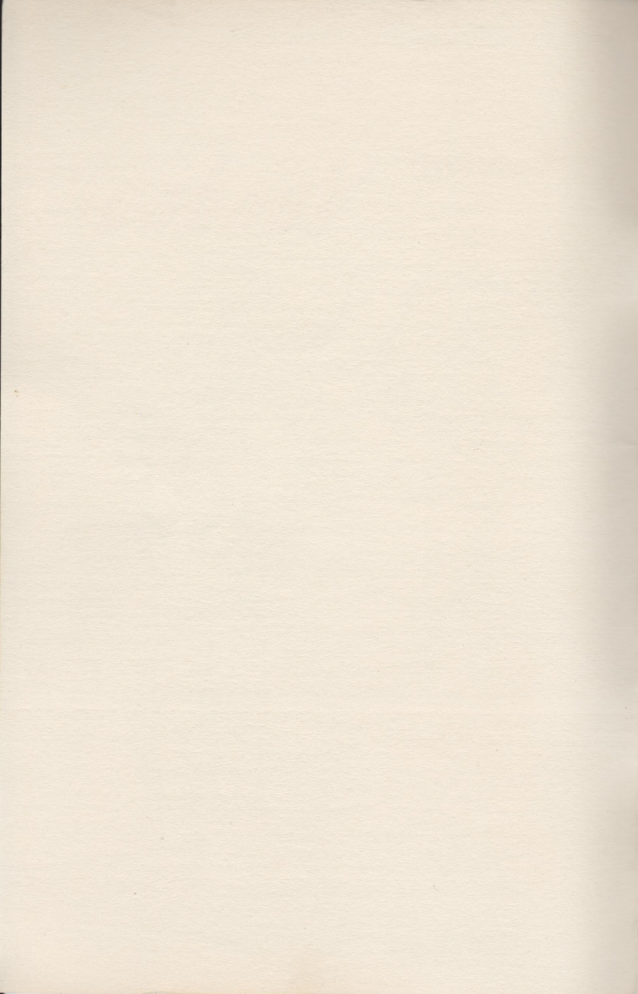


Kevin Esser

Voodoo





Voodoo

An excerpt
from a novel in progress

Kevin Esser

That voodoo-doll power is the reason child pornography charges with fanciful sanctions to clear a space for the lies told about must boy love, the reality of our relationships must be erased. A photo of a smiling boy with a hard-on leaves traces that are hard to eradicate.

Fiction cannot have the literal historical power of photography, but author Kevin Esser has for more than 20 years created novels and short stories that claim some of that function. In the absence of Polaroids and snapshots, *Something Dreaming*, *Something Like Happiness*, "Brothers in the Dark," "Santo Domingo" and other works prove that we do exist, that our loves endure. Like photography, his fiction testifies and unearths desire.

A writer needs a variety of gifts to provide this testimony. First, perhaps foremost, is courage. Oscar Wilde is celebrated today as the voice of "the love that dare not speak its name," but Wilde was scorned and imprisoned not because he dared to love but because he spoke. In his trial 100 years ago, the writer's stories, poems, essays and letters were as much the focus of the prosecution as his behavior.

Oscar's savage wit lives on in the modern observation that homosexuality has become "the love that won't shut up." But the risk of law still silences the love of man for boy and boy for man. To defend it, or even describe it honestly, is a risky business. Esser's fic-

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INTRODUCING KEVIN ESSER

Why should pictures of men fucking create such tremendous opposition from church and state? In *Hard to Imagine*, his history of pornographic gay photography, Thomas Waugh points to one reason. The photograph is not just a piece of art. It's a piece of history. These images constitute irrefutable proof that homosexuality is real, that men do love men. "That is," Waugh writes, "photography manages not only to resemble the living flesh of everyday sexual experience (iconic) but also testify to the existence of that flesh (indexical), thereby unleashing many of the psychological mechanisms in the spectator around voyeurism and fetishism that are still hotly debated. It is this quality that made film and photography of particular interest to censors and other moral guardians throughout this history: you can see the actual victim, criminal and pervert, and you may have legal proof of the crime. Look no further for the roots of the current criminalization of the depiction of youths and children."

This evidentiary power is the reason child pornography elicits such ferocious sanctions: to clear a space for the lies told about man/boy love, the reality of our relationships must be erased. A photo of a smiling boy with a hard-on leaves traces that are hard to eradicate.

Fiction cannot have the literal historical power of photography, but author Kevin Esser has for more than 20 years created novels and short stories that claim some of that function. In the absence of Polaroids and snapshots, *Streetboy Dreams*, *Something Like Happiness*, "Brothers in the Dark," "Santo Domingo" and other works prove that we do exist, that our loves endure. Like photographs, his fictions testify and unleash desire.

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Oscar's savage wit lives on in the modern observation that homosexuality has become "the love that won't shut up." But the rule of law still silences the love of man for boy and boy for man. To defend it, or even describe it honestly, is a risky business. Esser's fic-

tion makes it clear that he understands the risks and tells his stories in spite of them.

The courage to try doesn't guarantee success. Esser has the particular writer's voice necessary to document a culture driven underground. His basic style: he's a storyteller for whom writing is "as natural as breathing." He's blessed with a knack for evocative details, and he's a master of erotic prose.

The latter talent is less common than you might expect. It's not clear why it should be so difficult to write about sex in a way that satisfies both the body and the mind. But anyone who's surfed the net looking for hot stories knows that most authors miss the mark. Esser's conspicuous success in this endeavor is linked with his other great talent as a writer. A sharp observer of the world around him, he pays attention to little things that might easily go unnoticed, building his characters with care. Before they take their clothes off, we know what they're wearing. Our engagement with the character is what helps make the sex hot.

The final element of Esser's work crucial to his role as "novelist of record" for the boy-love community is also linked to his attention to detail. In all of Esser's work, the reader finds an honesty that sometimes makes boy-lovers uncomfortable. The men who love boys in Esser's fiction are not saints (and the boys aren't either). He doesn't apologize for boy-lovers, nor does he whitewash. Esser probably put it best himself in the Author's Note he provided for this selection from his latest novel. "The following excerpt from *Voodoo* deals with a dilemma of conscience familiar to any boy-lover. It explores, at its heart, the conflict of fear and desire, of self-control and temptation, of trust and betrayal. It should be read as an examination of bluntly realistic emotions and behavior. Any reader offended by honesty and the reality of human nature should turn elsewhere."

Readers offended by honesty and reality, unfortunately, have included critics and publishers. Given the value of Esser's artistic achievement, his commercial and critical success has been pitiful. His first novel, *Streetboy Dreams*, was published by Felice Picano's Sea Horse Press. Picano, an author himself, has won respectful attention from reviewers, especially within the gay press. And he commented that *Streetboy Dreams* was "something of a best seller" for his small publishing house. But the novel was almost completely ignored by

critics and went out of print. (It's recently been released by Ariel's Press and is the only one of Esser's books that's easily available to readers today.)

The silence of the gay press didn't silence Esser. But his most reliable publisher in the years to follow would be Acolyte Press, a European company that specialized in boy-love literature. This gave the unfortunate impression that Esser's work was valuable only to a specialized audience, and it's further limited the amount of attention the writer has received. (Publication of this current selection as part of the *NAMBLA Topics* series might perpetuate the stereotype, but at this point having Esser in print at all is the primary consideration.)

All his novels since *Streetboy Dreams* are out of print: *Mad to Be Saved*, about life in a college town; *Dance of the Warriors*, science fiction in a future both utopian and dystopian; and the coming-of-teenage tale *Something Like Happiness*. Most of the Acolyte Readers series, which includes many of Esser's short stories, are gone as well, with the rest likely to disappear from bookstores soon. Esser's also been published in periodicals including *The James White Review*, *Koinos*, and *Gayme*, but these can be even harder to find than his out-of-print books.

Treating Esser's work as of interest only to boy-lovers is unfair, but it isn't surprising. While he hasn't spoken only to those who share his sexual interests, he has been resolute in speaking about it in all his work. (If that sounds like a limitation, think of Henry Miller.) He's been conscious of doing it despite his understanding that corporate publishing houses and glossy gay magazines are part of the cultural defenses society uses against the testimony he offers. But since providing a record is such an important aspect of his work, the failure to keep his work in print or see it discussed seriously must be an awful frustration.

Esser does enjoy a consolation few other writers can identify with such precision, however: a tangible link to a writer of another generation. Luis Miguel Fuentes, who began publishing in the early 90s before he turned fifteen, has identified Esser as his mentor. Moreover, he claimed that *Streetboy Dreams* imagined his own teenage years before he lived them himself, a biography in reverse. Esser didn't write the life story of Luis Fuentes; the story wrote the life. *Streetboy Dreams* went out of print, but Fuentes went in.

Throughout Esser's career, NAMBLA has benefited from his generosity. He's been a frequent contributor to the *Bulletin* as well as the *NAMBLA Journal*. "Pepper," a story drawn from his novel-in-progress *Voodoo* has already been published in the *Bulletin* (and also in *Koinos* 13, which includes an important article on Esser). The selection published here is significantly longer, but still only a small slice of a novel Esser expects will consume the next several years of his writing.

VOODOO

PROLOGUE

Jake Brahms is a middle-aged mailman living in Sandburg. One of his oldest and finest friends is a co-worker at the post office named Holly Robinson, whose twelve-year-old son Khalid (nicknamed Pepper) has been growing closer and closer to Jake in recent months, becoming a frequent overnight guest. On Halloween, Jake and the boy playfully put a Voodoo curse on the nosey old woman who lives across the street (excerpted in NAMBLA *Bulletin* 18.1). A few weeks later, Jake begins picking up the boy each day after school to protect him from a gang of playground bullies. Jake is nervous about this relationship developing between the two of them, but finds Pepper irresistibly attractive:

He was a delicate mingling of his white mother and his black father, with hair like ringlets of brown cotton and skin of the smoothest cocoa; big dark eyes alive with frisky intelligence; a wide full-lipped mouth always curled upward at the corners in the slightest hint of a sly, playful smile. His father had been a basketball player, and Pepper was built the same way, long and thin, with gangly arms and legs and spidery fingers.

Jake begins taking Polaroids of the boy to create a "Pepper collection" for himself:

The first photo, fully developed, showed Pepper from the knees up, posed with one hand on his hip like a statue of Pan—remarkably like a pubescent Pan, I suddenly realized, with his dark skin, and his hair like curly fleece, and his ears that were actually pointy at the tops like the ears of a little goat-boy.

In bed together, still determined to keep their relationship safely non-sexual, Jake studies the boy's face:

. . . the flawless cafe-au-lait smoothness of the skin; the pointy arch of each eyebrow giving him an expression of elfin mischief even in repose; the moist prominence of his big, sulky bottom lip; the small but deep dimple in his chin, like the imprint of a pinkie finger in brown dough. I tried to capture all of it in my mind's eye, to keep that face with me forever.

In the meantime, Jake has also become friendly with Ryan Fox, a ten-year-old from his mail route whose main passions are swim-

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ming and running track and bragging about his many trophies:

I had a chance, for the first time, to really examine the boy up close: His face was round and ivory pink with a splash of freckles across the nose; his four front teeth on top were still gappy, not quite finished growing together; his eyes were the kind of blue that looked almost artificial, like the electric blue of neon-lit glass. Making his round face and head look even rounder was his perfect mushroom-cap of yellow hair, a more radical variation on the bowl haircut he'd been sporting his entire brief life.

Ryan is bratty and conceited and not especially likeable, but Jake can't stop thinking about him.

Jake's best friend for over twenty years has been Doc Wilson, a writer who lives in grumpy isolation some few miles outside of town. Doc has been receiving fan letters (via his publisher in New York) from a gay sixteen-year-old named Frankie Patallero, who, it turns out, lives in a small town not far from Sandburg. Doc finally invites the boy to his home the weekend before Thanksgiving. Doc and Jake are discussing this and other matters when we join them in Chapter Eleven. . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Doc sipped his coffee from a Star Trek mug. "I thought perhaps I'd get the chance to meet Khalid today," he said. "Did he spend the night?"

"He left around noon," I nodded, sitting at the opposite end of the couch. Pepper's magic books were between us on the middle cushion. "These are his, in fact. He decided to keep them here."

"So the two of you dabble in the dark arts? How sinister!"

"You have no idea," I said. "We just killed Helen Dillon, the woman who lived across the street. With a curse. On Halloween."

"You don't say."

"It's true. She died last night at Silver Cross Hospital. Cause and effect, very simple."

"I hope you're joking," Doc said between sips of Folgers. He was glancing through one of the books, flipping the pages one-handed. "There are no mystic forces controlling our lives, Jacob."

"Says who?"

"It's not like you to be so superstitious."

"I've never *killed* anyone before now," I said, finally smiling. "Anyway, you still haven't told me about Frankie. What's the story?"

"The story, basically, is that he got my letter of invitation and showed up at my door yesterday afternoon."

"And?"

"And," Doc said, "we spent a rather enjoyable day together. He's a very likeable young man."

"So...how does he look?"

"Just as he described himself in his first letter, really. Fine-boned, long hair, lively eyes. He likes tie-dyed shirts and combat boots. . . like a hippie boy from thirty years ago."

"That would explain his psychedelic stationery," I remarked. "He's a retro hippie. Probably a Grateful Dead fan. . ."

"In fact, he is. I'm impressed by your powers of deduction. He loves the Grateful Dead, and the Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix, et cetera, et cetera. He's very...passionate."

"In what way?"

"He always seems," Doc paused again to find the right word, "enthusiastic about...about everything. Loaded with energy."

"That was obvious in his letters."

"Exuberant might be a good word for him. Very exuberant."

I had to laugh at Doc and his frazzled expression. He finished his coffee and peered into the mug as if baffled by its emptiness. I took it from him and went to the kitchen for a refill. When I came back, Doc had crossed the living room and was perusing the new photos of Pepper that were stacked on the television. "Such a contented little boy," he said. "Very cute."

I looked over his shoulder at the photo in his hand, a shot of Pepper belly-down on the floor, drawing. "Here," I said, "take your coffee. Now tell me more about Frankie."

"Are you changing the subject, Jacob? Something wrong with Khalid?"

"No, no, nothing wrong. Same old story. I make a cautious advance and he retreats. But we like each other very much. We're good friends."

"Fair enough."

"Now...what about Frankie?"

We were back on the couch, which I always thought of now as Pepper's bed. The window behind us was rattling in a cold November gust. "There's not a great deal more to tell," Doc finally said. "We talked and talked. I showed him around the homestead. We spent hours going through videos and books, old manuscripts, everything you can imagine. He seemed thrilled by even the littlest things."

"Well, sure...you're his hero."

"He's like an overly excited puppy. You can't imagine. And, no, we have not had sex."

"Did I ask such a rude question?"

"Our visit was exceedingly proper, you might say. Our contact was limited to hugging...when he arrived and when he left."

I was drinking a Coors while I listened. "Hugging? His idea or yours?"

"His," Doc smiled, "definitely his. He's a real hugger, that boy. Not at all bashful about it. He grabbed me in his arms as soon as I opened the door."

"The complete opposite of Pepper, in other words. You lucky

dog!”

Doc responded with a slow nod and a shrug, clearly ambivalent. “He’s coming back again today. Later this afternoon. That’s one of the reasons I’m here.”

“What are you saying? Are you hiding from him?”

“No! I wouldn’t do that. I just need a bit of moral support, that’s all.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re...”

“Just a bit of moral support,” Doc repeated. “I’d like for you to meet him. Do you understand? Just to relieve a bit of the pressure...until I get to know him a little better.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“I’m happy you think so.”

“There *is* more pressure with an older boy,” I agreed.

“Of course there is! Little boys are happy to lose themselves in play, in their own imaginations. They’re children, after all, still children, with no expectations or agendas or cynical attitudes. Older teenagers, in most ways, are already adults.”

“But much cuter and sexier than adults.”

“Yes, no question about it,” Doc said, gulping the rest of his coffee. “I’m not saying that Frankie isn’t cute or desirable. He is. Very much so. But...but I can’t give him a bowl of ice cream and some toys and leave him to his own amusement. He expects more from me. He has *adult* expectations of me, you could say.”

I finished my beer and played a few notes with the empty bottle by blowing across the top. “Sixteen-year-old boys can be very playful,” I said between my idle tootling. “They generally love sports and video games and comic books. It’s a great age for hobbies, for collecting, that sort of thing. Honestly, you should relax, stop worrying so much.”

“It’s been too long, I think,” Doc said in a distracted mumble. “I’ve forgotten how to...how to behave with young people.” He pushed himself up and went to the kitchen for more coffee, but found the pot empty. I was right behind him, ready with an apology. He put his Star Trek mug in the sink and said, “Never mind, never mind. We should be going, anyway. Are you ready?”

“You go ahead, I’ll follow you.”

“Good, good,” Doc said in that same distracted mumble, on

his way out.

A flurry of snow was falling by the time I arrived at his house. Doc was rebuilding the fire in the pot-bellied stove, his face ruddied by the heat. "You know," I told him as I came in, "I'm a little uncomfortable with this. I feel like I'm interfering."

"Nonsense! I invited you here."

"But Frankie didn't invite me. He might not be so glad to see me."

"Nonsense," Doc scoffed again. "I told him all about you. He's very eager to meet 'Kenneth' in person."

Doc was referring to my fictionalized alter ego, a character based on me that he had used in several stories throughout the years. Being a fan of those stories, Frankie was understandably curious about meeting me, the real-life Kenneth. "Just so long as I'm not in the way," I hedged one more time.

Doc straightened up, wincing at the pain in his knees, grumbling about his damned arthritis. He looked past me through the window in the front door and said, "Well, it's too late for second-guessing. Frankie is coming up the road. You see, that's his red Honda."

I stepped to the door for a better view of Frankie's car as it slowed to a stop behind my white Volvo, which was parked behind Doc's blue pickup, all three vehicles lined up patriotically in the gravelly cul-de-sac that served as Doc's driveway. The boy seemed slightly puzzled by the sight of my car, touching it with his fingertips as he walked past, like a psychic feeling for impressions. Snow had powdered the ground by now. Frankie's black combat boots left prints as he approached the front door. He had his hands in the pockets of his jacket—actually not a jacket but a ski vest of ribbed, insulated silver-and-orange nylon. His jeans were ripped, it seemed deliberately, at the knees.

I opened the door for him as soon as he stepped onto the wooden porch and began stomping the dirty slush from his boots. He looked at me with a smile, a very squinty and very dimply smile, as if responding to the punchline of some wickedly funny joke. He kept stomping his boots even as he moved towards me. "Are you Kenneth?"

"Sort of," I said, extending my hand to greet him. "My real name is Jacob...but everybody calls me Jake."

"Well hey, bro, I'm Frankie," the boy said. "It's cool to meet you." He took my hand and then, at the same time, surprised me with a hug, using his free arm. I hugged him back, also one-armed, patting the shoulder of his lumpy ski vest. Just as Doc had described him: a real hugger, that boy. "I come here most Sundays to see Doc," I explained. "I've heard all about you, Frankie."

"Dude, I hope it was all good!"

"Extremely good, I can honestly say. Come inside," I told him, my hand still on his shoulder. "It's cold out there."

"No doubt, it's totally cold," the boy said, still smiling so squinty-eyed and dimpled, so goddamned *cute* that I wanted to pinch his cheek and kiss him. He moved past me into the house. His hair was long and straight, nearly to his shoulders, parted in the middle where it was darkest blond, lighter where it had grown out. He went straight to Doc and grabbed him in a full hug. They were exactly the same height, as far as I could see, Doc possibly an inch or so taller—and, of course, a good seventy or eighty pounds heavier. "It's nice to see you again, my boy," Doc said to him as they separated, and as Frankie unzipped and removed his insulated vest. "How's the road from Stonerville?"

"It's cool, it's cool, no problem," the boy said, nodding and smiling, nodding and smiling. He was wearing a dark flannel shirt unbuttoned and untucked beneath the ski vest, and a tie-dyed T-shirt (all greens and reds and purples) beneath that. Doc started toward the kitchen with sideways steps, beckoning with his finger for Frankie to follow. "I went shopping," he said, "as I promised yesterday."

The boy jogged past him and opened the refrigerator. "Oh man, Doc, you're too cool! Cherry Coke, my favorite!" He grabbed one of the cans and popped the top for a quick swig. "This is so great."

"Also chips...and nuts...and Twinkies," Doc recited, displaying each item in turn. "And some little pizzas in the freezer, the kind you wanted."

Frankie opened the freezer door and nodded a vigorous confirmation. "Dude, the little snack pizzas! Totally!"

"As for dinner tonight, it's already in the oven."

"It smells really, really good. What is it?"

"Venison," Doc said, "with roasted potatoes and vegetables."

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Before I had arrived, and before rebuilding the fire, Doc had apparently started everything cooking. "You've been very busy today," I told him, "full of surprises." I looked at Frankie. "Have you ever had venison?"

"No, never, I don't think so."

"You're in for a treat, then. Doc's venison is the best, the very best. He's a superb cook."

"Please, Jacob, no more flattery. We'll let Frankie judge for himself, if you don't mind."

I sidled past the two of them to get myself a beer from the refrigerator. "Feel free to have one of these now and then," I said to the boy. "If you ever feel like being naughty and rebellious, that is."

"Oh man, my parents would slaughter me if they smelled beer on my breath!"

"You live with both parents?"

"Both of them, yeah, which is sometimes a pain in the ass, believe me."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"A little brother and a little sister," Frankie nodded, sipping at his can of Cherry Coke. "It's such a nightmare, our house, you wouldn't believe it."

All of us had wandered into the living room with our drinks and a can of mixed nuts, mostly pecans and cashews—something to nibble before dinner. Doc was in his usual chair in the center of the room, Frankie and myself on the couch along the wall to his left. I produced a manila envelope full of old photos that I had gathered just before coming to Doc's. "I thought Frankie might enjoy seeing some pictures from the old days," I said, scooting next to him. "This one here, for example, is Doc in his office at Sandburg College, when he was still a professor."

"Jacob, Jacob, you sadistic fiend!"

"Dude, no, it's cool! I love this stuff," Frankie said. He took the photos one after another as I pulled them from the envelope and described them—photos of Doc at the college when his hair and beard had still been dark brown and carefully trimmed; of Doc and myself at his apartment on Tompkins Street; of Doc with his arm around a succession of boyfriends from the seventies and eighties. "I love this stuff," Frankie gushed again. He was seated at the end of the

couch closest to Doc. "These pictures are excellent."

"He was quite the handsome devil," I said as I pulled out the last photo. It was another of Doc in his old office at Sandburg College, smiling from behind his messy desk and resembling, I'd always thought, a middle-aged Ernest Hemingway.

"Yeah, he was, no doubt," Frankie said with rapidly bobbing nods of his head. "Like a real stud, you know, like sharp."

"As opposed to now," Doc added, letting the thought finish itself.

"Dude, no, I think you still look cool...like some total mountain man or something."

"That's exactly right," I said, pleased to see that Doc was grinning at the description. Such a little thing, so simple, but Frankie's sincere compliment had somehow eased Doc's tension. He was more talkative as he finished preparing dinner and as he served us plates of venison and carrots and roasted potatoes all swimming in glistening brown juice. Frankie tore into the food with his typical passion, wolfing oversized bites, each mouthful causing him to smile and nod with pleasure. It was while he was eating that I noticed the braces on his teeth, the clear plastic kind that escape detection on first glance. I mentioned them to Frankie and told him, after a swallow of beer to clear my throat, how lucky he was. "You should have seen the metal monstrosities that kids like *me* had to wear," I said. "It was a real freak show."

"I've seen them."

"Count your blessings, buddy."

"Yeah, these aren't so bad," the boy agreed. "They'll come off pretty soon, like next summer."

Doc leaned forward to get a better look. "Your teeth look fine to me."

"They were totally gappy on top, really major, before I got the braces."

Gappy like Ryan's, I found myself thinking, smiling at the conjured image of that other boy's pretty, bratty face. "Do they get in the way when you're kissing?"

"Oh man, such a wicked question! I can't answer that," Frankie laughed, visibly blushing.

"OK, we'll just have to use our imaginations," I teased him.

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"Right, Doc?"

"Behave yourself, Jacob."

I shrugged and then asked Frankie what he thought of the venison. "It's so good," he said, "it really is. Like ordinarily, most of the time, I don't even *eat* meat, you know. Like steaks and stuff, I don't even eat them...but this venison is different, like more natural or something, I like it a lot."

Doc nodded approvingly. "It tastes more natural, as you say, because it *is* more natural, without all the chemicals and preservatives routinely injected into supermarket meat."

"That's why it's so cool out here, bro, because everything is, like, in total harmony with nature. It's like in *Woodstock*, you know, in the movie, when they were talking about peace and love and all that."

The boy never stopped moving as he talked, some part of him always in animated motion—his head doing that excited, rhythmic bob; his hands gesturing for emphasis; his legs bouncing and bouncing as if eager to catapult him from the couch and run him around the room. "So you're a fan of the Woodstock Generation," I said, something between an observation and a question.

"It would've been more fun back then," Frankie told me. "The music was better and everybody was, like, devoted to the revolution because of the war and all that..."

"I happen to agree with you."

"Were you a hippie?"

"I was a definite long-haired freak. In fact," I said, "I looked very much the way you do right now...except that my hair was red, not blond."

"I wish my hair was *really* blond, you know, like Macaulay Culkin when he was young."

"It tends to darken as you get older, unless you're a full-blooded Scandinavian or whatever. Even Macaulay Culkin doesn't have hair like Macaulay Culkin anymore."

"I tried dying it a few weeks ago," the boy confessed. His plate, now empty, was on his lap, and he was taking swigs of Cherry Coke as we chatted. "It looked kind of trippy for a while, but now it's growing out weird."

"I noticed the two-tone effect..."

"I didn't have the nerve to ask," Doc remarked softly, like

someone thinking aloud. "So, my boy, how about some more food?"

"Thanks, thanks, but no, I'm full," Frankie said, patting his scrawny belly. Doc and I told him, in unison, that he ate like a bird, the two of us sounding like identical old nags as we refilled our own plates. The boy laughed at us and said that we sounded like his mom, always badgering him to eat more, complaining that he was too thin. "But I *will* have dessert," he announced, in the kitchen with us, bouncy as ever. "There's always room for Twinkies!" He grabbed the whole box, then another can of Cherry Coke from the refrigerator, and hurried back to the couch. "He's just like Pepper," I said to Doc. "A true sugar fiend."

Frankie heard me, as I'd intended. "Who's Pepper?" he wanted to know, ripping at the cellophane of a Twinkie pack.

"He's a friend of mine, a boy, his real name is Khalid Robinson."

How much more, I wondered, should I say? This was strange, this was something new, dealing with a gay teenager like Frankie. This was not just your average omnisexual teenager playing hooky, so to speak, from the hetero world, around for the affection and the pleasure but still and always just a secret sharer, a temporary refugee from alien territory. No, this kid was something different: a genuine sixteen-year-old faggot, and proud of it. There was no reason to be cautious around him, I realized; no reason to worry about him returning to the enemy camp with sensitive or confidential information, with loose talk, with gossip. And yet. . . he was still a stranger in nearly every way, still an outsider, a visitor who might or might not become a close friend, too soon to tell, too soon to trust. And yet, and yet. . . caution seemed to dissolve in the presence of this high-spirited boy with the squinty, dimply grin. I added, finally, "He's twelve years old, very cute, sort of shy. . ."

"Why is he called Pepper?"

"Same thing I wanted to know," Doc said. He was looking through the videotapes piled beside the television. His plate of food was waiting for him on the arm of his chair. I was back on the couch with Frankie, eating more venison while he devoured Twinkie after Twinkie. "All I can tell you," I said, "is that his grandmother started calling him Pepper when he was two or three years old. Just a term of affection for a feisty little boy, I imagine. You'd like him, Frankie, I'm

sure.”

“Does he come out here?”

“Not yet, no, we haven’t had a chance.”

“He *has* been invited,” Doc said, putting a tape into the VCR.

“We were talking about it just yesterday, in fact. He seems eager for a visit.”

“Good, good, bring him out here any time, Jacob.”

“Dude, this is too cool! I mean, being here, it’s just like one of Doc’s stories or something!”

“Life imitating art imitating life,” Doc mumbled as he found his remote and hit the “play” button. His well-worn copy of *You Are Not Alone* came to life on the screen. It was our earlier discussion of blond hair, he said, as well as my mention of Scandinavia, which had reminded him of that particular film. Frankie shook his head “no” when we asked him—once again in vaudeville unison—if he had ever seen it. “I’ve never even *heard* of it,” he said, a smear of white Twinkie filling on his bottom lip. “Is it like famous or something?”

I kept silent this time in deference to Doc, who was busily consuming his second plateful of venison and potatoes and carrots. He took a moment to swallow before offering a reply. “It’s a brave little film, nothing else quite like it, about two boys in love, openly and candidly in love, as close as cinema has ever come to an authentic boy-love romance.”

Frankie responded, as he listened to Doc and as he watched Bo’s first scene on the beach, with a soft and slightly awe-struck, “Duuude!”

“It could never be made today,” Doc added. “The mere act of showing it or watching it would now be illegal in some countries. Canada, for instance.”

The boy nodded, but his eyes were riveted to the screen. At Kim’s first appearance, he pointed and said, “There, you see, he has truly *excellent* hair!”

“It looks just like yours,” I told him, although it was difficult to see on Doc’s defective TV.

“Better than my hair,” he insisted. “Seriously.”

It was intriguing, watching this soft-core boy-meets-boy romance with a real teenager, peeking at his reaction when Kim jerked off in his bedroom, when Bo and Kim took their shower together,

when Bo interrupted two other boys making out in the bathroom—and, of course, when Bo and Kim exchanged their climactic kiss. “Duuude,” was Frankie’s general response, the word uttered as a soft croon of amazement, of marvel, of delight. He had never seen anything like this movie, he gleefully confessed at the end, then asked Doc, a bit bashfully, if we might see the shower scene one more time.

I decided, at that point, to retire discreetly before I became a nuisance, an obstacle. Both Doc and Frankie protested. “It’s early,” the boy said. “Don’t go so soon.”

“Stay, Jacob, by all means.”

“I’m a mailman, remember? Early to bed, early to rise, blah blah blah.”

Doc was rewinding the tape to find the shower scene. He paused when it became obvious that I was really leaving. “Jacob, Jacob, we haven’t even discussed plans for Thursday.”

“Oh my god,” I said, “Thanksgiving! I forgot about it entirely.”

It had become traditional for me to spend my holidays with Doc. I had no family, after all, and neither did he; being together at Easter or Christmas or Thanksgiving had always seemed a sensible way of spending an otherwise dreary and depressing day. “Same plans as always for me,” I said. “I’ll be here around noon...unless you’re doing something different this year.”

“Nothing different. I’ll be having the mandatory turkey and trimmings. Everyone is invited,” Doc said, glancing at Frankie.

“I’ll be stuck at my grandparents’ house,” the boy grumbled. “Such a bummer.”

“Same as Pepper,” I said. “He gets carted off to his grandmother’s house in Peoria for practically every holiday.”

“Such a *bummer!*”

“Yeah, life is a bitch,” I said, and headed for the door. Frankie jumped from the couch to intercept me, the manila envelope full of photos in his hand. “Don’t forget your stuff!”

I thanked him and patted his shoulder, which was all the encouragement he needed for another hug—so affectionate, this boy, that he made me laugh. “You’re a great kid, Frankie. It’s a pleasure having you around.”

“Well hey, bro, you’re really cool,” he said as we stepped apart.

"I'm totally glad I got to meet you."

"Stop by my house and say hello whenever you're in town."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," I said, "have Doc give you my address and phone number."

That was the end of my first meeting with Frankie Patallero.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Instead of a boring old turkey, Doc ended up roasting a dozen quails for Thanksgiving dinner. I spent the day drinking beer and watching football while Doc kept busy with material for his new story about Morocco. We agreed, both of us, that Frankie had lived up to every expectation, a delightful boy filled with warmth and humor and infectious spirit. But, I wanted to know, what had happened after my departure Sunday night? Had Frankie watched the shower scene from *You Are Not Alone* one more time? Yes, Doc finally revealed, they had watched the shower scene again, and yes, Frankie had become excited, and yes, the boy had looked at Doc for approval and then had opened his own pants, those raggedy blue jeans ripped at the knees, and had begun jerking himself off. Doc, with paper napkins from the kitchen, had helped him finish. "Lucky bastard," I said.

I could imagine a similar scene with Pepper—someday, with luck, maybe. We had seen each other, Pepper and I, when I picked him up after school Monday and Tuesday, before the start of Thanksgiving break. He had seemed quiet to me, a little glum, but nothing I said could coax an explanation from him. Was he having trouble with the bullies? He wouldn't say. Was he upset about leaving town for the holiday? He wouldn't say. Or was he disturbed in some way by our previous weekend together, by my tickling and groping which had gone too far? That particular question, I never asked.

Whatever the reason, I saw nothing more of Pepper that holiday weekend, which left me to wonder and worry about his unusually dark mood. That same holiday also brought another encounter with Ryan, who was home from school when I came delivering mail on Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. He was outside on the front porch with a small army of action figures, everything from Power Rangers to Transformers to plastic Civil War soldiers. The snow from earlier in the week had melted, and the weather was clear and mild for an afternoon in late November; even so, it seemed peculiar that the boy should be outside to play, dressed against the cold in his orange sweatshirt and stocking cap, his cheeks rouged by the chill breeze.

Seeing me, he started talking immediately about whatever

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was on his mind, never bothering with any type of greeting—as if, always, I were late for an appointment and he needed to make up for lost time. “Hey,” he said, “my first swimming tournament is in two weeks.”

“That’s great,” I replied. “Good luck.”

“Are you coming?”

I shrugged, taken by surprise. “Why? Are you inviting me?”

“You should come and watch me,” was the boy’s answer. He was fiddling with a red-and-black Transformer while he talked. “I’ll probably win.”

I imagined him nearly naked in his Speedo briefs, and then I shrugged again, and smiled. “Do I need a ticket or something?”

“No, don’t be stupid! Just show up and *watch* me! Here,” he said, yanking a sheet of yellow paper from the pouch of his sweatshirt, “this is the schedule for the whole season.”

I took it from him and glanced at the list of dates and times and locations. Ryan, still fidgeting with the toy, told me to keep the list, to take it home. “That’s very nice of you,” I said.

“I bet you won’t even show up.”

“Of course I’ll show up...with one little condition.”

The boy sprang to his feet and faced me, eye to eye, from the second step, like someone responding to a challenge. “What kind of condition?”

“Nothing big,” I said. “Just call me Jake, you know, like a regular friend, instead of hey-you-mailman.”

“Why?”

“Because it would make me happy, that’s why!”

Ryan regarded me with that quizzical, scrunched-nose look of his. “I thought your name was Sam,” he told me. “That’s what Old Man Kauffman calls you.”

I laughed, then explained to him that the old man next door called me Sam, short for Uncle Sam, because I was a government worker. “But my real name is Jake Brahms. So let’s make this a proper introduction,” I said, extending my hand. “Shake, pardner.”

Ryan made a this-is-stupid face, which didn’t surprise me, but he took my hand anyway, and took it with some enthusiasm, a good strong grip for a ten-year-old. I had never touched him before. Holding his chilled hand (and keeping it held for just a moment or

two longer than necessary) made the flesh-and-blood reality of him suddenly vivid, suddenly intense. "OK," I told him, "now we're buddies."

"Oh wow, *buddies*," Ryan repeated, sarcasm in every word. Somehow, though, it seemed unconvincing, just a nervous young boy's pretense against appearing too soft, too vulnerable. He was staring at me hard with those neon-blue eyes of his, both of us at the same height because of his perch on the second step. "You probably don't even live in Sandburg," he finally said. "Where do you live? In Gilson or Stonerville or someplace stupid like that?"

I laughed again, always something amusing about being so mercilessly belittled by this kid, this child. "No," I said, "I live right here in Sandburg. On Whitman Street. Number 747. Like the airplane."

"The jumbo jet."

"That's right. It's not very far from here. Just an easy bike ride, really."

"I *know* where Whitman Street is," Ryan said. "It's over by the junior high."

"Exactly."

"I'll be going there next year."

Again, I let my imagination play with the idea of him in skimpy Speedos, but this time as a junior-high swimmer of twelve or thirteen years old, perfect from his blond head to his bare pink toes. I needed to touch him at that moment, and I did, quickly on the shoulder and then just as quickly on the cheek. He didn't flinch or pull away, as I'd expected he might. A slight flare of his nostrils was his only reaction. I'd seen it before, that flaring of his nostrils, an exaggerated intake of breath that made his nose widen and his mouth turn down at the corners, like someone confronted with an unusual odor. What did it mean? I had no idea, and no time to find out. "Gotta go," I said, turning away. "It's holiday time. Lots of mail to deliver."

"OK, whatever," the boy mumbled. He sat down on the concrete porch to continue playing with his army of toys. Or so I assumed. But when I reached the house next door and glanced back to see him, he had already gathered the toys and disappeared. It occurred to me, with a tingle of revelation, that the boy had been wait-

ing for me, playing outside on the porch solely in order to see me and invite me to his swimming tournament. Maybe not, of course. Just wishful thinking on my part. Impossible to know for sure.

Two days later, December hit with an arctic blast of wind and snow. My life, outside of work, seemed to go as cold as the weather for the next couple of weeks. Of Ryan and Frankie, I saw not a trace, nothing sinister about their disappearance, just a consequence of school for them and work for me and blizzardy weather for all of us. The same bad weather also prevented me from visiting Doc; whether he and Frankie managed to see each other, I didn't know, but it seemed unlikely.

Pepper, of course, remained a part of my daily routine regardless of ice or snow. I continued to pick him up after school and drop him at his home, stopping twice during those first weeks in December to have dinner with him and his mother. His sulkiness came and went as the days passed, and I eventually decided not to take it personally, and not to worry about it.

Something else I decided: Pepper's story about being bullied after school had been exaggerated—not exactly a lie, but almost certainly embellished for reasons only he could know or explain. This became obvious after I'd been picking him up for a while, noticing most days that the three big boys—the alleged bullies—were nowhere in sight, clearly not a threat. I was willing to believe that they had harassed Pepper at some point, but not to the brink of desperation that Holly, and I, had first assumed. Whenever pressed for details about the situation, Pepper himself always became vague and absent-minded, like a bruised little victim unable to discuss his trauma. Several weeks of this routine had finally convinced me that Pepper was, for the most part, pretending.

But why? What was his reason for making such a big deal out of such an apparently minor problem? Did he want attention, just simple attention, from both his mother and me? Possibly—but I was reminded of Ryan from two weeks earlier, from the day after Thanksgiving, out on the front porch with his toys for reasons just as mysterious as Pepper's. There was only one piece in common between the two puzzles—and that was me. Only me. Both boys, it seemed, had concocted ploys for spending time with me, for getting closer to me—ploys which would have been condemned, if used by

an adult, as manipulative and seductive, possibly even criminal.

Or was I being hopelessly narcissistic? Perhaps I was misreading both situations, inventing motives and strategies where none existed. Then again, maybe I really did have two boys plotting for my attention, for my affection, for a kind of friendship unclear even to themselves. Vague longings. Unfamiliar feelings, desires. The age-old story of boys and men together, always a goatish whiff of sex in the air.

Despite so much prepubescent intrigue, I was left alone throughout that first half of December, without even a visit from Pepper to enliven my Saturdays. I used my abundance of free time to give the house a thorough cleaning, and also to fix the troublesome toilet that always took thirty or forty minutes to refill between flushes. One of the components in the tank, I discovered, had been destroyed by age and rust. The job of replacing it, which should have taken no more than an hour, dragged on for days in a nightmare of leaky joints and broken valves and blisters on nearly every one of my fingers. Even my knees ended up bruised, thoroughly black and blue from the marathon hours of kneeling on the hard tiles in front of the toilet.

In the end, with the component finally replaced and the toilet working properly, I stood in the bathroom and eyed the defective shower spigot like a battered fighter appraising his next opponent. No, I decided. It was too much. Pepper's wish for a "better shower" would have to wait for some other day.

I wondered, as I stood there and thought of Pepper: When would he be back to use that shower? And when, if ever, would we use it together? The prospect of that, to be realistic, seemed unlikely—more and more unlikely as I became increasingly familiar with his skittish, self-conscious personality. He was a bashful boy in every way, uncomfortable with hugging or kissing, shy about his body, always scrupulously modest. How would a boy like that, a boy as bashful as Pepper, end up out of his clothes and in the shower, or the bath, with me? How would such a naughty—and extremely naked—escapade ever take place?

Midway through December, with Christmas less than two weeks away, the weather grew warmer and the drifts of snow, some of them three or four feet high, began slowly to melt. On one of those pleasantly sunny days (a Wednesday, to be exact, when I was home

from work), a moving van pulled up across the street and two burly workers commenced the job of emptying Helen Dillon's house. I watched them from my living room window, getting a chance to see every piece of furniture that the old woman had owned, something crude and undignified about the whole process, a postmortem violation of her privacy. Tables and chairs, beds and chests, a spinet piano, a heavy old console television, lamps of every shape and size, a big hi-fi stereo cabinet obviously from the fifties or early sixties—a public parade of her possessions for the voyeuristic delight of each and every neighbor.

It took surprisingly little time, emptying her house. The two men worked with the silent efficiency of assassins; within two hours, they were finished and the mammoth truck was gone. Later that same day, a "For Sale" sign appeared in the front yard. Next day, the house was already being shown to prospective buyers. No trace of Helen Dillon remained.

Each day when I picked him up after school, I told Pepper the latest information about the Dillon house. He responded with his usual questions, wondering most often about "porch police" and the prospect of our privacy, as if we had something genuinely covert to hide from nosey neighbors. "Come over any weekend," I told him one time, "and you can check out the situation for yourself."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said, "that would be great. In fact, I have the whole weekend off for a change. Saturday and Sunday both. So, if you'd like..."

"I can come over tonight and stay till Sunday?"

"Exactly."

"Yesss," Pepper exclaimed in a rare outburst of excitement. He was already scrambling from the car to get inside the house and find his mother, to win her permission for our weekend together. I turned off the Volvo's engine and followed him in. Holly had just returned home from work, and was quick to say "yes" when Pepper found her in the kitchen—probably relieved to get the boy "out of her hair," as she often said, for a day or two.

We all agreed, standing there in the kitchen, that I should stay for dinner (a casserole from the freezer, made of turkey left over from Thanksgiving), then afterwards take Pepper with me back home.

The boy packed as if leaving town, stuffing his Nike bag with art supplies, a few favorite comic books, packs of Big Red gum, a large box of Milk Duds candy, some extra T-shirts and socks and underwear. He also brought his saxophone—"just in *case*," he said, making a pun. "Get it?" he asked.

"Just in case," I nodded, "as in saxophone case. Very clever. Do you know any new songs?"

"Have you heard me play 'Eleanor Rigby' before? It's a Beatles song."

"I'm familiar with it," I chuckled as we pulled into my driveway. "But no, I have *not* heard you play it before. I'm looking forward to it." Across the street, there was light and activity in the Dillon house. The realtor, apparently, was working overtime, showing the house to another prospective buyer, whose Chevrolet minivan, with Missouri license plates, was parked in front. It was Pepper who identified the plates by sneaking across the street for a closer look; even in the dim streetlight, he had detected a strange color and design which had piqued his curiosity. "Maybe they're from the Ozarks," he said after sneaking back, when we were safely inside the house. "The Ozarks are in Missouri, I think."

"Mostly in Missouri and Arkansas, yeah."

Pepper was at the window, peeking outside from behind the curtain. "We can see them when they come out."

"I'm not sure it's worth the wait. They're just here to *look* at the house, after all. Come on," I said from behind him, "at least take off your coat."

Now that wintry weather had arrived in full force, the boy had started wearing an actual coat, hip-length, zippered and insulated but without a hood. Usually he wore no hat unless subzero temperatures demanded one. He had a red Bulls stocking cap for those special occasions. Otherwise, like today, he relied on his thick and fleecy hair to keep his head warm.

I helped him out of his coat while he stood at the window and kept watch. Without turning, he went ahead and took off the pullover sweatshirt that he was wearing underneath, which left him in a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt with "GIBSON USA" shaped like a white guitar on the chest. I took his coat and sweatshirt to the couch, just to lay them there temporarily, when my eye caught some-

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thing yellow nearly hidden between the cushions, a piece of yellow paper. It was Ryan's swimming schedule, which I had set aside and forgotten two weeks earlier. I grabbed it with a feeling close to panic, afraid that I had broken my promise to the boy and missed his tournament. Pepper turned his head to see what I had found. I strolled back to the window while reading the schedule. "It's a list of swimming meets," I explained, holding it up for Pepper to see. "A boy on my mail route gave it to me."

"For what?"

"He wants me to come and watch him...so that he can show off, basically. He likes to brag and show off, this kid, believe me."

"When is it?"

"His first tournament is tomorrow afternoon," I said, "at one o'clock."

It occurred to me, as I was talking, that Pepper's visit had come at just the right time, that his presence at the tournament could be an advantage. By myself, I might appear conspicuous and out of place; with a boy at my side, I would blend in more convincingly as one of the parents, a father in the bleachers with his son to root for one of his other kids, all very upright and proper. "It's at the high school," I said to Pepper's back. "Are you interested in coming along?"

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

"That's right."

"Are you going for sure?"

"Yeah," I said, "I promised that I would. If you don't want to come, I can drop you off at your house, then pick you..."

"No, it's OK," Pepper cut in, "I'll go with you."

"Good! It might be fun."

"Is it fun to watch swimming?"

"We'll find out tomorrow," I said. How else could I answer? How could I tell Pepper that I wanted to go in order to watch young boys, especially Ryan, without their clothes? Sure, he knew I was gay. But what did "gay" mean to Pepper, to a virginal twelve-year-old? It was a vague and inadequate label, in any event. To him, and to everyone else who knew me as gay, I suppose it meant that I liked other men, other adult men, an "orientation" and a "lifestyle" now considered safely alternative, almost quaint, like being a vegetarian or a Quaker. Loving boys (and ogling them at swimming tournaments)

had nothing to do with that acceptable gay lifestyle. Homosexuality, like everything else, had been sanitized for public consumption, just another commodity, nothing but hype and pretense and fraud.

My random musings were interrupted when Pepper spotted someone through the window. "It's the Missouri people," he said, pointing. I turned off the room's overhead light to give us a better view through the darkness, and to hide us at the window while we spied. I stood behind the boy with my arms around him, peering over the top of his head and letting the familiar wooly musk of his hair fill my nose. We watched as the female real-estate agent locked the house and walked to her car and waved a final goodbye to the group of prospective buyers. Difficult to see them clearly, but there were five figures in all, two larger and three smaller, probably a mother and a father and three kids. Girls? Boys? Pepper couldn't tell for sure, and neither could I. "Anyway," I pointed out one more time, "they're just here to look at the house, nothing else. So it doesn't matter if..."

"I think they'll buy it," Pepper interjected quietly.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Because they came a long way, I think they'll probably buy it."

"It might be sort of small for five people."

Pepper shrugged and said, "It's probably big enough." He waited until the Chevrolet minivan had driven away, then touched both of my hands with both of his and gently freed himself from my embrace. I turned on the light and squinted against the sudden glare. Pepper was already on his way to the kitchen for something to drink.

The night passed uneventfully. We watched movies on TV; we played a few games of checkers; we ate hot-fudge sundaes. Pepper took out his saxophone around ten o'clock and treated me to another concert, with "Eleanor Rigby" as the featured selection. "And I can do part of 'Penny Lane', too, but not very good," he told me. "That's another Beatles song."

"Why so many?"

"The band director is a Beatles fan," Pepper explained, "so we're learning a Beatles medley."

"I've got an idea," I said, then hurried to my boxes full of records and dug out a collected-hits Beatles album that included both of the songs in Pepper's repertoire. "You can play along with the

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record," I proposed, an idea that made the boy smile in agreement. By midnight, while I sat and read his comic books (mostly issues of *Batman* and *Spawn*), he had played each song several times, delighted by the karaoke effect of accompanying professional musicians. He was finally forced to stop because, as he said, "My lips are tired."

He retired to the bathroom after that to change into his Nike shorts—a white pair this time, but just as baggy around his thin brown legs as his usual yellow ones. It was then, as he was coming back out, that I told him about my repair job on the toilet. He agreed that it was a major improvement, then recommended again that I should also fix the shower. "You need like a big tub and a real stall with a door and everything."

"You almost never use it, anyway," I said to tease him. "So you shouldn't complain."

"I never use it?"

"Hardly ever. Like tonight. Did you take a shower or even a bath?" When the boy answered "no" with a shake of his head, I said, "Well, there you go! I rest my case, your Honor."

"No, no, no, it's not true," Pepper whined in protest, playing along. "I use it all the time!"

"Such a liar you are!"

Pepper started his comical sobbing with his face lifted to the ceiling. Again he whined, "I'm not lying, I'm not lying, I use it every day, all the time!"

I wrapped one arm around his neck to half-drag him into the living room. "You have a twenty-four hour reprieve, chum! But you're taking a bath tomorrow night or else!"

"Or else what?"

"Or else," I said, "I'll give you a bath myself!"

"No, you can't do that!"

"Sure I can."

Pepper poked me in the stomach with his elbow and twisted away from my grip. He was smiling when he said, "I'll do it tomorrow, for sure I will, just wait and see."

"OK," I agreed after a moment of fake deliberation, "we'll see what happens tomorrow." We slept together that night on the lumpy pull-out couch, an arrangement that had come to feel as natural and routine as sharing a meal or sitting side by side to watch

television. I started the Beatles album at the first song and let it play through uninterrupted as we lay in the darkness and listened. Pepper was asleep against me by the time "Strawberry Fields" concluded the first side. I put my hand beneath his "GIBSON USA" T-shirt and felt his heartbeat while he slept.

* * *

Next afternoon, shortly before one o'clock, Pepper and I arrived at Sandburg High School and made our way to the gymnasium and swimming pool, the two areas separated by a huge wall of cinderblocks and glass. Today, an extra section of bleachers had been set up against that wall to accommodate the crowd of spectators in the humid, chlorine-smelling natatorium. There were more people in attendance that I had expected—at least a hundred adults and kids in a gaudy array of rival school colors—orange and white over here, scarlet and gold over there, purple across the way.

Pepper and I sat on the bottom row of bleachers directly behind the starting blocks, where young swimmers were taking turns practicing their "ready, set, go" dives into the pool. Others were already in the water, doing slow laps or splashing lazily to stretch and loosen their muscles. Most others were milling around the edges of the pool in T-shirts and baggy shorts, keeping themselves covered until their time to compete. Their voices sounded diffuse and echoey in the vast enclosure of concrete and water and turquoise tile.

One of those milling, poolside competitors was Ryan Fox himself. He was with two boys his own age, teammates no doubt, all of them draped in the same oversized T-shirts and shorts while they stood with arms crossed and appraised the competition. He hadn't seen me on the bleachers some thirty or forty feet away—to his left as he was currently positioned—and he didn't appear to be looking for me, either. I pointed him out to Pepper, who seemed restless, probably bored. "We should be seeing some action here pretty soon," I said. "Be patient."

"When does that kid swim?"

"He'll be in several different races...but I don't know when. Maybe I should find out," I decided, then got up and headed towards Ryan. He turned and saw me as I stepped beside him, and he

almost smiled. "Well god, so weird, you showed up for real," he said, sidling away from the other boys as if we needed a bit of privacy.

"Didn't you believe me before?"

Ryan made a dismissive "pfff" sound and put his hands on his hips. "Why aren't you working?"

"I took the day off," I told him, making it sound, not quite honestly, like my own magnanimous gesture. "I had to come and watch my buddy Ryan kick ass."

"Your buddy Ryan," the boy repeated with a quiet chuckle, his large and gappy front teeth bared in a nervous sneer. He glanced at the other two boys standing a few feet away, embarrassed perhaps that they might overhear—or hoping perhaps that they would. I asked him about the times for his races, but his answer was a vague one. "Our coach keeps track of the times," he informed me. "Just watch for me, that's all."

I thought of Pepper and looked at my watch and told Ryan that I had to leave by—looking at my watch again—two o'clock or thereabouts. "I'm taking care of a friend's kid," I said with a quick sideways nod in Pepper's direction. "I'll stay as long as I can."

"OK, whatever," Ryan said. He was taking a long look at Pepper in the bleachers, appraising him as he might another of his swimming competitors. Just a few minutes later, the first group of swimmers was in the water and I was back with Pepper, watching the action. There were boys and girls from eight years old to fourteen competing in this tournament, with the youngest going first in each round of events, as I determined by the third or fourth race.

Throughout, I tried to keep my eyes on Ryan, difficult as it was with the distraction of so many other boys. Twice I caught him glancing at me from his position beside the pool, making sure apparently that I was in my proper place and ready to watch him. He waited until just moments before his first event—the hundred-yard-freestyle—to remove his shirt and shorts, the grand unveiling, the only chance to see a boy actually undress in public. His body was the same delicate pinkish white as his face, the blush of roses in the snow, built perfectly for the water (or for running track) with slim but surprisingly well-muscled legs and arms. He and the other Butler Middle School boys were sporting American flag Speedo briefs with red-and-white stripes across the butt and patriotic white stars on the blue

crotch. Ryan ran his thumbs quickly under the elastic at his waist and thighs to adjust the skimpy trunks, then padded barefoot to the starting blocks, an almost dainty stride, slightly up on his toes, as graceful as a little dancer.

He glanced at me, and at Pepper, as he prepared to take his place. "That's Ryan," I said pointlessly, having identified him once already. I must have been agitated by the sight of seven young asses in tight spandex so close in front of me, Ryan's directly in the middle of the line-up, all of them bent forward now in colorful full moons as the starter's whistle sent them hurtling into the pool. Perhaps I was a distraction to Ryan as well, a minor one certainly, but enough to disrupt his concentration and his rhythm, costing him the race. Whatever the reason, he ended up in third place and slammed the water furiously with his fist as soon as he looked around and realized the outcome. He never even glanced at me when he climbed from the water.

It was another ninety minutes before he swam again, this time in the fifty-yard butterfly. Pepper, while we were waiting, had encountered a couple of his friends and was now shooting hoops with them in the gym. Having him occupied gave me the freedom to relax and enjoy the swimming—or, more accurately, the swimmers, dozens of sleek young boys in nothing but scraps of elastic just barely covering their bulges in front and their cheeks in back. Ryan was as handsome as any of them in his star-spangled Speedos, still obviously prepubescent but definitely a healthy boy, no mystery about that, impossible not to notice the bold lump beneath the blue spandex at his crotch.

In this second race, Ryan lived up to his own self-promotion and won easily. He pumped both fists above his head to celebrate while still bouncing and splashing in the pool, then climbed out and continued the celebration with his teammates, all of them whooping and laughing and high-fiving. It was plain to see, even to a casual spectator like myself, that Ryan was the star of his team, the stud, the big shot, expected by one and all to bring home the trophies and the glory. He was the Golden Boy—the kid I'd always hated at school, the object of my envy and my lust in equal measures, superior and unreachable except in my fantasies, always in my fantasies, where we were set free to grapple naked, and to kiss, and to taste each other's

cum. My fantasies hadn't changed, and sometimes, with luck and diligence, they actually came true—even with the perfect Golden Boys themselves. Like Ryan Fox.

Pepper, meanwhile, was still busy with his friends. At one point, they left the school entirely and went to a video arcade down the street, returning, when they were out of money, for another basketball game in the gym. With Pepper so happily involved elsewhere, I was able to stay on and on at the pool to watch Ryan, two o'clock becoming three o'clock becoming four, the tournament finally concluding with a 500-yard team relay as afternoon became evening and my stomach began rumbling for food. Ryan ended up competing in three events and winning two. He vanished with his teammates (to the locker room, I assumed) while the older kids were still swimming. I was about to head for the exit when he made his reappearance, dressed in orange-and-white sweats and carrying his gym bag, ready to leave.

I strolled over to congratulate him. He wondered why I hadn't left earlier, as planned. I hemmed and hawed a murky response about changing my mind, not being able to tear myself away, and so on. "You were great," I concluded. "How could I leave before you were finished? No way!"

"See, I *told* you I would win! You probably didn't believe me."

"I came to watch you kick ass, remember?"

"Yeah, well... I need to find my ride," the boy said. His perfectly round mop of blond hair was still wet from swimming (and perhaps from showering afterwards), which made it darker than usual and a bit stringy. His ears were reddened from the chlorinated water, and also his eyelids, like someone who'd been crying. I looked for his mother or his father. "Are your parents here somewhere?"

"Not my parents," he corrected, without bothering to explain their absence. "I'm riding with Davis and Gallagher."

"Teammates?"

"Yeah...duh!"

"I could give you a ride...if you'd like."

"Why?"

"Because...because it's on my way home, no big deal," I said. "It's not like I'm a stranger or something."

Ryan looked at me with that peculiar expression of his, like someone sniffing a funny odor, his nostrils flared and his mouth downturned, then he wheeled and jogged to his friends and told them to leave without him. Just like that. So quickly, so easily—the boy had chosen to be with me.

Together, we tracked down Pepper in the gymnasium, where he and five other kids were using a basketball in some type of noisy and disorganized kicking game, like soccer at a lunatic asylum. He had run himself into exhaustion during the long afternoon and was glad, finally, to be leaving. I had never seen him so sweaty, or so brick-red from the heat of his own body. It came as a surprise to him, of course, that Ryan would be leaving with us. He pushed up the copper-rimmed glasses on his sweaty nose to appraise the situation, and the other boy, more clearly. Was he jealous? Probably so. I didn't like that uncomfortable side effect of Ryan's presence, but I hoped that it might be only temporary, that the two of them might actually become friends, or at least friendly.

The three of us decided, as we walked to the car, that we should stop somewhere for dinner before going home. The Steak'n'Shake on Main Street was where we ended up. It was Ryan's suggestion, but even Pepper agreed that the choice was a good one. We sat in one of the black-and-chrome booths and ordered a high-fat feast of steakburgers and fries, onion rings and chili, sundaes and milkshakes. "This should hold us for a while," I joked.

"There's *onions* on this," Pepper suddenly announced, horrified.

"You must've gotten mine by mistake," I said, trading burgers with him. "Don't panic."

"Onions are the nastiest," Ryan sympathized, much to my surprise. He and Pepper hadn't spoken to each other until that moment, and his comment had a conciliatory, let's-make-nice feeling about it. Definitely a surprise, coming from him. "They make your breath stink *so* bad, man, it's gross."

"Oh great," I said, "another fanatical onion-hater. That's all I need."

Pepper, beside me in the booth, smiled for the first time that evening. "Are you outnumbered?"

"It looks that way."

Ryan was across the table from us on the opposite bench, all alone on that big black bench like a princeling on his throne. "Only dorks eat onions," he said.

"Now that's a bit harsh."

"Well, god, it's true!"

"Onions ruin everything," Pepper said. "They're evil."

"Good," I said, "that means I get to eat all the onion rings."

Both boys moved quickly to claim their shares. "They're OK when they're *cooked*," Ryan explained to me. "Don't you know that?"

"I'm learning, I'm learning."

"They're only evil when they're raw," Pepper chimed in, clearly enjoying this new game of pick-on-the-adult. He was still sweaty from his afternoon in the gym, damp ringlets of hair stuck to the skin around his forehead and temples. He and Ryan joked for another minute or two about the horrors of onions, then joked a while longer about other nasty and despised foods, which led to a discussion of movie snacks, which led to a discussion of favorite movies and movie stars—all conducted in goofy and hyper boy-speak with no help or direction from myself. I was free to sit and listen and watch, feasting on the boys as I feasted on the food.

Ryan had already finished his burger and several onion rings when he started on his french fries. It must have been a habit of his, a culinary ritual, saving his fries for last. He filled the empty spot on his plate, where his burger had been, with a red puddle of ketchup, then proceeded to dip each french fry into the puddle and, one by one, devour them. His way of biting and chewing was peculiar, as gracefully dainty as his walk, each fry bitten slowly and carefully between his side teeth like a little treasure, always with his side teeth, the way Bugs Bunny would eat a carrot. He peered at me, red-eyed, while he delicately chomped and chewed.

After dinner, I drove Ryan home to Tompkins Street, jumping out quickly to say hello to his parents and explain our situation. But only his older sister (she must have been sixteen or so) was at the house. His mother and father were already out for the evening with friends, apparently confident that Ryan was also with friends, celebrating with his teammates, no reason to be concerned about him. As we said goodbye, I offered him a hastily concocted invitation that

surprised even myself. "Come to my house sometime," I said. "You and Pepper can mess around, watch videos, whatever."

"Oh wow, big thrill."

"I'm serious," I laughed, poking his shoulder until he nearly grinned.

"I know where you live," Ryan said with a flare of his nostrils. It was a difficult-to-decipher comment. He lifted his chin and glared at me as if in defiance. "I know where your house is... on Whitman Street."

"That's right," I said. Hadn't we already had this same conversation? When I left him a moment later and jogged back to the car, I wasn't sure if he'd ended up accepting or rejecting my invitation.

Pepper performed another of his saxophone concerts back at the house, then turned his attention to his drawing, belly-down on the floor with his art supplies and comic books to reproduce pictures from *Batman* and *Spawn*. His activities were becoming predictable, routine, the two of us like...what? Father and son? Husband and wife? Or just old friends? That, probably, was the best description: old friends intimate with each other's habits and quirks, comfortable together, cozy in our familiarity.

Ten o'clock came, and I reminded the boy about his need for a bath. "Especially after getting so sweaty today," I said. "You need a thorough washing."

"Right now?"

"You promised last night."

Pepper gave me an over-the-shoulder look with one of his usual impish half-smiles. "Did I promise?"

I crossed the room and grabbed him beneath the armpits and yanked to lift him. "OK, that's it, I'm going to wash you myself!"

"No, no, no," he wailed right on cue, his inevitable response, "I can do it myself!"

I wanted to tease him a little further. "Too late, too late! I warned you last night..."

"I can do it myself," Pepper again laughed and whined in panicky protest. He let his pen and papers drop to the floor as I hoisted him to his feet and started tugging at his "GIBSON USA" T-shirt, only playing around, never seriously intending to undress him.

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He struggled, of course, and pretended to sob, but surprisingly he allowed me to remove his T-shirt, then his white undershirt, while he held and readjusted his glasses with one hand and pushed at me with the other. He was bare to the waist in my arms as we shuffled and sidestepped like clumsy dancers toward the bathroom. "Come on, take everything off," I said, and as I said it, began fumbling with the cold little copper button on his jeans, and also with the zipper, which is when he finally twisted himself free from my arms.

"I can do it," he almost shouted, a barely controlled yelp. But when I looked at him and he looked back, his face was smiley and excited and not at all upset. It was his own shyness, his own deep-rooted modesty, that had prevented our game of striptease from moving below the waist, nothing to do with anger.

"OK," I said, relieved and maybe even a little encouraged, "get your butt in there and take a bath."

"A shower," Pepper corrected.

"A bath, a shower, whatever," I said, spanking him lightly, pat pat pat against the seat of his blue jeans to propel him into the bathroom. He was still smiling when he closed the door between us. I stayed there in the hallway with my hand against the wooden door, so easy to grab the knob and turn it and go in. No lock on the door to keep me out. So easy to walk in and see the boy, just a big joke, oops sorry, laugh about it as he stands naked in front of me. So easy, and so impossible.

With the first splash of water into the tub, I went to the living room and pulled out the couch, then gathered Pepper's comic books and art supplies and put them back in his gym bag. On the floor beside the bag, wadded and unrecognizable until I picked them up, were the boy's white Nike shorts. In the confusion of our roughhousing, he must have forgotten them. I held them up with both hands and smiled, so small they looked, hard to believe anyone's hips could be slim enough to fit them—and yet they were baggy on Pepper, actually too large. I put them to my nose and sniffed for some smell of him, some lingering fragrance from his ass or his crotch, but there was nothing except the generic staleness of unwashed clothing, nothing to teach me the secrets of his body.

Standing there, I could hear the bathtub filling loudly and steadily with water. I left Pepper's shorts on the floor and returned to

my place outside the bathroom door, just in time to hear the squeaky handles on the faucets being turned shut, cutting off the flow of water into the tub. I knocked on the door and then did the unthinkable and turned the knob. "Hey," I called in through the crack, "what's going on? Why are you taking a bath instead of a shower?"

"The nozzle won't work."

"Are you sure?"

"It won't work for sure," Pepper called back. I could hear him practically dive into the tub, which was behind the half-opened door, out of sight from where I was standing with my hand still on the knob. "Maybe I can make it work," I proposed, shouldering the door open a few inches.

"No, it's OK!"

"Relax, man, it'll only take a minute," I said. "Don't freak out." I pushed the door completely open and stepped into the little room. Pepper unleashed a plaintive chorus of boo-hooing with his eyes closed and his head tossing from side to side, Pan in a panic, his frantic sobbing betrayed by the merest flicker of a grin. He had his knees hugged to his chest, no way to see between his legs—but still, there he was, there he was—nude in the water as I leaned above him and began fiddling with the faucets and with the lever for the shower, briefly running the water while I jiggled this and banged that, all to no effect. "Well," I said, "you were right. It's busted. Not a trickle from the nozzle."

"I told you, I told you, I told you," Pepper cried with shrillness verging on hysteria. It occurred to me that he was embarrassed by his own embarrassment, and was doing his best to compensate with outbursts of slightly crazed silliness. He opened his eyes and yipped when he saw me, as if startled that I hadn't left, then clamped his eyes shut again and hugged his knees tighter. He was facing to the front, toward the faucets, his toes nearly touching the drain and its old-fashioned rubber plug. As I finished my tinkering and straightened up, I scooped a handful of water against his face. He yipped even louder and shook his head and tried not to laugh, then retaliated with a kick of his right foot that sprayed water against the front of my pants and shirt. "Hey, no fair," I said, "I'm defenseless here!"

The boy opened his eyes to see the effect of his kick, then kicked again, and again, provoking me until I counterattacked with

more handfuls of water shoved against his face. The water blinded him and made him laugh and sob and kick back even harder, a frenzy of thrashing that defeated his modesty without the boy even realizing it, each kick forcing his legs apart and exposing everything between them. I continued splashing at him to keep his eyes filled for just another moment, just one more moment while I peered into the water to see that well-guarded dick of his, no hair around it that I could detect, difficult to get a good look at it or to see anything of the balls beneath, my eager glimpses telling me only that it was circumcised and pale brown and, like the rest of his body, very long and thin, impressively long for a twelve-year-old, the same approximate size and shape as his own middle finger, at least three soft inches bobbing there between his skinny legs as he kicked and thrashed.

"OK, OK," I finally said to him, "let's call a truce. Good god, what a mess!"

He stopped kicking and instinctively hugged his knees once again to his chest, unaware that he had already exposed himself. His hair was soaked, dripping into his eyes, making him blink and blink as if dazed. "Is it all your fault?"

"Yes, it's all my fault," I chuckled, happy to take the blame. "Go ahead and wash while I clean up *my* mess."

I grabbed the four largest towels I could find from the cabinet beside the tub and spread them on the floor to soak up the puddle of bath water. Pepper, his knees still modestly upraised and pressed together, began soaping his arms and his shoulders while I covered the floor. "I'll wring these out when you're done," I said, then unfastened my drenched trousers and took them off. "Sorry, I have to do this, no choice."

"Are you wet?"

"Slightly moist, yeah. Don't look," I warned in a shy-virgin falsetto as I decided, on a suddenly giddy impulse, to finish undressing in front of him. Of course, given my exaggerated warning, he *did* look, first one glance and then a second as I stripped off my boxer shorts and my shirt. "There, now we're equal," I said, taking another towel from the cabinet to dry myself. "I'm as wet as you are, I think."

Pepper stared at my face, carefully and directly at my face while he continued to soap his arms and chest and shoulders. "Is that why we're equal?"

"Both of us are wet, yeah, and both of us are *naked*," I said, special emphasis on the last word and a cartoonish leer making the boy look away with a grin and a phony whimper like some delicate little creature trapped with the Big Bad Wolf. I stood facing him as I slowly dried my entire body, glad to let him see me if he cared for a look, proud of a physique made fit and taut by miles of walking every day to deliver the mail. "I think your arms are clean enough," I remarked after a minute or two of silence. "Don't forget the rest of your filthy little bod."

"I'll do the rest, I'll do the rest," Pepper whined in that same hysterical tone, soaping his knees as a tiny concession. I wanted to stay, to do more, but his body language was thoroughly defensive and off-putting, no trace of invitation in those hunched shoulders or tightly clamped legs. Any further contact between us would have been a bossy intrusion upon an uncooperative and clearly uncomfortable young boy, a betrayal of our friendship, unacceptable.

And yet, I needed more, some little token, something. When I announced that I was finished and dry and held out my arms in a "voilà!" gesture to prove it, Pepper couldn't resist another look, a more comprehensive one this time, as if checking me up and down for drops of telltale moisture. It was a torture of self-discipline to keep myself from getting an erection while I stood there with him inspecting me. As soon as shyness again forced his eyes away, I wrapped the towel around my waist and said, "Hey, I just remembered!"

"Remembered what?"

"Hold on, just one second," I told him. "I need to get something!" I rushed to the living room and grabbed the Polaroid camera and rushed back, nearly slipping on the wet towels spread across the floor. "This'll be perfect for my Pepper collection," I said, already aiming and clicking. The boy didn't seem to realize what was happening until the flash forever captured the image of him in the tub—his hair a mess of soaked curls; his eyes turned blearily in my direction (how well, I wondered, could he see without his glasses?); his wide, full lips parted in an expression of quiet confusion. His reaction, no surprise, was a pitiful yelp and boo-hoo, but without much spirit or energy to it. He went on soaping his bony brown knees, first one and then the other, back and forth, as I stepped next to the tub. "You're so cute like this," I teased him in a saccharine coo-coo voice. "Sim-

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ply adorable! We need at least one more shot.”

“Do you *need* it? For sure?”

“Oh, without a doubt,” I said, showing him the first photo, taken from the doorway so that everything below his chest was hidden by the tub. The boy couldn’t help laughing at the image of his drenched-puppy hair and befuddled expression. I put aside the photo and aimed for another shot, close enough now to see his bare hips and legs below the water, a genuine nudie picture of my favorite twelve-year-old. “So cute,” I gushed again. “These pictures will be great!”

“Do you need more?”

“Well,” I laughed, “maybe one more...if you insist.”

“They’re *so* ugly,” was Pepper’s way of agreeing. Again I aimed the camera, this time from the head of the tub, as directly in front of the boy as I could manage, hoping for some glimpse between those gangly legs of his. But he never relaxed them and, I swear, never realized how desperately I hoped that he might. In his mind, we were still playing the same goofy game as always, a bit naughtier now because we were playing it without our clothes, difficult for him, but a game that had nothing to do with actual sex, or with the dangly sex hidden between his own legs. So why didn’t he let me see it? Because he was bashful, I’m convinced, and nothing more.

I finally settled for his huddled and discreet pose, similar to the previous shot except for a better view of his seated right buttock roundly glistening beneath the water’s soapy surface. “OK,” I said, “that’s all for now.”

“Ugly, evil pictures!”

As a last teasing gambit, I reached into the water *below* his knees and managed to pinch his seated, slippery butt, another inch to the right and I might have pinched a hidden testicle. “Now get this stuff nice and clean down here, buddy boy.”

“I will, I will!”

“All right, enjoy your bath,” I said, giving up and heading back to the living room with the camera and photos in my dry hand. I left the door of the bathroom open behind me, a signal to Pepper (I hoped) that a new and deeper intimacy had blossomed between us, more of a raunchy guys-in-the-locker-room camaraderie that involved undressing and bathing and seeing each other naked. Bit by bit, such little gestures and signals might encourage the boy to relax his up-

tight guard and laugh at his own inhibitions, perhaps even to enjoy a boys-club atmosphere of casual nudity, no need for clothing, maybe do a little jerking off (like Frankie) just for the fun of it. Bit by bit, all of it might become reality.

But then those sweet, erotic fantasies were sent fleeing by what I heard and saw on television, a news report about someone named Kurt Randall and the "most sordid case of sexual predation in Sandburg's history." He had been arraigned earlier in December, his bond set at two million dollars and his trial scheduled for March, three months away. That, in living color and stereo sound, was the stark reality of men loving boys, all dreams and fantasies transmuted to nightmare because of one careless word, one reckless touch, one moment of thrilling but ill-advised pleasure.

Had I already gone too far with Pepper? Done too much? Being naked with him, grabbing his ass, taking pictures of him in the bath—any or all of it could have gotten me arrested if the boy said something indiscreet to the wrong person. In short, I needed to cool my engines and leave the kid alone. He had to be getting tired by now of my constant touching and groping, harassment really, no other word for it. Face the truth, I thought: When I looked at Pepper, I saw a lovely and exciting boy; when he looked at me, he saw an ordinary grown-up man who happened to be his friend, but who meant nothing to him in a sexual way, any more than his music teacher or one of his uncles in Peoria.

I changed into a fresh pair of boxers while I pondered my situation, then settled on the hide-a-bed with a beer and a cigarette to help myself relax. I needed to quit grabbing at the boy and goading him, teasing him, trying to manufacture something randy between us. Back off, I told myself, and let the friendship evolve naturally. Let Pepper decide the pace and the extent of our involvement.

As I thought of him, the boy came rushing into the room with a towel clutched around his waist. "I forgot my shorts," he explained, which I already knew, of course. He looked deliciously bare and disheveled in nothing but the towel, his hair like a nest of wild ivy, his eyes large and moist and darkly unfocused without their glasses. I wanted to reach for that towel and strip it away, a funny prank, routine locker-room horseplay that would allow me to see every forbidden morsel of him. But I couldn't, and I didn't, and he rushed

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back to the bathroom with his shorts in hand and the towel still securely in place.

I was enjoying a second beer and another cigarette when Pepper returned. He was wearing his white shorts and carrying his other clothes in a bundle against his bare chest, everything in one tangled and twisted bundle, including his Fruit of the Loom briefs. For whatever reason, he had decided to do without underwear for the night. I forced myself not to mention it, just continued to sip and puff while he went about his business: fussing with his comic books, running to the kitchen for a can of root beer, studying the new Polaroids of himself, cleaning his glasses with a corner of the sheet on our bed. While he was wiping the lenses, he volunteered an unexpected comment about his bath. "I got nice and clean," he said. "I don't stink anymore."

"You're right," I said, laughing out a cloud of smoke. "Sweet as a rose."

"Will you need a new shower now?"

"I'm afraid so. I'll have to call a plumber, I guess."

"Get a really, really good shower."

"Like what, for example?"

Pepper finished cleaning his glasses and put them on so that they rested on the very tip of his nose, easier to see through them that way as he lounged with his head back, watching a Japanese monster movie on TV. "Like I said last night, you know, a really big tub and a glass door and...and maybe a Jacuzzi."

"A Jacuzzi?"

"Or at least a real fancy nozzle with, like, different settings, like one for massage and one for regular and..."

"This all sounds very expensive."

"More than a thousand dollars?"

"Maybe."

"More than two thousand?"

"I really have no idea."

Pepper's fingers were playing absently with his own bare stomach while we talked, and especially with his little brown nipple of a belly button. "Will you do it next week?"

"With all possible speed," I promised. "Consider it one of your Christmas gifts. A super-duper new shower, something we can

both enjoy." I was still watching Pepper's hands, both of them fidgety-fidgety all over his stomach and across the waistband of his shorts, and often underneath, his spidery fingers finding their way again and again beneath the white elastic to flick it snap snap snap against the skin of his belly. "Well, I should finish cleaning the bathroom," I said, already forcing myself away. The boy must not have known what he was doing by snapping that waistband. He must not have remembered that he was wearing no underpants, that I could see down into his shorts nearly to the groin every time he gave the elastic an upward flick. He must not have realized.

When I returned from the bathroom, Pepper was still on his back and still had both hands tucked into his shorts, the fingers all the way in and the thumbs out, crossed on his belly. But his eyes were closed now and he was asleep, breathing deeply. I took off his glasses, which caused him to roll his head and sigh, then I crawled beside him on the mattress with its usual straining and creaking of decades-old springs. What to do next, I had no idea. Close my eyes and try to sleep? Watch television? Cuddle with the boy while he slept? A long day of watching young swimmers in sexy Speedos and then being naked with Pepper had left me tense and horny—despite my earlier resolution. Fear or desire. Which, in the eternal conflict, is stronger?

The Japanese monster movie was still on TV, Godzilla versus Gamera or some such thing, cheap-looking rubbery creatures stomping clumsily through Tokyo. One of the heroes was a pubescent Nipponese lad in tight-tight shorts, which did nothing to ease my agitation. I looked again at Pepper, at the wrinkly fabric of his shorts, at his hands tucked inside. The springs responded with another creak as I rolled toward him and touched his left thigh. So this, I realized, was the advantage of baggy shorts: With hardly more than a nudge of my fingertips, almost as an accident, the leg of Pepper's shorts slid up to the very top of his thigh, to the crease of the groin, and then up even farther, so gently and easily that the boy never felt himself being uncovered, the baggy white fabric all the way up with a final delicate nudge, everything hanging bare for me to see. I held the bunched-up fabric with my thumb less than an inch from his penis, then surrendered and let my thumb touch it, the subtlest whisper of a touch, just one time, careful not to disturb the sleeping boy attached.

As monsters battled across the room, I wiggled out of my boxer shorts and began to masturbate. No need to keep a hand on Pepper's shorts; they stayed up, bunched in place, by themselves, leaving me a free hand to pet his perfect coffee-with-cream thigh while I stared at his exposed parts—right there in front of me, easy to caress them or lick them if I had the nerve—letting my hand just momentarily brush the bottom of his balls, no hair on them, no hair anywhere except for seven tiny pubic whiskers around the very base of his penis, exactly seven tiny whiskers which I counted while I continued to jerk off. My hand on his thigh must have had a pleasurable effect, or maybe I was simply imagining that his snaky soft dick was becoming just a bit snakier and firmer as I watched it.

Right then I remembered the camera and rolled, as lightly as possible, off the mattress. Every floorboard seemed to screech as I crossed the room and grabbed the Polaroid from beside the television and then positioned myself near the bed. I stood there with an erection and trembly hands, afraid every moment that the boy might awaken and discover me snapping first one and then two and then three and four pictures of him with his dick and balls totally, nakedly displayed. But his eyes never opened and his breath never shifted; an entire afternoon of playing in the gym had left him exhausted—dead to the world, as my mother used to say.

I set the camera and pictures on the floor and returned to my place next to him, this time with the soggy towel I'd worn earlier spread beside me, between me and the boy, so that I could lie on my side and stare at him and have something to catch the mess when I ejaculated, which took no more than three or four minutes despite my best effort to prolong the experience. I aimed for the towel but shot so forcefully and wildly that one spurt hit like a sneezeful of snot against the side of Pepper's leg.

Godzilla roared as I slowly regained my breath and cleaned myself with the towel. I saved Pepper's leg until last, relishing the sight of him messy with sex, even if he hadn't participated. Then, just before I decided to clean him, hopeful that I could do it without waking him, he reacted to the strange substance on his leg by swiping at it in his sleep, then scratching it like an itchy bug bite, smearing it with his fingers. The messy surprise must have been enough to rouse him very slightly, a moment of panic for me when he half-opened his

eyes and looked down at himself, then wiped his hand on his bunched-up shorts and rolled on his side, facing me. But his eyes were shut again and he was still asleep, really had never been fully awake, hadn't even noticed that his goodies were uncovered. Rolling onto his side had dislodged the leg of his shorts and undone my handiwork, baggy fabric once again hiding everything between his legs.

I grabbed the photos of him from the floor and became hard in an instant, ready to masturbate one more time, enjoying a potency like I hadn't experienced in many years. There was a possibility that Pepper might, even now, open his eyes and see me, but that only added to the thrill—naked beside him, pulling my pecker, studying every detail of the X-rated Polaroids, more and more convinced that the boy had been mildly aroused by my hand on his thigh, not much, hardly noticeable, just a hint of swelling in that slinky little snake of his.

A second ejaculation into the towel, and I was finished. Wiped out. Nothing left inside except a sludgy residue of guilt and dread. I put on my boxer shorts and hid the photos of Pepper in my bedroom, in the bottom of the drawer beneath a pile of books and magazines and other pictures where Pepper couldn't find them or see them. The whole night felt wrong, like a broken promise or a nasty bit of treachery, certainly no way to treat a friend. Very wrong—as well as stupid and reckless and the opposite of everything I'd resolved after seeing the story about Kurt Randall on the news. But I loved the boy. Goddammit and god help me, I loved him like a storm in my heart.

Fear or desire: Which is stronger? Nearly always, desire.

* * *

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