees to him.”

“I do,” Ryan said.

“I know.”

“You make me sound like Hitler lusting after a blond Aryan hunk.”

“Without the edge of homosexuality, there would never have been a Third Reich, *mein smallische Fuehrer*.”

“Fuck you!”

“Gays and fascists. Both consider themselves the ultimate elite. Don’t ever forget that.”

Ryan left Solly’s penthouse knowing the inevitable.

The ultimate elite.

He understood what Solly was saying.

He must finally, totally, fall down on his knees before Kick.

To do what Kick wanted.

To truly take muscle as far as it goes.

Some people choose longevity.

Some people choose quality of life.

What was it Sandahl Bergman said to Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Conan the Barbarian*?

“Do you want to live forever?”

What an ambiguous question.

One thing was meaning two things again.

Ryan said *yes* when Kick told him it was time.

“Give me,” Kick said, “your arms and pecs and shoulders.”

As Ryan had done at his First Communion, when he was seven years old, he opened his mouth.

Kick’s fingers smelled sweet. He placed the blue pill on Ryan’s tongue.

Ryan looked into Kick's blue eyes and hoped for more than he had hoped for all his life.

He hoped for his own muscle.

He closed his lips and kissed the tips of Kick's fingers.

If Death must be embraced, then let me be in Kick's strong blond arms.

He swallowed the Dianabol.

Another bite from the apple of paradise.

Kick led him to the bedroom. "I feel sorry," Kick said, "for anyone who isn't us tonight."

5

Up in Sonoma County the Bar Nada ranch house smelled of Velveeta panfried in margarine on enriched white Wonder Bread. It was a February weekend in the country. Kick, who had driven the Corvette only the week before to El Lay for his checkup with Doctor Steroid, had received a phone call from someone, not the doctor, who, Kick inferred, owed him a chunk of change. He seemed slightly upset. Ryan was not one to pry; but not without some eagerness Kick told Ryan El Lay called him back for the next weekend as well. "Urgent business," Kick said.

Ryan was disconsolate. "Not two weekends in a row!"

As usual, when Kick was away, Ryan invited me along to watch the family circus. "Not," I said, "two weekends in a row!"

"You can't leave me defenseless," he said.

"You? Defenseless?" I said. "Don't be moronically oxymoronic."

The triplets were on the warpath. Sandy was beside herself. "It's all from your side of the family, Thom. All of it."

Abe had discovered masturbation. He emerged from his room only to fry cheese sandwiches and fight with his sisters. Sie was working on her porn vocabulary and Bea had taken to wetting the bed. Thom had forced Beatrice to sleep in Pampers. He had wrestled her to the floor of her bedroom and fastened the diapers on her himself. She howled at the indignity. She told anyone who came in the front door what they were doing to her, and what she

planned to do to them. "I'm going to be a lesbian," she shouted. "I'll show them."

Sandy was impassive to the commotion. She sat on the edge of the bench-like brick hearth, chain-smoking, feeding a week's accumulation of wet plastic diapers into the fireplace. She threw them one by one into the fire. They landed white and wet on the burning logs, sat for a moment, turned brown around the edges, and curled up like huge marshmallows, going up finally in a roar over the high hissing sound of her teenage daughter's urine evaporating to steam. One after the other she rationed the diapers into the fire, watching the burning, with the sudden plastic blaze lighting her thin boned face, accenting her hawk-nose and chopped black hair. She was the witch of Endor reading the runes of burning diapers. She was the wreck of a woman whom marriage had made. When Ryan ushered me around the corner and into the room, Sandy did not really look up. She sat on the hearth, smoking and drinking coffee, while hypnotically she burned the wet diapers. Finally, she looked up and said, "What's so funny?"

"Welcome to the Big Top," Ryan said.

"What?" Sandy Gully said. Finally, she laughed, almost seeing what a ridiculous figure she cut. "So, somebody has to do it."

Thom, for his part, cornered Sic at the end of the long green hallway. They were at each other's throats.

"Can we discreetly withdraw?" I asked.

"Are you kidding?" Ryan said. "I promised you a reserved seat at the main event."

The worst storm to hit the coast in a century had blown in from the Pacific. California was under siege. El Lay was sliding away. The Russian River was at flood stage. The small bridge leading up to the ranch from the road was underwater. Horses stood on the hillside with their withers turned into the wind. We were trapped like Brad and Janet in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Thom was outraged by his insolent daughter. Rain pelted the Plexiglas dome over their heads. Sic had been fifteen when she had first spit in her father's face. The week before, she had run to a neighboring ranch and cried that her father and her mother had beaten her. She had driven Thom and Sandy to their wit's end. Thom went

to the neighbors' door and shouted through the screen, "Either you come home now or I call the sheriff."

"Call the sheriff," she said. "You and Mom hit us. You hit us all. You beat us. We're abused children."

"Get your ass out here," Thom said in a low voice, "or I'll have you taken away not as a runaway but as an uncontrollable little brat."

"I want to go to a foster home."

"You're going to end up in a juvenile facility in about five minutes flat."

Thom had no choice. He had to play his trump card. He stormed home and called the sheriff. When the two deputies arrived, they listened while Thom spun out the history. The three men drove down the road in the squad car to the neighbor's ranch.

The bigger of the two deputies crossed his thick forearms. He was blond, muscular, and imposing. Ryan knew the big man used his Look to straighten people out.

Me next! he wished.

"Little girl," the deputy said, "we've got all the details—not only from your father, but from your brother and your sister. You have a choice. Either you go home with your dad, or my partner here and I take you for a ride in the back of our squad car. If we take you in, you might be in juvenile hall for anywhere up to six or eight weeks."

"I don't care," Sie said. "Take me away from them."

"That means," the deputy leaned in close to her face, "six to eight weeks of greasy jailhouse food, no makeup, and no telephone."

Sullen, Sie touched her zits and came home.

Within an hour the three of them were fighting again. Ryan was embarrassed that the law had been called, but to the killer triplets, deputies in real life were no more startling than they were on a TV series.

Thom had commanded platoons in Nam, but his family was beyond his control. The storm trapped them all together in the ranch house. Thom cornered Ryan. "Please," Thom said, "you've got a way with kids. Do something. Maybe they'll listen to you."

"A fine mess this is," Ryan said. "What can I do?" Ryan could hardly keep up, weekend to weekend, with their antics. The

information was too garbled. Their program changed too fast. They spoke no English. They spoke *sitcom*. They lived television. Video had penetrated their brains. Cathode rays had driven them to believe that life was a continuing series with a new situation dragged out, built to a climax, and resolved in half-hour segments. They lived on twelve acres of land and at any given moment they all crowded together fighting for territory to keep warm in the five square feet in front of the television.

They were a family of idolaters punished for their idolatry by the very idol they worshiped.

"The three of them," Thom said, "trapped Sandy in our bedroom last Wednesday morning. She wouldn't come out until I came home from work. Our own son and daughters! They said they were tired of child abuse. They told Sandy they wanted to abuse her so she'd know what it felt like. Their own mother!"

"The little darlings," Ryan said. "Have you thought of rolling Valium into their meatballs?"

"This isn't funny," Thom said.

"Maybe we could think up some game to distract them."

Ryan winked at me. "Something like you played last weekend."

"That only worked for a while," Thom said.

The Sunday before, Thom had dressed in his green camo fatigues and taken up a position on the living-room couch. He had thrown open the window and aimed his rifle out into the yard.

"You people," he shouted out to the triplets, "when I say go, I want you girls to throw that cracked corn around on the grass. Abe," he commanded, "while Bea and Sie spread the corn, your orders are to open up the chicken coop and chase the old biddies out onto the lawn."

Thom, sailing on double Percodans and black coffee, was oblivious to us watching him from the kitchen.

"Aren't you going to stop him?" I asked Ryan.

"How do you stop a man who has a foxhole dug next to the back deck?"

"This is turning into *Apocalypse Now*."

"This has always been *Apocalypse Now*."

"Don't you care?"

“Of course, I care. I actually want to see how far he’ll go.”

I think one of Ryan’s character faults was that he always wanted the intensity of life *in extremis*.

Thom watched the chickens, curious at their liberation, slowly spread out from each other, hunting and pecking across the lawn. The girls each had a supply of brown Safeway bags under their arms. Thom lit a Camel and cupped it in his hand, waiting in ambush. He smoked slowly, relishing the maneuvers.

“Come on, Dad,” Sie yelled. “This is boring.”

“Shut up,” Thom said. “Keep back up against the house. I don’t want you in range when the shooting starts.”

“I don’t believe this,” I said.

“Believe it,” Ryan said. “Should I be the only witness to all this madness?”

Thom raised his rifle, aimed it through the window, sighted a Rhode Island Red, hunched his shoulder, resighted the target, squeezed the trigger, and dropped the chicken in its tracks.

“Is that supper?” I asked.

The other chickens wandered mindlessly on the lawn.

“Okay, people. Get on it!” Thom said. “Bea, you pick it up and put it in Sie’s bag. Abe, I want you to place the bag with the chicken in it exactly where it dropped.”

The children followed the orders.

“I like this,” Abe shouted back.

“It’s gross,” Bea said.

Thom took a slow, careful hour, gunning down chicken after chicken. The kids no longer needed orders. After each kill, they bagged the body and set its memorial sack where it had fallen. The lawn was dotted with a random disarray of brown grocery bags leaking chicken blood.

Thom called out to the triplets. “You go play now.”

“We are playing,” Abe said.

Thom walked toward us in the kitchen. “That takes care of that,” he said.

“Of what?” I was incredulous.

“Those fuckers haven’t laid an egg in three weeks.”

“It’s winter,” Ryan said. “They don’t lay in winter.”

Thom turned to Sandy. “Make me some more coffee.”

Later, Sandy cooked supper. “We’re having SpaghettiOs,” she said. “I’m not touching those chickens.”

“I told you,” Thom said, “there’s nothing to plucking and gutting a chicken.”

“Yuck,” Sie said.

“Then why don’t you do it?” Sandy said.

“Because,” Thom said, “I’m the hunter. You’re the cook.”

“Oh, really,” Ryan said.

“Fuckin’ A,” Thom said. “Anyone who doesn’t carry their own weight around here can clear out.” He stared hard at Sandy who tried for an instant to stare him down, but then retreated.

Abe and Bea, with their mouths full, spent the meal tormenting Sie who had come late to the table from somewhere outside with straw in her hair. “I’m not hungry,” she said.

“You’ve been out,” Abe said, “putting cocks in your mouth.”

“Sie’s a cocksucker,” Bea said.

“You’re the cocksucker, Bea!” Sie said.

“Yuck!” Bea said. “I don’t even eat hotdogs.”

“Lesbo,” Abe said.

“Boy!” Ryan said, “You guys really know how to make conversation.”

“I’ve told the three of them,” Thom said, “that this weekend you’re in charge of them.”

“Big deal,” Bea said.

“I refuse to be in charge of them,” Ryan said.

“I told you,” Thom addressed all three triplets, “to eat with knives and forks and spoons.”

“If you don’t,” Sandy said, “you won’t know how to act when you start dating.”

“You don’t need forks,” Abe said, “to eat at McDonald’s.”

“Sie doesn’t need a knife and fork to eat dick,” Bea said.

Bea picked up a handful of SpaghettiOs and threw them at Sie. The nuclear family went into meltdown. Sandy started screaming: “Stop it! Stop it!” Thom pushed his chair back from the table. A mess of salad, dripping with Kraft French dressing, hit him in the face. He roared up at the end of the table. He looked directly at Abe who sat defiantly in his chair. Abe had meant the salad to hit Bea, but he hardly looked as if he cared he had hit his father.

“Do something,” Sandy screamed. “Now you see what they’re like!”

Thom rose from his chair. He stared down across the table at his son. “You son of a bitch,” he said to Abe, “you’re going to make my day.” He pulled his belt from his jeans and wrapped it around his thick hand. “I’ve had enough, squatface! This is the end of it!”

Ryan quickly rose from the table. Deep down he hated the triplets, but he was afraid that Thom might hurt them physically as much as he and Sandy had hurt them emotionally. Ryan turned to Abe. “Get up, Abe,” Ryan said in a low voice, “and head for your room.”

Abe looked at his uncle in contempt. “Why don’t you fuck off,” he said. “I don’t need your help. You’re nothing but a faggot queer anyway.” He reached into his plate of SpaghettiOs and threw a sloppy handful into Ryan’s crotch. “We don’t need you here to help us anymore,” Abe said. “I don’t like queers in our house.”

I had never seen Ryan get truly angry before; but truly enraged he became. “Your house! Your house?” he said. “You ungrateful little bastard. This is my house. I own this house.”

The entire kitchen drew to a startled halt. No one had ever seen Ryan so furious.

“You’ll never eat another bite in my house,” Ryan said.

“Oh, yeah?” Abe took a tablespoon, dug it into the food on his plate, and hauled it to his open mouth.

“Drop it,” Ryan said.

“Fuck you,” Abe said.

Ryan’s anger descended. He scooped Abe’s plate up off the table in the flat of his hand and shoved the dripping salad and SpaghettiOs into Abe’s face.

“Get him!” Thom shouted. “Get the little bastard!”

The plate in the face knocked Abe to the floor. He lay in an instant garbage heap of food. He rolled over on his belly, his chin on the linoleum, and with both hands he shoveled the mess into his mouth. Ryan sprang from his chair. He dropped to the floor, straddling his nephew who was almost as big as he was, and squeezed the boy’s cheeks to force his mouth open.

“Spit it out!” Ryan commanded. Even in his rage, I noticed a cool deliberateness, as if he anticipated every move. He was like Annie Sullivan taming Helen Keller. “Spit it out!”

Thom stood over the two of them. “Listen to your uncle,” he shouted.

Ryan shouted up at Thom. “Don’t call me their uncle.”

Abe grit his teeth together. Ryan squeezed hard on his cheeks with one hand and with the other forced his nephew’s lips open. He dug two fingers into the thrashing boy’s mouth. He pulled the food spewing out of the boy’s face.

“Hit him!” Sandy shouted to Ryan. “Hit him!”

Ryan pulled back still squeezing his nephew’s cheeks. “I won’t hit him,” he said.

Sandy shouted to him again, as if finally he had come as reinforcement to her side in this marriage. “Hit him! Some kids deserve child abuse.”

Ryan pulled Abe up by the neck of his shirt. Food covered them both.

Abe was defiant. “Straight,” he shouted into Ryan’s face, “is better than gay.”

“Not,” Ryan said, “when a faggot has you by the throat, you little sonuvabitch!”

Abe spit in Ryan’s face.

“You ever do that again, and you’ll go through life, little boy, explaining what a violent fairy did to your face. Sheriff or no sheriff. No court in the land would convict me of putting all three of you piece by piece through the blender.”

Bea and Sie were laughing and slapping each other.

“Stop it, you two,” Thom said, “or you’ll get the same treatment.”

Sie looked at her father contemptuously. “Don’t you touch me,” she said. “I want you to take me to a foster home.”

Ryan, holding tight onto Abe’s shirt, turned to Sie, and said, “Get your shit together, little girl. You’re sixteen. You don’t need a foster home. Kids your age run away.”

Bea turned to Sie. “So run away, you little cocksucker,” she said.

Ryan pushed Abe toward the hall. “Go take a shower,” he said, “and stay in your bedroom until you can come out and act like a civilized human being. Go on!”

Abe gave him the finger, then shuffled off down the long hall. “Sie,” Ryan said, “you get your butt off to your room. You started all this.”

Bea looked at her uncle. “No she didn’t,” she said. “Us kids didn’t start this. They started it.”

Thom moved toward her.

“It’s true,” Sie said. “They started it.” She pointed at her father and then at her mother. “That bitch gave Abe forty dollars to get her some speed on the playground. He didn’t want to, but she made him do it.”

From down the hall, Abe called back, “It’s true. What kind of mother would make you do that?”

Sandy flushed. “They’re all such liars,” she said. She stood up from the table and pulled on her coat. “Where’s the car keys?” she asked Thom. “I’m going for a drive. I can’t take this.” She turned to Ryan and me and said, “Now you know why both times Thom went to Vietnam I ended up in a mental hospital.” She fled out the door.

Sie marched off to her room.

“I’ll clean up the mess,” Bea said.

“No,” Ryan said. “Why should you? You weren’t involved in this fight.”

She smiled at him. “Well, I’ve been in others, Uncle Ry.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I’m glad you stopped this before it got too bad.”

Ryan looked at her in amazement. “You mean sometimes you’re worse?”

Bea laughed. “When we’re alone, we’re horrid. We’re good around you. Dad forces us to be. He says we owe you because you let us stay here in your house. Mom says because you’re never going to have kids that we’re supposed to be like your substitute children.”

“I’m going to puke.” Ryan actually blushed. “You’re kidding,” he said.

Thom moved close to Ryan. “She’s not kidding,” Thom said. “Thank you for handling this.”

Ryan resented them all making him play the daddy since Charley-Pop had died. “Wait a minute,” he said, “you’re the father.”

“And you’re my older brother, Ry.” Thom put his arms around Ryan and hugged him. He was bigger than Ryan and his forearms were covered with tattoos.

Ryan caught my eye over Thom’s shoulder. His face turned quizzical. “I don’t understand,” Ryan said into Thom’s ear, “why all this is happening. I don’t understand why you let it ever get so far out of control.”

Thom buried his head in Ryan’s shoulder. He was crying. “I don’t know what’s happening. I can’t take it anymore. I want them all to leave. I want to leave myself. Just get in the car and drive off. I just want to be left alone.”

Ryan held his brother for a full two minutes. I could tell Ryan found the hug a strain. He was used to giving sexual hugs to men. He once told me that you could tell if a guy was homosexual or not by the way he hugged. When straight guys hug, they hug chests and shoulders and hold their hips carefully away from each other. When men, who prefer men, hug, it’s a whole body press. It had long been a running joke on Castro that guys had to be careful when they went home to visit their families, because they get so used to Frenching everyone they meet that it’s hard to remember not to put their tongues down their mothers’ throats. Funny, but by the end of the two-minute hug, Thom, not Ryan, had pushed his hips, not hard, but tentatively, into Ryan’s.

“I’m tense,” Thom whispered. “I’m so fucking tensed out. They’re all driving me crazy.”

Later that night, something happened. The triplets had settled down and Sandy had gone to bed after her long drive.

“If you want drugs,” she had said, not at all in apology, “you tell me a better place than a school playground.”

I had wanted, despite the storm and flooding, to head back to San Francisco. This family was better off without witnesses. Facing the raw elements seemed easier than facing our raw hosts. Ryan would not hear of it. “You must stay,” he said.

“Must?”

“I hid the car keys.” He handed me his first-edition hardback of Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* and set me down in what

they called the “Family Room” on the couch opposite the television. He handed me a bottle of Christian Brothers Brandy and a large snifter. “Read,” he said. “Stick around for the jokes.”

“Fuck you and the high horse you rode in on,” I said. I settled back, watching him, around the covers of Mailer’s epic, walk dead ahead in a straight sight line from me, through the small kitchen, into the living room to his brother.

The storm howled around the ranch house the way storms always show up as special effects in horror movies underscoring the dramatic human moments with nature’s chill. Slightly pissed at being held captive, I poured two fingers of Brandy, swirled the amber, took a warming sip, and, lowering the curved snifter to my eye, studied how the rich liquor toned the view through the glass distortions. I could spy into the living room most discreetly, a fact, not lost on me, that Ryan, ever the exhibitionist, had removed me from the orchestra to the balcony. He was shameless, setting me up, setting Thom up, but no more shameless than I who opened the shameless-macho Mailer somewhere in the middle, not for reading, but for shield, held at nose level, watching the two brothers flickering like an old-time movie in the firelight. Clever Ryan! He had situated me far enough away that Thom, in his sobbing jag, forgot about me who could see and hear everything. What a bastard!

“What’s the longest you’ve ever had sex?” Thom asked.

“What?”

“You heard me.” Thom actually laughed a small laugh.

“Sometimes Kick and I go eight or nine hours at a time.”

“On drugs?”

“Sex and drugs.”

“The longest sex I ever had,” Thom said, “was fifteen minutes with Sandy—until I went to Nam. In Saigon, once, I lasted for almost two hours with a Mama-San.”

Thom’s revealing intimacy hardly surprised Ryan. They, all of them, his whole family, he guessed, felt they could tell him anything. They could confess all their secrets and sins. In their minds he had come so close to being a priest that in their minds he had become one. The fact he had never married shored up that idea of priestly character. He had become the Father O’Hara they had

dreamed in their Catholic dreams. Deep down they all thought he was, living without wife and children, more priestly than queer.

Out of his blues, or maybe more out of the Rorer 714 Quaalude, Thom said, “You may be older than me, but my cock’s bigger.”

Ryan appeared unsure which challenging remark ticked him off more. “Older,” Ryan said. “But with less mileage.”

“Older and wiser, I meant,” Thom said.

“So wise up yourself,” Ryan said. “Stop competing.”

“Who’s competing?”

“You. About everything.”

“What *everything*?”

“All the *everything* you always reduce down to cock size. Like size means something. Stop deluding yourself.”

“About what? My cock?”

“About your cock. About *everything*. For godsake, who cares about cock? You’re a worse size-queen than any faggot I know. You just don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“Life. Living. Forget about our cocks. Jeez. Stop competing. That’s not what this is all about. It’s never been what it’s all about. Not when we slept in the same bed as kids. Not the hundred times you’ve gotten off with me.”

“What hundred times?”

“Stop being so literal. You’re so goddam John Wayne you can’t see the forest for the trees.”

“What’s...that...mean?” Thom’s belligerence was succumbing to the Quaalude.

“Must you think foreplay is always a fight? Is that what gets you up with Sandy? Is violence the secret of your sex life?”

“Leave Sandy out of this.”

“Gladly.”

“I like fighting. I’m a soldier.”

“Aren’t we all,” Ryan said.

“I want to shoot,” Thom said. He lay on the couch, facing away from Ryan, staring into the fire, seeing, God knows, some burning in-country Viet village.

Both brothers sat quiet.

The storm.

The firelight.

The hard day.

The late night.

Ryan lounged in the chair behind Thom's head, looking down the length of his brother's familiar, rugged body. Like a shrink with a patient on a couch. Both of them stayed put.

I dropped *The Naked* along with *The Dead* to the floor. I'd read it anyway. Mailer, never my favorite author, had, bowing to the censors of his time, written *Fug you* throughout his novel. He deserved what he got, when, at the height of his first celebrity, he was introduced at a cocktail party to Tallulah Bankhead who said to him, "Ah, yes! You're the young man who can't spell *fuck*." Whereupon Miss Bankhead turned her heels cold on Mr. Mailer.

The Brothers O'Hara remained in a horn-locked *de deux* without much *pas*.

Perhaps it was the unusual clap of thunder, perhaps it was some explosion Thom visualized in the popping fire, but the static tension between them broke. Thom unbuttoned his fatigues and yanked out a strictly government-issue, Army-circumcised, short arm. So it began. Ryan freed himself, and, more studied than a dinner-theater actor who has sung "Sunrise, Sunset" twenty thousand times, stroked his rising shaft. As he did with Kick, so Ryan did with Thom. He began a hypnotic ritual chant designed for each man's head. He started slowly, carefully, feeling his way through Thom's fantasies, talking of exotic women, and more exotic sex. He moved into straight sex slang, spieling a scenario of dominant women dropping their pussies on Thom's mouth. The more intense the scene became the more Thom's dick grew in the firelight.

Ryan was thrilled. Sex would alleviate Thom's violence the way Solly calmed down his bad boys. His own cock hardened. His brother had fallen to his verbal seduction. No matter they were not touching. No matter Thom could not see him the way he could watch Thom. What mattered was Thom's stroking his rod to the rhythms of his brother's voice. Ryan knew all the right words. He kept his place in the chair, and built the story to a pitch that caused Thom's hips to rise and his hand to pull wildly on his cock until, grinding his teeth, and moaning like a dying soldier, Thom's load

shot straight up into the air. At full tilt, Thom sported the usual six inches. Thom kept his hand on his dick and fell back into the space where a man is asleep but not asleep with his hand wrapped wet and sticky around his shrinking hard-on.

Ryan did not disturb him. He simply took three final, lackluster strokes, looking at his brother, then shot off into his own hand, sad he had not cum with Kick, but happy that he had, no matter how *pro forma* the mercy-fuck, calmed his brother down to a post-ejaculation doze. Talk about the naked and the dead! Ryan's only solace was that every time he got Thom off was one more reason Thom, unlike Abe, could never have any Attitude toward him about his homosexuality.

Their little scene, staged partly for me, dramatized, as Ryan intended—always pulling me in as reluctant witness to his confidences, a special hybrid of homomale sex: two brothers, one gay and one straight, jerking off together. Ryan could have won Thom's inchworm contest, but the gentleman in him allowed his brother his myopic fantasy. Ryan bit his lip and slapped the face of the sassy size-queen who lives inside every gay man. He sat in sticky silence, connecting disconsolate Energy over the miles with Kick, eschewing competition with Thom for Kick's ideal of communication. Ryan wanted no more than an exorcism, a sexual healing, a sensual crack in his brother's macho armor. I tipped off the brandy. The scene was not without success. Ryan had calmed Thom down to an earlier sleep than he had experienced since before the Tet Offensive or his marriage to Sandy—two not dissimilar traumatic events.

Kweenie with her own taste for sibling passion had a few choice words for Ryan. "You're a bastard," she said. "You do it with Thom but you don't do it with me. It's not incest that bothers you, is it? You'd have done it with me long ago if I had been your brother and not your sister. That's the bottom line, Ry. You've always wished I was your little brother and not your little sister. You reject me for something I can't help. What am I supposed to think about that, when I love you like I do?"

"Revenge," Ryan said.

6

One of Ryan's most poignant *Journal* entries was about Solly: Thanksgiving 1975.

Solly is good at adapting to any situation. His halfway house for ex-cons and hustlers is his professional practice. It's made him cynical, but not jaded. Jaded is when you do it but don't enjoy whatever it is. He is frank. You adapt or you get out. You adapt or you die. He adapts continually. He handles alternate realities well. All the time, I think.

Especially one night, late, a bit drunk and a lot ripped, he told me, confessed actually, embarrassed the way a woman is embarrassed after a rape. No fault of hers, nor in this case his, but the embarrassment acute all the same.

Solly at thirty-five for all his wanting to be a dirty old man, is boyishly attractive.

Some years before this drunken confessional, he was vacationing out of sheer perversity in Beirut, pushing the edge of danger that so thrilled him. The Hilton was under fire. The city was an armed camp of swarthy young soldiers. In two months, the American ambassador would be murdered. But this night, Solly was traveling through the Muslim section in the early evening to ball the son of a gold merchant. The winter before, in a Tenderloin bar, Solly had met the young foreign student who had come on to him as perfect Arabian trade.

"Then he became a terrorist in the sheets. These people are not of the twentieth century," Solly said. "We were very primitive together. Having never fucked above the lower classes in America, you can imagine my surprise afterwards. I found out he was a son of the wealthy bourgeoisie. He was every rugged eastern Mediterranean I had ever seen on CBS. From now on, you can call me the Ayatollah Bluestein."

In a way it was logical he should go to Beirut. Ten years before, he would have gone to Saigon.

“Terror,” he wrote in one of his Solid Blue Video brochures, “is my only hard-on.”

The Muslim section of Beirut was awash with people. Dark faces pressed against the glass windows of his slow-moving car. What he had been looking for seemed to be looking for him. The driver of his car cursed their luck as the car immediately ahead rear-ended the auto closest to the intersection. The trunk of the car in front of Solly popped open. “Omigod,” he said. Bulging from inside the sprung trunk of the small car was a fully clothed, bullet-riddled body. Within seconds a mob careened around all three cars. Veiled women ululated a high-pitched wail from windows above the street. The driver of the middle car was dragged into the street. Solly heard him shout: “It’s only the body of a Christian.”

Two dozen or more Muslim men inspected, milled about, pushed, conferred, peered into Solly’s car, turned away, talked, shouted, then completely surrounded his car stalled in the traffic in their section. What went wrong went wrong very quickly. They smashed the glass of the locked doors. His driver shouted, “American! American!” A gun butt to the mouth silenced him. He fell unconscious, bleeding across the steering wheel. The crowd had no patience with a foreigner who might be a Christian, or worse, a Jew. They punched at Solly without question. They lifted him bodily from the car and carried him into a small shop whose corrugated steel storefront a dark moustached man pulled down from its roll in the ceiling and locked to a ring in the floor.

In the semidarkness, Solly could see very little. Hands held him, pushed him, punched him. A thick-veined fist tore the sleeve off his jacket. A frenzy of ripping and shredding followed. Buttons popped as his shirt tore away. His zipper-fly split apart at the bottom as his slacks were dropped like shackles around his ankles. For a moment, the men held him, fair-skinned in the olive darkness, stripped to his white undershorts. No one moved. The silence was absolute. Then a short thick man punched him hard in the

stomach, and his shorts were ripped away. For two hours they beat him with their fists and, holding him firmly with many hands in the stifling room, took an electric prod to his eyelids, gums, penis, testicles, and anus.

It wasn't sex.

It was politics.

He expected to be raped. He was. He at first thought they wanted information. They didn't and besides he knew nothing. He thought at first there was some purpose to his torture, but his suffering had no meaning more than to vent some release for them through his pain. At last, allowed to fall to the floor, he lay flat on his back. He heard a rifle bolt click. He lay motionless. Three streams, he remembered, three streams, exactly three, of piss rained down from the darkness on his face and genitals.

Then they lifted him, pulled up his torn slacks, rolled up the corrugated steel door, and shoved him into the street alone. The door roared down closed behind him. He tried to pull what was left of his piss-soaked clothes together around him to avoid attention, to pretend nothing had happened so that no more would happen, but no one on the street seemed to notice.

In the distance, the shelling of the hotels continued. Gunfire crackled through the night. They had hurt him anonymously, for no reason, for nothing he had done. They had turned on him for some kicks and he felt angry and dirty enough to be sick in the street, next to the burnt-out body, dirty and sick and embarrassed enough to mention nothing to me of the incident until this one night of confidences. And even at that, he seemed to hold something back.

People who are tortured, no matter how or for whatever reason, seem always to gain a reserve, a mistrust, a modesty, born of an astonished, well-grounded fear of their own kind.

"It was a wonderful vacation," he said. He always made a joke of everything. "I love foreign travel."

7

Kick had become Ryan's father. He had replaced the father whom Ryan could forgive neither for dying so young nor living so long so tortured by illness. The exchange of one man for the other was a simple equation. The Long Good Friday, the 13th of April, 1979, Ryan had told Kick on top of the parking deck overlooking the corner of Market and Castro: "I love you more than anyone. More than my father. More than my mother. My brother. My sister. Anyone." He meant, "You are my father. You are my family."

He gave it all to Kick.

Ryan always knew that one thing could mean two things. Ryan had always loved wordplay. It was Charley-Pop's fault. Back in Ryan's Technicolor childhood, his rugged and dashing father had amused and amazed him. He taught him how a riddle means more than the guesser thinks. Leaving a restaurant, Charley-Pop had handed Ryan a book of matches from a fish bowl near the cash register. It read on the cover: "For our matchless friends." Ryan thought Charley-Pop a wonder as he explained the little joke. He saw suddenly the possibilities of the duplicity of words, and maybe the ambiguity of life itself when one thing between two people can mean two different things to them both, but he was too innocent then to let himself be frightened by the prospect.

He would not learn real fright until he was in his mid-thirties.

Late on a spring night, after watching Schwarzenegger as *Conan* nailed up naked to the Tree of Woe, Kick was inspired to play an exotic sex scene. At first they joked about it, but the joshing fell away and the night grew serious. It was typical of the way they had sex. Kick poured them each a hit of the ecstatic drug their dealer nicknamed *Kryptonite*.

"I only want half a hit," Ryan said.

"Name your poison," Kick said.

They toasted one another with the wine glasses. "To Arnold," Kick said. "And to us."

They had both liked the scene in which the muscle-warrior Conan, captured by the evil priest James Earl Jones, was crucified to the mammoth stump of a huge tree on a barren primeval plain.

Ryan grew excited as the image of Kick crucified grew between them. They began their preparations. Kick slowly stripped. Ryan anointed his body with olive oil to a high glaze.

In the basement room of the Victorian where they played before three full-length mirrors under the tracklight spots, huge horizontal beams crossed over the heavy upright wooden foundation posts. They stood, both naked, before the crossed beams in the center of the room. Ryan fashioned a small linen loin cloth that he wrapped around Kick's muscular waist, then dropped down to create a pouch for his dick and balls. He pulled the long, twisted length of linen up the crack of his ass and knotted the cloth to the waistband in the small of his back.

"I want to look stronger than Conan," Kick said. "I want us to get more intense than the movie. Let's see what a real musclebeast restrained by steel looks like."

Ryan cinched Kick's wrists into heavy leather cuffs. Ryan's dick grew hard at the prospect of a new worshipful view of the man who relied on him to create the most private of the fantasies he could not perform alone.

Kick smiled at him. "Now you know why I love you," he said. "Now you know when I heard about you and read your stories, I had to meet you."

Ryan, the acolyte, led Kick to the beams. He placed a short wooden barrel at the foot of the cross. He gave Kick a hit of popper.

"I love you," Kick said, "for this, and more than this." He looked deep into Ryan's eyes. "You know, don't you! You *know!* You understand the Gift. It's not always in a man's body the way it is in mine. But more than my body, it's in my head. You're one of the few men who know I have a head."

"I love you," Ryan said.

The Kryptonite ecstasy was coming on. Ryan raised Kick's huge arm and dug his tongue into the sweat steaming in his armpit. His mind swirled with images of ideal men, men without whom the world would be an intolerable place.

Kick mounted the barrel. His calves, sculpted to the perfection of inverted hearts, bulged as he rose up to position himself. He turned, as he always turned on the posing platform, arms held

loosely akimbo from his massive shoulders, his hands hanging down, thumbs in, eight inches out from his thighs, and looked down at Ryan. He flexed his pecs: the muscles striated and defined and rolled, up, then down his chest. His dick tented the soft linen loincloth. His smile at Ryan was triumphant. There was no shame in this crucifixion.

Ryan administered them both a hit of popper. Kick's face, in the low tracklight, began to morph into the face of the idealized young Christ, stripped and crucified, whom Ryan had worshiped since boyhood. He had been trained at Misericordia to be an *alter Christus*, another Christ, but he knew he'd never be another Christ.

He realized a special revelation.

It was not himself; it had never been himself; it was Kick who was the *alter Christus*.

"I'm stoned. I'm stoned. I'm stoned," Ryan repeated to himself. "This is so crazy...." But the vision would not vanish.

"Tight," Kick said. "Tie me tight. I want to feel this." He nodded toward the three body-length mirrors. "I want to see this. I want to show you a show I've never shown anyone before."

Ryan tied Kick's ankles together and then wrapped the rope around the rough-hewn post.

"I want to take it as long as I can," Kick said. "I want to feel the full glory of muscular restraint."

Ryan tied Kick's huge arms wide open on the cross. Kick raised his headland breathed. His chest expanded. Sweat rolled down his face and dripped on his pecs. His cock writhed in the small linen loincloth.

Ryan offered him, the way Christ on the cross had been offered vinegar mixed with opium on a sponge, a double hit of coke. Kick snorted, then relaxed. He twisted one hand to a more comfortable angle on the cross.

"I'm ready," Kick said. "I want you to see a musclebeast more glorious than you've ever imagined."

Ryan pulled the barrel out from under his lover's feet. Kick's muscles tensed. His whole body, hanging under the strain, and triggered by the rush of the coke, took on a pump and vascularity so supernal that Ryan fell to his knees at the foot of the cross. He

watched his lover strain and flex like a muscular Olympic gymnast performing the crucifix on the double rings. *I always thought*, Ryan's head swirled, *that it was to be me who was to be crucified.*

He serviced them both with popper.

Kick locked into a massive body flex. His loincloth, heavy with sweat, fell away under the strain of his muscle. His dirty-blond cock jutted straight forward over his massive thighs. He took a huge breath and let go. He hung, by his massive arms, crucified, head back and haloed by the shine of the tracklight. Ryan knelt before the sweating muscleman, cruciform above him. He took himself in his right hand and began to stroke his own hardening flesh. The moment grew mystical as Kick struggled, flexed, relaxed, flexed, and endured against the hard wooden cross.

It started as night games: heroic sculpture from drawings and movies. It became some ritual else. Their separate fantasies meshed in the flesh, then separated in their minds, coming back together, each traveling separately, traveling together, finding the Ecstasy, the Energy, the Entity, the boundaries, the limits. Kick was a body-builder, crucified, displayed in all his muscular glory, straining against the bondage, flying with the bondage. Ryan was his coach, his lover, his priest. He worshiped Kick's body from the foot of the cross. Coke sweat poured down Kick's naked flanks. The hard rod of his manhood arched over Ryan. The blond man glowed in the spotlight. He began to moan under the weight of his own big body. He saw his own face in the mirrors, handsome over his hanging muscle body. He moaned the moan Ryan always knew meant he was entering the Energy. Ryan followed with his own cock. He clamped the clips on his own tits. He hit them both with popper and tongued his way down Kick's body to his feet.

This was no Imitation of Christ.

This was real.

Kick was more than an *alter Christus*.

He was the incarnation of the real Christ Himself.

Ryan rose from his knees. He licked the sacred sweat from the blond fur of the thighs. He touched his Savior's massive meat. He massaged it, stroked it, while he stroked himself, until Kick's huge prick, throbbing with the tension of the muscle bondage, glistened. His whole body tightened down into a cruciform Most-Muscular

position. Ryan's greased hand stroked Kick up to the edge of cumming. Ryan readied himself, stroking faster, his face looking up lovingly at his crucified Savior. He could feel the power rising in the crucified's body. Then suddenly, the white clotted rain shot like saving grace from Kick's lordly rod. Ryan's mouth opened hungrily. In his own hand, his own flesh throbbed to a simultaneous climax.

"Oh, my God," he said. "Oh, my beautiful God."

8

"What you gay boys," Solly said on the phone, "won't do to have fun."

9

Ryan was spending the weekend after the Fourth of July in the country. Kick had flown back to Birmingham. His own father had suddenly died. Solly made a crack about gay boys and karma.

"What do you mean *gay boys*?" Ryan said. He had been dozing, passing in and out of consciousness, watching the veils of ocean fog pass across the moon. He had asked Kick, because Annie Laurie had once asked Charley-Pop the same thing, to look to the moon. "I'll look at the moon," he had said, "and I'll be seeing you."

"You can just listen." Solly's voice sounded soothing on the phone.

Ryan clicked on his recorder. "I'm too stoned to remember anything you say."

"I'm up here in this lovely penthouse apartment. The moon is beautiful over the whole City. There are two fires burning in the Mission. There's smoke and flames. This is the side of the City that burns. Tiger brought me two new Quaaludes. I took one an hour ago. It's quite wonderful. It's Lemmon. It's remarkable. I think, by the way, that I've decided to try heroin. You'll think bad of me for that. But life is what it is. I know that. Everything is what it is. If it kills me, then if that's all there is, I'll keep on dancing. Miss Peggy Lee is the only philosopher I know.

“Actually, the videotapes I’ve been shooting are better than ever. I always understate my ads for them in my brochures. I must read you a letter that came with my latest orders. ‘Your tapes are better than you describe them.’ Nobody does what I am doing. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I am an artist. Nobody’s touching this part of America. Can I take credit for discovering that straight street hustlers are exhibition artists? Opel and I and maybe just me.

“Six years in this risky business. Running it all on the up and up with the IRS. But consorting with murderers. Do you know how many murderers there are wandering loose in this country? Very few get caught. Fewer get convicted. Hardly anyone gets capital punishment. So at any given moment, all these murderers are wandering around the country as if nothing has happened. They killed once. They’ll do it again. They’re serial murderers. They kill one person after another. It’s like the song by the Police: ‘Murder by Numbers—one, two, three.’ They prey on women and homosexuals and kids. What it is, you know, is the danger. The thrill of danger. Most of the guys I hire for my videos are murderers, or could be murderers.

“I’ve noticed that petty criminals have lots of tattoos. Murderers have hardly any. Somehow, as much as I like men with tattoos on their arms, I keep remembering that murderers don’t have tattoos. There are thousands of murderers loose in this country now. I’ve been to bed with lots of them. The one who robbed me last year: the nineteen-year-old ex-con from San Quentin. Great thighs. Wonderful sex. Got up out of the bed and pulled out a twenty-two. Lobo came over the other night with a twenty-five. A twenty-two is much more deadly. A bigger gun spends its energy passing right through you. In one side and out the other. A twenty-two has enough force to enter your head and ricochet around making sushi out of your brain.

“Did I tell you I’m going to try heroin? I figure why not. I remember that book title, *It’s So Good, Don’t Try It Even Once*. I’ll wait till after my mother’s visit next week. I’ve booked her on every Gray Line charter tour there is. My mother thinks visiting me is me taking her down to Union Square and putting her on a bus with all the other senior tourists. These new Lemmon Quaaludes are wonderful. My television reception has never been better. I’ve

finally gotten to the point where I can enjoy at least the illusion of success. When my mother sees my apartment, she'll think I have it made. Of course, she's bringing my niece. Some brat I've never seen. The kid's been warned no doubt by my sister that her uncle is, well, odd, and to watch out.

"You know, there's a noose hanging down on a post on a roof way below my windows. This view is really interesting. I'm in a penthouse on the top of the Tenderloin. I feel almost biblical: like I could have been taken to the top of the mount and am being shown all the things that could be mine.

"And all I want, all I really get off on, is the danger from the young street trash I pay nightly. The other day one of them was strangling me just right and spitting in my face and telling me about all the guys he had killed. While I was cuming, I thought how close I was. How close we all are all the time, even if we don't go out and cruise it, recruit it, and pay for it, because what is, is. None of us, you're always saying, is going to get out of this alive. I think, too, our mothers are right. We shouldn't all be going home with strangers the way we do.

"I feel so wonderful. I really like living alone. But I miss Tiger living here. I liked educating him, giving him advice. He was learning. He calls me *Dear Old Dad*. They all call me *Dear Old Dad*. He turned nineteen last week. I really love him. But I really like being alone. My view. My TV. My Presto-log burning in the fireplace. I'm boring you, I know. But I guess I really do love you. I never said that before. And I will come up to Bar Nada to see what you've done. I am interested. I did tell you, didn't I, that I may take some heroin. I figure why not? I want to see the rancho. It all seems like a good idea. Sometimes everything seems like a good idea. Other times, nothing does. Just what is, is. Murderers.

"One of the several reasons I called you...Are you sitting down?... is Robert Opel is dead."

"What?" Ryan's voice rose loud and clear into the taping on the phone.

"I tried to tell you that murderers are all around us. Someone shot him in his gallery."

"When?"

“Last night, I think. Yeah. I have the article right here. Last night.”

“Read it to me.”

“I’m too stoned to read. I’m not too stoned to talk.”

“Then talk to me.”

“It’s like this reporter, Maitland Zane, writes. ‘July 9, 1979. THIEVES KILL GALLERY OWNER, GET \$5.’ What the hell kind of name is ‘Maitland Zane?’ It’s so gender-hidden San Francisco. Anyway, *Mr.*, *Miss*, or *Ms.* Zane, as the case may be, reminds us all that Robert streaked the 1974 Oscars and then got shot in his art gallery.”

“Robert would be happy.”

“Why?”

“The straight press finally called it art.”

“Anyway, these two white guys came in with a sawed-off shotgun and an automatic. I love murders. Don’t you love murders?”

“I’ll murder you if you don’t tell me exactly what happened.”

“Who knows? Whoever knows exactly what happens? Does Maitland Zane know? I mean, Maitland says Robert was thirty-nine. I thought he was younger. Even if he wasn’t younger, he should have been smarter like I’m smarter when it comes to guys like these who came into the gallery demanding money and drugs.”

“Was Robert alone?”

“No. Somebody named Anthony Rogers was there. And, I think, some other guy. So was Camille.”

“I interviewed her last week for an article. Robert played the clown all around us.”

“You forced me to listen to the tape, remember. You show me, write me, tell me every goddam thing.”

“You said you like that.”

“I lie a lot.”

“Fuck you. Is Camille okay?”

“Camille O’Grady was not killed, Ryan, if that’s what you mean. I never know if anybody’s okay.”

“Poor Camille.”

“Poor Robert. He argued with these guys. Maitland says Robert begged them to leave. I always beg them to stay. If we have sex,

they can have every cent I've got. I change them from robbers to whores."

"I'm glad I know all the identifying marks on your body."

"That's my revenge on you for making me read your *Journal* and watch your tapes: staring at my Mansonized corpse," Solly said.

"I promise to gasp and faint, just like in the movies."

"Stop! Don't talk to stoned people about Death."

"What is, is, whether you're stoned or not."

"I'll ignore that."

"Try to."

"Anyway, the guy with the shotgun pointed it at Camille's head and said, 'Give us the money or I'll kill her.'"

"Robert never had any money."

"Apparently he gave a fine farewell performance. He told the robbers to kill them all. Sort of like playing I-Double-Dare-You, don't you think?"

"Don't be cute."

"So the guy fired a shot into a painting and Opel yells, 'Get out of my space!' Which, of course, they didn't. They dragged Robert to his apartment behind the gallery. Camille and the other two witnesses heard shouting."

"Robert argued with them?"

"His first and last mistake. They said stuff like, 'We're gonna blow your head off,' and Robert says, 'You're gonna have to, because there's no money here.' Am I stoned, or was he stupid?"

"Maybe brave."

"Brave or stupid, he's dead. I'm stoned."

"They shot him?" Ryan asked.

"Maitland assures us that the witnesses heard, and I quote, 'the thump of Opel falling to the floor.' The *thump* of Opel? Bring me the head of Maitland Zane."

"You're really upsetting me."

"Think how upset Robert Opel was. He didn't die at the gallery. The robbery started about 9 p.m. and he was pronounced curtains at San Francisco General at 10:40."

"His final performance art."

“Sweet Maitland talks about that too. It says here that Robert pranced....”

“Robert never pranced.”

“Maitland thinks so. Stop interrupting me. Stoned people have a hard enough time remembering what they’re saying. It says here in print that Robert, five years ago, pranced across the 1974 Oscar stage as David Niven was introducing Liz Taylor.”

“That description, *prancing*, is fag-bashing rhetoric.”

“So write Maitland.”

“I might. Robert was a legend.”

“That’s all he is now.”

“Maitland gets very *National Enquirer*. Does your inquiring mind want to know?”

“What’s worse than to know he’s dead and fag-bashed?”

“Nothing, really. Just how Robert stripped in front of Police Chief Davis, that well-known fascist pig, at an El Lay City Council meeting to protest the banning of nudity at city beaches. He was acquitted of indecent exposure.”

“I know that.”

“But he was convicted of disrupting a public meeting.”

“Nothing like a naked cock to disrupt a meeting.”

“Remember that. It may come in handy,” Solly instructed.

“God! You’re bitchy when you’re stoned.”

“Getting stoned only makes anyone more of what they already are.”

“So how’s Camille?”

“I only know what Maitland knows.”

“Such as?”

“Survivors include Opel’s mother and a sister.”

“Poor Robert.”

“So...how’s that grab you? You try and tell me about good and evil, and I can’t hear you because what is shouts very loud.”

“You and your egocentric existentialism!”

“Stop bitching. And stop crying.”

“Why should I? Death hardly ever lets anyone say good-bye.”

“Stop blathering pseudo-country-western song titles, or I’m going to hang up.”

“Don’t hang up.”

“I wonder what they’ll write about me. I can see the headlines now. ‘PORNOGRAPHER FOUND POISONED, SHOT, STRANGLED, DROWNED, AND ELECTROCUTED IN TUB WITH MULTIPLE KNIFE WOUNDS by Maitland Zane.”

In his *Journal* entry for July 9, 1979, Ryan wrote:

At my Death, let gather bodybuilders. One by one in my life these muscular brother-men have placed their arms around me. Now, bonded, let them gather. In the perfect face and body and look of each is all the study of all the universe a man ever needs. I look at one face. I look at all the faces. I see finally the only face that counts. Death is a murderer. Oh, please, my Lord, let Death be not mean. Let Death look like these men. Let Death be a golden muscle angel. Oh, please, my God, when I come to you, let Death be as beautiful as a golden man-angel in flight, welcoming me with open arms. I could have died the morning after the night I first met Kick. Every minute I’ve lived since then has been an excess of luxury. Take me....But don’t take me now.

10

Ryan was as much photojournalist as writer. By the beginning of his third year with *Kick*, he had shot thousands of black-and-white stills and color transparencies and nearly fifty hours of videotape.

Kick was always *on*.

I remember one particularly poignant videotape: an intense, silent study of *Kick*’s face. “Video portraiture,” Ryan said, “captures the subject’s essence far better in its multiple frames than any single-frame still shot.”

When *Kick* flew back to Birmingham to visit his widowed mother, Ryan ran the tapes in slow motion and freeze-frame. He studied expressions and movements that in real time occur too fast for the eye to appreciate. He pored into *Kick*’s soul held captive

on his video. He masturbated. He remembered, then ignored, Monsignor Linotti's quaint rule of Catholic moral theology.

"During war, for instance," the good Monsignor had said, "when a man and wife are separated, neither spouse, during the separation, may stare at a photograph of the other and masturbate. No matter if they're thinking of their love far away. Masturbation, no matter the circumstances, is always a mortal sin. A man's seed must be deposited in the receptacle of the woman. Masturbation, without question, condemns the masturbator, male or female, to the eternal fires of hell."

Kick himself enjoyed the videos of his body and face. Often they viewed the tapes side by side in bed, stroking each other: buddies in-love with the ideal they watched moving on the bright screen.

"Kick," Ryan said, and I had no reason to doubt this, especially at the pure beginning of their affair, "has a wonderful ability to distance himself objectively from the image on the screen. He understands the concept of Emerson's world view of the *Me* and the *Not-Me*. He understands my position in this whole matter. It's like he becomes me and I become him and we both become the ideal on the screen. We transcend space and time and ego. We conjure together, and as sure as a child may be created between a man and a woman, an Energy is created between us."

Actually, Kick was very like a sculptor, who, after he sculpts, sits back and studies his own creation. In Ryan's bed he could lie back from the Energy he put into bodybuilding and enjoy the beauty of the art object he and Ryan had created in his flesh. "You and me, coach," he said. "We did it. You helped me do it. No one has ever treated me like you treat me."

Ryan knew in his heart it was true. He had never treated anyone the way he took care of Kick. He knew from the first instant he saw Kick what Kick needed and what he himself wanted.

It was the same thing.

"I always believed this was possible," Ryan said. "I just never thought it would happen."

There was that night, straight out of a romance magazine, that stuck in Ryan's head. He remembered it a thousand different ways. Heading for supper at Without Reservation, they had driven

the Corvette to Market and Castro and parked on the roof of the Fireman's Fund Building. Instead of turning off the engine, Kick touched the dashboard to push a cassette into the tape deck. "You ain't heard nothin' yet," he said. "Don't get out. Let's do a doobie." He fired up a joint. "Listen to this cut."

They sat knee to knee in the tiny cockpit of the car, laughing as the windows misted up inside and out. Their breath, their words, circled around their heads in a blue haze swirling around the music of a gentle *bossa nova*.

"Who's playing?" Ryan asked.

"This dude, this guy, this amazing guy I know from El Lay."

"Others come. Others go. Me to you, soul to soul."

"This guy is a bodybuilder." Kick held the joint to Ryan's lips. "He poses and sings in Vegas."

"The dream of me and you becomes the dream of us."

"Poses?" Ryan hit, and hit again. "And sings?"

Guitars lifted the man's gentle voice.

"When a man loves a man...he trades the world for what he trusts."

"Poses and sings in gay clubs in Vegas." Kick kissed Ryan's fingers. "He writes for Liberace."

"Now you're scaring me."

"Have another hit."

"...that you love me still the same."

"I should be," Ryan said, "singing this to you."

"Angel, breathing your breath I breathe. Oh, how lovely. In the arms of love..."

Ryan touched Kick's beautiful wrist.

"Never treat each other bad. I would give you all I had...for one more day with you."

He pulled Kick's forearm to his mouth and exhaled, licking his tongue across the blond hair.

"Soaring to the end of time. Get it right, no end this time."

Kick smiled.

"The magic of our love will win. I'll be guiding you."

Ryan's heart leapt up.

"Soul to soul, man to man. The power of love...that you love me still."

“I do love you still, now, and forever,” Kick said. Smoke wreathed his face. His thick blond moustache bloomed over his white teeth. “This shit is primo.”

“Thrilling till the end of time... We keep on keepin’ on.”

The lyrics sounded penned by Kick’s hand. He was so strong, so silent, so southern, maybe this was a surprise.

“You wrote this. You had him write this. You told him what to write.”

“No. No way. Other guys...other guys are like us.”

“No one’s like us.”

The song flowed into the chorus. “...*Soul to soul, man to man... that you love me still.*”

Ryan took one hit over the line: Sweet Jesus, he understands the Energy we conjure is magic.

“The dream becomes the dream of us.”

Kick’s hand in his proved the words meant more than the muscle contests.

“Keep on keepin’ on.”

He could have anything if only he remained true to Kick whose ideals altered his consciousness.

“I’ll lift you bright in dark of night.”

Ryan began to speak, but Kick put his finger to his lips.

“Others come. Others go. We are home free.”

The home team.

“Under stars in dark of night.”

Ryan-Orion.

“Ever will I be your guide.”

Ryan’s heart, ruptured by Charley-Pop’s death, was set to burst. Kick had found Ryan brokenhearted in a way Teddy could not fix. Kick could save him.

“Guiding you at your side.”

Ryan sensed Kick realized he, not Ryan, was the coach. With Charley-Pop dead, Ryan needed Kick to be in charge. For a while. With all his Command Presence. To be held in trust. Kick, leveling eye-to-eye with Ryan, let the lyric make his pledge.

“Breathing your breath, I breathe.”

Nights inhaling Kick’s breath; Kick inhaling him back; falling together, high, down into the bed.

“Please,” Ryan said, “if this should not be you, don’t ever tell me.”

“Believing in you, I believe in me.”

“I believe in you,” Kick said. “You must believe in me.”

Together forever.

“...When a man loves a man, soul to soul...”

My lover, my coach.

“I’ll wake all your dreams alive.”

Kick hit the joint deep, pulled Ryan’s face to his, and exhaled into his mouth. He pulled the palm of Ryan’s hand to the mound of his left pec, holding it over his beating heart.

“Ever will I be your guide.”

They sat stoned, savoring, enchanted with each other.

Finally, Ryan stumbled from the car, laughing, very loaded, exhaling the Technicolor Benday Dots of romance comic books. His hot breath in the cold night blew stoned circles around the million lights of Castro Street reflecting wet below. More Benday Dots bubbled up the pink-champagne neon outlining the tall marquee of the Castro Theatre. Roy Lichtenstein panels pop-pop-popped on the three huge billboards stilted high above the traffic on Market Street with cartoon balloons exclaiming: *What movie am I now? I’m every movie I’ve ever seen. When do we move to Vegas?*

Kick walked him closer to the railing of the rooftop parking lot. A light mist fell through the glow hovering over the intersection of Market and Castro. Below them, tires sang on the glistening blacktop. They huddled together. Ryan ached with his discipline of self-denial. He wanted to shout out the truth. He was in-love with Kick. What difference did it make anymore after all that had passed between them?

“I love you,” Kick said.

He put his arms around Ryan in the blowing mist. Ryan was crying. Ryan knew he could not say, was not allowed to say, because every fairy tale had one unbreakable caveat, “I’m in-love with you.” Instead, he said what he always said, “I love you.” And he meant this too, and meant it the more because of the hurt of holding his tongue in check, disciplined against what Kick cautioned might pass for cheap love on Castro. “I love you more than anyone I’ve ever loved.”

“I love you too,” Kick said.

They both laughed.

“This is the balcony scene,” Ryan said. “Admission twenty-five cents. We’re both nuts. *I love you* sounds like *please love me*, and *I love you too* sounds wrung out by torture.”

“But I do love you,” Kick said. “I do no kidding love you.”

“*Pretty Poison*,” Ryan said. “Tony Perkins said that to Tuesday Weld.”

Again they laughed.

“I really love you, Kick,” Ryan insisted. “You are the greatest love of my life.”

Tears and laughter made him, on this rooftop in this foggy night with this golden man, feel absolutely larger than life. His soul careened out-of-body up higher than the glow from the towering marquee of the Castro Theatre.

“Do you understand, Billy Ray Sorensen? It’s you I love. Not your face. Not your muscles. I love you the way maybe no one in this whole gay intersection loves anyone else. The way I know no one loves you. I love you in away that has nothing to do with sex. I love your soul. I would die for you.”

“I want you to live for me.”

“I do live for you. You have no idea how much I live for you.”

Kick pulled Ryan close to him. He kissed Ryan’s cheeks. He put his moustache against Ryan’s moustache. Their lips touched. Ryan held tight. He felt Kick’s baseball biceps knot around him and pull him into his massive chest. He knew this was the way it was supposed to be. His very breath was squeezed from him. Kick’s tongue darted through Ryan’s moustache, parted his lips, passed through his teeth, and slid down Ryan’s throat.

“Oh, God!” Ryan breathed.

This was no joke. Lichtenstein’s cartoon balloons, filled with Benday Dots, appeared above their heads.

“We’ll be together forever,” Kick said. “I promise. However life takes us, we’ll always be together.” He held Ryan’s jawline in both his iron-calloused hands. “I’ll never leave you but once,” he said. His blue eyes pierced Ryan’s soul. “And that will be when I die.”

“Oh, God! I love you!”

If ever Ryan were ordained a priest, his ordination was that night in the swirling mist, anointed not by some Roman cardinal, but by the southern bodybuilder who held his face in his hairy blond hands and breathed immortality into his soul.

“You are,” Kick said, “my lover forever.”

“And you are mine.”

That night on that rooftop something happened.

It was bonding.

It was marriage.

“It was just another cheap balcony scene,” Solly said.

I harbor a suspicion that the truth is cornier than we think until the moment when we find ourselves inside some truth that is stranger than fiction. Ryan was a child of the movies. He lived cinema. The way he described the rooftop scenario moved me profoundly.

Imagining that scene, I genuinely wanted to have been seated behind a Panaflex camera in a helicopter that would lift off from the two of them on that roof, holding on them in each other's arms in slow motion in the mist, while the camera rose and they grew smaller and smaller, shrinking against the night, as the rooftop took reference from the intersection and the intersection from the Castro and the Castro from the City and the bright City from the darkness of land and sea until the Earth itself stood majestic against the full moon.

11

January Guggenheim finished shooting her television special in a glorious late October, days before Halloween 1979. Her last three days of shooting featured Kick posing, pumped and oiled, on the rocky outcroppings of Corona Heights with the Castro spread out below his feet. She flew to El Lay to complete her editing.

“You must come down,” she said to Ryan over the phone. “I need a rewrite concerning the Opel matter. I mean Death can change things substantially. Of course, Kick can come. You can stay with me. Oh, yes, and, darling, if she's free, bring Kweenie. We'll have such fun.”

Late the following March, *The New Homosexuals* scored an okay 11 share of the viewing audience. That was more than enough to make January come off a difficult subject smelling like a rose.

The critics liked it.

The public liked it.

One too many viewers liked it.

In San Diego, lying on his couch, a tall, dark-haired bodybuilder, who by that time had run through all the cash-and-drug pals he ever had, sat bolt upright when January's camera first closed in for a two-shot of Ryan and Kick.

"I recognize you two," he said. "So that's what you're up to."

At Kick's first contest, Ryan had sat next to what looked to be three powerlifters.

The dark bodybuilder recognized Ryan on his TV screen. "Fuck! I thought the geek was lying when he said he knew Blondie."

Then he saw Kick take his arm from around Ryan's shoulder and glide into his posing routine.

All alone, the dark bodybuilder, hardening with the intensity of muscle lust, stared in wonder at the golden man of bodybuilding on his TV screen, and announced, "Whoa! I'm gonna get me some of you!"

As simple as that, the serpent once again entered Eden.

This time his name was Logan Doyle.