

FETISHES, FACES, AND FLOWERS OF EVIL

Robert Mapplethorpe
1946-1989

The pre-AIDS past of the 1970s has become a strange country. We lived life differently a dozen years ago. The High Time was in full swing. Liberation was in the air, and so were we, performing nightly our high-wire sex acts in a circus without nets. If we fell, we fell with splendor in the grass. That carnival, ended now, has no more memory than the remembrance we give it, and we give remembrance here.

In 1977, just before Halloween, Robert Mapplethorpe arrived unexpectedly at my job and in my life. In San Francisco, I was editor-in-chief of the international leather magazine *Drummer*. Robert was a photographer little known outside New York. *Drummer* wanted good photos. Robert was experimenting with portraits of leathermen and urban primitive scenes of leathersex. Always recruiting new models with kinky trips, he wanted access to the leather community who subscribed to *Drummer*. He arrived at my desk and zipped open his portfolio with photos perfectly suited to my goal to upgrade one of the first gay magazines founded after the Stonewall riot. He knew that one of the civilizing things *Drummer* did was teach gay men new ways to live. I accepted every black-and-white photo and hired him to shoot a color cover. Our mutual professional desires ignited almost instantly into mutual personal passion. In movie scripts, couples meet cute this way. Life imitates art. We became bicoastal

lovers for nearly three years when our erotic love became empathetic love. We knew what we were doing. We both liked ethical polyamory in our crowded love affairs. We weren't kids. He was thirty-one, and I was thirty-eight. He saved my life. I couldn't save his.

Robert was a serious artist, disciplined enough to play by night and work by day. His "take" (one of his favorite words) on life pleased me. He was a grownup gifted with the discipline that drives talent. That made him appealing. During the wild party of the 1970s, he was the opposite of artists who wanted to write but never wrote, who wanted to shoot photographs but spent their cash on cocaine. The sex and drugs that drained some fueled others.

Robert Mapplethorpe's bawdy life was the source of his art. "You live it up to write it down," he said. "I expose myself on film. We both have the Catholic need to confess." Letters and notes sealed our east-west romance. "Jack, if you're not free for dinner tomorrow night, I'm going to beat you up. Love, Robert" (July 26, 1979). To Robert, S&M did not mean sadism and masochism so much as sex and magic.

Robert by the late-1970s was becoming a reciprocal talent in the New York art scene. He shot Warhol. Warhol shot him. I introduced him to Tom of Finland. Robert shot Tom. Tom drew him. Whenever I pissed in Robert's 24 Bond Street loft, I stood facing him, hanging over the toilet, looking down, insouciant, from the framed portrait Scavullo had lensed of him. Francesco caught Robert, hands jammed into his leather jeans, Kool cigarette hanging from his mouth, torn T-shirt tight around his speed-lean torso, his road-warrior hair tousled satyr-like. He confessed in our correspondence that his main enjoyment in sex was uncovering the devil in his partner. Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, was avatar for Robert, the prince of darkrooms.

Robert, innocent as any victim, died of AIDS on March 9, 1989, at the pinnacle of his international photographic success. With his early S&M work published in *Drummer*, he was an archetype of the homosexual artist who struggles up from the gaystream of outsider art to mainstream acceptance in galleries and museums.

At age sixteen, he made his first trip to Manhattan from Floral Park, Long Island, across the border from Queens, where he was born November 4, 1946, and baptized. He attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, earning a bachelor of arts degree, sniffing around the edges of photography, crafting mixed-media collages from other people's photographs, until, in 1971, art historian John McKendry, curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, gave Robert his first Polaroid camera to take his own photographs. McKendry fancied Robert, as did his wife, Maxime de la Falaise, the British fashion model, *Vogue* columnist, and Warhol actress who navigated Robert's entrée into European and American high society.

Soon after, Robert was exhibiting at a small gallery in a group show when, he told me, his life abruptly changed the moment his first lover David Croland introduced him to a man admiring his photos. The man took Robert's hand and said, "I'm looking for someone to spoil."

"You've found him," Robert said.

The man was the charming, aristocratic millionaire Sam Wagstaff, the brother of Mrs. Thomas Jefferson IV, who in 1987 contested Sam's will whose beneficiary was the dying Robert. Sam was a patron of the arts, who in the 1970s, came from self-imposed monasticism, with Robert in tow, to create a new market and intellectual respect for fine-art photography—including photography whose esthetic of eros was endorsed by art experts, and acquitted by law, a dozen years later in the culture war when seven of Robert's pictures were put on trial for obscenity in Cincinnati in 1990. Robert became Sam's protégé, lover, and friend. They were born on the same day, twenty-five years apart.

One splendid sunny March afternoon in 1978, after Robert and I had flown from San Francisco to Manhattan, we taxied directly to the restaurant, One Fifth, at 1 Fifth Avenue, with its deluxe ocean-liner decor, where Robert walked us through the maze of tables into an upholstered green banquette. Several people nodded and waved. Robert's chiseled face, porcelain skin stretched tight over classic Irish bone structure, broke into his easy grin. "I'm not into celebrities," he once told a *New York Times* reporter.

Nevertheless, celebrities and socialite swans climbed the stairs to his fifth-floor Bond Street loft to sit in the south light of the front room with its silver umbrellas and exposed heating pipes like the radiator gripped by Patti crouching in his early pictures of her. Whether in studio or on location, everyone from Arnold Schwarzenegger in his Speedo to Princess Margaret in Mustique wanted to be photographed by the fashionable bad boy with the Hasselblad.

“Arnold was cute,” Robert said. “He sat with all his clothes on and we talked. He’s nice. He’s bright. He’s straight. The gay bodybuilders I’ve been with are so roided out they’re like fucks from outer space. I can’t relate to all that mass. It overshadows personality. Arnold’s soul is big enough to fill his added muscle.”

Robert’s relationship with bodybuilder Lisa Lyon was a seditious gender-spinning upgrade of the physique photography he found on 42nd Street in gay magazines like *Physique Pictorial*, *The Young Physique*, and *Tomorrow’s Man*. Lisa was the first of the new wave of female bodybuilders and Robert promoted her because she was, like him, changing stereotypes into archetypes on the androgynous cutting edge. Lisa at our supper on San Francisco’s Castro Street, at a clone café named Without Reservation, seemed yet one more psychic twin to Robert. She was a good-looking, poised, and charming collaborator with Robert. The culturally predictable pin-up pictures of her in *Playboy* gain frisson because Robert’s transgressive photos of her subvert the Playmate cliché.

I inhaled the atmosphere at the posh One Fifth. Robert lounged comfortably close, waiting for Sam. “Did you ever go to Max’s Kansas City?” Robert asked. “Did you ever *have* to go to Max’s Kansas City? I went to Max’s every night for a year. I had to. The people I needed to meet were there. I met them. They introduced me to their friends.”

Robert delighted in acting the cool edgy artist with clients, celebrities, and editors of magazines. *Vogue* rang us awake one morning. Was it Grace Mirabella, frequent publisher of Helmut Newton and Richard Avedon, begging Robert to shoot Faye or Fonda or Gere or Travolta or somebody hot they needed fast? I could hear only his side of the conversation, our bodies tucked

together, my front to his back, a fine fit, lying slugabed in his twisted sheets on his mattress on the floor.

“Ah, a *principessa!*” Robert said. *Vogue* wanted some princess, maybe some rising hot soon-to-be royal like Gloria von Thurn und Taxis headlined in the tabloids as “Princess TNT,” or anyone part of the stylish Eurotrash invading the New York club scene. Robert liked climbing climbers. He had a soft spot for princesses and a hard-on for nasty sex. Life with Robert was the Cabaret, oh, chum, of Dr. Caligari.

While waiting to meet Sam at One Fifth, I realized what confidence Robert had pushing the activism of his art past the prejudice against gay liberation, and into prominence by identifying himself as a society photographer while assaulting mainstream conventions with phallic nudes and hydraulic leathermen. Yesterday, the kidnaped torture victim John Paul Getty III. Today, the toughest S&M hustler I’d ever hired for the cover of *Drummer*. Tomorrow, Eva Amurri, the three-year-old daughter of Susan Sarandon. In a decade of fashion designers like Saint Laurent and Halston and Vivienne Westwood democratizing their brands by mixing in the DNA of young street-smart disco and punk styles, he sired the perfect frames of his layered and polite signature look on the streetwise DNA of leathermen, fetish clothing, and chain-link jewelry made popular by Kenneth Anger in *Scorpio Rising*, and de rigueur at bars, baths, and sex clubs like the Mineshaft. He cross-pollinated the flowering divine decadence of Manhattan society with the sticky gay seed of the leather-stud esthetic that captivated him in Times Square porn shops where he had his epiphany on the homomale sex photography of Bob Mizer of AMG Studio, Chuck Renslow of Kris Studio, Don Whitman of Western Photography Guild, and Bruce of Los Angeles. At sixteen, he was a junior midnight cowboy coming out into an art tutorial he could only get on the pop-culture strip of the gloriously depraved 42nd Street. He took up smoking. He hustled. Like Caravaggio, he turned a trick or two. Imagine the one and only original Mapplethorpe on sale for twenty bucks. He spent snowy afternoons and hot humid evenings searching dozens of dirty book stores and fingering his chewed nails through thousands of wooden filing bins of a million filthy photographs selling

for ten cents each. Nothing grabs a viewer like sex. Sex seduces. He wanted his elegant pictures to excite with the same interactive intensity of pornography that succeeds because its power causes irresistible brain and body responses.

Across the crowded room, Sam Wagstaff entered, making his modest way through tables of celebrities, blue-haired ladies, and out-of-towners. His handsome granite face was eager for Robert, who introduced us before they touched. They were too cool to more than air kiss. When Sam held out his hand, Robert pulled back in surprise at the diamond ring Sam slipped into his palm. "Welcome back," Sam said. Robert, swear to God, bit the diamond with his teeth. I nearly died. To Robert, who fancied himself an imp of the perverse, nothing was sacred. Sam laughed and whisked us up to his all-white penthouse atop One Fifth. His zillionaire digs were spartan, but what was there had all the comforts of old money, good taste, and safe home. Historical photographs of all kinds lay shuffled about like playing cards stacked in casual treasure piles on the white tile floor. Robert's interest in photography had kindled Sam's. Inspired by Alfred Stieglitz's push to include photography as a fine art, they had bought up the best of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photography, including male nudes and physique photography shot in the covert homoerotic style of the times.

The past in that present met the future. Sam and Robert built up a keen-eyed blue-chip collection of early photography that we three carefully handed back and forth, including sepia-toned photographs of Native Americans shot by Edward S. Curtis whose own millionaire patron was J. P. Morgan. Robert studied his way through thousands of photographs, exactly the way he had self-educated himself on 42nd Street. He absorbed the history of content, style, and ethnography and folded it into his images of race and gender and sadomasochism, several of which saw first publication in my 1978 *Drummer* feature article, "Mapplethorpe Censored," introducing to the national culture of leatherfolk his pictures of bondage; black rubber body suits; a nude male cutter with torso scarred by razor blades; a leather master with a leather slave in chains in a designer apartment (*Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*); men sucking piss-dripping jockstraps (*Jim and Tom*,

Sausalito, 1977); men with fists up their butts; and a celebrity leatherman, Nick Bienes, with a satanic tattoo on his forehead who, when I met him, lived in a tiny apartment decorated like a subway car with rubber mats on the floor, and several black-and-white video monitors inserted like small subway windows into the silver walls, and who, as “Judith Gould,” wrote a sensational best-seller that became the Joan Collins’ TV mini-series, *Sins*.

“You could do the same,” Robert counseled.

Robert was as well acquainted with the English and American smart set as he was with after-hours sex clubs like the Mineshaft where he was the official photographer, shooting pictures like his portrait of leatherman David O’Brien, *Mr. Mineshaft*. In 1970, he starred in Sandy Daley’s underground film, *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced*. He liked consensual, ritual, sexual action that philistines mistake as violence. He gloried in male flesh and courted statuesque bodybuilders who were artists sculpting themselves. His taste ran from leathermen to finger-licking “perverts” to majestic blacks. In the polyamory of 1980, wanting my San Francisco lover Jim Enger, a most handsome championship bodybuilder and one of the most sought-after men of the 1970s, to be preserved forever in all his transitory muscle glory by the permanence of my New York lover’s camera, I set up a shoot on March 25, in a Twin Peaks condo perched high above Castro Street, that we three ultimately found satisfying even after it was upended by Enger’s not-unreasonable refusal to sign a release without photo approval. So Robert cut off his head and turned his rear torso into a full-color greeting card sold in gift shops in Provincetown.

In early 1978, Robert copied me with fifty photographs of some of his most edgy work so I might write the introduction to our book, *Rimshots*, pairing his erotic pictures and my erotic writing. As happened at that time of competing representations by galleries, and of the censorship wars caused by Anita Bryant, our venture fell through, and some of those deep dark photos may yet see the light of day as have his once forbidden fisting photos. In 1983, Robert had curator Edward DeCelle hand-deliver a package whose personal value far exceeds offers asking about rumored private images Robert might have given me. Robert is

likely laughing at my sentiment; but some things, Roberto, have no price.

In 1986, just as his AIDS was diagnosed, eight of Robert's pictures managed to dominate and vivify Rimbaud's text of a luxe quarto version of *A Season in Hell*. He pictured himself on the cover as Pan, the horned devil. One of his most expressionistic role-playing frames is his contorted *Self Portrait with Whip* (1978). In this comic photograph, the trickster spins the pop-culture children's party game *Pin the Tail on the Donkey* into an alternative adult fetish game. His ass framed in leather chaps dramatizes S&M psychology and scatology with the bullwhip handle inserted petulantly up his skinny bum, its long tail evacuating out and down its full braided length, and trailing out the bottom of frame. This photo is remarkable because in it the artist who never wrote a monograph about his process reveals his agency in front of and behind the camera by showing the cable-release bulb in the fingers of his left hand.

"This is," I told him, "your first reincarnation in three thousand years."

"How so?"

"Intuition. I get re-incarnational readings off some people."

"I'm one?"

"The most intense."

The world and Robert Mapplethorpe were on no uncertain terms with each other. In this NYC incarnation, or in past goat-footed Dionysian lives, Robert demanded, managed, and delivered what he wanted from life. He lived on an ascending arc of creativity, ambition, and success. He died with seven books in print; a large bibliography of critics and social historians appraising him, not the least of whom was Susan Sontag who wrote the introduction to his portrait book, *Certain People*; a top-tier list of more than one hundred international gallery exhibitions, the triumphant epitome of which was the successful showing at the Whitney Museum of American Art from July 28 to October 23, 1988, which Robert gallantly attended in a wheelchair and an oxygen mask.

Like Jesus taken to the mountaintop by Lucifer who promised all the kingdoms of the world and their glories, the dying

Robert Mapplethorpe taken to the top of the Empire State Building could have ascended to heaven looking down on the city he conquered. He was a definitive New Yorker. He took from life all he wanted of its quality, if not of its longevity. He lived fast romancing the 1970s pop-culture paradigm of Byron, Shelley, and Keats who died young like James Dean, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison, whom he most resembled in look and style. Rimbaud died of cancer at thirty-seven. Robert died at forty-two, the same age as the androgynous Elvis who had also turned to black culture for inspiration.

Among all the apocalyptic photos giving absolutely necessary personal faces to the genocide of AIDS, one of the most appalling photographs is Jonathan Becker's photo of an emaciated Robert Mapplethorpe attending his Whitney opening. AIDS is a time-lapse speed trip of the aging process. Robert looks a million years old in the stark realism of Becker's informal picture illustrating Dominick Dunne's essay, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Proud Finale," in *Vanity Fair*, February 1989. The year before, Robert the formalist, assisted by his brother Edward, had shot the perfect moment of his mortality in his *Self-Portrait* wherein his ghostly head floats disembodied with face fading in soft focus in the upper right on a field of black while in the lower left his right hand in crisp focus holds a cane topped with a skull. The choice of the skull makes death his subject the way the choice of one of his lilies in his hand would have made resurrection his point. A year after this stark photo, Robert, who wore the Roman torture device of a cross on a chain, returned to Catholicism.

I wrote about Robert in my 1978 short story that was republished in a 1984 anthology, *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley*, that Robert forever reincarnating, "will, when his next death-passage is appropriate, take his life with the same hands with which he has created and crafted it. He will neatly, stylishly even, finish it." Dunne and Becker confirmed Robert's stylishness right down to that insouciant death's-head cane that was his final prop in his final self-portrait.

Robert's early work, sexually explicit leather images, many of them shot in his hidden life in San Francisco, shocked the New York art world in the 1970s. What succeeds better than calling

society's bluff? He double-dared squeamish clients: "If you don't like this photo, maybe you're not as avant garde as you think." His reputation spread beyond Manhattan chatter of a new talent in SoHo. The bad boy had tuxedo elegance and leather attitude. His ironic smile charmed the checks from the checkbooks of clients, patrons, and gallery mavens. At \$2,000 a shoot, the right people sat in Robert's studio. The right runs of platinum prints and lithographs, dispensed in wallet-whetting limited editions, found their way into the right galleries, the right magazines, the right addresses.

Robert was a shooting star, a lone rider, a nova-bright guy in the fast lane, careening with me, one April night, up the Avenue of the Americas, both of us happily stoned on pot, but less loaded than the wild taxi driver who driving quite recklessly scared us both so much we sat cuddled on the floor of the backseat. He sometimes acted out what he wanted me to see. He wanted intimate biography. Although he rarely read books, he admired the publishing of books. He liked that before 1972 this tenured university professor had written three books on subjects he could relate to: a doctoral dissertation on Tennessee Williams, a leather novel, and a university-press book on the occult featuring the celebrity High Priest founder of the Church of Satan Anton LaVey whom, like Tennessee Williams, he should have photographed. "You do write well," he wrote me on April 20, 1978, "I think we should go fast on the book [*Rimshots*]."

He confessed, late one night, walking elbow to elbow from our signature haunt, the Mineshaft, that, as a starving student at Pratt, he had depended on Patti Smith to survive. Patti became Robert's first patron the day she went to work to earn money to support him. She was a hyphenate poet-singer-artist who in tandem with Robert set out to score their fifteen minutes of fame. The photogenic waifs stylized their androgynous Jack and Jill look while each entertained other lovers. They conjured their new identities as artists in the flophouse drug den of the Chelsea Hotel. During the free-wheeling open-access of the swinging 1960s and 1970s, more than one handsome young man walked into gay venues like Warhol's Factory and was hired immediately on the cheap. Teenage juvenile delinquent Joe Dallesandro met Andy

in 1967 and became a Superstar. The teenage artist Jed Johnson, delivering a message in 1967, was hired as a janitor, and became Warhol's lover. Wherever doors were open, in walked Robert. By 1971, Robert was tête-à-tête with Bob Colacello, the platonic-ideal of an editor at Warhol's *Interview* magazine. By 1972, his first lover David Croland had introduced him to Sam Wagstaff; and Patti, initially funded by Wagstaff, was headed downtown to stardom as a singer-poet-punk linked to both Robert and married playwright Sam Shepard. After Hilly Kristal opened CBGB in 1973, she became one of the first female punk rockers in a CBGB roster that included singer-composer-poet Camille O'Grady and her band Leather Secrets. Patti's music and Robert's gender-bending simpatico cover portrait of her for the Patti Smith Group album *Horses* was a trophy to their bond.

"Patti," Robert said, "is a genius. She deserves to be a legend."

Robert was a legend in this own time. Mapplethorpe! His name acquired mystique. Under Sam's guidance and through the Robert Miller Gallery, limited prints of branded Mapplethorpe photographs zoomed up in price, a sure sign of success in America where money is the way of keeping score. Robert's opening at Robert Miller in 1978, in which his pictures hung alongside Patti's drawings, was marketed to capture a diverse demographic of suits, pearls, black leather, and New Wave punk. In 1981, a Mapplethorpe sold for \$2,000; in 1984, \$5,000; in 1987, \$15,000. In 1986, Sam, whom Robert truly loved, died of AIDS, leaving Robert \$5,000,000.

By 1988, Robert's name and face were so elegant a commodity he posed with fashion photographer Norman Parkinson in a campy full-page ad for Rose's lime juice shot by Annie Leibovitz whom he had lensed wearing a leather jacket in 1983. What a send-up for a man whose favorite cocktail was poppers and MDA. Beginning with *Drummer* in 1978, his photographs slowly began to grace the covers of other alternative magazines like *New York Rocker* and *East Village Eye*. By January 1988, at the height of the AIDS crisis, *American Photographer* featured a Mapplethorpe cover photo and lead story "Mapplethorpe: The Art of His Wicked, Wicked Ways." The June 1988 *Harper's* published some of his photos of blacks in Shelby Steele's lead essay, "I'm Black,

You're White, Who's Innocent: Race and Power in an Era of Shame." By 1989, he had worked, not clawed, his meritorious way up to the pop-culture pinnacle of the cover of *Time* magazine. It was not ambition that killed him. He was killed by a virus.

One afternoon, he sat me down in his Bond Street loft. The sun slanted through the four south-facing windows and hurt my eyes. We had kept each other going for days.

"You okay?" He unscrewed the legs of his tripod.

"Yeah." There was a fire escape outside the windows.

"Come on, Jack, you're lying."

"How embarrassed do you want me?" We were perversatile together, but while he set up his gear, I shied away.

"Why should you be embarrassed?"

"I don't know why."

But I knew why. Robert's eye was true. The third eye of his camera proved it. I understood why primitive cultures feared that the camera stole their souls, but maybe he was trying to save my soul, or at least examine it out of curiosity. We both played at being cynics abroad in the world. Maybe he wasn't playing. Even though I frequently traveled for extended cultural stays in New York beginning in 1957 when he was eleven, maybe I was only California attitude. Maybe he was existential reality. As a professor teaching popular culture, I loved New York in the 1960s when he was in school. While neither of us was present in Greenwich Village the night of the Stonewall riot in 1969, I did march in New York's first Gay Liberation parade in 1970 which I shot on Super-8 film. So, I sat, the visiting West Coast writer, submitting to the East Coast photographer's camera that made me anxious about appearance and reality. His sight and insight cut through bull. In conversations, we traded quips for fun, but now he was dead serious. He was a man at work, assessing me, his hands arranging me, re-arranging me, his green eyes darting between me and his viewfinder. I remembered the first night we ever made love, he licked his tongue across my eyeball. That was a probing first. No one had ever so directly fucked my vision. Sitting for him in his sunny studio, I feared his eye, *malocchio*, his evil eye, his wonderful eye that through the omniscient third eye of his

lens might burn through my appearance to my reality and tell me something I didn't know.

I had seen others whom he had photographed. Each face seemed different from the visage he captured in a single frame. I did not want to be victim of a single shot. Not JFK frozen in a Zapruder 8-mm frame. I wanted to be Mapplethorped, transformed, if not into an exotic persona, then at least into the guise he fancied for a gay writer. So my fear of his camera was primitive. He was a sorcerer. I surrendered to a magic process that X-rays a person in a single frame. I wanted to give the devil his due. I wanted him to have his way with my face. Appearing nightly in the performance art that was his bed was not enough. Pillow talk was not enough. We were both tactical. I wanted what he wanted: to experience him working so I could write what it felt like to be inside his process. Yet, for all my personal trust in him, I feared he might expose the private face I thought I hid from the world. Photographs say what is true despite the sitter's wishes.

In fact, he shot me effortlessly and quickly. He sealed the rolls of film and handed them to his assistant working in the darkroom in his loft. Years later, when he moved to a luxury apartment on West 23rd Street, he kept 24 Bond Street as his studio.

"The contact proofs will be ready tomorrow." He hugged me.

I made us instant coffee in the jumble of his tiny kitchen. Under his Warhol of Jackie Kennedy veiled in mourning, an ash-tray broke from smolder to blaze on the table littered with Con Edison electricity receipts and please-please-please letters from galleries. Robert brushed the small fire to the floor and stomped the flames with his black pointy-toed snakeskin cowboy boots. Minor disasters stalked us: that insane Saturday-night kamikaze ride in the taxi up the Avenue of the Americas; a car crashing into a restaurant; a run-in with organized Italian businessmen; a young gay man shot in the shin, before our eyes, by a mugger in the lobby of 2 Charlton Street; a naked man falling headfirst out of a piss-filled bathtub to the concrete floor of the Mineshaft.

Robert laughed. "You're paranoid," he said.

"Signs and omens are everywhere."

"Homosexuality can cause paranoia."

“Homosexuals have reason to be paranoid.” I thought of our friend and mutual model, Larry Hunt, whom I had photographed in bondage on a bike run in the mountains, and he had photographed sitting on a couch, feet and legs laced up tight to the knees in leather boots. When Larry disappeared from a Los Angeles leather bar, all that was found of him was his lower jaw and teeth in Griffith Park.

I remember Robert lowered his eyes. His mouth grew tighter. Robert resented resistance. Robert loved compliance. Shit happens, same as magic. Wordlessly.

We walked to Jack McNenny’s flower shop, Gifts of Nature, at Sixth and Houston. Robert was as famous for his flower photographs as he was for his phallic fetish pictures such as *Mr. 10½* and *Man in Polyester Suit* in which a thick uncut black penis droops succulently like a pollen-wet reproductive organ of a flower from the unzipped fly. The sweet Jack McNenny, the floral designer with the drop-dead breath of an outhouse, always saved Robert his filthiest jockstraps and his best blooms for Robert’s flowers of evil. The name of his shop was a scatological pun. For a moment, the altar boy in me recoiled.

Near Jack’s refrigerator of roses, Robert, standing among the white calla lilies, picked up on my vibe, suddenly, intuitively, knowing I did not want to go to bed with him. Not that night. Maybe not anymore. Definitely not just then. He wanted to know why. I didn’t know why. I think it was because the devil had captured my soul with his magic camera. Robert was miffed, but congenial, when I stepped back in that moment when the gay orgy of the 1970s was spiraling at its zenith. I wanted some neutral time together to sort things out. He wanted time to further his seduction. He suggested supper at Duff’s on Christopher Street. We lingered long. He plied beautifully subtle ways to untangle my mood. For some sexual-aesthetic reason, he wanted me, not in any way forever, just for that night of the afternoon he had shot me.

“There’s been a madness on us all for some time,” I said.

“You’re afraid to go as far into nasty sex as I want to take you.”

The hanging green glass lampshades in Duff’s lit pools of light over separate tables.

“You want to be dirty.” He spun his web.

“Let’s pay the check.”

At the door, the cold spring night chilled straight through our leather jackets. Robert headed out onto the crowded mid-night sidewalk. A hundred guys cruised up and down from Ty’s Bar to Boots-and-Saddle. Feeling our movie was headed toward disaster, I kept pace past the bagel shop we liked that had been the Stonewall Inn to Sheridan Square. The drama was coming right on cue. We stood a long time in absolute silence, stoned on grass, two still points in a rushing kaleidoscope of headlights and traffic streaming past us down 7th Avenue.

Finally, Robert said, “It’s stupid.”

“Everything is.”

“It’s stupid.” He wasn’t even holding one of his usual Kools to punctuate his gesture. “I’m not in love with you.”

“I never thought you were.”

“But when two intelligent people make love, if they don’t do it when they can, it’s stupid.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s that.”

This sexual short circuit was about the fuck of intellect?

He hailed a taxi. No hands on each other’s knees now. Where was that curious lesbian photographer, Nita? Earlier that day, she had shot us together when she discovered us sitting in Stompers Gallery and Boot Shop. She was doing a book on gay couples, and she liked the way our arms and legs twined so well around each other. We gave her the poses she wanted.

She was right. Our bodies were a perfect fit. Our heads were another matter.

I ordered the cab to go to the Mineshaft.

“You need fresh meat,” the devil said.

In the Meatpacking District, the cab pulled over at 835 Washington, and into a painting by William Hogarth. Leathermen in cowhide chaps and jackets stood in the shadows smoking outside the club’s metal door on the loading dock shared with hundreds of burly meat-packers in bloody white butcher aprons, yelling, unloading trucks, shouldering huge sides of raw beef striated with fat into the florescent abattoir, hanging long halves of cow bodies on overhead conveyor lines of meat hooks, ready for processing.

Just like the sex action next door. I pushed some bucks between Robert's clenched fist and his leather-chapped thigh. I turned full face to his, and the rhythm spilled out: "What you said you're not, I think I partly am." I meant "in love." I climbed out, closed the door, and walked off without looking back.

Two mornings later, on the Sunday after Easter, lying with Robert in his loft, I felt his arm wrap around my neck. We were both repentant.

"What I said the other night," he whispered, "I didn't mean."

I kissed his long artist's fingers. I said nothing. I didn't need to.

"I wanted to get really crazy. I want to go so far with you. Get so nasty."

"This is my farewell tour to New York. I'm joining a monastery. This is it for sex."

"Yeah. Sure." He pulled from his leather jeans pocket one of those little plastic MDA bags he was always dipping his finger into and shoving up my nose.

"No. I mean it, Robert. I'm tired of fistfuckers and dirty people. I'm tired of everybody always being sick with hepatitis and amebiasis and clap and crabs and you name it. You can glamorize sex all you want with your photographs. I can glamorize it with my writing. When did gay sex become a constant search for new ways to be disgusting?"

"You're dirty, Jack. You have a face that could have been drawn by Rex. You have dirty eyes."

"What I may want to do is not what I ought to do," I said. "What about my eyes?"

"You've got dark circles."

"I won't after two weeks of rest. I'm not kidding. I'm heading back to California. I'm doing my own 1978 version of being born again. I don't want my face to look like a collapsed cake."

"Dark circles are what I look for. Interesting people have dark circles."

"Robert Mapplethorpe's famous raccoon effect."

"Stay through tomorrow night. Andy's throwing an Oscar party at Studio Fifty-four." The Academy Awards that year were April 3. "I have to go."

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Mario Amaya will be there.”

I hesitated. I liked Mario. He was an art critic and a longtime friend. I had felt sorry for him when he had been shot, wounded, along with Warhol, when separatist feminist Valerie Solanas, the schizophrenic founder of SCUM (Society to Cut Up Men), had opened fire on Warhol for, she screamed, taking too much control of her life. Maybe Valerie, who died a year before Robert, felt about Andy the way I feared Robert’s pushing us beyond my common sense.

“Hard sex,” I said, “leads to hard times.” None of us knew then that gay liberation would end up in an intensive care unit.

That morning, I could have gone his way or mine. Had our night ships been in convoy for so long never to connect again? If so, then I knew that what-was must remain always so dear to my heart and my head. We rarely dared say “love.” We had no need. Life is a series of Gatsby’s beautiful gestures: a look, a lick across the eye, a touch, a word, sex verging on love—each and all again.

I fled New York, leaving on a jet. “I want, I need, I love, yes, love, with incredible respect, this man, Robert Mapplethorpe,” I wrote at twenty-five thousand feet in my journal, “even though we may never really be together again.”

When Robert sent me a package with a print of his photo of me, or perhaps not-me, or, more, what I was then, I hesitated. I wanted to see what this visionary photographer had found in me with his scrying camera. I had to see if I looked dirty, not from the inside out, but from the outside in. I had to know if I had a gay face: the haunted, hunted, distorted, stereotypical kind. I had to find out if my face had become like the Otto Dix faces in the opening scene of *Cabaret*, or like the *Fellini Satyricon* faces emerging in the bars and the baths: a dead giveaway of whatever *vampyr* night hunger it was that made us terminally different from other men. Had Robert exposed my soul to save it? With his photograph, had he saved my life? We often counseled and consoled each other. I thought of our late-night phone conversations and the letters he wrote when he was lonely.

His letters ached with the isolation of the gifted artist for whom life is never intense enough. In his left-handed slant, he

wrote on April 20, 1977: "I think you're right about me needing a psychiatrist. I'm a male nymphomaniac.... Just can't get sex out of my head. I'm never satisfied. It will drive me mad. But otherwise, life doesn't seem worth it. I'm probably going to have to find one person somehow that can keep me in. Otherwise my energy will just pick up and leave."

On May 21, 1978, he wrote: "It's midnight...I almost forgot to tell you. I let some creep stick his hand up my ass. I've been fisted—even came—but I think I prefer being the giver. I don't seem to have any great desire for it to happen again. In fact, I can't help but to give preferential treatment to the feeding process. I want to see the devil in us all. That's my real turn on. The MDA is coming on stronger. I have to take a dump, but I'll save it. I'm sure somebody out there is hungry. It's time to get myself together, pack my skin in leather. The package is always important. Good-night for now. I feel the pull to the West Side. The night is getting older. Love, Robert."

September 12, 1979: "The 'punk' leather boy from San Francisco is getting more and more on my nerves. I hate naïve people. He just left wearing his motorcycle jacket. I feel as though he shouldn't be allowed to wear it as he just doesn't have a sophisticated sense of sex. I hate happy, naïve people. I guess I believe in total dictatorship with someone who thinks exactly like I do in charge. How's that for ego? ...I took pictures of Nick [Bienes] in color last week for a second possible [*Drummer*] cover.... I met that publisher from *Drummer* a couple of times in the bar. Nothing much else to report. Blood is in the air. Love, Robert."

As he progressed into his *Mandingo* period of shooting black men, he confessed: "I'm still somewhat into Niggers. [*sic*] I even have a button that spells it out that I wear to the bars. It seems to attract the dirty jiggers. Sex Sex Sex Sex—that's all I think of. Let me out of this place. It's driving me crazy."

On April 10, 1978, on Hotel Boulderado letterhead, Robert, bored in Colorado, wrote: "Dear Jack—I just arrived here from New York. The London *Times* sent me to Boulder to take a picture of Allen Ginsberg. It sounds good, but I would prefer to be under the sheets in New York or even better in San Francisco. It makes me crazy when I travel, especially this sort of trip which is for

less than 24 hours.... Thanks to you and your friends I've been spoiled. I haven't really been satisfied since I left San Francisco. I miss you, Jack. I regret we never got into anything more while you were in New York...It's 10 P.M. I'm in bed already. I checked out the 3 bars near the hotel and nothing was happening on a Monday night in Boulder—at least I saw nothing. Besides, life has exhausted me.

“Ginsberg was a Jewish drag. He made me sit through his lecture on William Blake which was OK except that it reminded me of when I was in school as I had to make a great effort not to close my eyes and fall asleep. Then he complained about the *Times* spending the money to send a photographer out here as he's had so many pictures taken already.”

Ginsberg, whom I had filmed May 9, 1970, at the protest march on Washington after the shootings at Kent State, did not seem to catch on that this was not just another motor-driven camera hack; this was to be a portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe.

“Then he complained about having no time to make an effort. He finally decided to sit in the Lotus position barefoot. I quickly set up my lights which I had to drag out here and took 2 rolls (24) of film. I had wanted to do more than that as I came all the way and I do get nervous about the results. Somehow I brought up the subject of S&M and he did say (still in the Lotus position) that he was getting into it. No blood, however. Anyhow, by the time I was through, he was apologizing and invited me to meet him later at some Rock 'n' Roll club. I said I would, but I won't. His day is up. The time for chanting is over. As far as I'm concerned, it never existed.

“I'm going to turn out the lights and try to muster up enough energy to 'Jack' off. I'm going to think about having my fist up your clean asshole while you.... Love, Robert.”

Let the art critics recount the international art world's loss at the death of Robert Mapplethorpe. Let them explicate the wonders of his fourteen different printing processes, of his still-life studies of floral genitalia, of marble sculptures, of male and female nudes and fetishes and celebrity portraits, of all his shocking American gun photos, and of his cool sexualism. Let them reprise his distinctive aesthetic edge in sinister pictures of a watermelon stabbed

with a butcher knife. Let them wax jealous over his rich patron who knew art when he saw it and who saw the genius in Robert's art. Let Paloma Picasso and Willem de Kooning and Louise Nevelson and Philip Glass and the punk princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis be grateful Robert Mapplethorpe ever existed at all.

So many dead around us all. Let us sit on the ground and tell sad tales of the death of kings and queens. Let me say I distrust the portrait Robert shot of me. Let me distance myself from whatever truth he sucked from my face that is so different from the truth I think of my face. Perhaps he broke the mask I had polished for forty years. Perhaps Robert, the salvific artist, forced me to look into my soul and change my ways. I wonder, did Richard Gere and Grace Jones and Yoko Ono feel somehow changed? Robert's tongue never licked their eyeball. Robert's lean body never made love to them. But his camera did.

I confess now that in my May 10, 1978, letter I lied to him: "Caro Roberto, ...the portrait you took of me arrived. You're good.... I see the way you slanted me. I should be so kind to you in the slant of my written vision of you. Two pieces are completed in which you figure: the article, short, in *Drummer*, and another piece, barely fictionalized, in *Corporal in Charge*.... Take care, my good friend, I love you with all my head."

Let the critics assess the artist and his art. Leave the private man—what does not belong to other friends and lovers—to me. We were too hot not to cool down. As writer and photographer, as men, as fuckbuddies, something special passed between us. Revelation. Lust. Darkness and light. Good and evil. Understanding. Maybe even love.

We were what he said: intelligent people making excellent sex. That's the value of ships passing in the night: reassurance that in the dark sea-swells, with Robert gone, his art living on, other talented lights, rising and falling, will certainly loom closer out of the distance, learn from his brilliance, and, in their own brief passage, prove once again that none of us, as I learned from him, playing Nick Carraway to his Jay Gatsby, borne back against the current, is forever alone.

Centuries from now, people will look at Mapplethorpe's photographs, but what will they know of Robert, who has no more memory than the remembrance we give him?

Robert Mapplethorpe was a creature of the night. Take a walk down Greenwich after midnight. Peer in the windows of shops where we browsed for antiques. Robert was an offhand collector. He wrote impulsive, enormous checks for small bronze sculptures of the goat-footed devil. I think he will haunt those Village streets until his next incarnation. I think I am happy to be left with the memory of him and with the evil-smirking cover of *Drummer, Biker for Hire*, which is perhaps the most authentic color portrait work he ever shot.

Robert came, saw, conquered. He became one of the premier photographers of the twentieth century. He got what he wanted, leaving all of us with sweet memories of a private man who was a public artist. He dared lay bare how vulnerable and strong we homosexuals can be as seers and sayers explaining truths of the human condition to a blind and deaf society. Is this the reminiscence you wanted from me, Roberto? *Caro* Roberto!

