

## Reel Six

### Good-Bye, Dear, and A-Men!

#### 1

Kick flew a direct flight from Alabama back to the tangle of San Francisco sexuality and California self-deception. Two weeks in Birmingham had changed him. He glowed with southern heat. He was more muscular. Two weeks shooting Decadurobolin caused more change than two months of hard training on a natural metabolism.

His Look had hardened.

Ryan was almost afraid of him.

His mosey had turned to the exaggerated swagger of professional bodybuilders. His lats rose from his hipless hips up the back of his V-shaped torso spreading like bat wings behind his thick chest. His pecs were massive. His neck thicker. From his broad shoulders, widened with new muscle, his huge arms hung out from his body as if he carried twin basketballs between each inner elbow and his tight waist.

The steroids had made him thicker. Thicker than ideal. He turned more heads than ever in the airport terminal; but this time, Ryan felt the stares more quickly averted—not like before when men with normal bodies had looked pleasantly at him, identifying with his athletic Look, desiring to be like him. Identification seemed to have vanished.

His Universal Appeal was disappearing.

He was beefcake on the cusp of appealing only to hard-core muscle-freaks.

He was meat.

Ryan was embarrassed. His lover looked like a man whose dedication had pushed him over the fanatic edge. The tan was too tan. The blond hair too hard. The blue eyes too brilliant. The muscles from outer space. What had looked dramatic in the hot overhead spot of the posing platform, in the cold fluorescence of the airport terminal was beyond the pale. Ryan suddenly realized why most women don't care for bodybuilders. Something brutal had happened. Something esthetic had died. Kick was no longer a physique artist. Something innocent was gone. That innocence had been his virtue. The well-muscled athlete, turned out like he might

have strayed off some college playing field, had disappeared. In his place was a hard-core El Lay bodybuilder. A professional. A mercenary.

“So what do you think?” Kick smiled, anticipating the enthusiasm he expected from Ryan.

“You’re too much,” Ryan said ambiguously. He had been changing too. He could make one thing mean two things purposely, easily. He dropped back from truth. “You’re terrific.” He rallied his determination. “You...are...beyond our wildest dreams.”

“I promised you we’d take muscle as far as it could go.” Kick worked his seductive grin. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

Passengers deplaning from holiday trips streamed around them. Ryan wanted to embrace Kick, hold him, shake him; but he could not. Their feelings were at the public mercy. The straight couples hugging each other, in away forbidden to them, suddenly made him feel very gay.

“Fuck it,” Ryan said. He threw his arms around Kick and hugged him close. “I love you.”

Kick hugged him back. “I knew you’d go for it. I did it for us. I’m going to take the Mr. California, the Mr. America, the Mr. Universe.” He held Ryan out at arms’ length. “I’m taking you along. I’ll take the titles and you’ll do our book. We’re going and we’re going together. How’s that for a New Year’s resolution! You and me!”

*You and me.* Ryan hated himself. His real face hid behind the face he showed Kick. *You and me.* Reciprocal terms. *You and me.* One can’t be understood without the other. Like *father* and *child*, *love* and *hate*, *life* and *death*, *anima* and *animus*. *Yin* and *yang*. *Difference* and *deference*. Saying *yes* and saying *no*.

“You and me,” Ryan said. “It’s reciprocal.”

“Me, jock. You, coach! Let’s hit it!”

*Reciprocity.* Ryan had been thinking reciprocity all day. The *Chronicle* that morning had featured a lead story about the isolation of the AIDS virus, a virus turned reverse, a retrovirus that replicated genetic material backward.

Mirrorfucks and real love.

They were all falling through the looking glass.

Kick had changed over the holidays, but not so much that Ryan didn’t love him. Kick’s bravado was the bravado of steroids. Ryan felt immobilized. He knew what he must do, but he did not know if he could follow his plan. He knew the odds of convincing someone on drugs of anything at all. He would say nothing the first night. He would wait till the next night. In case everything went haywire, he wanted to have at least one last

fuck, one last time together. What was it Peggy Ann Garner had said in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*? “The last time of anything has the poignancy of Death itself.”

In the airport parking deck, Kick was surprised. “Where’s the Corvette?”

“I felt like driving my own car,” Ryan said. It was an independent act he was already regretting in the face of Kick’s disappointment.

“Your car’s fine,” Kick said.

“A Rabbit hardly compares to a Corvette.” Ryan stepped on the rebellion surging in his heart.

“I don’t care what we drive as long as it gets us back fast to your bed. I haven’t had sex with anybody but myself for two weeks. My balls ache.”

“I thought you might be too tired.”

“Me tired? I may have a little jet lag tomorrow, but I’m Mr. San Francisco tonight.” He waved a small snifter of coke. They blew a couple of lines.

Ryan had readied the bedroom. He had washed the mirrors, turned back the bed, and set the track lights on low. Everything looked as it had always looked.

Kick was pleased. “I love you, madman,” he said. “Come sit over here by me.” Kick rose and slowly began stripping himself naked under the track light, checking himself out in the mirrors. “How do you like our new Look?”

“I love it.” Ryan hated himself. “It’s a wonderful Look. How can I help...but love you more than ever.”

Kick raised his arms in a double-biceps shot. “Come on over,” he said. “I want you to feel these arms.” He dropped one arm and pulled Ryan’s head into his rampant armpit. Ryan breathed the sweat like a man drowning. They moved through familiar paces. Double-bicep pose. Front-lat spread. Heavy-duty Most Muscular. Out of the cold airport fluorescence, under the hot bedroom track light, Ryan felt better about Kick’s added size if not about its cause. Maybe the muscle was worth the gamble. *Maybe I’m a schmuck*. They shared a hit of popper. His tongue ran across the thick hair of Kick’s pecs. Ryan’s tits stood at hard attention under Kick’s fingertips. Everything was right. Ryan was determined. If this was possibly their last fuck, it was going to be a fuck to remember. He took his own hard-on in one hand and gently pushed it between Kick’s thighs.

“Break, break,” Kick said. “Let’s take a break.” Sweat poured from his face. His dirty-blond hair was streaked with sweat. “Whoa!” Kick said. “I forgot what a workout this can be.” He ran his hand down the rippled

slab of his belly, palming the sweat toward his hard cock.

Ryan took Kick's sweaty hand and licked it dry. The sweet, sweaty taste he remembered had an almost acrid chemical after-burn.

"Let's lie back for a minute," Kick said. He took Ryan's hand and led him to the bed. "Come here," he said. He lay on his back, both arms pillowed behind his head. His big blond dick flopped hard and wet on his golden thigh.

Ryan knelt up in bed with his knees against Kick's side. "You okay?" Ryan asked.

"Too much popper," he said. "Maybe I have jet lag. The whole trip took a lot out of me."

Ryan smiled at him and shifted gears from heat to affection. He lay down next to Kick. He breathed the beach-fresh smell of Kick's Copper-tone. He snuggled in close. The coke rush had been slight. He was content to sleep. Sleep would delay the showdown. Sleep meant one more night together before he sat Kick down to talk. He was happy Kick was home. He laid the flat of his hand on Kick's warm belly and stroked up to the pecs he adored. They were two hard velvet handfuls.

*Maybe steroids aren't so bad after all.*

Ryan turned chicken. "We can do this tomorrow night," he said. "Maybe we should get some sleep."

"Maybe I should sleep," Kick said. He winked. "You're not tired. Why don't I just lie back and you can carry on."

"I can't do that," Ryan said. More than once, after a scene, Ryan, wanting more, had masturbated on Kick's sleeping body.

"You know how to take care of yourself," Kick said. "Take care of yourself now."

"I can't get enough of you," Ryan said. He was mildly embarrassed. "You weren't always asleep?" he said. "You've known all along?"

"I know everything about you, Ry." Kick paused like a man handing out a belated Christmas gift. "You're my one true love."

Ryan's heart leapt to his throat. Kick had said the words he said so rarely anymore.

*Why now? Why after so long? After Logan. After steroids. Why say you love me now? When I'm about to betray you.*

Kick took Ryan's dick into his hand. "I want you to feel free to do what you want."

Ryan raised up on his elbow. Astonished.

"I want you to have a wild and wonderful and crazy time." Kick said it like an offhand order. Kick was directing the scene: he wanted to lie back

and have his new muscle admired, loved, worshiped.

With ineffable sadness Ryan realized his true place in Kick's world. "I'd like that." It was a lie and not a lie. He pulled himself free from the curve of Kick's rib, feeling not a little bit like Eve pulling up off Adam.

Kick lay still, offering himself as a passive object of love. He was offering Ryan the scene a thousand men lusted for. To Ryan, sex was a sacrament, a Holy Mass, and Kick was sacred. He knelt like a solitary priest before the altar of his God. This was what was. His relationship to Kick had always been a mystery play. Bewildered in the fusion of the sacred and the sensual, he studied in the flesh the Kick he had studied so long on videotape. Kick's flesh looked perfect, but Kick was illusion. He was *maya*. He was appearance not reality. His life was his posing routine.

Ryan could not fault him for it. No one was perfect in an imperfect world. Nothing was what it seemed. That, at least, gave Ryan courage, because nothing, he reasoned, was exactly what you feared it to be. Yet he could not will Kick to change any more than he could change himself. Destiny was a tyrant. They both would be forever the boys they had always been. The way of the past was the way it was and the way it would be ever after.

Ryan was never meant to be one of the boys.

He sat back on his haunches, his knees against Kick's sculpted torso, looking down over the naked length of Kick's glorious body, remembering how he had been, seeing how he was, knowing what he would become.

Kick, his blond head again cradled in the palms of his own hands, closed his eyes. He lay like a beautiful, fallen warrior. He was the lazing soldier-comrade Whitman loved. He was the man Ryan adored.

Ryan touched himself, obediently, ritually, with his hand slick with Kick's sweat, studying for the last time, he knew, Kick incarnate.

This was the last intimacy.

This was the last time of physical company with this man he loved more than life itself.

This was what was. Not because tomorrow Kick might flee from Ryan's announcement; but because in the heart of darkness of this night, this moment, this hard point in a harder time, Ryan himself finally decided, because of the way they were, that, barring Kick's acceptance of the truth, barring his kicking of the drugs, this was the last time he could give more than he received. He had to know if he really could have anything he wanted from Kick. He had to know if he really was the coach.

He hated the peevish righteousness that rose in him like a power play. He didn't want to be right. He didn't want control. He wanted to have

Kick. He wanted him alive, balanced, in their high-flying mutual act of love on the high wire, not haywire, not prematurely dead like both their fathers. Kick was the only man since Charley-Pop died who stood between Ryan and Death. He cleansed his heart. He stroked up the Energy, more loving than sexual, in himself. Kick's eyes remained closed; his breathing deepened. Ryan studied his face for a trace of his once soft smile. Ryan was the high priest of the temple of this body. He savored the years of intimacy. He felt the Energy of it all building in himself. Plato had said the soul rides the body the way a man rides a horse. Even if the soul inhabiting this body had faltered, Ryan knew he'd love forever the rider who had fallen so far. No matter the storm. No matter the risk of misunderstood communication.

He stroked himself to still, sad music. Was this always how Famous Couples crashed, burned, and exploded? He was Dido mourning Aeneas. He was Romeo, void, bereft over the unrousible Juliet. They were Dae-dalus and Icarus cruising too close to the sun. They had come so close to touching something eternal. They had pushed back the barriers of the finite. They had soared and cruised too close to infinity. Perhaps what gods there were had grown jealous or fearful and knocked them both from their high horse.

In his heart, Ryan said, *I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. For what I must do, Oh, my God, I'm so heartily sorry.* Ryan, rising up into full passion on his knees, ejaculated the hope and sorrow of his seed across Kick's splendid body. He saluted all they had been and all they had tried to invent in a world with no models. He came, not to pleasure, but to sadness for all the joy they'd never know together again.

Kick's face remained expressionless. But he was not asleep. He was more brutally handsome than ever. *Handsome.* Ryan rolled the word like a hard gem in his mouth. *Handsome is as handsome does.* What would Kick do when Ryan asked him to clean up his act?

The thought was blasphemy. *Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having to offend thee.* Ryan lay back beside the man who called him *lover*, watching him, until, in the dim, gold light from the spot over the bed, they drifted in each other's arms to sleep together, the way they had the night of their first meeting.

In the morning, in the shower, Ryan washed Kick's body. For the first time, he saw on Kick's back, unmarred by adolescent acne, traces of something more than acne and less than boils. Three small eruptions. One on his shoulder and two in the small of his back. Exactly the blemishes Kick had long ago faulted as signs of heavy steroid use in professional

bodybuilders. The angry red bumps signaled a boiling metabolism trying to detoxify poisonous injections. Mortality. Death.

Ryan was more resolved than ever.

Even if no one else spoke straight to Kick, he would; for the first time, he would.

Because he loved him.

All day he tried to find an opening. Some way to broach the subject, but Kick was full of chat about his Birmingham trip, about the Mr. California, about getting back to the gym.

## 2

That evening, they drove the Corvette to supper at Without Reservation on Castro. They sat at their usual table in the front window. Kick was excited by his return to the crowded street.

“God! Castro gives me face!” He pointed to his grin.

Usually Kick’s perpetual optimism made him glow like the blond movie hero who can see the way out for everyone. Not this time. The steroidal changes in his face shook Ryan. He was in a way more handsome than ever, but he looked different from that first night three years before in El Lay. He was changed and he wasn’t seeing straight.

He refused to acknowledge AIDS.

He could not see that Castro Street had become the River Styx. The gay parade had slowed to a funeral march. Ryan excused himself and walked a path through the close tables back to the rest room. Maybe he was the one not seeing straight. It was he, not Kick who had made himself the outsider on Castro. He needed a moment alone to catch his breath.

The toilet walls were covered with graffiti. He hated the curse of literacy. Once you can read, you can avoid none of the writing on any wall: “You told your parents you were gay. All they could do was hang their heads in shame. So God in Her infinite understanding sent you AIDS.”

Ryan moaned. “Just what I need. Signs and omens are everywhere.” He ran from the toilet back to the table. The graffiti resolved his imperative of health. He could not eat the food on his plate. Gay waiters seemed dangerous.

“Let’s mosey around before we go back home,” Kick said.

“I’d rather go home right now,” Ryan said. “I have to talk to you about something.”

Kick looked surprised. “You’re the coach.”

The ride home was strangely silent. Kick sensed something serious

was up. He figured he knew what it was. Neither of them had mentioned Logan all day.

Inside the door of the Victorian, Ryan stood square in front of Kick. “Tell me again what you told me last night,” he said. “Tell me we’re lovers. Tell me I’m your lover. Tell me you’re my lover.”

Kick looked relieved. All Ryan wanted was stroking.

“Of course we’re lovers,” he said.

In his own qualified southern way, he meant it.

“I want you to say it. I want to hear you say it. I want you to say, ‘Ryan Steven O’Hara, you are my lover.’”

Kick looked him straight in the eye. “Ryan...Steven...O’Hara.” His slight drawl was almost ceremonial. “You are my lover. I am your lover.”

Ryan embraced Kick for dear life. “I love you more than you’ll ever know,” Ryan said. “Don’t ever hate me.”

“How could I hate you? No one’s ever treated me better.”

Ryan led him into the living room. “I need to talk to you,” he said.

“Okay, Ry. Lighten up. Don’t make it sound so serious. You’ve always talked to me.”

“This time I want us to really talk.”

“Is this a test?” Kick asked. He sat down on the couch, prepared to right Ryan’s delicate balance, even if it meant explaining Logan one more time.

Ryan took the chair opposite him. “Remember the day of the Castro Street Fair when you said you couldn’t always be the bodybuilder? And I said you didn’t have to be anything but yourself with me? Did you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Everybody knows how beautiful you look. I know how beautiful you are.”

Ryan was afraid Kick might speak. He raised the palm of his hand flat against Kick, almost supremely, to stop in the name of love. If Ryan were interrupted, he might never speak his piece.

“You coached me out of my great depression. You aired my blues. You made me happy. You said you weren’t responsible for anybody’s happiness but your own. You said all of us are responsible for our own happiness. And you’re right. But we’re also responsible for not making anyone unhappy either.”

“I know these past few months with Logan I’ve...”

“Please,” Ryan said. “It’s not Logan. It’s something else. If you stop me, I’ll never finish. Once we promised to take muscle as far as it would

go. You've done that. Now we have to take our relationship as far as it will go. I'm scared. I admit it. There's a plague in the streets and I don't want either of us to die."

He saw Kick in a worst-case future, bloated with water retention, pock-marked with steroids, stressed out, his liver turning to pudding, his bone marrow rotten with cancer, his immune system depressed by the 'roids.

"Come on, Ry. We're both the picture of health."

"I'm not talking the fantasy of pumping iron. I'm talking bodybuilding as an innocent sport. I'm talking the reality of the muscle business. Not sport. Business. I'm talking steroids, Kick. I'm talking injectable shit. I found the syringes in the refrigerator. I saw the pimples on your back in the shower this morning. You've always told me everything, but you didn't tell me you were a shooter. I love your surprises, but this one scares me. Needles! My God. Intravenous drug users get AIDS. You can't add that risk to the risk of being gay."

Kick raised his arms in his famous double-biceps pose to charm Ryan to quiet. "Does this body look down-home healthy, or whu-u-a-t?" he drawled.

"I don't know anymore whether you're shooting steroids because you want to, or because you think I want you to."

Ryan said the one thing, but he thought something else. *I don't know anymore whether you're putting out to me because you want to, or because you think I want you to.*

"Don't answer that, please. Because if you're shooting up more for me than you, then I can't help but love you more. I like the bodybuilder trip, but I love you. You've got to stop. Think of the side effects. I don't want you to die. I don't want me to die."

"Ry, Ry, Ry," Kick said. "You're not going to die. You shouldn't read so much. You take this AIDS thing too seriously. This is America. Next month there'll be a cure."

"Too seriously? I'm not talking AIDS. I'm talking steroids. I'm talking poppers, coke, Kryptonite, MDA."

Ryan saw Kick did not like the conversation.

"You're talking Logan," he said.

"I'm not."

"You always say one thing and mean another."

"There's no way this can be forced into a triangle. I handled all that from the first. This is between you and me." Ryan looked hard at Kick. "I can't keep up with you. I'll die."

“Don’t threaten me with your Death,” Kick said. He folded his big arms like a stern father across his chest.

“I’m not talking about our Deaths. I’m talking about our lives. I want you to stay alive for very personal reasons.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Kick said. “I’ve always known what we’re both doing. In the long and short run.”

“We’ve become, my love, and don’t think less of me for saying it, fashionably dysfunctional. Sex, street life, drugs, denial. Our dedication to each other has twisted into addiction.”

Kick, engaging his arsenal of southern charm, tried a seductive southern smile. The redneck in him couldn’t quite manage the pose. His face locked into a Look of hard, steroid-stubborn grin. He was surprised, the way the exceptionally beautiful, who always get what they want, are surprised when someone finally dares call their game up short.

Ryan was crossing the Mason-Dixon line where Northern values collide with Southern.

Kick, figuring to push Ryan’s rebellion back to deference, armored his voice with one of his surefire aphorisms that had always before reassured Ryan. “We’re keeping on,” he said. “We’ll keep on keeping on.”

“I said I’d never say *no* to you, and now I am.” Ryan started to cry. “Oh, damn!”

“This is hardly your style, Ry.”

“I don’t want a showdown.”

“I love you,” Kick said. “You love me. Leave well enough alone. What more is there?”

“I want real communication.”

“Please don’t cry,” Kick said. “I’m not crying.”

“I can’t help it. I’m real. Look at me, Kick. I’m really real. Remember what Alice said? ‘If I wasn’t real, I shouldn’t be able to cry.’ We have to move from our fantasy level. We have to become real to each other.”

“I thought we promised never to become ordinary.”

“*Real* and *ordinary* aren’t the same thing. Something happens between us when we’re together. It’s real. It’s not ordinary. You know what I mean. You feel it, don’t you? You feel the Energy we conjure between us?”

“Why do you think I keep coming back for something I told you I can’t get anywhere else?”

“I’ve never said *no* to you. I’ve given you no bounds, no limits. But we have to have limits or we fall apart.”

“The game has changed, Ry. I’m going for the Mr. Cal. I have to take steroids to be competitive. I want to turn professional.”

“It’s not worth the chance.” Ryan sat upright in his chair. “You always said you wanted to be more communicative than competitive.” Then he dared. “Do you need the crowds cheering your muscle?”

“No.” Kick shrugged his shoulders. “If you want the truth...”

“Go ahead. Hurt me with it.”

“It was always only you out there. I posed for you.”

“Omigod. Don’t do this to me. I love you so much.”

“As for the other drugs, our use is no more than recreational.”

“Don’t be angry,” Ryan said.

“I’m not angry. I’m hurt.”

“I’m dying. I’m scared to Death. I can’t go on like this. We’ll get sick. We’ll die.” Ryan gasped. “Everyone’s changing their bad habits.”

“Fuck everyone,” Kick said. “Whenever I do something, I do it the best and see it through to the end.”

Ryan’s heart raced at his words. *The end*. Just like the movies. *THE END*.

“If there’s a problem between us, I never knew till now,” Kick said. “We’ve had three good years.”

“You’ve had three good years. I’ve had two.”

“Don’t start, Ry.” Kick recognized the darting razor-flick of Ryan’s tongue breaking its check. “I remember how you could start on Thom and Teddy, and how you go at Solly. I don’t want you to start on me.”

“I’m sorry. That was a rotten thing to say.”

“I think I’d better leave.”

“What?”

“I have to leave.”

“Why?”

“If I make anyone unhappy, I have to leave,” Kick said.

“You don’t want to address our problem?”

“I have no problem. I’ve chosen quality of life over quantity of life.”

“That’s a problem.”

“It’s your problem. If I leave, maybe you can solve it.”

“What’s with you southern guys? How can one little conversation make you head for the door? What is this? *Gone with the Wind?*” *Southern men! Southern men!* “No working anything out? You just walk out the door and frankly don’t give a damn?”

“I give a damn,” Kick said. “You can handle this. You can handle anything. You’re a writer.”

“This is not one of my porn stories. You’re not a character I want to manipulate. A long time ago, maybe, I had the conceit to feel I conjured

you up in one of my stories. But I didn't. You have a life of your own."

"So do you."

"I don't want a life of my own." Ryan threw his hands up. "What play are we?" he asked. "We're *Six Characters in Search of an Author*."

Kick read Ryan literally. "What author?"

"God? Maybe God. I don't know."

"You're the only author I know, Ry." Kick hit the pose of his smile.

"Don't look at me that way."

"Why not?" he grinned.

"I won't say what I have to say."

"Sometimes," Kick said, "the best thing to say is don't say anything."

"I sold my soul..."

"I told you I bought it back for you."

"You see? You are responsible for my happiness. That makes me responsible for yours."

"So what are we talking about?"

"Muscle and more than muscle," Ryan said. "You have the Gift. I want you to have the knowledge of the Gift. You have strength. I want you to have more than strength. I want you to have power. I want you to be happy with the Gift you have. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Hurt myself?"

"By gilding the lily. Taking steroids."

"Do you love me?" Kick asked.

"You know I love you."

"You know," Kick said, "how I depend on your love." He crossed the room and put both his strong hands on Ryan's shoulders.

"I love us," Ryan said. "I love the Energy-Being we create between us."

"So let's keep on," Kick said.

"I don't know if I can."

"We have to." Kick turned droll and his drollness was threatening. "How would we decide who gets custody of the Energy we create?"

Ryan retreated. He could not bear to lose title to that special place outside space and time which he had only found with Kick. "I don't want to cause you pain."

"No pain. No gain," Kick said. "We can grow from this. We can keep on keeping on."

"Maybe we're bad for each other."

"We look good together," Kick said. He kissed Ryan long and hard.

Nothing was going the way Ryan had planned. He wanted to say: *Stop the steroids*. He wanted to say: *Stay away from Castro*. He wanted to say:

*Drop Logan and get a job.* He wanted to say: *You woke the man in me; don't kill the child.* Instead, he turned into Mary Tyler Moore, embarrassed at making a fool of herself: "You know me. Dumb old me. Always making mountains out of molehills."

"I do have to leave," Kick stood up.

"Why?"

"I can't stay here tonight."

"Because I opened my big mouth?"

"I hadn't planned to stay anyway. I promised Logan I'd drive to Bar Nada."

"Logan?"

"I want to talk to him," Kick said. "Like you wanted to talk to me."

Ryan could not ask what about. "You mean you weren't going to spend the night anyway?"

"I thought I told you."

"Maybe I forgot." Ryan tested the waters. "You have to leave?"

"I promised."

"You can't stay?"

"No."

"No?" Ryan looked bewildered.

"Don't worry," Kick said. "I'm not saying *no*. I'm saying *not now*."

"To me? To me? You're saying *not now*?"

*Not now* was the line, *that line*, Kick always used to put off kindly the petulant propositions from strangers on Castro. Ryan had heard him say it a thousand times. He knew on the street it meant *never*. He wasn't sure what it meant in his own house.

His deference smothered his weak defiance.

He conceded. One more time.

Never underestimate the power of sexual attraction.

Kick was no fool. He pulled Ryan's hands to his big pecs. "These are for you," he said. He draped his own arms over Ryan's shoulders. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "Don't worry. I'll only leave you once."

"What's that mean? What's that really mean?"

"I told you before. When I die."

"What do you mean *die*?" He scared Ryan. He sounded like Charley-Pop.

"I think you'll live longer than me," Kick said.

"No," Ryan said, "you can't ever die and leave me. Who would hold me when I lay dying?"

"You don't need anyone like I need you," Kick said.

“How do you need me?” Ryan asked. “I used to know. I need to know now.”

“We have my body,” Kick said. “We have your words. When my body is gone, all that will remain are your words.”

What was it Kick had said the night of the first muscle contest victory?

*I want us to be a story told at night in beds around the world.*

“So that’s what I’m writing? Your memoirs? *The Gospel according to Saint Kick.*”

Kick grinned. “Who better than you?”

“You are droll,” Ryan said. “Do I look,” he smirked at Kick’s impossible suggestion, “like an apostle?”

*Is that what you want? A biographer? A press agent?*

Most gay men only want daddies.

Kick silenced Ryan with a kiss good-bye.

“Trust me,” Kick said.

Ryan was exhausted. “I’m too far gone not to trust you.”

That night Ryan watched no videotapes. He had no lust for Kick’s flannel shirts and posing trunks. Instead, he prayed. He actually knelt, for the first time in years, at the side of his bed, feeling more defeated than foolish, praying for Kick, praying against *dee*-struction and depression and disaster, praying for himself, praying for all the boys who had died, who lay dying, and who would die. AIDS was not going away soon.

Kick called from Bar Nada. He had to stay another day. The next day became the next weekend. On Wednesday of the following week, Ryan picked up the phone to call the ranch.

Is it psychic coincidence, or just chance, when two people try to telephone each other at the same time? It’s happened to everyone. You reach for the phone. You pick up the receiver. You get set to punch in the numbers. The person you intended to call is already on the line. “It never rang,” you both say. Maybe you overhear a bit of conversation you shouldn’t hear while the other one waits for your phone to ring. Not a whole conversation, mind you, just a sentence. Not a sentence even, just a phrase: words spoken in the background by someone speaking to the caller on the other end of your line. All you catch through the beeps of your touchtone is an Attitude. Muffled syllables of words you can’t quite hear. Then a voice, closer to the receiver, laughing, saying something like, “Shut up.” Or maybe *Shut Up! Never let him hear you say that.*

“Kick!” Ryan said. “I was about to call you.”

“I called you.” Kick was still laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about you.”

“We’re psychic.”

“How are you doing?” Kick asked.

“Alright. I was concerned about you. How are things at Bar Nada?”  
He knew Kick understood he meant, “How are things with Logan?”

“The kitchen’s coming along fine. It’s a great remodel.”

“I don’t mean the kitchen. How are you? How’s he been acting?”

“We’ve run the new lines for the sink.”

“You can’t talk. He’s standing right there.”

“Right. It’s really going to be great.”

“You sounded worried last Sunday. About him, I mean.”

“Everything’s okay. Our little plantation is almost ready for harvest.”

“I thought it was harvested. I don’t understand how growing pot can take so long. Isn’t there a normal growing season?”

“We’re timing the lights. Logan’s been harvesting flower tops for the last month. He’s boxed up a nice big bunch just for you,” Kick said.

“Oh, really?” *With just a touch of insecticide.*

“He wants me to thank you for letting him stay here.”

“Don’t put words into his mouth. It’s only as a favor to you.”

“You make it all possible.” Kick’s attention was pulled away from the phone, then returned. “Logan says it’s a perfect three-way split.”

“That’s a contradiction in terms.”

“Trust me. Let me work with the balance of things,” Kick said. “Another month or so and we’ll have worked these plants for all they’re worth. This little project will make us all a lot of money. Out of season, this crop will have a great going-rate. We’ll have more cash to button up some top-notch art direction for *Universal Appeal*. I think it’s time to get back on the book, don’t you?”

“When are you coming back?”

“Give me a couple more weeks, okay?”

“That long?”

“I need some time to think.”

“About what?”

“About what we talked about.”

Ryan felt a twinge of hope. Maybe he had broken through. “Are you still working out?”

“You betcha. There’s a great gym over in Santa Rosa.” Kick paused. He made no reference to steroids. He was testing Ryan’s resolve. “Living here at the ranch is great for training. Logan drained your goose pond.

The cement bowl makes a great tanning basin. You know how I've always preferred quality of life." The sound of daring to challenge the odds was in his devil-may-care voice.

Ryan ignored the bait. "When will I see you?"

"Give me a couple more weeks. We're hanging pretty close to the ranch right now."

The two weeks dragged into a month. Ryan's Dr. Quack upped his prescription of Valium. Ryan said to Solly, "What can I say? Kick needs alone-time to think."

"He's not alone, you fool." Solly looked up from his newspaper. "And the time he's having, at your rancho, I might add, is the time of his life with Loganberry dingleberry. You're now letting two hustlers—count them, two!—live free!"

"When he's with Logan, he's as good as alone," Ryan said. "I trust him."

"Trust is the main mistake you can make in San Francisco. Never trust gay boys." Solly sipped his Coca-Cola. "I hear tell some guys with AIDS are still pulling tricks out of the bars and fucking their brains out at the baths."

"I'm retired from gay sex. I can't even watch gay videotapes."

"Not even mine?" Solly asked.

"Yours are solo jerk off. That's different from gay videos with all the sucking and fucking and rimming that look like sex acts from a lost civilization."

Solly waxed nostalgic. "Remember what a gay trick used to be? You pick him up. He fucks you and pants and screams and throws you around. He spasms and cums, moaning all over you like you're the greatest lay in his life, and you think he's a liar, and you wonder if he's faking, because you feel so dead, and you wonder if he really came. So when he rolls off you, you run into the toilet and squat it out to check for those few precious clots of proof."

"You're cynical."

"Cynical? You're cynical. You pray to God to stop the epidemic. What kind of God would let an epidemic begin? Your God is cynical. Why pray to a God to protect you from AIDS if he was mean enough to let it start in the first place? If he's so omnipotent, he has all the power. If you believe in that kind of God, you're as hapless as an S&M bottom begging for torture. I really wish you'd stop worshipping at the Church of our Lady of Perpetual Guilt."

"Leave me some consolation," Ryan said.

“There are certain consolations I cannot tolerate,” Solly Blue said. “Your Catholic obsessions prime among them.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“You’re obsessive-compulsive. Obsessed with religion. Obsessed with sex. Obsessed with Kick. Now you’re obsessed with AIDS. When are you going to realize that these obsessions are killing you? AIDS paranoia is worse than AIDS itself.”

“Aha!” Ryan said. “I’m not obsessed. I’m not paranoid. Look at the newspaper you’re reading. Even the cops have demanded masks and gloves and plastic resuscitators to deal with guys who might have AIDS.”

“Yes, of course. The SFPD is so well known for its logic and compassion.” Solly shook the newspaper at Ryan. “Add this to your obsessions. The Los Angeles coroner’s office is working on plans to detect murderers who might take advantage of an earthquake. They will inspect all bodies to separate quake victims from murder victims. They figure a big earthquake will provide perfect cover-up for murderers waiting their chance.”

“That’s so El Lay,” Ryan said. “That’s your paranoia calling me obsessive.”

“Don’t protest too much,” Solly said. “In an earthquake, you could kill Logan.”

“You watch too much television. Besides, Logan’s not really the point. He’s negligible. He’s nothing.”

“Oh, yeah?” Solly read from the paper: “Coroner Thomas Noguchi revealed his plan last week to a gathering of the county’s undertakers, who were told they must carefully inspect the corpses gathered in such a catastrophe for evidence of foul play.’ Undertakers know things other people don’t know,” he said. He stared at Ryan. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “Be very careful of any new obsession.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ryan said. “Thinking about what?”

“About shooting guns.”

“Out windows?” Ryan was amused.

“At people.”

“Come on.” Ryan caught his drift. “I might want Logan gone. But dead?”

“Not Logan? Then maybe Kick.”

“God! The last thing I want is him dead. I could never shoot him. I could never shoot anyone.”

“Not even yourself?”

“You are,” Ryan said, “evil...”

“And you’re too ethereal.”

“...like the Devil tempting Christ!”

“You’re not Christ.”

“Get behind me, Satan.”

“You need to get down to earth. You’re overeducated. You need to roll around with my boys. You need to get down off that pedestal where you’re kneeling between Kick’s legs. You need to forget everything you’ve ever read or been taught. You need to feel raw and basic and nasty and dirty.”

“I did that at the Barracks and the Slot.”

“Do it again.”

“I did it with Kick.”

“Listen to me,” Solly said. “I’m a guru of consciousness lowering.”

“Consciousness raising.”

“Consciousness lowering. For people who got too sensitive in the sixties and seventies.”

“How California,” Ryan said. “You’ll make a fortune.”

“We all live our separate fantasies that hardly ever intermesh. When they do, it’s comedy. When they don’t, it’s another story.”

“So?” Ryan asked.

“It’s time for you to shit or get off the pot.”

“Why?”

“Because what honor you have left in this town is on the line.”

“My honor? I don’t give a fuck about San Francisco.”

“If you don’t do something to resolve where you stand with Kick, then everything you say is so much a doo-doo about nothing. Stop being a fool. It doesn’t become you.”

Ryan was miffed. “At least, it’s honest ‘ado.’”

“Then,” Solly said, “prove it.”

### 3

Katharine Hepburn played her part in all this.

Ryan once accused me as well as Solly of a certain coldness. “Nothing ever takes either of you outside your calm, cool, existential selves,” he said. He was wrong. About both of us.

The thighs of young hustlers lowered Solly’s consciousness.

I, Magnus Bishop, sometimes have what I call *grand moments* when something on screen or on stage truly overwhelms me. In a theater, I sit, up front and center, closer to the action than most of the audience dares to sit. Sometimes I forget who I am. I forget I am a professor of popular culture. Sometimes I am sucked up from my seat into the vortex of drama

that art, more intensely than loose reality, tightens down into those old Aristotelian satisfactions of unity: this time, this place, this action, this certain resolution. Stage and screen in two hours resolve plot and characterization and concepts in a definitive way that real life, suspended open ended, rarely does.

Distractions, unforgivable distractions, in a theater make me want to kill the gum-poppers, the coughers, the whisperers, and those self-important few who wear wristwatches that beep, once, then twice, like electronic crickets calling feebly to one another throughout the dark field of the audience.

Only once for me was the distraction in the audience, perhaps something like the front-row murder committed by the Hell's Angels during the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont, more intense, tighter than the action on stage.

It was a winter-season night at the Curran Theater when Katharine Hepburn, playing her starring role in *The West Side Waltz*, must have felt even her grand self being virtually dragged from the stage to the orchestra where Ryan, glowing more intensely passionate than the Luminous One herself, became larger, immense, explosive, dangerous in the seat next to me. That night in that theater, because of all that was happening, a cast of six and an audience of six hundred sank, in one grand collision, like so many dark ships under the brilliant intensity of Hepburn's face, of Ryan's face, and the third face from which neither Hepburn nor Ryan could keep their eyes.

Kick was where he shouldn't have been. Handsome. Glowing. Radiant. On the arm of Logan Doyle.

It was Saint Valentine's Night. Ryan had bought rear orchestra seats for himself, Solly, Kweenie, and me. With Kick lodged in up at Bar Nada, Ryan was strung out writing what he called "Dear Kick: Letters You'll Never See." They were turgid *Journal* entries.

I feel you receding from me like a sleek white ship moving under heavy sail from the Embarcadero into the windswept Bay and out toward the Golden Gate. Cries of lonely gulls screech over the waves churned up behind the boat. Everything in life seems borne backward on the tide. Time is the only villain. I lie sleepless in the night. My sheets, unwashed, smell of the suntoast sweat of your blond body. I dream of sunlight whipping through your blond hair in the wild wind of your topless Corvette. Once you moved toward me. Now you move away from me.

Ryan's going to bed was a ritual preparation not unlike a little suicide. He straightened up the house. Ran water on the evening's collection of glasses and snack dishes piled in the sink. Washed his face. Brushed his teeth. Carried a glass of water to his bedside. Stripped down to a tee shirt. Opened the pill bottle. Swallowed the Valium Dr. Quack prescribed for him, because, Quack said, the world and he were at odds. He lay in the bed, waiting for pills to slow the rush of consciousness. His *Journal* beside him on the bedcovers.

Signs and omens are everywhere. If my molehill has become a mountain, it is Mt. St. Helens. Why couldn't we have been blown away like that lucky, lucky boy and girl, honeymooners at last alone, sleeping in each others' arms in their small tent on the edge of the volcano. They died the moment when they had said yes to everything about each other. We haven't died. Worse. I sleep alone. He sleeps with someone else. I know I'm losing my grip. My life has never been so star-crossed.

He had pasted a news clipping on the page. "A ground search of the volcano area discovered the bodies of two men who had been riding horseback in the upper reaches of the Green River Valley, about twelve miles north of St. Helens." The script was perfectly Ryan and Kick. "One man apparently was watering the horses at a stream when the mountain exploded. He dived or was knocked into the water, surviving the initial eruption. His companion and the two horses were killed instantly. 'They were burned,' the county chief of detectives said, adding that the hot blast 'burned up the ridge and burned over the ridge. Then it burned down the other side of the ridge. It took everything.' The surviving man picked himself up and stumbled eight miles through the hot ash. But finally, succumbing to his injuries or the fumes from the ash and gases, he lay down, covered himself with a sleeping bag, and died. There were huge blisters on his face."

Ryan's own handwriting picked up after the clipping:

So, like that poor man, I've been knocked from my high horse, my companion irretrievably changed, our horses burned dead, me crawling through ash and gases, but unlike him I cannot die. I can hardly sleep. I want nothing more than to lie back and never wake up again. I can't even take refuge in sex anymore.

It is dangerous. There is no joy in it. Other men, because they are not him, would simply remind me of him. There is no one I can turn to. No one can do anything but comfort me with words or with their caring touch, which hurts me worse because their words are not his words, their touch is not his touch. He was the measure of everything in the world. I want to cry. I want to die. But I go on living. The wave of fire has not killed me yet. I've never felt so unloved or so unwanted. I could easily do something crazy. I could easily flip out and never come back again. My brother betrayed my trust. My first lover betrayed my trust. Now this man, I don't know yet, may not have been trustworthy.

Saint Valentine's Day meant something to the romantic in Ryan. With Kick gone this night, all these nights, he needed the feel of company. He had insisted on paying for the four tickets the way he had always paid Kick's way. He was the last of the big spenders. Kweenie and Solly and I were his guests.

If you can't go out with your lover, go out with a crowd.

We arrived at the theater early. Ryan never liked to miss the beginning of anything, and no matter how dreadful the drama, always stayed in his seat through to the end. He was excited by the milling crowd in the ornate lobby. On the sidewalk beyond the brass-and-glass doors of the theater, ticket holders brushed shoulders with street people. The theater was on the edge of the Tenderloin, only four blocks from Solly's penthouse, not far from the Market Street corner where, for years, straight young hustlers, eager for a gay buck, leaned insouciant against the dirty windows of the deserted "Flagg Bros Shoes" waiting for johns cruising by on foot and in cars.

"Ah, yes," Solly said as we walked up the street. "I know this corner well. I want my ashes spread here...in the gutter." He pointed to one of his boys working the opposite corner. "You'd like that one," he said to Kweenie. "You're his type of woman."

"Darling!" Kweenie shook her red hair. "Me? Recycle trash?"

Solly loved to find tricks for friends. "You'd like him. He's a good boy. He's nineteen. He's a recovered alcoholic."

"Recovered in what? Chintz? Corduroy? Leather?" She tapped her program on Solly's shoulder. "Behave yourself."

"*West Side Waltz* is a new play." Ryan was acting as tour guide. He was intent we all have a good time. He needed a good time. "The author wrote *On Golden Pond*."

“That’s a credential?” Solly said.

“Who cares if it’s good or bad,” Ryan said. “Hepburn is the event.” He stood taller than usual, putting on a certain Attitude, the kind of air that homosexual men cannot help assuming in a theater lobby.

The incoming theater crowd flowed around us. Small islands of chattering yuppies staked their territory, speaking in clenched-jawed Stanford voices meant to be overheard. We watched faces. We listened in on passing conversations. A cluster of gays in screamer tuxes and full leather camped against the wall nearest us. They were *on*. They *loved* Lansbury whose picture hung in the Coming Attractions poster for *Sweeney Todd*. They *knew* that little Joel Grey was hung bigger than even the superbly hung Roddy McDowall. They called Edward Albee a “gay hypocrite” because he refused, for “commercial reasons,” to allow four men to play the two couples in *Virginia Woolf* “which was his original concept anyway.” They loudly dished everything they’d ever read or heard about show biz as if gossip columns and rumor were theater.

“Why is it,” Solly said, “just because queens take it up the ass, they think they’re critics?”

He stole the line from a German poem written before the turn of the century about decadence among chic Berliners. I didn’t call him on it. I let him get away with his bit of borrowed wit. He and Kweenie and I were all on the same mission. Ryan needed any distraction we could offer. He had been hearing new rumors about Kick he did not want to hear. In that well-lit lobby, Ryan’s face was carefully masked. The three of us stood with him, minus one, if the subtraction of Ryan’s real face, like the subtraction of Kick from his life, counted.

What happened that night happens only in theaters. I’ve watched the scene in a thousand movies.

Ryan insisted we settle into our seats early. He liked to establish territory by presence, as if being seated first, much like his primogeniture with Thom, gave us some strange squatters’ power, showing those arriving after us that they must excuse themselves to us, making them somehow apologetic. After all, they were disturbing us, weren’t they, making us stand and press the backs of our calves against the flipped-up seats, so they could crawl and bump, more apologies, through the narrow space between our thighs and the seat backs of the row in front of us.

It’s an age-old theater game: well-dressed, overfed bodies trying to make themselves small, crawling, mumbling regrets, toward their assigned places. Specific seats in the universe for three hours. The authority in the usher’s flashlight presiding over the ritual, transferring dignity to those of

us already so properly, maybe prudently seated, against the indignity of the crawl of latecomers.

The difficult *pas de orchestra* gave Ryan a vantage from which to command silence, at first warning politely, from those who, after the curtain rose, continued to talk, then whisper, or worse, comment, Look-she's-coming-through-the-door-and-she's-wearing-a-hat, giving a blow-by-blow running commentary as if they'd come to the theater with a party of the blind. By the third warning, Ryan was given to saying things like, "Madam!" They always became "Madam!" by the third warning. "Madam! Quiet! You are not home watching television."

Plays, even movies, were sacred events for Ryan. He did not want to be disturbed, distracted, pulled back from the brilliant light of the stage or screen by noisy wives dragging disinterested husbands out for a night on the town.

A pair of straight couples inched over us and settled down apologetically. Ryan seemed pleased. They would be no trouble. The wives chatted quietly. The husbands, on opposite ends of the pair of wives, flipped the pages of their programs. They were not so comfortable as their wives. They had been dressed in their three-piece suits since early morning. The wives were fresher. Dressed for the evening. In from the suburbs of Orinda and Milpitas. Wives, not husbands, buy season's tickets.

Suddenly, Ryan leaned across me to Kweenie and Solly. His face was agitated, alarmed, like someone urgently seized by a premonition based on what? A glimpse? A lightning dart of recognizable Energy? Something that distinguishes a special face from the anonymous heads of the dark audience? Ryan started in his seat the way an animal downwind catches the shocking spoor of the hunter, seconds before the glint of rifle flashes once, and disappears through thickets of leaves.

"You're not going to believe," he said, "who in two seconds will come through the side-aisle curtain." He nodded toward the draped arch stage-right of the first three rows.

It was Kick.

Naturally.

Of course.

Why not?

Life has no coincidences. Only collisions.

Twenty rows and three hundred people between them. All of it, the whole theater, dimmed to soft focus. Kick knew instantly what he had walked into. His blond handsome face hardened like a plate. I felt the heat rise in Ryan's body. He sat up in his seat straight as a judge. I felt him

growing hotter, growing physically bigger next to me. He was huge. He transmitted to Kick in the same way—now I was witnessing it, actually witnessing—that he had confided to me they communicated in bed and out. Beyond words. Out of time and space. A single laser of light, red-gold at Kick's end, muting to virulent green at Ryan's, cut through the low-lit gloom over the seated audience who were facing the stage waiting for something to happen, and something was happening. Palpable. Real.

"Turn yourself down," Solly said. "You're going to explode."

Ryan said, with no self-pity, and with full salute to the irony, "This could only happen to us." And he knew there was no more *us* for them. Kick was not alone. "Do you see now," he said to me. "I wasn't making it up. This stuff between us keeps happening. Keeps growing. Never stops." He grew big as a blotter that could absorb very little more.

The houselights dimmed. The stage lights came up. The play began. Dorothy Loudon entered the set. Polite applause. The audience, settling into Loudon's opening soliloquy, anticipated the great Hepburn's entrance. The light from the stage fell, even to my eyes, directly on Kick at the right end of the second row. Kweenie and Solly and I tried to watch the stage, but the lightbeam from Ryan to Kick, and back, was so powerful I was distracted from the stage more than Ryan had ever been by the most unruly audience.

Kick's blondness, objectively and truly, was striking. No matter what drugs he was taking, he was not becoming the mess Ryan projected on him. Kick Sorensen remained a brutally handsome man. Square jawed. Sculpted features. His carefully groomed blond head sat on a thick muscular neck. His broad shoulders spanned the seat back, inadvertently pressuring those seated on either side. The woman on his left did not pull away. Logan seemed to enjoy Kick's hard shoulder pressing against his own. Kick's athletic presence glowed in the stage light. He eclipsed everyone. Even Logan.

I felt sorry for Ryan, really sorry for him, in a way I had never fully realized before from his telling of it. Kick was the stuff of theater. He was dreams and fantasy and ideals and aspirations. He was from Central Casting. He could have played the title role of the drop-dead blond athlete in Albee's *The American Dream*.

The designed curve of the front-row seats turned Kick, at the far corner of the stage, almost full-quarter profile toward us. He kept the impassive plate of his face directly on Hepburn.

He knew. I knew he knew. I knew he knew Ryan knew. I knew he knew we all knew. We were that tight little circle around Ryan that he

had never penetrated. He knew he was not one of us. He knew we all knew each other too well, as sure as he knew exactly what was happening to them both. I can't say I saw it exactly, but I feel certain I saw his eyes involuntarily dart fully to Ryan sitting bolt upright next to me. Always, I'm certain, Kick was peripherally aware of Ryan, whose escalating Energy beamed out through the bald screen of his high forehead across the rows of seated heads.

Behind us, a woman leaned forward and whispered, "Will you all please behave!"

Kweenie giggled. "Have a taste of your own medicine," she whispered.

Ryan could not keep his eyes on the stage. Would not. Tried to. Could not. He borrowed Kweenie's opera glasses. He made the set piece complete. He could not *not* do it. He raised the glasses to his eyes, studied the healthy glow of Hepburn's skin, translucent with the dignity of age, of a life she herself lived through an undying love for Spencer Tracy, as part of a Famous Couple; then, slowly, with a great deal of discipline, ever so slowly, he turned his head with the glasses tight against his eyes, and swept them over the dark backs of heads until he was close up on Kick's brightly lit face.

Ryan sat perfectly still, reading the golden face that never moved. Not once. Not during the long instant of the one look Ryan allowed himself.

In that moment, I felt the surge of the long riptide of wild passion.

Suddenly I understood.

*Passion.*

That was the name of the Energy they had so long conjured between them. It was passion. I felt it, felt what it must have been like between them: hot, horny, stoned, roped, muscled, oiled, posing, rapping, stroking, screwing, sucking, sniffing, licking, hugging, lifting off together.

Not that Ryan moved or even shuddered. Quite the opposite. Actresses did not drop their lines. Trains did not roar into tunnels. Waves did not crash on the beach. Trees did not bend and sway under the force of the wind. Lightning did not flash. Thunder did not crack. Dogs did not howl in the night. Crops did not fail.

Nowhere, that is, but in Ryan's heart.

I felt his palpable Energy. I felt Kick's. It was passion and more than passion. Something there was beyond human reason between them. A laser of burning intensity connected them. I felt Ryan rising up, flying up toward the ceiling of the theater, floating over the heads of the audience, as if he had fainted or died or both and he was enduring an out-of-body experience once again. Ryan was on a long leash, but no one, particularly

Kick, was holding the other end. Only Ryan, by strength of his own character, held himself, raw, bleeding, and lacerated in the seat next to me.

Sixty seconds it lasted. No more. No less. One minute. And then he lowered the glasses into his lap and turned his eyes back to the stage.

I wonder if Hepburn, herself, up on that brightly lit stage with all those upturned faces adoring her, could not but feel herself, instead of stage-center, triangulated with the two faces burning out in the darkness. I wanted to write to her to ask her if she felt something more fragile than a mirror crack that night when her play became only part of another drama.

Before Hepburn took her final curtain call, Ryan rushed us from the theater. We were escaping.

Jack Woods, the tattooed bodybuilder biker, caught Ryan's arm. "I saw everything," he gloated. He stood 220 pounds in full black leather, chewing the butt of his unlit cigar.

Ryan rushed us out quickly through the Tenderloin night to Solly's penthouse.

"What was Kick doing there anyway?" Kweenie asked. "Some nerve. I thought he was at Bar Nada."

"You could never get him to go anywhere but to bodybuilding contests," I said.

"And to bed," Solly said.

It was true. Because of Kick, Ryan had given up the popular culture that entertains ordinary people as much as he had given up his circle of friends.

"Ryan's not mad because Kick was there," Kweenie said. "He was mad because Kick and Logan were wearing almost identical plaid shirts. He hates couples, straight or gay, who dress like twins."

"Kick lives his own life." Ryan was unconvincing.

"Since when?" Solly asked.

"He always has," Kweenie said.

"Since before I found out about it," Ryan said. "I'm the last to know."

"They say that breaking up is hard to do," Kweenie said.

"Now I know," Ryan said. "I know that it's true."

The jokey song lyrics could not hide his sadness. I looked him straight on.

Face, I've written more than once, is the essence of cinema. RKO once spun movies out of the legs of Fred and Ginger, but the best movies have been built around the memorable faces of the likes of Garbo and Gable, Crawford and Redford, Newman and DeNiro, Streisand and Streep, and Hepburn herself. Television has reduced the mystique of Face to talking

heads, but the lure of Face remains.

Ryan's was an open book. I could not hold my eyes on his face. He was at that moment too open, too real, too vulnerable. He had been insomniac for a month. His features were the wreckage of reality.

I never wanted that lovelorn Look in my eyes. For that reason, I've always avoided romantic relationships. I've generally lived alone. I prefer to confront faces only on celluloid in wide-screen color, with the two-dimensional plane of eyes and nose and mouth spread twenty-feet across the silver screen. Face to face in the flesh is almost more that I can tolerate. I fear the fatal lure of Face.

Ryan had fallen through the looking glass of Kick's face.

"So. Ryan." Kweenie took up imperious residence on Solly's sofa. "How do you like it?"

"Like what?" he said.

"The treatment you're getting."

"What treatment?"

"Men," she said. "The way men are treating you. Maybe now you understand why women act the way we do. We're tired of reaching out to men." She had the direct drive of a sister who felt she could say anything. She was angry with the anger of what Kick's seed had planted in her body, but she had too much compassion to tell Ryan the truth of how Kick had betrayed him more than he knew when she herself had caused the betrayal. "Because of a man, I had to have an abortion. I had to do violence to my body."

"To say nothing of the child," Ryan said.

"To say nothing of the father." Kweenie corrected him. "What did that jerk suffer?"

"You never told him?"

"Told him what?"

"That you were pregnant?"

"No."

"That you carried his child?"

"No."

"That you killed his child?"

"His child? His? What's this *bis*? What's this *killed*?"

"His. Yes. Yours too. You murdered your own child."

"I murdered nothing but something hateful he left inside me." Kweenie had taken advantage of Charley-Pop's long illness. She had hit Annie Laurie at a weak moment and extricated herself in the sixth grade from Catholic school. She knew little about the moral theology that drove

Ryan. She was not a victim of Catholicism. She was an artist.

“Why are we discussing this?” Ryan asked. “I’ve got other things on my mind. I can’t believe this.”

Kweenie pulled off her kid gloves. “What can’t you believe? That I’d take care of myself? Take a lesson.”

“Only a whore would murder a child.”

Solly and I could not move from the room without being obvious; but then neither brother nor sister seemed embarrassed. Both of them were busy deflecting their own guilt.

“Only a whore takes care of herself?” Kweenie said. “Let me tell you something, Ryan Steven O’Hara. Let me tell you something you don’t know. Let me tell you something only daughters know. Let me tell you what mom told me happened between her and Charley-Pop the first year they were married.”

“You can’t tell me anything about Annie Laurie and Charley-Pop.”

“Our mother had a D and C, Ryan. Do you know what that is? It’s dilation-and-curettement surgery. It’s a Catholic abortion.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“Believe me. She told me she had to take care of herself. She told me that baby, who came before you, might have killed her.”

Ryan was crying.

“She told me the name of the doctor who took the thing out of her that would have killed her. She told me it was a boy baby, a son she might have had who came before you. Just like you came before Thom.”

“No.”

“Think of it. An older brother who might have pushed you around the way you pushed Thom around.”

“Shut up,” Ryan said. “Just shut up!”

They sat staring at each other.

“Why,” Ryan finally asked, “are you telling me this?”

“Because I want to get through to you. I want you to take care of yourself. After what I saw tonight, you have to take care of yourself. Kick’s certainly not taking care of you. I can’t. Magnus and Solly can’t. You’ve got to take care of you.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You’re my brother. I love you. You’re so desperate.”

“I’m not desperate.”

She played her Streisand Jewish shtick: “You want I should sing you ‘Desperado’ to show you how desperate?” She put out her hand toward Ryan. “Cut Kick out of your heart. He’s doing to you what men have been

doing for ages to women. Get over it. Get something out of it.” She took his hand in hers.

“What am I supposed to get out of it?”

“Abort him. Forget him. Nothing goes on forever.”

“Being without him will go on forever.”

Kweenie turned to us. “You’re wrong,” she said to Solly. “Ry’s not obsessed. He’s possessed.”

“Maybe,” Solly said, “we should call an exorcist before he says your mother sucks cock in hell.”

“Why can’t you turn Kick free?” she asked.

“Because,” Ryan said, “I’m a carnivore. Because he’s a carnivore. Because muscle is a specialty act. An eccentric act. Because muscle is about incarnation, about becoming meat, worshiping meat. Because he wanted me to love his flesh, worship his flesh, become his flesh...”

“As always,” Solly said, “Catholicism.”

“...because some tribes sacrifice blonds to the sun. Because we promised each other certain things, certain things only buddies can promise each other late at night, certain things that only a man can promise another man...”

Kweenie stuck her index finger into her open mouth and made gagging sounds.

“...certain things I no longer find it tolerable to live without now that I’ve tasted them.”

“Is this love?” Kweenie asked.

“It’s addiction,” Solly said. “It’s harder to get over than love.”

“This isn’t funny,” Ryan said.

Life, John Lennon said, is what happens to you while you’re making other plans. Life, Cicero said, is a play with a bad last act.

“Life,” Solly said, “is a joke.”

Ryan went for the punch line.

**4**

During the next month, Ryan holed up in his Victorian. He wrote fast and furiously on a new manuscript. He called me on the phone. “It’s post-gay. It’s post-*Manifesto*,” he said. “I call it *Killing Time till Armageddon*.”

“Finally, your memoirs?” I asked.

“No way. I hate sensitive little persons earnestly forging their souls in the fire of life and emerging whole as Thomas Merton on the last page. I’m an asshole. How can I confess that to the world? I’m an asshole. If

anything, I'm working to get my memoirs into a hundred words or less."

"So what's it about?"

"There is no God in Oz. There is only the phony Wizard. And San Francisco is his City. Castro is a godforsaken place. God may have created the world, but Satan designed it."

Ryan's depression had turned to bitterness since the night at the theater. He was unhappy with life. He understood the Luis Bunuel films with the dog always walking through the plots as if men were only one mad-dog bite away from rabidity.

"Have you talked to Kick?"

"Three times. On the phone."

"And..."

"And nothing. He acts like nothing happened that night. We've never mentioned it."

"So you're content to let your affair fade away and die a natural Death?"

"I'm writing him letters."

"Are you mailing them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Kick experiences very little of the soul-searching that goes with living. He's too beautiful to be bothered."

"But you're bothered."

"No. I was bewitched, but I'm not bothered. I'm not bothered the way Arthur Jones is not bothered."

"Who's Arthur Jones?" I asked.

"Kick trained with him. He's the guy who invented the Nautilus exercise machines. He's a self-described misanthrope..."

"So now you've replaced misogyny with misanthropy."

"Jones keeps a .45-caliber pistol under the front seat of his car. He knows about human treachery."

"How's that?"

"He deals with bodybuilders."

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm researching him for an article. He likes to quote Twain's line: 'If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.'"

"So you're bothered," I said. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to wait until he's tired of Logan."

"Solly says you should throw them both out of Bar Nada."

"No. As long as he's living in my place, he's thinking of me. I know

he is. I intend to play the gentleman to the very end. If it kills me. It's my only shot."

"I think you're making a mistake."

"I have," he said, "something very important to learn here. I want to milk my feelings for all they're worth. If I don't do that, then all this gay emergence has been for nothing. I want to feel it all. What it felt like at the beginning. What it feels like at the end."

When Ryan's Victorian could no longer contain his exploding despair, he took to the streets, the last refuge of the urban damned, shrouded in a fur parka and gloves against the cold nights. He called me from phone booths. I could imagine him standing masked with dark glasses and a thick four-day growth of beard. He liked to pretend he was down and out, shuffling along the red bricks of Market Street, feeling that his life lay not in his apartment, not in any place or any thing, but only in Kick.

But he did not have Kick.

He forced himself to walk among vagrants and bag ladies, envying them. They survived with nothing. Ryan, despite the gain of his writing, his property, and his past time with Kick, knew that his life lay only in his body, which he indulged in none of the expected vices. He had stopped drugs completely. He neither smoked nor drank nor did any of the things grown men were supposed to do. He purified his body. His body remembered Kick's body. His body was all he had left.

Everything was his body, and his body, as with his father's body, felled at forty-four, dead at fifty-six, was a cache of time bombs ticking toward total explosion. His pancreas, his liver, his lungs, his immune system, were each on a timer counting down; but none counted more than his heart, the ultimate body clock. He had long before thrown the gold Rolex Kick had given him deep into a drawer of old socks. "*It's a fake Rolex,*" Solly said. Nightly, the news reminded him he was at the high-risk center of Castro-Folsom roulette. Somewhere the AIDS virus waited for him on the lip of an unwashed glass.

Standing at 7th and Market, dressed like a bum, waiting to cross the street, he was hit hard in the head by a Hostess Berry Pie. At first, he thought he had been shot; but then he realized that someone on a passing Muni bus had thrown the eight-ounce chunk. Unwrapped. Cherries-in-goo ran down his face and onto his jacket.

By the time he called me, he said, "I've been hit in the face with a cosmic pie."

Ryan never let anything be simply what it was. Once I understood his style of portent, I knew where to add the grain of salt.

“I’m an approval junkie,” he said. He meant Kick’s, Charley-Pop’s, God’s approval. “I’ll do anything to get attention. I’ll tell jokes. I’ll court danger. I’ll let my lover live with his boyfriend in my house. I’ll even stoop to taking a pie in the face. I’ll do anything to get Kick back and not get AIDS.”

In Karel Reisz’s film *Isadora*, Vanessa Redgrave sang a nursery song that haunted Ryan. Out of all women, Redgrave was his muse—his *Vanessa-Isadora*. In *Camelot*, her Guenevere, closeted in-love with her Lancelot, sang, “I Loved You Once in Silence.” But was the bum-diddly-bummed-out lyrics of La Redgrave swathed up as the dancing, doomed Isadora Duncan that haunted Ryan—all that movie-queen bravado packing up cares and woes ’cause here she goes, swinging low, “Bye-Bye, Blackbird.” Fucking A! The voice that sings loops in the back of heads: is it the inner fat-lady singing camp? *So what if no one loves or understands me? What a fucking hard-luck story! I can take it like a man. I made my bed. I lit all the lights. And it’s still “Blackbird, bye-bye.”*

Isadora, born in San Francisco on the northwest corner of Geary and Taylor, in the Tenderloin, knew it, knew it all, as she tossed her scarf around her neck and settled in next to the young, dark, handsome driver of the red Bugatti convertible. Ryan felt hurt by so many well-intentioned people trying to adjust what they saw in him to what they thought he should be, that he turned deeper inside himself. He thought it was a sign and an omen that Isadora’s long scarf, which she tossed so gaily as the car sped off, had caught in the spokes of the Bugatti’s rear wheel and broke her neck instantly. So much for Quentin Crisp’s theory about the tall, dark man. Bitterly he wrote a poem called “Postmark.”

Dear God: You created me. Then you hated me.  
Dear Folks: You conceived me. Then deceived me.  
Dear Teacher: You told me. Then you sold me.  
Dear Boss: You bought me. Then you fought me.  
Dear Lover: You thrilled me. Then you killed me.  
Dear Death: You embraced me. Then erased me.

“I figured,” he said, “that between my adolescent crisis and my midlife crisis, I’d have at least one day off.”

Three years had passed since the Death of his father. He missed Charley-Pop so desperately that he was jarred to tears in a Market Street cafeteria, overhearing two homeless street people conversing about a third, also dead, saying, “He’s better off wherever he is.”

He felt the grief surge up from his belly. His sorrow was a mix of loss: his father and Kick; the only difference between them was that Kick was unfinished business. He crushed his napkin, meant for syrup, not tears, to a paper ball in his hand. He feared any more public sorrow in a City grown so sad with plague. Three years is too long not to see a father loved so much, especially when those long years are suddenly realized as the beginning of forever.

Not only do people die, you don't know where they go or how they are. Yet some nights, their presences linger. As much as he could touch Kick in the dark of his lonely bed, he often felt overlain by his father's remembered feel, as if neither of them were really gone. More often than he liked, his father hovered over him those dark nights, just as Ryan had hovered for years over his father's hospital bed, touching the man's forehead, afraid to touch his own father's hands, grown so soft with sickness, for fear that a loving touch might be felt by the dying man as a pressure as intense as pain.

He missed his father desperately. He promised: *Wherever you are, as I promised you so often before, I'll take care of them*, meaning his mother and sister, apologizing for not having taken better care of Thom for whom he had not cared enough.

One question chewed at his guts.

*Who, if not Kick, will take care of me?*

*None of this is real. The alarm will ring. Everyone will wake up. The bad dreams will be over. My father will be alive. Kick will return. The plague will go away. We'll sit down to toast and coffee. We'll use our napkins properly, not for tears, but for syrup and cakes.*

*But the alarm is ringing, can't be shut off, won't be shut off. Everyone's lying alone in their beds staring at their ceilings, missing all the sweetnesses past, fearful of the dead star-vader terrors to come, terrified of traveling alone to some eternal multiple-choice place, better or worse, up or down, wherever it is, or is not.*

He was a dedicated moviegoer whom Kick had kept away from films. He made up for lost time. He haunted the sleazy grind houses on Market Street, especially the corroding Strand Theater between 7th and 8th. Blacks smoked. Mexicans sat singly in blue watch caps. Unstoppable cock-suckers roamed the balconies. His feet stuck to the floor. He saw the world in mean montage on the wide screen. The violent intensity of film was for him not an escape. He forked out no admission to escape reality. He paid to intensify reality in images so big and bright even the blind could see.

In that one month, a sudden late-winter revival of art movies and

neo-leftist films unreeled before him the repressed terrors of the anti-fascist war of his childhood when he had wakened screaming from his dreams, smothering in his pillow, pissing in terror of the Germans and Japs who were trying to kill him. For that one month of double features at the Strand he watched the comedy of pain and blood and shit that men visit one on the other.

He could not resist his celluloid fix. He understood his relationship to the screen. Dreams, he remembered as his own from childhood, sometimes shocked him in old film revivals and on the late show when those dreams, that he had thought were *his* dreams, appeared as real scenes in real films to which his parents had taken him from birth. They had not been his private dreams at all, but Hollywood dramas drenched in violence and propaganda and chauvinism of all kinds. They soaked into the blotter of his tiny head, were digested like popcorn into his interior self.

To him all images were erotic. During his orgiastic month, masturbating in movie theaters, he was exhausted as much by his unrequited passion for Kick as he was by the cinema bloodlust. The suffering on screen was less than the suffering Kick caused in his heart.

He was a part of all he watched.

Technicolor images hovered over him, huge on screen, like carrion birds over sweet rotting flesh. Catholicism had programmed him into sanctified sex and violence. Every noon, for ten years, over silent lunch at Misericordia Seminary, the priests had read *The Roman Martyrology* from the pulpit overlooking the dining tables. Ryan digested his bread and soup to those stories of mutilated saints tortured to Death for centuries by bearded pagans who flaunted their own naked bodies, and by barbarian infidels who trampled the beliefs he held. He swallowed the glamour of martyrdom with his lunch. But the priests went too far. Ryan had left them, refusing to become a priest at all, because, once they had admitted him so deep inside Catholicism, he had decoded the Church's double-talk from inside out. The priests taught Absolute Truth, but they cautioned the seminarians never to speak the full truth to the baptized—but unwashed—laity. "They are not really ready," Monsignor Linotti had said, "to understand complicated moral theology—that abortion after rape or incest, for instance, is permitted as a reasonable self-defense, because the fetus is an unjust aggressor in the woman's body." It was not sex, but intellect that caused Ryan to exit the Church. He had not known that he was a born spy.

He had asked the priests about cardinals wearing scarlet and ermine robes as opposed to their clothing the naked and feeding the hungry.

They shook their fingers at him, accused him of worldliness and pride, and said the poor needed the vision of hope dramatized in all the pomp of Roman ritual and pageantry. They wanted his obedience, but his intelligence could no longer let him kneel in blind faith. His first attraction to the Church had turned to distraction. Faith gave way to reason. His distraction, by dint of reason, turned to refraction. He saw the world in a different way: bent in and through and then out of a Catholicism that had shaped then shaken him.

His soul resounded to Mexican filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*. Jodorowsky's vision of Catholicism, twisted through mystic myths of Santaria saints and pagan warriors, spit in the face of Roman theology. Wildly. Magically. Jodorowsky's films, virtually painted on black velvet, were as ritually crazy as Catholicism's worship of the sweating, naked, crucified, muscular Jesus. Jodorowsky engaged Ryan's Catholic bloodlust as much as his uncle Les had engaged him sexually for the love of God in the sacristy. Something sacred and erotic in the dark womb-cavern of profane movie theaters made him need to cum. The cuming relieved ever so temporarily his anxiety. If ever Ryan's life was a movie, Jodorowsky was the director.

Ryan was so fascinated by *The Holy Mountain*, he went back for a second time to the Ghirardelli Square Cinema, taking, against his loneliness, an acquaintance named Juan Jose Morales who danced the "Love Act" with a blonde woman in a North Beach topless club. The "Axon: Chief of Police" sequence had proved too much for Juan Jose. In the seat next to Ryan, Juan Jose fainted dead away under the power of the on-screen action.

Ryan watched, in utter surprise, something like Juan Jose's Catholic soul rise momentarily, sucked up and out of his front-row seat to merge with the screen. With good reason. The young male victim in the film looked physically much like the beautifully built, olive-skinned Juan Jose himself.

Lithely muscular, he was strapped, on screen, this young Latin boy, to a raised platform, spread-eagled and naked, his cock covered with a black leather sheath, his dark curly hair garlanded with flowers. He was spread for initiation into Axon's army of soldier-lovers. The platform itself stood centered in a hot and dusty military parade ground. A thousand soldiers in green fatigue pants, stripped to the waist, faces covered with gas masks, stood at silent attention, as through the fortress gate rode, on his huge stallion, Axon, the Chief of Police of the Planet Axon.

Kick could have played the part. Axon was as fair as Juan Jose was

dark. Axon's body was fully muscled. His blond hair, unlike the boy's full head of curls, was shaved but for a Mohawk crest of blond from his stern forehead to the nape of his thick neck. His tanned, naked body was harnessed at biceps, chest, waist, and thighs with black-leather bands. The soldiers, as Axon dismounted, jumped up and down in place shouting, "Axon! Axon! Axon!"

Axon himself strode up the platform between the boy's spread legs. He carried a huge shears in his big hands. In close-up, he palmed the young balls, pulled them ever so gently down from the boy's torso, down from the black-sheathed cock. The shears glinted hot around the sweating balls. Then Axon's muscular hand closed to a fist, snapping the shears, severing the balls. *Cut. Quick edit.* Magically, as only movies can do, the young initiate was kneeling in Axon's private, circular chamber, surrounded by row above row of glass jars, each with its own scrotum. The boy's was the thousandth Axon had taken.

In the theater darkness, even this second viewing, Ryan had cum, helpless in his own swoon to revive Juan Jose in his faint, both of them reviving together, laughing, crying, witnessing in each other the connection of the bright screen to their darkest thoughts.

Kick was slicing off Ryan's balls.

## 5

At the end of the month of films, Kick, one night, showed up, as expected as ever, as unexpected as ever, on Ryan's doorstep. "I can come in?" he said.

"You remembered," Ryan said. "I have this fatal attraction for men carrying gym bags."

Kick was more massive than ever. He lumbered into the house. He had come back as Ryan knew he would. He had come back and Ryan was determined behind his forced smile to fix it or finish it according to the plan he had made in *Killing Time till Armageddon*. He felt like a gunfighter approaching the Not-So-OK Corral; but as quickly as Kick embraced him, the old rush of feeling pent up for so long inside him broke loose. He could not mention the night with Katharine Hepburn. He wondered if Kick had even noticed him burning in flames in the back rows of the orchestra. "My God," Ryan said, "all this new muscle is unbelievable."

"The Mr. Cal is next month. I came back to buff up. I need to psych up with you. You're my lucky charm." He put his gym bag, nylon jock jacket, and car keys on a table by the door. "Let's go to Castro. I need a

six-egg omelet.”

“I don’t eat on Castro anymore.”

“Why not?”

Ryan lied. “Because of AIDS.” The plague was his excuse to avoid all the places they had once hung out, places where guys continually asked him, “Where’s Kick?”

“You can’t catch AIDS eating in a gay restaurant,” Kick said. “You’re going to live forever.” He threw his muscular arm around Ryan’s shoulder.” Come on,” he said.

“Only if I drive,” Ryan said.

“Okay, coach. If you insist.”

After supper at Without Reservation, they walked back to Ryan’s Rabbit, breaking through the wave of men who turned to gawk at Kick. Ryan had parked on Castro in front of Donuts & Things, three cars up from 18th Street.

He climbed in behind the wheel.

Kick settled his big blond turbo body into the economy passenger seat.

A white van, double-parked, blocked their exit. Ryan did not turn the key in the ignition. *Maybe I’ll win. Maybe I’ll lose. Maybe I’m cryin’ the blues. Ready or not, here comes mama!* He made it short and sweet. “Let’s drive up to Bar Nada.”

Kick winced.

“I want you to drive up to the country with me.”

“No.” Kick’s face looked pale in the cold light flooding the car from the donut shop. Kick knew, as Ryan was discovering, that his muscular blond power in leading their relationship had been all along a simple gift from Ryan.

“Why not?” Ryan saw in Kick’s face that Kick knew the jig was up. The whole film of three years with Kick raced fast-forward through his head. *I shouldn’t be doing this.* Ryan was like a man drowning. He could hardly breathe in the humid car.

“I’m tired of impossible demands,” Kick said.

“Impossible demands? I’ve never asked you for anything for myself. You said I could have anything. And now I’m asking for it. I want you to drive up to Bar Nada with me.”

“What do you really want?”

“I want...”

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want us to be the way we were. I want to be loved back.”

Kick rubbed the thick blond hair on his forearms. “I don’t love you the way you love me. I don’t love you that way.”

“You don’t want anybody that way.”

“I don’t need anybody that way.”

“Not even Logan?”

“No. Not even Logan.”

“Good. Then we’re clear on that.”

“I have a sexual attraction to Logan. I don’t love him.”

“You said you loved me. You said we were lovers.”

“I do love you. But not the way you want me to.”

“How do you love me then?”

“You’re the dearest man I know. You’re a madman. You have madness. You have passion. You have intensity.”

“I think too much. I get depressed.”

“You feel too much.”

“Is that wrong?”

“Not unless it hurts somebody,” Kick said.

“Have I ever hurt you?”

“Not unless you’re hurting me now.”

“Don’t double-talk me. I’m the talker.”

“You’ve always got what you wanted.”

“I got the fantasy of you. I hoped you were real.”

“I am real.”

“Prove it. Drive with me to Bar Nada.”

“No. I can’t. I won’t.”

“You must have freon for blood,” Ryan said.

Kick turned his face away. “This is part of the curse,” he said.

“What curse?”

“The curse of looking like this. Of looking the way I look. People make impossible demands. Something you never did. Something—the one thing—that made you different from everybody else. Something that kept you from being ordinary. Something that’s making you like everybody else.”

“You’re no god,” Ryan said. Saying it, he felt like a heretic coming out of the closet. “Your Universal Appeal is slipping.”

The temperature in the car changed.

“What’s that mean?”

“You’re becoming a musclefreak, a gym bum.”

“I intend to turn professional right after the Mr. California.”

“You’ve always been professional. Now you’re going to hustle your

muscle.” Ryan imagined Kick’s picture in the muscle magazines endorsing megavitamins and “natural” steroids, pushing \$29.95 mail-order courses screaming ad headlines: “You Can Have Arms Like Mine in Three Days.”

“Everything has its going rate.”

“You should never have hustled me. Never me.” Ryan flashed on Teddy, the original hustler Judas.

Ryan was too polite, even in his anger, to mention he’d found out on Kick’s trips to El Lay to see Dr. Steroid that he’d been invited to that famous swimming pool at that castle in the Hollywood hills where, every Sunday afternoon, the most handsome muscle guys from the gyms stood on one side of the pool and the checkbooks stood on the other.

“I didn’t have to hustle you. You gave me everything.”

“Exactly. I gave and gave and gave.”

“Then I didn’t hustle you.”

“You hustled my heart. I wish you could have turned my head and left my heart alone.”

“I don’t believe this,” Kick said. “My life is turning into a B-movie.”

“Just like when you muscle-hustled that poor girl.”

“What girl?” Kick’s face glowered, afraid that Kweenie had spilt their little secret.

“The Third Runner-Up in the Miss Alabama Contest. The girl who threw herself out of your car and landed on her face when you told her you didn’t really love her that way.”

“You forget nothing, do you?”

“I take notes. I have a photographic memory. I have tunnel vision around you. I see, hear, think of nothing else. I’m obsessed with you.”

“I love you for that.”

“Then drive to Bar Nada with me.”

“I’ve had enough,” Kick said.

“No, I’ve had enough. I want more.”

“So do I.”

“What more do you want?”

“I want you to see me as I really am,” Kick said.

“What a hoot. We both want the same thing. Don’t double-talk me. I hate reverse psychology. What’s all this mean? What has all this meant? What are you trying to do?”

Kick looked Ryan directly in the eye. “Make a man out of you.”

The low blow stopped Ryan dead in his tracks.

Outside, late winter rain pelted the sidewalks. Gay men stood huddled in the doorways of stores. The rain brought the street cruising to a

cold stand-still.

"I've been coaching you, Ry." Kick drawled it softly. "All along I've been the coach."

Ryan sat rocking behind the wheel of the small car. He could not look at Kick and Kick would not look away from him.

"You were the coach?"

"I'm always the coach."

"I want you to drive to Bar Nada." Ryan's voice was low and controlled.

"No," Kick said.

"No?"

"No." Kick's face hardened.

Ryan sucked in all the deep breaths he had been missing.

"Then, this time, Rhett Butler, you get out." With that one simple sentence, Ryan Steven O'Hara avenged every Miss Scarlett ever crossed by a man. He knew it was the end of his life.

Kick slowly moved his hand to the door. He opened it. The cold air sucked body heat from the car. He pulled his big body out the door. For a moment he stood on the curbing. Rain soaked his tee shirt tight against his shoulders and chest. His groomed blond hair curled into steaming wet locks. Then with both his enormous arms he gently shut the car door.

*Come back, Shane!*

*Come back, Little Sheba!*

*Come back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean!*

*Oh, Ashley! Ashley dahrrrrling, come bayack!*

*Stell-aaah!*

*What movie are we?*

*Without Margaret Mitchell there would be no Tennessee Williams.*

The white van double-parked next to Ryan roared into life and pulled away, screeching its tires on the wet street.

Slowly, Ryan turned the key in the ignition.

Kick stepped back from the car.

More slowly, Ryan pulled away from the curb.

He turned once to look, one last time to look, seeing Kick outlined in the glow from Donuts & Things, standing cast out in the cold rain without his jacket, without his gym bag, without his Corvette keys, locked out of the Victorian.

This was the ending against which Ryan had shot the videotapes, written the *Journals* and letters, and saved the gifts of Kick's boots and clothes. They were empty consolation prizes.

He figured it was the last time he would ever see Kick in his life.

He sped north through the City, wildly through the rain, heading toward the Bridge. Through the windshield, his face was lit like a crystal demon speeding through the orange mist of the Golden Gate, heading toward the dark freeway to Bar Nada. A whim to stop and jump crossed his mind, but he was too angry to kill himself. He knew what he must do. He pressed on through the rain. His heart was racing like a bad speed trip. He flew through the night. He felt like a small-town mailbag snatched up by a speeding express train. His car roared up the gravel drive to the ranch house.

Logan was standing in the rain waiting for him. He was big, dark with steroid-rage in his yellow rain slicker. Kick had called ahead and warned him.

“You skinny-necked geek,” Logan shouted. “You’re not throwing me out of here!”

“You’re history!” Ryan shouted. The rain drenched him.

“You’re nothing!” Logan walked slowly toward him. “You’re not getting any of the grass. We sold it months ago.” He pointed to the carport. “See the new truck? It’s in my name! It’s in Kick’s name! We bought it, geek! Together! We took you, you lame wimp! Because you were easy to take.”

“You’re a liar!”

“No, you dickhead, you’re the liar!” He pushed his face close up against Ryan’s. “You never even had sex with him. He told me so. Except for that one night when I sat on your face. He said we had to have a three-way with you. Whoa! What a joke! It was a mercy-fuck!”

Ryan threw a punch into Logan’s hard gut.

“You fuckin’ pussy!” He slapped Ryan across the face “You fuckin’ wimp!” He backhanded him again. “You cunt!” He punched Ryan in the stomach.

Ryan doubled over.

Logan wrapped his arm around Ryan’s waist, turned him upside down, and shook him. Ryan gasped for air. Logan bear-hugged him and carried him to the barn, dragging Ryan’s head through the mud, kicking his face with his boots. “We’ll see who’s fucking who,” he said. He threw Ryan on the floor, straddled his weight across his chest, and beat his face.

“We...,” Ryan shouted between the punches, “...made...love!”

“Pussy!”

“We...made...love!”

“You geek-cunt pussy!”

“You can kill me...”

“Don’t tempt me!”

“But we made...love!”

Logan tore at Ryan’s shirt, ripping it away from his chest. He pulled Ryan around the floor yanking off Ryan’s jeans. He kicked him repeatedly on his naked butt.

“You fucking asshole cunt!” He threw Ryan on his back across the leather-covered weight bench over which Thom had committed suicide. He handcuffed Ryan’s wrists together below the bench. “I’m gonna show you lu-u-v!”

Logan popped open the fly of his wet jeans. His huge cock stood at full attention. He spread Ryan’s legs. He drove his dry cock hard into Ryan’s ass. Ryan screamed. It was not pleasure. It was pain. It was not sex. It was violence. Logan slapped him hard in the face, pushed his knees back beside his ears, grabbed his shoulders with both his big hands, and threw the full weight of his muscular body into Ryan. “Take it, you bitch!” He threw a vicious fuck. “That’s what you deserve! That’s what you need! That’s what you get!” Deeper and deeper he plowed into Ryan’s ass.

“Get out!” Ryan screamed. “Get out! I’m going to kill you!”

Logan reared back and slapped Ryan’s face, riding him like a horse to full lather. “I’m gonna kill *you!*” Logan said. “I’m gonna fuck you to DEATH!”

He pulled his cock from Ryan’s ass. He deftly unlocked the handcuffs. He picked Ryan up bodily, turned him over like a wrestler in a ring, and slammed him belly-down across the bench, throwing the full fury of his hate into him, driving his cock home to the hilt. Cumming, he slapped the flat palms of both hands hard on Ryan’s back, driving the air from Ryan’s lungs. As rough as he entered, he pulled himself from Ryan’s bloody ass.

Ryan was nearly unconscious.

Logan pulled him up from the bench and threw him on his back on the floor. Again he straddled Ryan’s chest. He thrust his still-hard cock in Ryan’s face. He slapped him hard. Once. Then twice. “Clean it up,” he said. He shoved the slab of his dirty meat into Ryan’s mouth. “Clean it up, you silly pencil-neck geek bitch!”

But Ryan could not. He choked on the slimy head rammed deep down his throat. He vomited the supper he had eaten with Kick.

Logan pulled back in disgust. “No wonder he never had sex with you. You filthy cunt!” Logan stood up over Ryan’s face and chest. “You dirty bitch!” He wrapped the long rod of his cock in both his hands. Its big head bulged out angry and purple. “Piss on you,” he said. His long stream sprayed across Ryan’s body.

Logan left him naked and cold, choking, wet, unable to move on the floor of the barn.

Twenty minutes later, Logan, his new truck, the pink slip in his name only, the duffle with everything he owned, and some of what Ryan owned, roared down and out the drive of Bar Nada.

**6**

“I want them dead,” Ryan said. He had not gone back to the Victorian from Bar Nada. He holed up at Solly’s penthouse. “Kick called Logan,” he said. “Kick set me up. Kick might as well have raped me himself. I want them both dead. I want them to die in great pain.”

Solly was nonchalant. “Is that all there is to a rape?”

“It should happen to you,” Ryan said.

“It did,” Solly said. “I’ll always have Beirut.”

“You said they didn’t rape you.”

“I lied.”

“Life’s different,” Ryan said, “after you’ve been raped.”

“You are sounding,” Kweenie said, “very like a feminist.” She pulled a copy of the *Manifesto* from Solly’s bookshelves. She threw it on the couch. “Eat your words.”

“*Touché!*” Ryan said.

“What offended you more?” Solly said. “Getting fucked over or getting called *pussy* and *cunt*?”

The smoulder in Ryan’s face turned to fire.

“Just checking!” Solly said.

Ryan sat up slowly on the couch where he lay. His butt was sore. His right eye was black. His face was bruised. “Kick not only lied to me. He lied to Logan too. He told Logan that we never had sex.”

“Did you have sex?” Kweenie asked.

Ryan glared at her.

“Just checking,” she said.

“What do you mean, did we? Of course, we did. What do you think this is all about?”

“Get over it,” Solly said.

Ryan put his hand to the six stitches in his puffed lip. “He shouldn’t have hit my face.”

“Poor baby,” Kweenie said.

“It’s not over till it’s over,” Ryan said.

“It’s finished,” Kweenie said.

“It’s not finished till I finish it.”

“Exactly,” Solly said. “It’s over for Kick. Now you have to let go of it.”

“Nothing lasts forever,” Kweenie said.

“I’ll second that,” Solly said.

“I’ll tell you what lasts forever,” Ryan said. His anger collapsed under the weight of his heart. “His being gone will last forever. Loss lasts forever. Emptiness lasts forever.”

“You should be glad he’s gone,” Kweenie said.

When Ryan returned to the Victorian after a week at Solly’s, Kick’s clothes had disappeared from the house.

“He broke in and took them,” Ryan said. “He even stole the one Most Muscular trophy he said was mine.” Ryan had reached into the drawer where he kept mementos Kick had given him. He winced. “He took back the posing trunks he gave me from our first contest.”

A week passed before Ryan realized Kick had stolen the typed manuscript of *Universal Appeal* with all its photographs and negatives.

“Call the police,” Kweenie said.

“My dear,” Solly took her hand. “The San Francisco police do nothing about lovers’ domestic quarrels.”

“Even about Logan?” she asked.

“Even about Logan,” Solly said.

“Then you’re treated worse than women,” she said.

“The only justice,” Ryan said, “is vigilante justice.”

“I suggest,” Solly said, “you change your locks. That’s the one thing I’ve learned in dealing with my little hustlers. Keys disappear. Once a month I change my locks.”

“I already have.” Ryan held up a set of bright gold Schlage keys.

Three weeks later, Kick broke into the Victorian again. Ryan was furious.

“What did he take?” Solly asked.

“He didn’t take anything. Not this time.”

“Then why,” Kweenie asked, “are you so mad?”

“This time he made a delivery.”

“Flowers and candy?” Solly said.

“He had the nerve to bring back every single gift I ever gave him. He owes me money. But he sneaks into my house and brings back all the special sentimental gifts I ever gave him.”

“He’s good. He’s real good,” Solly said. “Signs and omens. Maybe’s he trying to tell you something.”

“Like good-bye, dear, and a-men,” Ryan said. “He really knows how

to hurt a guy. He kept all the Pendleton shirts and leather fetish clothes I gave him. Those he can still use with his new tricks." His voice rose. "Don't you understand? He sneaked in and piled on the floor inside the bedroom window all my gifts that were...personal!"

"So what are you going to do?" Kweenie asked.

"I'm going to teach Charles Bronson a thing or two about revenge!"

"First you have to find him," Solly said.

"I don't ever want to see him again."

"I've been playing Miss Marple," Kweenie said. "He's been at the gym every day."

"Naturally," Ryan said. "Mr. Schmuck wants to be Mr. California."

"And," Kweenie said, "he's taken a studio apartment in the Castro."

"Location," Solly said, "is everything."

"Some surprise," Ryan said.

"If you want a surprise," Kweenie said, "Logan has left town for good."

"Bad pennies," Solly warned, "always return."

"This one won't," Kweenie said. "Sources close to the couple..."

"Out with it," Ryan said.

...reveal that Logan split with the truck and the grass."

Ryan felt a rush of pure satisfaction. What he had to do he could now do with full clarity that he was not doing it because Kick had run off to live with Logan. Things were back to square one. What was between the two of them was between them only. He was bent on teaching Kick one final ultimate lesson.

I think, and this I have said many times, that when men go against the heterosexual norm and dare to love each other, they love each other somehow more intensely, precisely because the world is against them, and when that intense love ends, its passion becomes enormous rage, at each other, and at themselves, for making the straight world seem right and them seem wrong.

Yet what hurt Ryan most, among all the returned gifts of the unbonding, was that Kick, a man, a male, one of his own kind, had in fact acted badly, acted in the way women always protest a man in a relationship finally always acts. The seducer becomes the lover becomes the betrayer.

"He woke the man in me," he wrote in *Armageddon*, "but he killed the child."

"Make a man of me, indeed!" Ryan could not forgive Kick for coaching him into a sexual hyper-manhood and then turning him into an abandoned lover worn, like some gay trick, by the wars of the sexual revolution. He had thought Kick's form and face, his manly grace had ushered him

into a new state of grace; but finally the best boy on the movie set realized what he had lost in gaining the fast-lane manhood he had come to California to find.

Innocence.

Children live in a state of grace from which adults fall away. Ryan read tome from *The Education of Henry Adams*: “A boy’s will is his life, and he dies when it is broken, as the colt dies in harness, taking a new nature in becoming tame.”

Deep down, this taming of his will to deference, to become what Kick wanted, and not Kick’s dalliance with Logan Doyle, was the betrayal. All Ryan’s life was a taming: the doctor who, clucking at foreskins, had civilized his penis; the women in the kitchens of his childhood; the priests at Misericordia. Education had fucked him over. Nurture tried to destroy his nature. He had been an innocent who had resisted them all, more or less, for better or worse, until Kick came along and took all his resistance away. He had fought to save his wild innocence for a reason he did not know until Kick walked into that house in El Lay that hot summer night when he surrendered everything to become the wild man he wanted to be.

When Kick betrayed his innocence and trust, Ryan’s wildness turned into a madness. He became bitter, cynical, biting, sarcastic. He did not like himself, so he liked nothing and no one.

He stopped writing his erotic stories. He felt desexed. He could not encourage serial tricking. Heavy sex was unsafe; tricks were as dangerous as serial murderers. He had dreams, and sometimes dreams are wiser than waking, that his writing grew at the end of his hand like a cancer growing on his fingers.

I’ve written too much. I’ve written about the wild, promiscuous, dirty things our mothers warned us against. A bleary life of bars and baths and drugs. We have the bodies of men, the feelings of men, but we are headstrong babies. What if some poor fool gay boy reads my stuff, goes out and does it and dies.

He was afraid his writing encouraged behavior that caused the AIDS that killed the boys who lived in the fantasies Ryan built. He stopped publishing *Maneuvers*. He could no longer glorify sex in its pages.

Solly was appalled. “As a pornographer myself,” he said to Ryan, “all I can say is that we’re talking major league brain damage. Yours! Maybe you did take too many drugs.”

“I’m heavy into *Killing Time till Armageddon*,” Ryan said. “I’m into a

different trip now.”

“So am I,” Kweenie said.

“It’s about time for you both,” Solly said.

“I’m going to Los Angeles,” Kweenie said. “January asked me to come stay with her. She knows some people she says I should know. I’ve never performed in El Lay.”

Before Kweenie left, Ryan gave us each a copy of the lead essay in *Armageddon*. It was a confessional titled, “By Blonds Obsessed: Southern Men, Scarlett O’Hara, and Me.”

Loss. It stays forever. The only truth that stays forever is Kick couldn’t stay forever. It registers in my whole being. Forever I’ll feel him in my whole body. I’m filled with him, emptied by him, of him, for him. Somewhere in it all I sinned. I had a false god before me. I made him a god when he was only a man. He couldn’t sustain that. Who could? He feared that. He must have seen the way I looked at him, seen adoration in my eyes every time I was behind the cameras shooting him, recording the moments I knew even then couldn’t last. I gave him everything you can give a god: myself.

He knew he was no god; but he took the honor I bestowed on him. He shined with divinity. He took my money, my time, my love—everything. Friends said he emptied me like a checkbook; that he was not a god; that he was only a vampire. But I loved him. I loved the ideal I saw incarnate in him. So forever, at least, I have that to remember: that joy of fullness, that pain of subtraction, of emptiness. I hurt. When I die my thoughts will uncontrollably go back, not just to our three years together, but to those ecstatic moments when time stood still and space did not exist, when we were gods together, and my last thoughts will be of him.

I don’t think he knows, not really, how I loved—love—him. Maybe he does—did—and that’s why, when I told him I was dying, being drained by our relationship, by our way of relating, he said he’d have to go. Period. No discussion. Nothing. He knew. He knew. He knew all along—and that was the greatest betrayal—that he was loved more than he could love, not only me, but anybody.

That was it. That was his betrayal. That was the golden man’s deep secret.

He knew he could not love.

That's why he could never be responsible for anyone's happiness. That's what he meant when he said I didn't know what it was like to be inside a body like his.

He knew I could do what he could not.

I never meant love to be a contest.

I didn't mean to win. Not the way he thought I did when he said he hoped to love Logan the way I loved him. At least with Logan he tried. But he failed. Logan left him too.

He said he preferred communicative men to competitive men. In his mind, did he see me as a competitor? Did he feel me outstrip him in love? Did he think he had lost that competition? A competition more important than bodybuilding. Is that what turned him to steroids? Fear of not being big enough for love? Fear of losing? Fear of losing to other bodybuilders the way he feared he had lost to me? I didn't think he was that competitive. I didn't think winning meant so much to him. Has he lost his love of sport? Did he think in love, someone wins...and someone surrenders?

Love is not a physique contest.

"You'll never catch on, will you?" Kweenie said.

Ryan drove her to the airport. "Give January my regards," he said. He headed back to the City to call Teddy.

"What do you want?" Teddy was suspicious on the phone.

Ryan had spotted Teddy the day before on Castro. He had looked unhappy. Ryan had heard rumors of fights between Teddy and his leatherman lover. He decided to invite Teddy over for supper to ask him about the possibility of reconciliation; but on the phone he was clever enough not to reveal his motive. Ryan feared sex with strangers; Teddy was not Kick, but he had been, before Kick, the most Ryan had known of love. Ryan knew Teddy inside out. Teddy was safe.

Somewhat reluctantly, Teddy agreed to come. He was a sucker for a free meal.

Ryan carefully prepared the exotic lasagna that had always been Teddy's favorite. The kitchen filled with a warmth it had missed for years. Ryan and Kick had always eaten out. The only kitchen appliances they had ever used were the refrigerator and the blender. Ryan hoped against hope that a reconciliation with Teddy might be the best antidote to the strain of Kick's absence.

"I'll tell you one thing," Solly had said. "When you pushed Kick you

made him choose between the drugs and you.”

“I’m stronger than drugs,” Ryan had said.

“No one,” Solly had said, “wins against drugs.”

“Ah,” Ryan said to himself, checking the oven, “No one, especially Teddy, wins against lasagna.” He wondered how Kick and he had survived on only omelets and tuna fish for so long. No wonder the cheeses and sauce smelled so good.

Teddy arrived. Ryan hugged him at the door. “I think I smell lasagna,” Teddy said.

“How about some wine?” Ryan poured two glasses.

His tape deck was playing tunes recorded when they had been a couple. Teddy turned nervous when Liza sang “Come Saturday Morning” from her movie *The Sterile Cuckoo*. It had been their song. Both pretended not to notice the lyrics.

“So...” Ryan said.

“So...” Teddy said.

They sat at opposite ends of the living room. Ryan was careful not to press his game plan. He intended to start the summit somewhere in the middle of the lasagna.

“You surprised me,” he said to Teddy.

“Why?”

“I didn’t think you’d really come. But I wanted to see you.”

“I wanted to see you too,” Teddy said. “That’s why I came.”

Ryan’s bruised heart rose up. Teddy maybe felt the same way. Maybe absence had made their hearts grow fonder. A lot of blood had flowed beneath their bridge. Ryan, who could never let go of anyone or anything, knew there were some bridges that never burn.

“I’m sort of horny,” Teddy said.

Ryan smiled. Twist Teddy’s tits and he’d follow anyone anywhere. This was going to be easier than he thought. He felt a surge of certainty that Teddy, if asked and wooed the right way, might come home to the place he had never wanted to leave, even after Ryan had thrown him out.

“To us.” Ryan lifted his wine glass.

“To what once was us,” Teddy said. He sipped the wine. “Actually, the reason I came...”

Teddy’s faced glowed with the happiness Ryan remembered in his face during the best of their times. Ryan felt certainty bloom in the room. Teddy had grown up. He had become independent. He had become, instead of a shadow of Ryan, his own person. That transformation had, before all, been the main reason Ryan had thought Teddy needed a separate peace

to get his act together. He sensed in his old lover's face intimations of the joy they had once found in sex.

Teddy rubbed his crotch.

Against the confusion Kick had raised in his head, Ryan felt his confidence return in the dependability of Teddy's presence.

"I thought," Teddy said, "we deserved one more fuck together."

*He wants sex. Good. I'll feed him and fuck him and he'll come back home.*

"I know the reason you came." Ryan rubbed his own crotch. "It's the same reason I asked you."

"Then you know," Teddy said. "You've heard."

Ryan rose from his chair and sat on Teddy's lap. He turned his voice down to its most seductive. "I've heard what I used to hear," Ryan whispered, "that we were good when we were together."

"We were good," Teddy said, "until we were bad."

Ryan stared at him. *I've always loved him.*

"The reason I've come," Teddy said, "is to tell you myself."

Ryan felt something change in the room.

"I'm leaving San Francisco. Hank and I are moving to Wyoming. We both want to get as far away from AIDS and everything as we can. We want to start over together with each other. I wanted you to be the first to know. I wanted to tell you myself."

"No way," Solly later told me, "did anyone eat that lasagna!"

7

Ryan fled again to the refuge of Solly Blue. At the door, Ryan screamed, "What movie am I?"

*"The Towering Inferno?"*

*"Phaedra. I'm Melina Mercouri in Jules Dassin's Phaedra."*

"You've lost me."

"I've lost everyone." He acted like a soldier whose second trench mate had died in his arms. "What's the matter with me? What do I do to people?" He imitated Mercouri's deep voice. "Eagle of the cold north. Falcon of solitude. I give them milk and honey. They give me...poison!" He spun around the room like a full balloon with its neck untied. He was pumped up. He was on a mean roll.

"Calm down," Solly said. He couldn't believe the tactic Ryan had tried with Teddy. "You're out of your mind," he said. "Teddy's a jerk."

"You're goddam right I'm out of my mind. I want them dead. I want

them all dead.”

“Then, my friend, you live in the right City.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means we’ll all soon be dead.”

“I hope so. I sincerely hope so.”

“Do you know the Chinese proverb?” Solly asked. “May you live in interesting times.”

“If it gets any more interesting, I think I’ll be the one who dies,” Ryan said. “And for the first time in my life, I don’t fucking care.”

“Bite your tongue. Be careful what you say. People usually get what they wish for. Remember, this is California.”

“For godsakes!”

“I just thought you might be comforted,” Solly watched so much TV he spoke like a news anchor, “that James Curran, chief federal epidemiologist, announced today that AIDS will become evermore the leading cause of Death for gay men through the end of the century.”

“I want a freeze-frame ending,” Ryan said “Right here! Right now!”

Solly lounged back on his white couch. “What you’re saying is like air.”

Ryan stood at the window and pressed his hot forehead to the cool glass. The City shimmered in the night below him. He was suddenly afraid of the great height from the street. He was afraid he might jump.

“But air is very valuable,” Solly continued. “Breathe deep. Calm down.”

Ryan turned from the window. “Paging Dr. Quack!” His humor collapsed. “Sometimes...” His need to confess embarrassed him. “I want to mutilate myself. Cuts. Burns. Tattoos.”

“Take another breath,” Solly said. “I go through this myself about once a month. There’s no anxiety like sexual anxiety. If it’s any comfort, tomorrow is another day.”

“I want him dead.”

“Which one?”

“Kick,” Ryan said. “Who gives a fuck about Teddy.”

“I think I can end all this nonsense about Kick for you.”

“Oh, really? Oh, Solly!”

“I can.”

“No you can’t. No one can. I’ll follow him the rest of my life. Wherever he goes, I’ll go. I’ll worship him from afar. If I can’t be his adoring friend, I’ll be his adoring fan.”

“That’s short for fanatic.”

“The Mr. California is next Saturday. I’ll follow him there. I’ll follow him to every contest he enters. When he poses, I’ll shout, ‘Fag! Fag! Fag!’”

“All bodybuilders are fags,” Solly said. “I thought you wanted him dead.”

“I’ll kill him professionally. I’ll...Oh, shit! I don’t know what I want.” Ryan turned ambivalent back to the window. “I want...I want...”

“What do you want?”

“I want to remember all of this. I’d rather feel what I feel than never to have known I could feel this much...passion!” Ryan walked back to the couch where Solly reclined like Madame Recamier. “That’s what we had, you know. Passion. More than sex, we had passion.” He lifted Solly’s feet and scooted in under his legs. “How did we ever get to this point, this time, this place? All my life has been lived and I sit here with my best friend, whom I’ve never balled, wondering what happened and what I should do next.”

“I can end this nonsense for you,” Solly said.

“How?”

“Passion costs,” Solly said. “Sex pays. Maybe Kick didn’t like the going rate of passion. Sex turns a profit. He’s opened up a small business, and I think not for the first time.”

“I don’t understand.”

Solly turned the Pink Section of *The Advocate* open to the page where the hustlers, whom *The Advocate* called *models*, listed their personal ads. One of them was circled.

“Read this,” Solly said, “and weep.”

ARMSTRONG. San Francisco’s Biggest Bodybuilder. New in town. First ad. Big Guns. Big Arms. Feel them: thick, big ARMS, muscle-bulked heavily from sweaty workouts, their huge girth sported in a tee shirt, or subtly concealed by shirtsleeves of well-washed flannel stretched across their mass, now stripped to reveal mounds of baseball biceps cabled with vascularity, and thick horseshoe triceps, growing bigger before your eyes, the pump of each successive flex further expressing the disciplined power of the life force that built them. With those Big Guns lifted high in full frontal display of arm muscle, feel them again. Feel the density of each striation as it’s gathered down into the depths of muscle armpits rich with the heavy male scent of bodybuilder muscle sweat. After a bit of smoke and a hit of popper; if you find your nose and tongue exploring the depths of those pits, if you

can take that big muscular arm in one hand and your dick in the other, and discover that between the stroking of the two that you're cuming, then we're both gonna have fun! I'm on my way to the gym now. If BIG-GUNS rap-n-jackoff make you break into a sweat you can't cool off by yourself, give me a call. Health conscious. No fluid exchange. Universal Appeal. 100% repeat. \$300 minimum. I'm expensive, but I'm worth it.

"I don't believe it," Ryan said.

"Didn't I read this once before in *Maneuvers*?"

"The life force. I'll teach him the life force."

"At least he's selling safe sex. He told you he was turning professional."

"He meant professional bodybuilder, not hustler. There's some mistake. Some two-bit model who wanted to be like Kick lifted this ad from *Maneuvers*. Kick's not a hustler."

"Who paid your phone bill?"

"He's not a hustler."

"I always thought you wrote that ad for him."

"He wrote it. This only sounds like him talking like me. Some hustler who read me in *Maneuvers* rewrote that. I'm easy to mimic. It's a sex style."

"Who knows your style best of all?"

"Who would dare to steal this ad?"

"Find out. Call the number in the ad." Solly handed him the phone. He dialed.

It rang.

A machine answered. The taped voice was unmistakably Kick. "I'm at the gym pumping up right now. After the tone, please leave your number and I'll call you back to verify your message."

The machine beeped and Ryan slammed the receiver into its cradle.

"Easy!" Solly said. "I own my phone now."

Ryan threw *The Advocate* across the room.

"That long ad must have cost him a fortune," Solly said. "But he can afford it. He's charging three hundred dollars an hour."

If only Kick had died like Tony Tavarossi in intensive care, then Ryan could have remembered him the way he was, the way he remembered Charley-Pop, the way he remembered Thom. But Kick had not died. He had gone on living. A walking, talking insult, hustling his muscle.

"Everyone will think I was paying him," Ryan said.

"How many times did you have sex with him?" Solly asked.

"Almost every day for the first two years. Not as often last year."

Solly reached for his pocket calculator. “Say eight hundred times?”

“More than I’ve ever had sex with anyone else.”

“Eight hundred fucks at three hundred bucks.” His index finger danced over the keyboard. “That’s two hundred and forty thousand dollars,” Solly said. “Almost a quarter of a million. You never popped for that much, so I’d say you got more than your money’s worth.”

“He was my lover.”

“He’s turned himself into a franchise.”

“Love is a stunt,” Ryan said.

“And Kick’s a stuntman. You know what they say a stuntman is in Hollywood? Two hundred pounds of hamburger in a blond wig,” Solly turned off the lamp.

The surround of City lights filled the dark room of the penthouse. They sat for a long moment in silence. Solly cleared his throat. He began to speak hypnotically.

“You told Kick he had the Gift, but not the knowledge of the Gift. You had what Kick wanted. You had the knowledge of the Gift. You had the words. You were his priest. He was your vocation.”

“Then I’m a twice-failed priest.”

“You had the words.” Solly paused. “Let me put this so you’ll understand.” His voice was soft, insistent. “You had the words of transubstantiation. *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. You did something he could not do. You turned his flesh to godhead.”

“He’s no god.”

“He’s your lover,” Solly said.

“It’s over.”

“He’s your lover. You’re his lover.”

“Then we have some unfinished business.”

“It’s not over till you end it.” Solly was intense.

“This hurt will never end.”

“Then end it.”

“How?”

“Move on. Forget him.”

“I can’t survive.”

“Surviving is your best revenge.”

“That’s his revenge on me. He walked away from the scene of the accident. He survived without a scratch.”

“Then kill him.”

Ryan looked startled. “What?”

“Kill him.” Solly was deadly serious. “I’m only saying what I know

you're thinking. We all think it sometimes. We're all of us murderers in our own hearts."

Something darkly human hidden deep in Solly tried to connect with something unfound deep inside Ryan. "Baudelaire said, 'Life being what it is, one thinks of revenge.'"

"I'm no Baudelaire," Ryan said. "Kick pegged me. With his parting shot, he took my writing away from me. He stole our manuscript. I can't write anything anymore. He gutted me. He knew how to hurt me. He killed me. He said no nine-to-five porn hack was going to ruin his life."

"There you have it."

"Have what? He made sure he left me with nothing."

"All the better," Solly said. "You have your motive."

"What motive?"

"He attacked your very essence. Your way with words. The words he first pursued you for. The words he needed every night. The sex scenarios you created and talked him through. He had read you before he set out to meet you. He was silent as Moses until Michelangelo struck his statue and said, 'Speak!' You gave him words. He spoke and he silenced you. He's your Frankenstein's monster. He made you insane."

"I'm crazy. I'm depressed. I'm not insane."

"Temporary insanity," Solly said. "It worked for Dan White when he shot Harvey Milk." He wove his logic around Ryan's being. "Temporary insanity has nothing to do with the usual insanity defense. Full insanity leads to a judgment of mental incompetence."

"What about erotic incompetence? I know I'll never love this way again."

"Temporary insanity is a euphemism. It's the nearest equivalent a judge and jury can find to a verdict of justifiable homicide." Solly was amazing himself with his mystery writer's logic. "And that's only if you get caught. The fact is most murders go unsolved." He adjusted his butt on the couch. "You set up a situation. You stalk from a distance. You let things happen naturally. When you corner your prey, it's just the obvious conclusion. The murder is simply an action in the order of the hunt. It's just like cruising for sex. You dress yourself up to be appealing. You go where your target hangs out. You pick up on him. You close in. You have sex." Solly paused. "It ends up naturally. Just like you planned. You kill him. You close the door, leave him dead on the floor, and steal away into the night. Think of it."

"I am thinking of it," Ryan said. "Stop scaring me."

"I intend to scare you," Solly said.

“What movie are you?”

“I’m the oldest movie in the world.”

“Definitely an Agatha Christie plot...” Ryan feebly tried to escape Solly’s intense logic. “...narrated by Rod Serling’s silver-tongued devil.”

“You still have the gun I gave you?”

“It’s somewhere in the house.”

Solly laid flat his snare. “Sometimes it’s not wrong to murder.”

“I hate reverse psychology.” Ryan put both hands to his forehead. “Why does everyone use it on me?”

“He tampered with your affection. He took your money and your hospitality. He got you raped. He broke into your house. He assaulted the very writer in you. He stole your manuscript for *Universal Appeal*. He took your photographs. How can you live with yourself if you don’t get even?”

“I love him too much to get even.”

“Now he hustles. Publicly. For money.”

“You’re obsessed with hustlers,” Ryan said.

“He hustled you.”

“He never hustled me.”

“He turned your head and took your heart. That’s the ultimate hustle.”

“I want...”

“What do you want?”

Ryan sat still in the dark “I want him to know my pain.”

“Then scare him. Let him know murderers are everywhere.”

“I want him to know how far we’ve both fallen.”

“Then kill him.”

In the street below, a Muni bus roared up Geary. It was full of light in the dark street. Inside were only the driver and one weary passenger alone in the back of the bus.

“I have to, don’t I?”

A man’s motives need not coincide with civilization when his style of love has not.

“Cut! Print!” Solly said. “End of scene.” He flicked on the lamp, returned them to reality, and offered Ryan his glass of Coca-Cola. “You’re not the only one, buster, who can pull off a talk scene.”

“Very funny,” Ryan said.

“I’m cheaper than a shrink. You’ve got to let it out.”

“I’m so sad I can’t even cry.”

“Then write.”

“Write? I’m a hack, remember?”

“Use your writing,” Solly said “Write a revenge story. Title it ‘Lords

of Leather.’ Work it through. Write him off.”

“That won’t change anything. He loved me. He left me. I’m alone. He betrayed me.”

“We all betray each other. It’s our nature. Betrayal is what is.”

“I love him.”

“Stop loving him today,” Solly said. “That’s truly your best revenge. Stop loving him and start living again. Life goes on.”

“Long after the thrill of living is gone.”

“Forget Kick. Forget Logan. Forget Teddy. Forget ’em all.”

“I don’t want to forget,” Ryan said. “I want to remember all of this. I meant what I said. I’d rather feel what I’m feeling than never know that I could feel so much at all.”

“You must end this.”

“I will,” Ryan said. “I will.”

Solly did not like Ryan’s Look. “I think I took my little hypnotic therapy too far.”

“No,” Ryan said. He pushed Solly’s legs from his lap and walked to the fireplace. “I know I must do something.”

Ryan missed the excitement of being close to the edge with Kick. He needed the feeling of danger.

He leaned against the mantel and closed his eyes. A nightbird darted by the open windows. A voice that was not his voice came from his face. He was not imitating a movie; he had become a movie. He was Claude Rains, speaking perfectly in that actor’s accent, “A vampire can only be laid to rest by one who truly loves him.”

“Get out of here,” Solly said. “Go home. I was supposed to be the one humoring you. Now you’re scaring me.”

## 8

The night of the Mr. California contest Ryan knelt next to his bed. “Listen to us in our darkness, we beseech thee, Oh, Lord.” He prayed again the same passage he had prayed before from the *Book of Common Prayer*. “And by thy great mercy defend us from all the perils and dangers of this night.” This was the ritual darkness of ending and exorcism.

He had been passive long enough.

The time had come to take his life into his own hands.

In the end he could not deny his human heart.

Always he had known, long before he stood that rainy March night outside California Hall on Polk Street, with the gun in his hand, that

his life, scaled down, of course, would be forever like that of the Widow standing, alone in black, with her tiny son, his hand saluting as muffled dreams drummed across a dazed and weeping landscape.

She had been betrayed by a bullet.

Christ had been betrayed by a kiss.

Ryan rocked with images of betrayal: of draft cards burning up in defiant flames; of dogs tearing at black bodies on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Kick's Alabama; of priests arrested and ministers murdered; of American cities on fire; of frightened Vietnamese fleeing their American saviors on the evening news; of a president refusing to accept another term; of a president resigning; of an ancient movie-star president nuclearizing the twilight's last gleaming; of Contras and mercenaries in El Salvador; of faces, pious with hatred, from Dade County and Lynchburg, Tennessee; of wives beaten and raped by husbands; of countries and continents dying of hunger; of gay young men dying with a thousand diseases in their bodies; of a Golden Man smiling his killer smile, posing, posing for cheering audiences.

Chronology was not his style. Feeling was. Sometimes he forgot to breathe. Sometimes he remembered he had to pay for the good times. Sometimes he had that old high-flying feeling of a man who goes starved to bed. Sometimes nothing mattered. Sometimes everything mattered too much.

Ryan took the Yellow Brick Detour.

He was smaller, more real in size, than the Famous Widow, who like him would mourn her love forever, but who, unlike him, was not approaching the auditorium stage where his victorious lover was posing, handsome, golden, muscular, brilliant, shimmering with sweat, triumphant in the final moments of the Mr. California Contest.

Tidal waves of applause washed him closer and closer to the front bank of the stage. He felt himself moving in slow motion through air as thick as celluloid.

The gun was in his hand.

His hand was pulling the gun from the holster of his pocket.

The man he loved more than life itself was turning, in time with the thunderous music of "Marche Slav," nearly naked, in the cone of a hot over-head spotlight, into a magnificent double-biceps shot.

Death excited him now. He had fused with his lover who had fused with him and together they would fuse—wherefore art thou?—forever with Death.

"I want..." he whispered. This time he knew the answer to what he

wanted. The answer was something he could never have again. Something he would have to live without forever. “I want Kick.”

The pain was in him now. Thick and thorough and clear. He had to kill the man to save the ideal. He stood stock-still among the photographers jostling each other for room at the apron of the stage. The gun in his pocket was hard in his hand. He hurt from his fingertips to his soul. His body ached for the touch and smell and taste of the man whose body was as familiar to him as his own. He raised his left arm high above the screaming, surging crowd. He cupped his empty left hand in midair, tracing his moves over the imagined, remembered, sweet full curves of Kick’s massive shoulders, arms, and chest.

In the hot stage light, Kick powered into his finale, lats spread, shoulders wide, head up, face smiling the confidence of victory, legs planted firm for his final lockdown into the Most Muscular pose, the full presentation of the Universal Appeal of his Command Presence.

*He’s no longer posing only for me.*

This was worse suffering than Death could ever be. Kick had made him fearless. No one could do any worse to him than Kick had done. No courts. No judge. No jury. Not even God.

Kick hit his Most Muscular for the first of the three times he always repeated it. The crowd went wild.

There was no God outside themselves. Even gods could be sacrificed.

Kick powered down into the Most Muscular crunch a second time, extending his arms, revolving his fists one around the other, the rotation displaying the popping intricacies of his massively sculpted arms.

Ryan had once feared Death. Now he wanted it. Murder, not suicide, he had once thought the answer. Now he knew the answer was both. Nothing but Death mattered. Death could freeze them forever together outside space and time.

Kick raised his arms, drawing all the power of the lights and the music and the audience to him, and locked down into his final Most Muscular pose. The audience convulsed, rose, screaming.

Ryan pulled the gun from his pocket. He pointed it through the blinding sea of flash-popping cameras rushing the stage.

Kick rose from his crouch and threw both arms high over his head. His body ran rich and golden with sweat and oil.

In the gun sight, Ryan watched his proud grin.

He pulled the trigger, soundless in the cheering auditorium.

Kick’s massive neck bloomed red on blond in the white light. His upraised arms flew back. His whole body rose up from the platform, like

a diver, lifting up from his toes, flipping up to a backwards swan dive, through the fine red spray of blood.

He turned the gun to his own temple, but a bodybuilder standing next to him grappled the gun from his hand. The revolver shot off into thin air.

## 9

None of it worked. He shot Kick alright, but he only wounded him. The brilliant bodybuilder had turned full into the light. The bullet pierced his flesh and lodged in his spine and crippled him from the neck for the rest of his life.

In the instant between Ryan's first shot and his surprise and grief at watching his lover explode in slow-motion Zapruder crumble, something in Ryan flamed hotter than an arc lamp burning through a single celluloid frame caught in a 35-millimeter projector. The dark flicker between frames stopped for the first time in his life. He saw only the frozen single-frame moment with the traveling light burning out the melting Technicolor frame from its center to its edges.

In that pause, muscular hands from the judges' table and from the front row of the audience wrestled him to the floor. A crush of bodybuilders fell across him, smothering him. He felt nothing. He saw nothing. The shots had deafened him. The burning traveling light blinded him.

They took him away. They gave him shock treatments and ice baths and shot him full of Thorazine. For years, he sat, motionless, speechless, staring, wrapped in white sheets, a catatonic patient on the deck of a hospital ship.

He himself had died that night. His soul had left his body, driven by the logic of his passion. So he sat, for weeks, months, years, frozen, immobile, feeling nothing, dependent, as he always imagined he would be, on the blanched kindness of strangers.

## 10

What is the human heart if not a thing of ambiguity? The truth was Kick was a lover who wouldn't die. Good lovers die young. Bad lovers live forever. That's a fact of life. Kick could not be murdered. Kick could not be shot. At least not by Ryan. Kick had rendered him incapable of even that last act of the incapable: murder.

Ryan had gone to California Hall that night. The gun had been in his

pocket. But he could not shoot. He could not kill the winner. He could not murder the new Mr. California. He could not kill his lover in whose magnificent body, he could only hope, lodged, as in his own flesh, the memory of how they had for so long felt one to the other.

He called Kick's muscle-hustle number, prepared to leave at least a threat on his machine.

"You stay out of my way. I love you too much not to warn you. I want to kill you."

But he had not even been able to do that. There is an acceptable level of evil in the human heart, but Ryan, for all his pain, lacked the venom to act.

When he heard that the windshield on Kick's Corvette had been smashed, he wished he had done it himself. When he heard that Kick thought he had done it, he realized that Kick had never known him at all. He was a creator, not a destroyer. He lived only on paper. Kick had nothing to fear. Ryan took small solace from Francis Bacon: "By taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing over it, he is superior."

For months he languished in his Victorian. The place assaulted him. He opened drawers and found sweet old notes:

"I love you, madman!" He decided to reconnect his own answering machine. He tested the tape.

"Hello," the voice said, "you have reached 285-53...."

Ryan's face blanched. It was Kick. It was the message he had recorded when first he had moved in. The drawl in his southern voice was beautiful.

"I was wrong. He didn't fall from grace. I did. He was too good for me."

Small reproaches, sharp as stabbings, crept out of Ryan's bureau drawers and closets. Small reminders: Kick's brass cock ring, a Baggie of clipped blond hair, forgotten letters, a sweat-stiff pair of weightlifting gloves. He began the slow task of collecting the scattered detritus of their affair. It was like nuclear waste storage and retrieval. Its half-life was eternity.

"I'm tired," he said, "of being mugged by memories every time I open a box I haven't touched in a year. I'm living at the scene of the accident."

For four months Ryan haunted his Victorian. His small appliances danced on the counter tops. His electric meter spun in hungry circles. He could not leave. He could not bear the chance of running into Kick on Castro. Dr. Quack threw up his hands. Ryan's depression required more than Valium. Dr. Quack sent him to Dr. Shrink who smoked his pipe

and listened and prescribed Desyrel and lithium to relieve the progress of Ryan's stress, anxiety, and depression. No matter how much medication Ryan took, his pain remained.

He was carrying a torch.

He could not release, any more than he could kill, the ideal he had always known was possible but thought would never happen.

At least not to him.

In the movie *Dirty Harry*, he heard the message he had been waiting for. Clint Eastwood said, "A man's got to know his limitations."

Ryan knew his. He knew he had to let go of what he had promised to hold on to forever. He knew he would never be free of Kick until he himself ended his own heartbreak.

Five months later, on the eve of the following Christmas, Ryan took final matters into his own hand.

Ryan stripped himself naked.

In his room, in his bed, in his video collection of a stupendous lover's performances, in the spread of shirts and posing trunks exchanged in full fetish worship, in all the pictures framed on the walls, in the feel of flannel sheet sworn nubby by the many long nights of lovemaking, with the plastic bag full of hair clippings, near the closet full yet with his unclaimed California Highway Patrol uniform, the uniform he had worn the night they first met, under the dim track light spot, Ryan knelt mid-bed, with everything Kick had not stolen back, to commit finally the unspeakable act, the heretical act that would deny all his previous faith.

That morning out on Geary Street, he had Kick's name tattooed across the shaved skin between his balls and his buttock. The needle had felt like a red-hot razor blade. This evening he knelt in what had been their bed, to make it his bed again. Out of all the acreage he owned, ranch and City, the only claim he staked was the forty-two square feet of this bed, this altar of their bonding.

The handgun, the revolver that Solly had given him to hide, was slipped deep into the holster on Kick's CHP utility belt at the foot of the bed. Next to his brass pipe lay a chunk of hash, a marble ashtray, and a beige pack of matches with black ink spelling out Chuck Arnett's stylized logo for the Ambush bar.

Near him, arranged on the wool chessboard of his blanket, like knights and kings and bishops, and maybe queens, lay his tit clamps and a can of Crisco. On the bureau opposite, Ryan had set up both his television sets. A single image was never enough for him. One monitor, a standard nineteen-inch set, was connected to his video camera set to RECORD

on its tripod and aimed mid-focus at him on the bed. The other, a new forty-four-inch rear-projection screen, was connected to a recorder set to PLAY. Next to it sat a pile of cassettes. All of them of Kick.

“What is to happen tonight,” Ryan announced to the recording video camera, “is an act of freedom. I am untying the knots of our bonding to each other that somehow we both turned into my bondage to him. Enjoy this, Magnus,” Ryan said to me on the videotape. “It’s the autobiography you always wanted. Look around me in this bed. I have not to remember these things; they have remembered themselves. My memory of the vision, of the man who walked that first El Lay night into that vision and fulfilled it, remains clear and bright. Too clear. Too bright. What movie am I?” He laughed. “Alas, poor Yorick.” Sitting naked, up on his knees in his bed, he laughed.

“I guess I’m more narcissistic than Kick. Am I embarrassed? Are you embarrassed, Magnus? I can reveal anything to anyone. People who have been publicly humiliated have that freedom, you know. Stick with me, Magnus, the way you always have. Watch me kill. Watch me die. Watch me fill and smoke the sacred pipe. Watch me break the bonds of gravity and soar into the air with a sky full of angels.

“This is the ceremonial end of ceremony. My childhood and schooling and life choices now seem a strange series of mistakes, arranged first by others, then by myself. It wasn’t sex that made me happy. It was Kick who gave me more happiness than I have ever known. You know that, Magnus. You will be my only spokesman—spokesperson. Ah. I have learned that too. Is not Ginger greater than Fred? She did everything he did, Kweenie said, and she did it backward in high heels. It all makes sense, Magnus, and none of it makes sense. Ask the ladies to forgive my joke on them. You have to interpret everything.

“You can become me for a while, Magnus. You are the professor of popular culture. You can write a piece for a professional journal. What will you write? Confession? Apology? Memoir?”

“I went to Kick for precisely the same reason Thoreau went to Walden Pond: to front only the essential facts of life.

“Can you give lectures on that to your students? Can you be the genial professor lecturing to young students, handing out mimeographed notes to eager, upturned faces on the pop-culture rise and fall of the Castro, like we were part three of a miniseries that started with the Beats in North Beach and the hippies in the Haight-Ashbury? Was the Castro no more than *Brigadoon*? What will you say about AIDS? Will you trivialize all us gay guys—you see, I can say it; I can admit it—into questions and answers

on a pop quiz about our lost homosexual civilization?

"I can't hold that against you, Magnus. Analytical education is what you do best. You remain the teacher I once was, but unlike you I could not remain an observer. I had to go and get involved. I should have known I don't have the strength of character to get involved in anything. I've not been adventurer enough to handle life in California. I should have stayed sitting in my seat in the dark womb-caverns of movie theaters in the Midwest. I'm not cut out to live life. I was born to be a moviegoer, a film fan of dashing, adventurous, romantic men who act out lives larger than my life on brilliant Technicolor screens in Panavision with stereophonic sound.

"Where did I get the idea I could avert fate and change history?"

"I smoke my hash pipe and I ramble. The traditional narrative you want from me is impossible in a world of film and videotape that has turned us all into voyeurs of ourselves. I am a man who tried to be gay, and more than gay, because that seemed the way to absolute manhood.

"For one, brief, shining moment...Oh, Jack! Oh! Jackie!...I thought we all might be onto something; but finally I said *no* when I found no god in man, when I found no angel in him, when I found he was, like me, not perfect, but only a fraction of Adam after the Fall. Welcome, Magnus, to my *Paradise Lost*. What's the line the Eagles sang? 'Call some place *paradise*, kiss it good-bye.'

"How did you find me?' I asked him that golden afternoon his helicopter landed in my fields at Bar Nada. He never answered that. Not really. He only said, 'I know everything about you.' Did he love me before I didn't even know? I wonder if he did. I wonder if he loved me because of a secret me only he knew. Maybe he was trying to coach me to become that me of the me he loved. If he was, then he was guilty of the same sin as me trying to coach him into becoming the him of the him I loved. I wonder if I drove away the best man I ever met before he had a chance to tell me what to this night, this Christmas Eve, I still think he had to tell me. The last thing he said to me was that he had been trying to make a man out of me. He said it just like Charley-Pop.

"My God! My dad would have loved him for a son.

"What if he were an angel? What if I turned on a truly good man? What if I was too impatient with this young god? What if, as I suspect, it was I, not he, who fell from a state of grace?"

"I look at it now. Logan was nothing. The steroids were nothing. I should have put up with anything to keep on keeping on with him. But I couldn't keep up with him. Not physically. Not even sexually. I kept losing part of myself. I thought that was wrong. I feared I would die. But maybe

that's the eye of the needle that love must pass through. Loss of yourself, the Death of identity, until the needle is threaded, and you are given back by your lover anew, improved, reborn sense of your self, rewarded, because you trusted him enough to let go of yourself completely.

"I am not a philosopher, nor was I meant to be. I'm so J. Alfred Prufrock. All I know is I wanted something from him. I wanted something I can't have. I wanted something I lost at the baths. Cheap goods, the Wife of Bath said, have little value. I was cheap goods. I wanted him to give me my innocence back. I wanted purity back, his and mine....Dumb old me. Maybe he had never lost his purity. Maybe he was super-pure and I was too sex-crazed, too drug-impaired to recognize it. That's me all over. Call someplace paradise; kiss today good-bye."

Ryan took the remote gun of his video in his hand.

With the video camera still running, he knelt up in the bed, watching himself kneel up on the nineteen-inch live video screen. He was real. He was on video. He was his own Yorick between two mirrors. One thing was instantly, electronically, two things curving off to infinity. He could see his otherness. What was life if not Chinese puzzle boxes filled with cathode ray tubes?

He took the remote-control gun of his video in his hand. He turned from the live screen and knelt before the blank monitor. He pushed the remote PLAY button.

Kick's supernal blondness lit up the empty forty-four-inch screen.

Ryan controlled Kick's onscreen timing. He pulled the trigger of the video gun. Kick posed on stage, in open fields, in the playroom. Ryan's hand controlled the SLOW MOTION, the FAST-FORWARD, the SPEED-SEARCH for the appropriate footage, the FREEZE-FRAME that could hold Kick on screen forever, the SINGLE-FRAME ADVANCE that made Kick move totally under his coaching, clicking off his movements like the inexorable seconds on a clock.

Kick rose majestic as a sun god above the draw atop Corona Heights. He posed on the dais of a spotlighted stage. He strained in classic bondage sculpture against steel chains and black leather. He sat still in close-up as the camera circled again and again around his face. He stood powerful, oiled, pumped, jerking his enormous dirty-blond cock from the screen.

Ryan responded in kind for his live camera.

"This is an intimacy, Magnus, that I want to share with you."

In the background, his stereo played the Doors. Jim Morrison was singing, "This is the end, my only friend."

Ryan smiled into the camera. "At least I have enough self left to be

self-consciously theatrical,” he said. “That’s the song Coppola used to open *Apocalypse Now*. What is this if not *Heart of Darkness*? I ventured out to live on the edge and stayed out too long.”

He greased his own hard cock. He set his tit clamps. He watched Kick on screen. He stroked himself with the bittersweet feel of a man who knows he is watching something for the last time in his life.

He reached for the remote-control gun, took careful aim at the golden man muscularly stroking himself on screen, and pressed ever so slowly the button on the gun to ERASE DURING PLAY.

Every image he had so painstakingly recorded of Kick, all the images of Kick he had so carefully saved, he saw play for the last time. He was killing the video image of Kick. He was driving the stake through his vampire heart.

Blood on his hands.

The dying videotapes.

*Never to see him again!*

The colors breaking up.

*Never to hold him again!*

The lines per screen dissolving.

*Never to be held by him again!*

Crying like a comrade bereft.

Stroking like a lover.

Kick dissolving, fading, crumbling on-screen in scene after scene.

He had created this man. He was destroying his own creation. As one video erased Kick, the other recorded, if not Ryan, then the shell of Ryan kneeling in the bed, masturbating his final lust, rocking in tears, crying in his cuming, falling back on the bed, spent, watching the last images disappearing from the screen, lying like a perfect sculpture of late-twentieth-century man, spent, lustless, himself watched by the all-seeing eye of the video camera watching him fall back from his sexual pant to the regular rhythms of drugged sleep, his lean aerobic body adrift on the bed, in the sea of mementos, rolling finally, under the track light, to his side, his knees pulled to his chest, sleeping, dreaming, while the humming video camera looked coldly on, running on AUTOMATIC to the end of its LP cassette early that Christmas morning.

**11**

Sometime after New Year’s, Ryan read in *Iron Man* magazine that Kick had placed fifth in the Mr. America contest. Rumors had confirmed

what Ryan figured. After Mr. California, Kick had tossed everything he owned into the Corvette and headed for El Lay. More specifically, he had moved to Venice Beach to work out at the pro-bodybuilder gyms and hang out at Muscle Beach with the big boys.

“He never said *good-bye*,” Ryan said. “Did I hurt him that much? I was the one who was raped.”

Two months later the “Armstrong” ad was back in *The Advocate* with an El Lay phone number.

“Business as usual,” Ryan said. “I wonder what he’d do if I showed up at his door with three hundred bucks in my hand?”

“He’d take it,” Solly said, “and give you the time of your life.”

He tucked the ad into his wallet. The phone number listed was his last thin connection to Kick.

One thought lingered. He had no idea where Logan Doyle had disappeared. He figured not with Kick. It hardly mattered. Logan had never been the point. Logan finally had been the reality. He had given Ryan the physical beating that Kick had given his soul. Ryan nursed a small fear that their paths might cross and Logan might again hurt him physically. Deep down, he resented Kick’s not making sure Logan was safely out of the picture.

“Can we,” Solly asked Ryan, “never mention Kick’s name again?”

“Kick who?”

“Cool,” Solly said.

Ryan finally retracted his animosity to that Dowager Empress, Quentin Crisp, who had said, “There is no tall, dark man.”

“There is,” Ryan said crisply to Solly, “no short, blond one either.”

Solly was acting grand. He was glad Kick was gone. “I can say certain things,” Solly said. “I mean I’m one of the original homosexuals. Before me, there was only Oscar Wilde, Allen Ginsberg, and a couple of bishops. I was the first normal homosexual. Once you guys all turned to kinky specialty acts, you turned out thousands of weird homosexuals. That’s what got us in trouble. Outrageous dirty sex. You were all trying to be more weird than homosexual. You kept trying to find more and more disgusting things to do. That’s what caused AIDS. Since I’m venerable and grand, I can say that.”

Ryan gave him the finger. “Twirl on it.”

“Did you know,” Solly said, “that roofers have more tattoos than any other trade? Murderers have the fewest.”

“What is this? *Trivial Pursuit*?”

“It’s education. I’m educating you, so when I’m killed you can carry on

my business. You may be totally depressed, but you're my only beneficiary."

"Don't be morbid."

"This may seem," Solly said, "to be a moral fable, a story with a point to drive home, an ethical dilemma. Pay attention."

"You mean," Ryan said, "there's more to life than getting fistfucked on the altar of a Catholic Church at midnight on Halloween?"

"See how you are," Solly said. "You're bouncing back nicely for someone clinging to the wreckage."

"Gee, thanks," Ryan said. "What's the difference between a bounce and are bound?"

"I must tell you that there is more to my business than videotaping young hustlers."

"There's blowing young hustlers."

"As I always say, I don't know if I'm Fagin or Father Flanagan."

"I can answer that."

"Don't."

Solly fingered an antique silver spoon once used by stars in the studio commissary before the MGM auction. He sat on his luxurious new couch. He had been upgrading his penthouse furnishings from Salvation Army to Macy's. Behind his head a Warhol poster of Marilyn hung in a chrome frame on the stark white wall.

"Last night I gave this seventeen-year-old hustler my usual speech. Tiger brought him over. I told him why boys like him exist. I told him what his value was. He already knew his price. I actually tried to give him some direction to what he was doing in life. You thought you had a vocation! That's my calling. I counsel hustlers. He'll remember what I said for about two nights, then I'll have to make my speech to him again. Or to another boy just like him.

"That's the function of a john in a deteriorating society. I'm always giving advice. Me and Auntie Mame. Of course, she had the bucks. If I must be compared, Auntie Mame is my choice. I guess I've always wanted to be Auntie Mame. There was a time in life I would have been offended by that. Shows how times have changed."

"Life in the bizarre lane," Ryan said.

"This Auntie Mame's boys are street trash," Solly said. "My boys are not Colt models. If you're to be my heir and carry on my style and tradition, you've got to learn that thousands of men prefer my boys to the slick Colt Studio glamour-boy El Lay muscle types."

"That's why you never liked Kick. He was too 'Colt.'"

"Colt is too Vargas, too George Petty, too Flo Ziegfeld, too Hefner.

He glorifies one type of American gay man, same as you, as if there is no other kind to glorify. I don't like Colt's buffed, fluffed, powdered male 'modelles.' I don't buy into the so-called 'Straight Look' impersonated by butch faggots."

"Colt's not selling *straight* so much as he's peddling homomasculine photographs."

"Give me a break. All you homomasculinists, trying to pass as straight, are as much traitors as blacks passing for white, or Jews like me who change their names from 'Katz' to 'Keats.' What you are, you are."

"But what if some gay boy is more 'Keats' than 'Katz'? Colt is what some of us are. Colt glorifies an ideal. If it takes exaggeration of masculinity to teach sissies the alternatives of homomascularity, I love it."

"That's the trouble with gay porn. *Exaggeration*. It's incorrect, psychologically, and, maybe, as the dykes would say, politically. It idealizes the impossible. Big muscles. Big dicks. Big Looks."

"So you hate Plato? Everybody needs an image to worship and admire. Colt's men should be on Wheaties boxes."

"Ain't you the kid!" Solly said.

"Yeah. I'm the kid who, long before I knew homosexuality existed, wanted to grow up to be like my heroes."

"Spare me your Norman Rockwell idealism. My tapes are jerk-off videos, not training films."

"In porno, a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a camera for?"

"You don't get it, do you?"

"Cut to your point."

"Porn stars aren't meant to be role models."

"But they are, Blanche, but they are!"

"That's the problem."

"I guess I don't get it, do I?" Ryan said.

"Colt puts pressure on ordinary gay men that makes them feel bad about themselves because they don't match the Colt Ideal. Look how that tension got you involved with Kick. You fell in-love with a man on a box of flakes."

"That's a bit cold."

"Frankly, my dear, I don't like pornographers who hire gay men to pretend they're straight. My models actually are straight. Tough. Rough. Crude. Straight trade. I don't like men good-looking enough to sell beer and cigarettes in ads. I like the men who buy alcohol, tobacco, and firearms."

“Handsome men threaten you.”

“Wrong. Handsome men don’t threaten me enough. Colt shoots gay fantasy for design queens. I shoot straight, abusive reality for nasty queers.”

“That makes your stuff scary. No one’s scared of Colt models.”

“Terror makes my stuff a new style of porn: straight men abusing gay men. Who else has glorified rough trade?”

“Terror is your hard-on.”

“Sexual terror is the last closet. I know. My customers love it. I’ll gross over fifty thousand this year without ever leaving this penthouse. That’s why I can afford to be grand. I owe it all to the boys who ring my bell. You may meet Colt models at a gay cocktail party, but you’ll never meet my boys. My boys are boiled eggs and beer, not white wine and quiche.”

“How do you say in English,” Ryan said. “*Chacún a son goût.*”

“You need to know these things,” Solly said. “You’re my heir apparent.”

“I like the fifty-thousand part, but I don’t want you dead. You’re the only friend I have left in San Francisco.”

“Tiger threatened me last night.”

“Your one true love. Your adopted son?”

“You haven’t seen him in a year. My little boy has been working out. He weighs 190 pounds and both his arms are tattooed.”

“So what are you worried about? You said murderers don’t have tattoos.”

“Usually. Last night he showed up, stoned as usual. He took a look around at all my new stuff and said, ‘I should probably rob you, but you know me too well, and you’d probably laugh at me, and then I’d have to hit you.’ He has a knack for escalating violence.”

“Change your locks.”

“I told him it was only a matter of time before he went to prison. He’s lucky he’s still out. He’s a one-man crime wave. He’s got a couple of minor bench warrants out. He admitted he used a gun to hold up a trick on Polk Street. Robbing. Shoplifting. It’s all gone for drugs. Hustlers and drug addicts are the same thing.”

“Get rid of him.”

“I can’t. I love it when he calls me *Dear Old Dad.*”

“Hustlers always say what you want to hear. You told me that.”

“I’ve known Tiger since he was nineteen. He’s twenty-three.”

“Has it been that long?”

“You’ve been somewhat distracted the last few years.” Solly paused. “I feel fatherly toward him. He’s what keeps me from killing myself.”

“So you’re waiting for him to kill you?”

“He’s my responsibility to go on living. That’s what sons are to fathers. If I were detached from everything in the world, it wouldn’t make any difference what happened.”

“So much for ‘What is, is.’”

“What is, still is. You may have ended things with your crypto-Colt model fantasy, but my boy is real. My situation is different from yours. Kick was a puffed and powdered gay man. Tiger is a buffed young straight man. All my boys are straight. He may rent his body, but he’s definitely straight. I’m dealing with a straight problem here.”

“Whenever you don’t answer your phone, I’m always afraid the worst has happened.”

“And well you should. My boys are into sex and violence.” He hit his palm to his forehead. “Oy! For them sex is violence.”

“Like father, like sons.”

“Son. Singular. Son. Not sons. But in this respect they are all the same. My friend Boyd, who publishes *Straight to Hell*, warned his readers never to invite boys like these into their lovely homes. I have. I do. It’s my living. It’s my sex life. In the tradeoff of sex and violence, my survival to this point is that I give them sex. I top off their violence by having sex with them. They’ve got to have one or the other. After I videotape them, I have sex with them. They slap me around. They pinch my tits. They sit on my face. They strangle me. We both cum. They’re not like high-rent Colt-type models who stop when you yell *stop*.”

“They’re dangerous.”

“They’re expensive. When I’m finished with them, all they want is their money, and maybe some clean socks. Hustlers always want clean socks, so they can go out and score some dope and take their old ladies out for the night.”

“So how can I help? What do you want me to do?” Ryan asked.

“Nothing. I’m worried, but I’m not sitting here in fear. I’ve been robbed before. But Tiger is different. He has tracks on his arms. So does Susie Slit.”

“Susie Slit?”

“His latest squeeze. They were in a brawl in a shooting gallery. She stabbed Tiger in the thigh. A flesh wound. That’s how they met. She’s one of those skinny postmodern biker blondes with tattoos on her tits. She wears a buck knife on each hip.”

“Ah. A debutante.”

“My daughter-in-law. That’s what she calls herself when she calls me *Dear Old Dad*. She really pushes it.”

“They’re both shooting speed?”

“When they can get the money from me.”

“Don’t give them the money.”

“They’d only go out and rob some poor unsuspecting sucker.”

“And maybe kill him.”

“And maybe kill him.”

“And maybe kill you.”

“You don’t kill your banker.”

“Unless you’re on speed.”

Solly dropped his bombshell. “I’m moving to Los Angeles.”

“You’re not.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Because I believe one thing you always say: signs and omens are everywhere. Tiger is a warning. Maybe I’ve worn out my welcome in San Francisco. Like Kick wore out his. Besides, I am in the film industry. I’m practically a mogul. I belong in Hollywood.”

Ryan was speechless.

“We’ve all worn out our welcome in San Francisco,” Solly said. “It’s time you left too. Everybody’s giving up sex. That’s all the City was good for. It’s time everybody moved back where they came from. It’s time you moved up to Sonoma County and played Squire Western at Bar Nada.”

“Don’t leave,” Ryan said. “Don’t you leave me too.”

“Spare me the hysterics,” Solly said. “It’ll take me a month to get my shit together.”

A week later Tiger and Susie Slit climbed the fire escape to Solly’s penthouse. He heard the glass break in the kitchen window and climbed over the young hustler sleeping next to him. He found them in his video studio.

Susie Slit stood ready with a buck knife in each hand. Tiger was already unplugging the jacks and cords to all the video equipment: four recorders, two cameras, two 28-inch monitors. No one said anything. They all knew their parts. This was not the first robbery for any of them.

Susie Slit motioned Solly through the bedroom toward the bathroom. She kicked the hustler sleeping in the bed. He woke with her knife in his face. She nodded for him to follow Solly into the bathroom. Tiger crowded in behind her. He was strong. He was loaded. He pushed Solly and the hustler to the floor and tied their hands and feet with electrical cord.

Solly knew better than to struggle. The hustler didn’t. Susie Slit dropped to her knees and stuck the point of her blade against his jugular.

Solly knew she wanted to slash him.

“Let me do it,” she yelled to Tiger rummaging through Solly’s goods.

“Do what?”

“Stick ’em!”

“Makes me no difference.” Tiger stood in the bathroom doorway.

“Come on,” Solly said. He nodded toward the young hustler tied cowering next to him. “You’re not scaring me. You’re only scaring him. Come on, Tiger. Take anything you want. Just get her out of here.”

“Do it!” Tiger said.

Susie Slit slashed her blade across the boy’s throat. Blood spurted across Solly’s face.

“No!” Solly’s eyes widened.

Susie Slit turned to him, her blade aimed across the distance at his naked gut. She looked up at Tiger.

“So long, Dad,” Tiger said. He spit down on Solly, dropped to his knees across his bloody chest, and wrapped electrical cord tight around his neck. “Do it!” he said. “It’s what he wants anyway.”

Choking, with the pressure of Tiger’s weight sitting on his chest, Solly felt her drive cold steel into his stomach.

“At least,” Solly looked up at Tiger, “you could have done it yourself.”

“And give you everything you want?” He stood up. “Fuck you, Dad.”

They left the bathroom door open.

Solly, his lifeblood flowing red across the cold tile floor, watched them take load after load of his valuables out to the hall. He heard the ancient elevator rumble up the shaft. They loaded everything they could carry. Then they closed the door to the penthouse. Solly, choking, bleeding, heard the elevator whir and begin its slow descent to the deserted lobby that led out to the streets of the Tenderloin.

Tiger had been smart enough not to take Solly’s answering machine. For twenty-four hours, Ryan repeatedly got his recorded promise to get back to the caller. Then he called the police.

## 12

“GAY PORNOGRAPHER STABBED IN TENDERLOIN SEX DEN,” by Maitland Zane.

## 13

Ryan retreated to his Victorian. He took Solly’s Death hard. Not

even Solly's work remained. Tiger had stolen the videotape master copies and sold them at a buck a piece on the street to kids eager to tape MTV. Kick was gone. Teddy was gone. Kweenie was living with January in El Lay. Of all the friends and acquaintances he once had in San Francisco, several had moved away from the City, a dozen were dead from disease, the rest were cool, almost unforgiving, for his having dropped them, having dropped everybody, during his affair with Kick. The muscle crowd Kick had drawn to them was no longer interested once Kick had split. When Ryan passed them on Castro, they were unforgiving; they not only ignored him, they gave him Attitude. Readers of *Maneuvers* sent letters complaining he had abandoned the magazine. The few women he had known, mostly Kweenie's friends, remained miffed over the dead issue of the *Manifesto*.

He feared cruising new acquaintances, afraid they'd end up in bed, and he was resolved that could never happen. No one was sure what safe sex was. AIDS was a lottery. The more chances you took, the more your chance of winning, which meant losing. AIDS was like murder. A man's chance of contracting AIDS was one in a hundred; the chance of his being murdered was one in a hundred and thirty-three. He was truly alone. His life became a solitary masturbation. He was a victim of the ass-end of the sexual revolution.

He hated the changing Castro. Old faces gone. New faces eager to find the party they did not know was over. The quaint gay shops that had given the Castro its ambience gave way to chain stores. Asian restaurants opened overnight and competed with the gay restaurants where sometimes, despite his unreasonable fear of disease, for *auld lang syne*, he ventured out to eat alone, still aching with love for Kick, disguised with mirrored CHP shades and a blue SFPD ball cap. He sat alone, insulated from the dapper waiters. He dissolved into the sounds coming from the other tables where he and Kick had once dined.

I could not help but think those gay men and lesbian women had all come, the way we all came, immigrants and refugees from all across the country to become Californians. They—and I mean we, although I am only a scholarly fellow traveler and sympathizer, because I am not exactly one of them—all trekked west for sexual and political freedom, for love, happiness, real estate, and each other. Instead, somehow very much *instead*, they conjured lust and greed and abuse and Death. They all thought they were special. And they were. All of them. Ryan lived and wrote and told them they were chosen, charmed, gifted, exempt. They thought the party would never stop.

Before things turned sour and Ryan turned bitter, he wrote, “Scott Fitzgerald was right. When the best people get together, things go glimmering.”

Like the rest of them, he thought the sanctuary of San Francisco was their mecca of Sodom-Oz. They thought, before the drugs and before the breakdowns and before the epidemic Deaths, that they would live forever. I once wrote in *The Journal of Popular Culture* that “homosexuals have always been their own best invention.” And also perhaps their worst.

Before Stonewall ignited the seventies when they spun their existence out of media whole cloth, because no one like them had ever before been seen in the streets of America, their history of closets and shame had for years been their prison. I think their newfound freedom, and especially the gay pride that so petulantly for so many became an outrageous vanity, turned into a much more deadly sentence, not of AIDS, but of the heart.

I’m not sitting in judgment. I try to examine what happened and make the best sense possible. Popular culture and cinema, after all, are my specialty. I can tell you more than you probably want to know about *Citizen Kane*. I study movies—forgive me, analytically.

Ryan’s memorabilia are my “Rosebud.”

“You have too much Attitude,” Ryan once told me.

“I’m a critic. I can let nothing obstruct my objectivity.”

“That’s why you can’t get a date,” Ryan said. “That’s why no one makes love to a critic. Love is not objective.” He tried to redeem me. “Maybe you’re a critic and more than a critic,” he said. “You may be an appreciator, a true appreciator of other people’s visions. Most critics are detractors of other people’s work. Parasites: that’s what critics are. If artists stopped producing, critics would starve. Critics don’t act; they react. Most of the criticism I read is no more than Attitude. I’m an expert on Attitude. Kick made me an expert on Attitude. Kick had real Attitude. He taught me everything I know about Attitude.”

“Kick was a world-class teacher of Attitude,” I said.

We had words, Ryan and I.

Sometimes, I must reveal, I was too close to Ryan Steven O’Hara. Sometimes I thought we were the same person playing Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*. He had that boyishly charming way of pulling people into his center. Teddy had fallen for it. Kick pursued him for it. I felt his undertow, particularly in those last days, pulling me dangerously close to him. My empathy toward him, then and now, worries me.

Objectivity, I believe, even more than passionate love and hate, is the most fragile gift in the human order of things. Passion has to do with the

volatile heart. Objectivity is the coolest function of the human mind. I loved Ryan for the Energy of his passion, and I pitied him for what had happened.

I realized early on that it was Kick, and only Kick, who had ever broken through to what Ryan called his soul. It was Kick, and only Kick, whose brilliant golden light was intense enough to pierce the fearful dark night in Ryan's soul. It was Kick, and only Kick, whose arms, strong as angel's wings, lifted Ryan from his isolation and his terror of Death. At least for a time.

I remember, you see, all too well that morning on Venice Beach when I met a woman who had run into a Golden Man. The startled Look in her eyes has never left me. That Look was the willing suspension of disbelief that lodges in a face when something ecstatic beyond expectation lifts a person once and forever outside the closed circuit of themselves.

It is a profound belief in otherness.

I spent more and more time with Ryan.

He stripped the Victorian. He excavated the mounds of paper and artwork in his study. He boxed everything up for a fast escape.

"Packing boxes are the only way to live," Solly had always said.

Ryan called a mover named Ralph Joy, whose yellow truck, painted with the logo, "The Joy of Moving," appealed to his ironic sense of humor.

"There is," Ryan said, "no joy in this."

The yellow truck, loaded by eager young gay boys, made six trips carting everything he owned into storage in the house and barn at Bar Nada.

Ryan did not move to the ranch. He holed up in the Victorian for six more months, sleeping his prescription-drug sleep like a monk on a pallet on the floor. By night he wrote *Killing Time till Armageddon*, sending photo-copied sections to Kweenie and me. By day he painted the large empty rooms of the house. He lived among canvas drop cloths, paint-brushes, and rollers. He pointed to his single wooden stepladder.

"What movie am I?" he asked. He answered the question himself. "*Our Town*." He was suffering, he said, a tenth-rate nervous breakdown, borrowed from Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. "I've hoped it would be a nervous breakthrough. But it can't be. Not here. Not in these rooms. Solly was right. I have to move."

The fresh paint had not erased his life in those rooms with Kick. The Victorian assaulted him. He put it on the market and sold it in two days to an Asian family. The sale of the house, bought in the early seventies of the great gay invasion into real estate, compounded with Solly's life insurance, brought enough for him to live on the rest of his life. He packed his

clothes and his typewriter into his Rabbit and drove north from the City, across the Bridge, to the ranch.

Kweenie wrote to him. "I adore *Armageddon*. It seems you finally understand what men do. January sends her love. We're producing music videos. Come down to see us."

He traveled nowhere. Kick was always out there on the edge of his mind. Warm afternoons he often sat on the exact spot in his field where Kick's helicopter had landed. His fever continued. He wrote a sheaf of unmailed letters to Kick.

Sometimes now, I can go a half-day and you never cross my mind. Then I see a man who looks vaguely like you. Dreams die hard when they don't come true. Loving somebody shouldn't make you suffer pain, but pain seems to be the essence of being in-love. Maybe that's why you warned me from this pain. I was the one who was wrong. For all I loved you, I didn't love you enough. I wanted you to be in-love with me, and all that could have done was cause you the pain it has caused me.

Sitting in the field, Ryan felt something mammoth fly between him and the sun. He didn't see it, but he felt its huge shadow pass over him. He heard the chop-chop of its wings. It was not the multicolored bird that Annie Laurie had hung over his crib. He felt primordial fear. He was a man with a primitive killer beast, a giant hawk, circling over him, waiting for him to drop. It was the first time Ryan ever experienced genetic fear of being eaten alive.

**14**

For my part, in the next year, I became his frequent houseguest, spending more and longer weekends at Bar Nada. One Saturday he disappeared and I found him sitting in the chicken yard. Rhode Island Reds, Barred Rocks, and Araucanas fought each other for the cracked corn and lay mash he had spread across the ground. Ducks jostled the chickens aside. A peacock and peahen strutted unruffled through the quarreling birds. "This has become my Castro," he said. "A chicken yard is everything you need to remember about pecking order."

I handed him an envelope from Kweenie. A rooster, turned on by the flurry of hens fighting for food, mounted a Barred Rock who squatted bored under his awkward pumping. Inside the envelope was a pink page

from *The Advocate*. The “Armstrong” ad was circled. This time it appeared in the Florida *Models* column. It confirmed the rumor Ryan had heard from friends who took no small delight in trampling out the wrath on the gay grapevine. Kick had last been sighted in Miami. The southern gold coast was the perfect place to muscle-hustle rich New Yorkers. They flew down from the dark-skinned island of Manhattan eager to pay for sex with blond beach-boys and blond bodybuilders. Other rumors said he had been sighted in Texas along the Gulf Coast, at an evangelical gym, pumping iron for Jesus.

He was everywhere. He was nowhere.

California, northern and southern, had not worked for Kick. The Florida *Advocate* ad was three months old. The blond bodybuilder, after all his small disappearances, seemed finally to manage his grand disappearance. I once read that nearly two million people in the U.S. disappear every year. Three hundred thousand are never seen again. They take a permanent hike. Many of them are gay men wanting to start over with a clean slate. They are adult runaways. The police call them social suicides.

A horn honked at the entry to the long drive up to the ranch house. Ryan stood up like a man hoping against hope. The rooster crowed.

But it was not Kick.

It was January in her red Mercedes with Kweenie at her side.

“Darlings!” January said. She walked toward us, all high heels and rings and bracelets and dark glasses. “You look so, so rural! I love the peacocks! I love the animals!”

“You sound,” Ryan said, “like Saint Francis.”

“Saint Frances Farmer, maybe,” January said. “This is Maggie O’Hara.” She introduced Kweenie as if she were a stranger.

“My God!” Ryan said. “What happened to you?”

“Success,” Kweenie said. She walked up to her brother and kissed him.

“Kiss-kiss,” January said. “Isn’t it wonderful!” She turned to me. “Magnus,” she said, “you look drab as ever.”

“What are you doing here?” Ryan held Kweenie in his arms. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

“It’s summertime, darling,” January said. “Half of Hollywood comes to Sonoma in the summertime. The Sonoma Inn is just divine, don’t you agree?”

“I’ve never been there,” Ryan said.

“You should, *mon cher*. You should rub shoulders. I’ve always told you with your talent you should go to pertinent places to power-lunch with pertinent types.”

“So who’s pertinent this season?” Ryan asked.

“Everyone on *Falcon Crest*, darling. We’re up here to watch the exterior shoot for their third season. When we talk *Falcon Crest*, my love, we’re talking major soap-series hit. I just adore shoots on location.”

“January means,” Kweenie said, “she’s fucking one of the crew.”

“Maggie, Maggie, Maggie,” January said to Kweenie, “must you tell everything you know?”

“Why not?” Kweenie said. “You do.”

“Maggie?” Ryan stared at Kweenie.

“A new rad name for a truly radical new Margaret Mary,” January said. “You remember her real name. My little protégé!” She turned to Ryan. “I keep Maggie around to keep me real!”

“She’s not doing her job.”

“Actually,” Kweenie said, “I’m January’s production assistant.”

“What’s that mean?” Ryan was snide. “You change the sheets?”

“Be tacky, darling,” January said. “It shows you’re getting your sense of humor back.”

“What do you mean *back*?”

“I mean after Kick...and your famous nervous breakdown...and all. You were so depressed. It was depressing.”

Ryan looked at me and threw up his hands. We walked from the Mercedes up the drive, past the barn, to the house. January was bursting with chat.

“Is that the place?” January pointed at the barn. “The place where Thom hanged himself?”

“I love your tact,” Ryan said. “What do you care?”

“I care, darling, because I’m scouting locations. I’m here to option *Killing Time till Armageddon* for a made-for-cable movie.”

“I don’t believe this,” Ryan said.

“Believe it,” Kweenie said. “Kick told you he wanted the two of you to be a story told around the world.”

They reached the house and sat on the deck.

“I own a piece,” January said, “of someone who owns a piece of Jon-Erik Hexum. Jack—his friends call him *Jack*—is the hottest unexploited property in Hollywood. He has a face and a body that come along once in twenty years. He’s straight. He even has a voice.” She motioned for Kweenie to hand Ryan a color publicity still of Hexum stripped to the waist. “Look at those eyes. He’s more than a piece of meat.”

Ryan was impressed. “So far I like it,” he teased. “Hexum’s a hunk. He can play me. Who’s going to play Kick? Arnold Schwarzenbalmer?”

“So droll,” January said. “You are so droll. I love it. Don’t you love it, Maggie?”

“Hexum has real appeal,” Kweenie said. “His muscle isn’t overdone.”

“He’s a natural,” Ryan said. “He has the face. He has a body. But he’s not blond. He doesn’t have a moustache.”

“He looks to me,” January said, “like he has the hormones to grow one. Besides, he’s almost blond. We can help his hair along. With Sly’s personal trainer we can even pump his muscle up. He’d be perfect.”

“He’s already perfect,” Ryan said.

January winked. “Keep Hexum’s picture, darling,” she said. “There’s rumors he’s gay, but he just laughs at them.”

“A man,” Ryan said, “after my own heart.”

Kweenie leveled with Ryan. “Let me warn you. Hexum is January’s bait.”

“Why Maggie!” January feigned surprise.

“I told her your manuscript was too personal. That you’d never option it for a TV movie.”

“Is this reverse psychology?” Ryan asked. “Or what?”

“Darling!” January said. “Think of it. You can help on the adaptation of the script. You can log your first screen credit. You can be on the set.”

“She means you can try for yourself to get into Jon-Erik’s pants.”

Ryan was chagrined. “Do I seem that venal to you?”

“Everybody,” January said, “seems that venal to me. Look at that photo. Look at that hunk.” She pulled a sheaf of papers from her hootchy-kootchy Gucci briefcase. “Look at this contract.” She waved the folder. “We’ll be casting tons of bodybuilders for atmosphere people for the gym locales and the contest scenes. Bodybuilding is so *in* now. Especially with women entering the sport.”

Ryan’s face flushed. He swallowed his comment about women on male steroids.

January handed him the option contract. “It could be your valedictory valentine to Kick.” She paused. “You will, of course, have to tone down the sex.”

“I give you permission,” Kweenie said, “to write it from my point of view.”

Ryan would not touch the folder. “Leave it,” he said.

January placed it on the table. “Then you will think about it.” She rattled all her bracelets.

“I’ll think about it.”

January was triumphant. “You’re an angel.” She looked at her watch.

“It’s almost four. We’re due back at the *Falcon Crest* shoot. Jane is so punctual about tea. She’s so lovely. I wonder how she ever married that terrible man!”

Ryan kissed Kweenie good-bye.

“By the way,” January said, “where is he?”

*He* always meant Kick.

“I don’t know,” Ryan said. “I don’t know.”

“Fame is so short,” January said. “I suppose his Universal Appeal has turned to Universal Ennui.” She bussed the air on both sides of Ryan’s cheeks. “You were so lucky to have him while he was hot.” She settled in behind the wheel of her red Mercedes. “Whoever has him now has less than you had.”

Ryan executed his worst Rita Moreno imitation. “I speet on whoever hass heem now.”

January raised her hand and made a writing motion in the air. She wanted his signature. “Ryan,” she said, “do be an angel.” She winked at me. “Later, Magnus.”

Ryan waved after them speeding down the drive. “She’s such a bitch,” he said.

“January?”

“No,” he said. “Kweenie.” He spit out the secret we’d all kept from him. He proved himself the intuitive mystic. “If only she’d had his child.”

“You know?”

“It figures,” he said. “Betrayal always figures.”

“With all Kweenie’s acid and all Kick’s steroids, it would have been born a monster.”

“Not to me.”

“Especially to you.”

“I should have killed them both.” He kicked at a chicken. “I can’t even kill myself. I don’t have Thom’s courage.” He looked at the contract papers and then at me. “Shit,” he said, “why not?”

“No,” I said. “No. You’re not seriously considering January’s option!”

“I’ll consider anything. It’s my story.”

“It’s his story too.”

“It’s all *Rashomon*, isn’t it? There’s my story and his story. Let him tell his. I gave him enough material. Besides, he always said he wanted us to do a project together.”

“The secrets of two are secret.”

“Unless one of them keeps journals, notes, letters, and videotapes; and the other one wants to be a story told in bed at night around the world.”

“But what about your own privacy?”

“He made all our privacy public.”

A passion of obsessive love, given the opportunity, can turn to obsessive hate. Passion is one of those things that can birth changeling good-and-evil twins.

“You hate him enough to do it to get even, don’t you?”

“No.” Ryan’s voice was low. “I love him. I’d never hurt him.”

“Do you love him enough not to do the movie?”

“I love him enough to make him sit up on the couch, wherever he is, in front of his TV set, and try one last time to make him see what I saw in him. We were the best thing that ever happened to either of us. He knew that. He knows that. I want him always to remember that. I want him to know the hell I’ve been through these past three years since he went away. I want to know if he thinks of me at all every waking hour of the day. I want to know if he dreams at night about me the way I dream about him.”

“You can’t want him back.”

“I never meant for him to leave.”

“You threw him out,” I said.

“I didn’t mean forever. I meant like I told Teddy to get out. Just for a while. To cool his heels. When I called him ‘Rhett Butler,’ my mouth got too smart-ass for my own good. When I told him to get out of the car, I meant...”

“What did you mean?”

“When I told him to get out, I meant the same thing Charley-Pop meant when he told me to get to my room and stay there until I could come out and behave myself.”

“He didn’t go to his room. He didn’t behave himself. He went to a phone booth...”

“Just like Superman....”

“...and called Logan. You can’t forget that. He got you beat up and raped.”

“Do you think I care about that?”

“You act like you care. You’re still in a rage at Logan.”

“Then you don’t know me.”

“I know you as well as I know myself.”

“I’ve never much had any feeling toward Logan one way or the other. Ever. Not even after his laughable, pathetic version of a rape.”

“What’s real with you, Ryan?”

“I want something I can’t have.”

“What movie are you?” I asked. “What movie are you trying to be?”

“This isn’t a movie,” Ryan said. “This isn’t that stupid movie game. This is my life.”

“Your life,” I trod on eggshells to say it, “is about as calm as a movie theater during the shower scene in *Psycho*.”

“Don’t trivialize me. Don’t take away from me what I feel.” Once on the wheel of fortune and men’s eyes, there is no escape. “I want to feel everything. I felt the heights. I feel the depths.” He stood and made a wide gesture across the valley around Bar Nada. “This is my valley of despair.” I hated it when literature made him operatic. “This is my slough of despond. What book am I now, Magnus?” He pulled a pen from his flannel shirt and looked hard at me. “I’m *Pilgrim’s Progress*.” He reached for January’s contract and turned to the last page where Kweenie had put a red X.

“Don’t do it,” I said. “Don’t sign it. You can’t.”

“Just watch me! I have one purity left: the innocence of my motive here!” He scrawled his name across the line. He thrust the contract at me. “Witness it,” he said.

“I can’t. I won’t.”

“Then you’re no friend of mine.”

“Because I won’t do what you want me to?”

“Because you won’t do what’s right.”

“What’s right?”

“Signing your witness.”

“You shouldn’t sign things when you’re depressed,” I said.

“Don’t call me depressed!” He was angry. “I’m not depressed.”

“You’ve been depressed ever since Logan showed up.”

“Bull!”

“You were depressed before you met Kick.”

“Bullshit!”

“You let everything get at you.”

“Nothing gets at me.”

“Everything gets at you.”

“You’re getting at me. And I don’t think I like it.”

“What I’m saying...”

“What the hell are you saying?” Ryan pointed toward a hedge row. “Do you need a larger bush to beat around?”

“I’m saying you blame Kick for missing your father’s Death. You blame him for calling you back to pump him up for that contest of sweaty men in colored underwear. You blame him because you weren’t holding Charley-Pop’s hand when he died.”

“Spare me.” He picked up the contract.

“What you’re looking for is...,” I had to say it. “You wanted something from your father.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. I wanted him to fuck me.”

“You wanted him to say it was okay you were gay.”

“I’m not gay! Gays live on drugs and Castro and die of AIDS!”

“But your father died...”

“He left me!”

“He never said what you wanted to hear.”

“No one leaves me! No one!”

“You have no control over that,” I said.

“Control? Control? Over what? Death? Charley-Pop and Thom and Solly?”

“Such anxiety. Such rage. You’re acting very gay.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He folded the contract.

“Anxiety. Anger. At Death. It’s the latest rage on Castro.”

“And well it should be.” He waved the contract. “If you don’t sign this, I’ll walk down the road and have the neighbors witness it.”

“You always saw Kick as the golden reincarnation of your father. He was the jock your father was and you never were. You told me yourself he was the son your father never had. You fucked him hoping to become him, hoping to become the son your father always wanted.”

“I don’t have to listen to this five-cent analysis. What kind of man doesn’t want to become his fantasy?”

“You put impossible demands on him. When Charley-Pop died, you wanted Kick to be your father, but he only wanted to be your lover. Then you tried to discipline him like he was your child. No wonder the man left when you threw him out into the rain with no jacket and no keys. What do you expect of people?”

“Fidelity. Not betrayal.” He started for the steps leading down from the deck. “Not betrayal like I’m getting from you.”

“God! Sometimes you’re nothing more than a bitchy, petulant, old queen! Sometimes you really are Miss Scarlett O’Hara!”

Ryan was furious. “Don’t you call me that! You fucking old closet case! You only hang on to all of us because you’re afraid to come out! You’re no professor of culture, popular or unpopular! Those who can, do! Those who can’t, teach! You’re worse than a faggot! You’re a maggot! You feed on us!”

“I don’t want us to fight.”

“We’re not fighting.” Ryan walked toward me. “We’re discussing something.”

“God spare anyone from a discussion with you.”

“I want you to sign this.”

“Is this a test of my fidelity?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because everything is a test.”

“Like life,” I said, “is a test to see if you’ll get into heaven?”

“Witness it.” He pushed the pen toward me.

“Aren’t you going to read it first?”

“It only says one thing. January wants to make a movie out of *Armageddon*. Let her. She shot the special that turned Logan on to Kick. She made something happen. Maybe she can turn Kick back on to me. Maybe lightning can strike twice.”

“Certainly you don’t think a made-for-TV movie can bring Kick back.”

“I’ll try anything.”

“It’s a long shot.”

“If I don’t have hope, I don’t have anything. I want him to hear my voice, my words, one last time.”

The movie, telecast out over the airwaves to wherever Kick might be, he saw as his one final chance to communicate with the man who had once been the flavor of the month.

“I’m going to read this contract first, including the small print,” I said.

“As long as you sign it.”

The next morning we drove into Santa Rosa to mail the option contract with both our signatures. He was depressed. He had always been depressed.

“Why can’t people leave love alone?” he asked. “If some intruder, some religion, some politician, some disease doesn’t mess it up, then leave it to the lovers. They will. We did.”

“It could be,” I said, “that love self-destructs. Maybe betrayal is the very nature of love.”

“You cynical, atheist bastard! I haven’t betrayed Kick. Kick betrayed me. I was raped more ways than one.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You think this TV-movie deal is a betrayal of our privacy? You suggested revenge.”

“The guilty flee....”

“*Armageddon* is fiction. It’s not about us. It’s about people like us. It’s

our relationship through a glass darkly.”

“How biblical! How Bergman!”

“*Armageddon* is a parallax view.” He quoted Osbert Sitwell to me: “When indiscretions become historical, they become discreet.” He was more sad than angry. “Kick and I are history. We’ll stay that way unless I do something about it. I don’t know where he is. I can’t call him. I can’t write to him.” He waved the envelope with the contract. “This is my last and only chance to communicate with him out there wherever he is.” He pulled open the mailbox and dropped the envelope. “I feel like a castaway throwing a note in a bottle into the ocean, hoping against hope.”

Kweenie kept Ryan posted with monthly updates. The option turned into a contract. The contract turned into a treatment and then a draft screenplay. The draft itself turned into a dozen drafts and then into a final shooting script.

In the end, nothing came of the deal. One afternoon, on the set of his *Cover Up* TV series, Jon-Erik Hexum woke from a nap and was told that the day’s shoot was delayed one more time. He did no more than any of us have done when we make a joke about being frustrated once too often: we point our forefinger at our temple, pull it like a trigger, and say *bang!*

Jon-Erik, however, pointed at his head with a prop gun loaded with blanks, smiled to make the joke we all make, and pulled the trigger.

The wadding from the blank imploded a piece of his skull the size of a quarter into his brain. For a week, machines kept his heart alive. The Friday after the Friday of the accident the doctors pronounced him brain-dead. With only two movies and a TV series to his name, Jon-Erik Hexum never became the James Dean of his generation. His healthy body, kept alive on machines, was flown from Hollywood to San Francisco for multiple transplantations.

“I want his face,” Ryan said.

For him, another supremely beautiful man was dead and gone.

That was the end of *Armageddon*.

“Hexum was my only connection,” January said over the telephone. “Without a star attached, the project is dead.”

## 15

Over the next year, Ryan and I finally became friends. One night, he simply said, “Live with me.”

“I am living with you,” I said. It was the summer of my sabbatical year and I had moved to Bar Nada to write my doctoral thesis.

Ryan sat at the opposite end of the long picnic table where we both worked under the shade of the ponderosa pines. He had arranged our work places. “You sit here and I’ll sit there. Just like Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers.”

“I miss the allusion,” I said.

“Williams and McCullers were great friends. One summer they sat at opposite ends of the same picnic table. She was writing *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and he was writing *Suddenly Last Summer*. Or maybe it was *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. What difference does it make?”

“Ah,” I said.

“I mean I really want you to really live with me. I don’t want sex. I need companionship.”

That summer he was on even more powerful medication prescribed for him by Dr. Shrink whom he saw weekly in Berkeley. On top of everything that happened, he suffered from total AIDS paranoia. He washed even his own dishes in Clorox.

“Dr. Shrink thinks you’re perfect for me.”

“Is Dr. Shrink always right?” I said.

“He’s righter than I am.” Ryan shook the small bottle of Lithobid. Dr. Shrink was an anxiety-depression specialist. “He says I’m starting to remember who I am.”

“With an ego like yours, I could have sworn you’d never forgotten.”

“I’m a Gemini. Remember? I’m a chameleon. When I wake up in the morning, I have no idea who I’ll be that day.”

That Acquired Identity Deficiency Syndrome may be the essence of homosexuality. Walt Whitman sang songs of himself, his wonderful multiple self; wandering through the streets of New York and the docks of New Jersey, identifying himself with every appealing male, man and boy, who caught the fancy of his eye. Monsignor Linotti at Misericordia had warned the seminarians that *Leaves of Grass*, despite its so-called literary reputation, was pornography.

The following summer vacation, when he was seventeen, Ryan had checked Whitman’s book out of the Peoria Public Library. He wanted to see for himself the truth about a man he suspected was a kindred spirit. He wrapped the hardbound cover in the plain brown paper of a Kroger’s grocery bag. He sat under the willow trees in his parents’ backyard and read the poems, searching at first for the forbidden parts, and, wondering, when he found nothing dirty, why the good Monsignor had been so stern in wanting to keep something so beautifully written away from him.

Whitman was the first crack in Ryan's vocation.

The priests never wanted Ryan's identity of Ryanness. They coached him to deny his own self, as they had denied theirs, to become "another Christ." A vocation to the priesthood is the supreme act of self-denial, a kind of religious suicide. It murders all the selves a man might become to make him into one other self only. They preached that his self must die to be filled with Christ's self. Souls open to multiple selves were like the New Testament souls possessed by devils whom Jesus exorcised into swine and stampeded over a cliff to their Deaths on the rocks below. The priests forbade Walt's singing because they could not chance Ryan filling himself up with multiple, alternative selves.

But he had.

Against their priestly intent, he had become a student of forbidden romantic poets "half in-love with easeful Death."

"You can't be a priest and have a mind," he said.

He romanced the drowned Byron and gunned-down Shelley and the tubercular Keats. He felt their restless spirits reborn and too soon dead again in obituaries on the evening news. Always there were the ghosts of Jack Kennedy, of Bobby Kennedy, of Martin Luther King.

He kept a pop hagiography of the famous who died before their time: James Byron Dean on a two-lane blacktop; Marilyn in her tangle of sheets; Hemingway sucking off his shotgun; Sharon Tate, Abigail Folger, and Jay Sebring slaughtered by slaves of Charles Manson in a house owned by Doris Day's son; Mama Cass, a nice Jewish girl, choked to Death on a ham sandwich; Janis and Jimi and the pouty Botticelli mystic of the Doors, Jim Morrison, killed by drugs and drink; Tennessee Williams, suffocated by a nasal-spray cap caught in his sinus; Natalie Wood and Dennis Wilson, famously drowned; the original golden boy, William Holden, bleeding to Death in a drunken fall; Richard Brautigan and Jon-Erik Hexum, dead by gunshots; Sal Mineo, murdered by knife; Pier Paolo Pasolini, beaten to Death by a hustler. He held open a blank space for the first big movie star to die of AIDS.

He kept notes for a book he titled *Great Movie Star Deaths*.

He wondered, with Sal and Natalie and Jimmy Dean dead, if there had been a curse on *Rebel without a Cause*; or on *The Misfits*, the last movie for Monroe and Gable and Montgomery Clift; or on *The Conqueror* whose stars Susan Hayward, John Wayne, Agnes Moorehead, and director Dick Powell had all died of cancer, as had most of the supporting cast and a hundred of the crew. They had shot on location in Utah, too near too soon, the site of a nuclear test blast. He saw them as archetype of the

AIDS epidemic: innocent people living creative lives while some invisible government Death Ray sneaks in to kill them.

Kick had no feel for Ryan's pop-schlock interests. When John Lennon was shot, Kick shocked Ryan. "Lennon was nothing to me."

Ryan pretended not to notice the difference between them.

Kick was a true southerner, cool to social and emotional issues that he said caused Ryan a world of hurt and depression.

Kick had the gift of sexual alternation of self, but he lacked the knowledge that is the true heart of romantic otherness. He lacked the generosity of love. If he ever, for one moment, had really put his redneck self inside Ryan's creative skin, no matter how *mondo bizarro* Ryan was, things might have turned out differently.

Kick, after his own fashion, loved Ryan. But I doubt if Kick could have identified Ryan's body in an accident. He can't be blamed. Ryan was such a changeling that Kick many nights must have wondered who he was. Ryan was an anticipation of anything he figured Kick wanted him to be. He was a million movies. He had a thousand faces and more expressions than all the Barrymores put together. Kick loved Ryan's sexual madness and creativity more than he loved Ryan himself.

Ryan may have been a Woolworth's Five-and-Dime Wordsworth reincarnate. He understood the poet, who himself had fallen out of space and time. "Our destiny, our being's heart and home/Is with infinitude, and only there." He loved Tennyson's declaration of dependence for imaginative identity: "I am a part of all that I have met."

Ryan's main intensity was an ironic drive, I think, to escape the isolation of solitary confinement in his own skin by becoming anyone and everyone else. He suffered a fatal attraction to otherness, to becoming other than he was, and he had achieved ecstatic otherness beyond his wildest expectations with Kick.

When the golden man of bodybuilding walked into that El Lay room that first summer night, Ryan rose up to shake his hand and was pulled into Kick's otherness. In all their nights together, conjuring on the stolen gym clothes, suiting Kick up in authentic uniforms of quarterbacks, cops, and Green Berets, playing their endless list of construction workers, loggers, cowboys, and musclemen, abstracting Kick's blondness against the tight black bondage of skintight latex, Ryan taught Kick the only trick Kick had not known. It was the trick Ryan knew best. The achievement of otherness. It was both his virtue, and, if not his fatal flaw, then at least also his vice.

His talent for otherness cost him his self.

In their night moments, shooting beyond space and time, powered by drugs and sex and Kick's blond muscle, Ryan spoke, after a fashion, in tongues. His words transmorphed Kick, ritually vested in the fetish clothes of otherness, into any identity they desired. Those identities they called forth in the night from the Energy they conjured and shared between them. Kick became the long parade of Whitman's symbolic males, then returned round-trip to himself, to become the images sometime again.

Ryan did not become them. He had a one-way ticket. He became Kick. He was Kick. He was no longer Ryan. He surpassed Walt Whitman creaming over every man he saw. He saw one man only, even as he turned that man nightly into visions of other men. He knew how to make one thing be two things. He hated the God who had imprisoned his Energy in a body that was neither muscular nor blond. He fixed his identity on Kick. He gave up all his other selves. Monsignor Linotti had been as right as Barbra Streisand and Michael Bennett: it was fitting and proper to deny one's self to become one with one person, one very special person, one singular sensation. And what he felt, he judged, for three years, to be happiness.

"So who does Dr. Shrink think you are?" I asked Ryan.

"He wants me to get to know who the hell you are," Ryan said. "Why have you, Magnus Bishop, out of all the others, hung around? What do you want? Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm just a poor creature," I said, "trying to make my way with intelligence and compassion through the world."

"You are, are you?"

"I am what I am," I said.

"I know what we are," Ryan said. "We are what kills us. We'll all probably be AIDS victims."

"What movie are you now?" I asked.

"How about *The French Lieutenant's Woman*?"

"Try *Magnificent Obsession*."

"Magnificent am I?"

"No. Obsessed."

"Possessed, maybe."

"Possessed by Catholicism," I said. "Obsessed with sex and Death."

"With life, you mean."

"With lovers. First with Teddy. Then with Kick. Now with this disease."

"It's not a disease. AIDS is a condition."

"Which you don't have. Both Dr. Quack and Dr. Shrink have told

you so.

“Not today. But what about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is another day.”

“Let me tell you something about *tomorrow*. Dr. Shrink said that by the end of the decade, fifty percent of us will be dead from AIDS.”

“I thought he was supposed to cure your depression.”

“Fifty percent. Between the two of us, you and me, that’s one of us.”

“If I were gay and if you had AIDS—which I’m not and which you don’t.”

“But I have this fear....”

“When you’re not a hypochondriac,” I said, “you’re a paranoid.”

“Why not combine the two? Have you ever thought that AIDS anxiety may be worse than AIDS itself?”

“Leave it to you to find some complicated way to suffer from something you don’t have.”

“I’m not guilty.” The words bounced off the wall.

“What?”

“I don’t want to be punished for all those nights of fun. I don’t want someone to say I got sick and died because I was a homosexual.” He paused. “Do you understand that I liked being a homosexual? I took pride in it. Even before I was with Kick, I had a positive vanity about it. People can undo every good thing we did by saying we finally got ours. It’s all so twisted.”

“So let Dr. Shrink untwist you.”

“That’s easy for you to say with your life record of six sexual contacts.” Ryan laid out his diversionary tactic. “You don’t even know what’s the length of a heartache.”

“That’s a *non sequitur*.”

“I’m a Gemini. Besides, it’s very *sequitur* after what I’ve been through.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. What’s the length of a heartache? Ten inches?”

“Very funny. It’s twice as long as the affair was itself.”

“So three years with Kick means six years to recover?”

“It’s compound interest.”

“Then there’s something to be said for one-night stands.”

“I dreamed last night I was being whipped by a man with muscular, tattooed arms.”

“Ryan Steven O’Hara,” I said. “You’ve got to learn to let go.”

“Let go? Of the best thing that ever happened to me? No. I can’t. I don’t know how. I don’t want to. If I had been straight and had suddenly seen Kick, I would have turned gay like *that!*” He snapped his fingers.

“You can’t go on living like this.”

“Don’t say that. I have to live like this. Doesn’t Jackie keep the Eternal Flame burning? If I find out I’m going to die, I’ll find Kick. If tomorrow I find I have AIDS, the first thing I’ll do is find Kick. I’ll have to. I want to die in his arms.”

“Let him be. The man has already given you everything he had.”

“Do you remember the Pioneer?” Ryan asked.

“The movie?”

“The rocket. The day they shot the Pioneer rocket out into space. It was the first human-made object to finally break out of the gravitational pull of our solar system.”

“This is shtick!” I put up my hand to stop him.

“It was Earth’s SOS. I’m sure help is on the way.”

“You’re nuts.”

“Someone out there will come to save us.”

“Spare me,” I said. “This is not *2001* or *2010*.”

“Then what movie are we?”

I wanted to say *Gone with the Wind*.

As God is my witness, Ryan was part of a cast of thousands. On the back lot of the Castro set, they worshiped movie queens who made it, like Vivien Leigh, no matter how bereft, to the last reel. They had been blown, more than they’d known, with the wind.

“Yeah, that’s our movie,” Ryan said. “*Blown with the Wind*.”

Their emancipation politics was their set up for their Civil War. Stonewall was their Fort Sumter. Harvey Milk was their Jeff Davis. They seceded from straight society to create their own. They took to the trenches against Dan White, the worst of the fag-bashing marauders. They danced at fancy balls wearing nothing but the window curtains. They knew nothing about birthing no babies. The burning of the Barracks by a straight workman was their Atlanta. The overcrowded hospital wards of San Francisco were their big scene of countless wounded lying in the rail yard waiting for help. AIDS was their final battle. Their only hope of victory was finding a new sense of themselves in the holocaust that was upon them.

“I asked you a question, Magnus,” Ryan said. “I want you to live with me.” He had the look in his eyes that must have been the look he used to get whatever he wanted from Charley-Pop. “I’ll put your name on the deed to the ranch.”

“Don’t insult me by trying to buy me.”

“I’m offering you something.”

“If I stay, I’ll stay because I want to.”

“Do you want to?”

“I’m already here, aren’t I? Do you see anyone else around? There’s just you and me, kid.”

“I don’t want sex,” Ryan said.

“I’m not offering sex.”

“I want a friend, not fireworks.”

“We’ve always been friends,” I said.

“I don’t want to sleep alone.”

“I think I can manage to sleep with you,” I said.

“Sleeping doesn’t mean having sex.”

“So would a little safe sex hurt?”

Ryan was startled. “You mean affection.”

“Call it what you will.”

“You’d let me make love to you?” he asked.

“You need to make love to somebody who’s real.”

“Are you real?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know if I can handle it,” he said.

“Handle what? That I might be someone real saying, ‘I love you.’”

“I know,” Ryan said, “that you love me. Who else would put up with me? Who else would make such an offer?”

“So?” I said.

“But you’re not gay.” Ryan hesitated. “Are you?”

“What I am is human. I don’t have to be gay to love you.”

“You can’t just try this stuff on for size, you know.”

“What stuff?”

“Homosexuality.”

“Who’s talking homosexuality? You. That’s who. I’m talking about real human love.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“Is it?”

“You’re an academic. A scholar. You categorize everything. You don’t have the feeling for this.”

“Is it homosexuality if I love you enough to hold you, just hold you? Charley-Pop held you on his lap.”

“Can you hold me?”

“To quote someone I know intimately: ‘I may not have eighteen-inch arms, but my arms are big enough to hold you.’”

“Is this what you’ve always wanted?” He was stymied. “Is this why you’ve always hung around? Is this why you’ve stuck by me? Is this a love

scene?”

“Are these your questions or my answers?”

“I’m trying to figure you out.”

“Stop putting words in my mouth. You can shut up. I want nothing.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Believe it. You’re not running a rap-talk sex scene with Kick.”

“I need to reveal myself to you,” Ryan said.

“So you can forget?”

“So I can remember. He’s slipping away.”

“He was always slipping away. Things fall apart.”

“Who are you? I’ve wondered that from the first time I met you.”

“I’m a patient man.”

“I’m a dangerous man.”

“In more ways than one.”

“Armies have marched over me.”

“Rita Hayworth, *Fire Down Below*. Don’t quote movies to me.”

“I might be incubating the virus.”

“Look at me, Ry.”

“I can’t chance infecting you.”

“Take a good look at me.”

“I’ve ruined everyone I ever touched.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You won’t ruin me,” I said.

“You sound like Teddy. You sound like Kick.”

“I’m not Teddy and I’m not Kick.”

“That’s no problem.”

I grabbed his hand. “Can you read lips? I...love...you.”

“That’ssss,” he held the sibilant, “...a problem.” He held me out at arms’ length.

“Only as long as you push me away.”

Ryan stared hard into my eyes as if he had not for years looked, really looked, into a straight man’s face. “Who the hell are you?”

I stared directly back. He had lived so long, so far too long, in the gay ghetto, inventing gay life, that he had lost touch with the legitimate otherness of heterosexuality. If Ryan liked reciprocal terms *father* and *son*, *hot* and *cold*—words whose meaning depends on another word, then, as the last friend he had left—and me with no gay closet door to throw open in blinding straight revelation—I had some, what? Some weird moral responsibility to bring him around full circle: *homosexuality* is reciprocally dependent on *heterosexuality*. Neither is understandable without the other. His gayness needed my straightness as much I needed him in the

high-wire act of human life.

“Who the hell are you?” he repeated.

I tried his movie game, toying with his taste for ambiguity, coaxing him into perspective. “Maybe Bergman,” I said, “can tell you.”

“Ingrid or Ingmar? I’ve fallen through the silver screen, Magnus. What...movie...am...I?”

## 16

The TV news called it the eclipse of the century. In Sonoma County, that Fourth of July weekend, Ryan sat in the moon-washed field where Kick’s helicopter had landed that long-ago afternoon. Far to the east, over Santa Rosa, fireworks shot up through the early twilight and fell like burning confetti across the full face of the huge moon sitting on the ridge of the far-off hills.

“I’ll look at the moon,” Charley-Pop had always said to Annie Laurie during their courtship and finally before he died, “and I’ll be seeing you.”

Ryan had said the same line so often to Kick driving away in the red Corvette that Kick had learned to say it too. He lay in the tall grass wondering if Kick might still remember looking at the moon, especially this night, with the moon’s clear face tilted to the right and its mouth in the perpetual pout of *O*, as if in wonderment, especially this night of relativity, when over the land and the sea, and through the sky, the Earth, moon, and sun all were to converge in a straight line of gravity’s pull showing who is what to whom and where.

Ryan, less than two weeks before, on the summer solstice, the day of the year’s longest light, had turned forty. He had heard nothing from Kick in three years. His head told his heart that the hurt in him must stop. Out there in the stars, extraterrestrials kept their distance from Earth. Its humans seemed so odd, dragging their hearts around, pining, wearing their hearts on their sleeves, sending radio waves of Top Ten heartbreak out into the bounce of space.

How can love be explained to creatures of intelligence?

Ryan was in one of his cosmic moods that night, blazing with the last pinwheels and rockets of the Independence Day weekend. The time had come, he knew, to let go—not of the memory of Kick, but of the madness of the last six years. He lay back in the dry grass, feeling sad and ironic, bitter-sweet, about all that had happened. The night fit his place in the universe. Appropriate, he decided. It was appropriate that, in the dark of the moon, in the slow creeping eclipse of the moon’s face, as the huge plate

of the Earth passed over the saucer of the moon, he and the sanctuary of Bar Nada would lie in the deepest darkness of his lifetime.

He watched the shadowy curve of the dark Earth eat into the face of the glowing moon. The moon's face was his face. Kick had been the sun, light as the sun, but something sodden as Earth had come between them, had eclipsed them, had brought them down heavy with gravity. His own face for the last three years had hardened around the bewildered *O* of his own mouth, as he in those terrible years realized that the man who once had shown on him, had shined on him, had thrown on him so generously his warming, brilliant light, had fallen, the way Icarus falls forever from Daedalus. But Kick was not Icarus. He had become Armstrong, and it had been an Armstrong, an astronaut named Armstrong, who was the man who first put his bootmarks on the face of the moon, crunching its primal surface with toe and instep and heel, posing for all the world to see.

Millions of faces across the dark interior of North America were turned toward the moon, watching the eclipse like some lunatic video game played out on the huge screen of the sky.

In San Francisco, Castro Street was jammed with moon-watchers. This holiday weekend, its nights unusually warm for July, even without the eclipse of the moon and despite the creeping eclipse of AIDS, was enough to trigger the street parties that boiled out from the bars in spontaneous revelry, celebrating any excuse for outrageous merriment, stopping the City's flow of traffic at the intersection of 18th and Castro.

Ryan missed the Castro he had known. He was glad that the Old Castro was gone and a new one on the rise. There was hope in that. Nothing, not disease or prejudice or murders or assassination, could stop their kind. They were an ancient and future race. They had existed before the Druids and they would endure forever. The secret gift that made them different was their strength. The knowledge of that gift was their power.

Since before time, their kind, even though never they themselves, had been immune to *dee*-struction. Their bodies might betray them and die, but their spirit would always be stronger than Death. If and when the last of them should ever lie dying, that last one of them will hear down the hospital corridor the spanking-fresh cry of a boychild newborn with the special gift that was always theirs.

What they were, what they are, and what they will be, faulty and glorious, has always and forever been something with more resistance, more cosmic immunity, than the world will ever understand.

Ryan was exhausted with suffering. He was exhausted by patience. He knew what was and what could never be. It was no longer Kick he

wanted back. It was himself. It was his ideal of manhood that he wanted redeemed like a deposit on a bottle. He could not mourn forever Kick's tumble from his pedestal, because when the sailor falls from grace with the sea, the sea remains, turbulent in places, calm in places, rolling under the pull of the shining moon.

What is one sailor on the great sea?

Ryan stripped himself naked and lay back in the bed of grass. The warm night air was soft on his body. His cock filled and rolled untouched up his belly toward his navel. The last sliver of the moon was orange, spectacular, lightly veiled with the dust of young lovers forever drifting through the atmosphere from Mt. St. Helens.

"We were lovers once," he announced to the moon.

He pulled on his dick. He did not close his eyes. He willed to imagine Kick, somewhere back in the deep South, watching the moon at this same instant. He stroked himself, trying to conjure Kick in space and time. He sent Kick his sexual Energy to communicate with him the way they so often had before in the good, golden, gone days.

"I love you," he said, and he said it, sighing, pulling his hand from his cock to keep from cuming. He breathed out a deep breath like a man releasing something he had been holding against all hope for too long. A small pearl formed on the head of his dick. Its clarity caught the last light of the orange underbelly of the moon disappearing into the total dark. He touched his finger to the pearl and raised it to his lips. Then he took his dick in both hands, the way Kick had always done, one above the other, and pressed down the shaft, hard, to the base. The crown of his cock was in direct line between his eyes and the moon. He stroked the shaft with both hands, slowly, inhaling as his hands rose up, remembering the fresh blond smell of Kick's body, exhaling all the air from his lungs as his hands slid down his cock gripping its root hard. The deep breathing made him lightheaded, but it kept him on the cusp of cuming. He raised both arms to the southern sky and shouted the one long sound of Kick's name across the deserted distance.

His body fell back to the grass. His head was lower than his cock standing at full measure against the sky. It seemed larger than he himself was. It pointed to a life beyond him. It was alive, sensate, lonely, calling out more loudly than he ever could to Kick. A teardrop of slick tube juiced from its head and glistened down the shaft.

He hated its carnal betrayal.

He had loved Kick with more than his cock. He spit long white flume at the throbbing traitor. He took it in both hands to strangle it, but the

more he hurt it the harder it became. He hated the fact that a masochist can never really punish himself. The pain was his pleasure.

He existed for pain. He mistrusted anything else.

He had always known that his very attraction to Kick was that only someone as perfect as Kick would cause him, sooner or later, the extravagant pain he deserved.

“You pay for heaven either in this life or the next,” Monsignor Linotti had said, “and it’s far better to suffer here than hereafter.”

Heaven’s gate had a steep price.

His only insurance against the Death he dreaded was suffering enough pain here and now to enter heaven when he died of whatever killed him. But his body betrayed him. His cock turned his pain to pleasure. He feared there was no way he could suffer enough in this life to be worthy of life beyond Death. There was no way out, no way he could work his way to heaven the way he had tried to work his way into the blessed circle of bodybuilder jocks.

Rejected here, he would be rejected hereafter. He broke into a cold sweat. He put his hands to his face. Naked and alone in the nightfield, he accepted his place in the universe. He was desperate to make any deal he could. He cried out to the darkness. The dark had its own dimension. The dark was not, as Kick had insisted, a void. The dark had stars, and the darkened moon hung, glorious in eclipse, with an imperial Command Presence of its own.

Finally, in his own life-movie, unreeling on the bone screen behind his high forehead, he was fully stuck in the total darkness between the flashing frames of light. He blasphemed and nothing struck him dead. No lightning. No thunder. No God. There was nothing in the dark night of the soul, and if there was nothing, then he ached for what consolation there was.

His asshole flinched for Kick’s fist.

He reached out to the dark moon with his left hand and followed its smooth contours with the cup of his palm. It was the moon he saw, but it was the curve of Kick’s shoulder and arm and thigh and butt he felt. He had memorized Kick in the palm of his hand. He cupped his hand around the strong nape of Kick’s fresh-clipped blond neck. He stroked the massive pecs, the fur on the washboard belly, the hang of the big blond balls and the erect penis. With the left hand we give Energy. With the right, we receive it. Kick was indelible in the palm of his left hand forever. He rubbed his hand into his face, sniffing and licking and biting it. He fingered his butthole and shoved his dick toward the dark sky.

His body convulsed. There was huge pleasure, and enormous ecstasy, in it. White clumps of thick seed spilled back on his belly and chest and face. He curled to his side in the grass and pulled his knees to his chest. He lay still for a long while. He hated himself thoroughly.

He threw himself over on his back. The moon was rolling out from its eclipse.

“God damn it!” he shouted into the night breeze. “God damn it!”

He rubbed his hand through the slaver of cum and sweat and bugs on his body.

“Is this the only goddam thing there is? Is this what it takes? Is this all there is?”

He knew it was time. He had to let go of Kick to release himself. He had waited for a message, an omen. The eclipse was a sign. It was time. It was no coincidence that this once-in-a-century ritual of total shadow should occur at this point in his life. He sank back into the grass waiting, the way primitive tribes wait, waiting for the moon to glide steadily out of Earth’s eclipse.

“Come on,” he coached the moon. His teeth were gritted. “Come on, you fucker! I’m looking at you!”

The stars shone brighter than he had ever seen them. He rooted for the moon.

“Come on! Come on!”

He reached up with both hands to push away the shadow of the Earth. The dark sky shimmered with the disconnected dots of stars where gazers who watch the sky had sketched the forms of animals and gods and hunters of the Bear, like Orion.

“Come on! God damn you!”

He reached toward the emerging moon and one last time he stroked the naked outline of Kick’s golden body.

“I love you!” he shouted. Then, willfully, with the full determination of his heart, as if saying it would make it so, he edited the tension and the tense of the verb, and repeated in a whisper, “I loved you.”

He let go of Kick.

The madness that had been in him for so long a time, the lunatic madness of love and loss, receded ever so slightly from him. He had let go of Kick, but something endless, maybe some reciprocal memory still in Kick, wherever he was, was still imprinted in him.

“I’ll never leave you but once,” Kick had said, “and that will be when I die.”

Ryan roamed the rooms of the house at Bar Nada and some nights

slept in the barn. Whatever Energy he and Kick had conjured was in his custody. It lingered, passionate, stronger than the spirit of Thom lingered, alive in the barn, adrift among the rafters and beams, asleep in the old iron bedstead, as quiet as the rust on the chrome collars and black plates of barbells strewn among the weight benches.

Ryan was no Sisyphus. He could lift no more.

Exercise depressed him. The very sight in his gym mirrors of his biceps curling a dumbbell toward his chest was pathetic to him. He could no longer address strength physically.

What remained was something better. Something beyond his body. Something beyond Kick's body. Something like a manly spirit, a masculine ghost, that some nights overshadowed him with a dream of manliness from which he hoped he'd never wake.

Charley-Pop.

17

In the pursuit of excellence there is no fault in high expectation. There is only virtue. Then, finally, comes the realization that the quest is of itself the only importance. The quest has no end. The questions have no answers. The questions themselves are the answers, and the quest its own end.

"You've got to dare to put your finger in the fire," Ryan once said, "or there's no passion to fire at all."

There may be embarrassments here, and ambiguities, but there are no lies.

The big house at Bar Nada was quiet. The phone rarely rang. Quiet music came from far-off rooms. I wrote, and Ryan pounded with his hammer on the house and painted the barn and gardened the grounds. Sometimes he stood out in the green field wearing his yellow slicker against the gray rain. He had turned the chickens loose and they gathered expectantly around him and then wandered away. He cooked and cleaned. He spent his evenings watching videotapes or reading magazines in front of the fire built with wood he had split.

He could not sleep.

He took up smoking a late-night cigar. Its sweet aroma drifted dreamily through the house. Some nights he pulled himself quietly in under the covers next to me in my bed. Most nights he bunked alone. He never asked me for sex and I never offered it. He left Bar Nada once a week, always on Friday, when he drove his big red pickup first to the office of Dr. Shrink for

his Viennese voodoo, and then to the grocery store. One kitchen cabinet over-flowed with vitamins and immunity supplements. He was careful about everything. The way a man is careful when he fears he might not have been careful enough.

Sometimes I caught him staring into the large mirror in the hall. It was the mirror Kick had used to practice his posing. It was the only thing he had rescued from the barn one night when I was off teaching, and he was home alone, and the barn had burned mysteriously to the ground.

He looked at me in the posing mirror standing behind him. "What movie am I, Magnus?" I made no answer.

"You're slipping, professor. I'll give you multiple choice: Olivier and Hepburn in *Love Among the Ruins*; Bogart and Bergman in *Casablanca*; Irons and Streep in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*."

He pushed me to end the game. "Life is not a movie," I said.

"Ashes. Ashes. All fall down."

"It's over," I said. "The party's over." I meant Kick. "It's time to call it a day." I meant Castro. I meant the seventies. I meant the way they all were. "Let it be." I stared at Ryan's face in the mirror.

He stared deeper into the mirror at my reflection.

"We didn't fail, did we?" he said. He meant himself, Kick, and all of gay liberation. "At least we dared."

"What was, was, as Solly would say."

"Touch me." He spoke into the mirror.

I moved my hand forward up his back and over his shoulder.

He reached back and up-caught my wrist and guided my hand to his high forehead, laying my palm horizontally above his eyes the way Liv Ullmann touched Bibi Andersson in *Persona*.

"You're not real, are you?" he said to me in the mirror.

I felt his skin heating my hand. "I'm very real," I said.

"We all came to San Francisco," he said, "to be ourselves. When that didn't work, we tried to become someone else."

"Some maybe," I said. "Not everyone. You can't speak for everyone."

"I can speak for me," he said. "What is sex besides trying to become part of someone until you finally become him?"

"That's not sex," I said.

"Is it love?"

It was the question Ryan had wanted to ask all along.

I made my voice firm. "I can't answer that. No one can answer that."

"I wish I were someone else."

"What you wish for in California, you get."

“Solly said that.”

“Be assured,” I said. “I am someone else.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Me,” I said, soothing his forehead, staring deep into his eyes, pulling him back from the edge. “Like you, I’m just me, Charles Bishop, out of San Francisco, California, North America, the Earth, the Solar System, the Cosmos. Just me. Just another human.”

“Just like Kick.” Ryan stared straight into my eyes in the mirror.

“Human. Just like them all.”

“Just like me,” he said. His face flushed. “What is, is what I am.”

“You finally understand,” I said.

“I always understood. I...just...wanted...to feel...everything.”

Fully human was all he had ever wanted to be.

“We are what we are.”

“I have no more tears,” he said. “I have a sadness.”

“Nothing stays forever.”

“Sadness stays forever.”

Fear, something like Adam must have felt at the first dawn of his first knowledge that he was different from the other animals, caused his high forehead to tighten, relax, tighten, relax, under my hand.

“What can I say?” I said.

“Time wounds all heels?” He managed a sad mood-swinging smile.

“How will I feel when today is tomorrow?”

“Old truths,” I said. “Better to have loved and lost...”

“No, it’s not,” Ryan said. “No. It’s not.”

### **Freeze Frame**