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The Light at the Top of the Stairs is Broken

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**The Light at the Top of the Stairs
Is Broken**

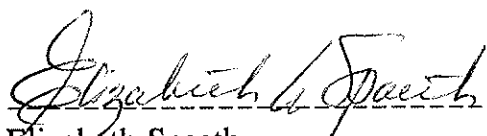
**A Senior Project
The Honors Program
College of St. Benedict/St. John's University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"
and the Degree Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of English**

**by
Michael Anson Schroeder
May, 1992**

Project Title: The Light at the Top of the Stairs Is Broken

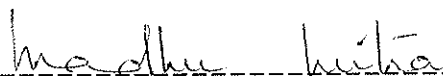
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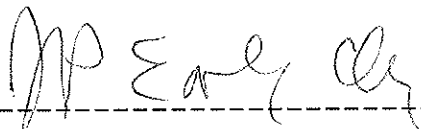
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NIGHTSWEATS

"Breathe....Breathe in. Breathe out," Reardon counseled himself. "Now calm down."

Reardon stared into the darkness surrounding him, listening for an echo, a sound, anything to disturb the silence. Jerked awake by the effort to keep his heart beating regularly, Reardon swung himself upright, blearily staving off the panic attack. Reardon's thoughts palpitated uncontrollably.

"Help me Boosey," Reardon cried out in the darkness to his absent best friend. "I don't want to die. I have living left to do. Oh God, please."

Kane muffled a groan as he obediently rolled over in response to the third installment in an on-going series of death scares.

"What's the matter now, hon'? Can't sleep?" Kane asked, hoping to hide his disinterest.

"I'm dying Kane!"

"We all are, you know. Everyone dies, so I've been told, though I'm not sure I believe it. Look at Marilyn Monroe's staying power. But it's really nothing to worry about. I mean, you can't control death, so why bother panicking? Besides," said Kane, "most people feel like they're dying every day, like they're dying every single minute of their lives."

"No, but you don't understand. I feel like I'm about to physically expire as we speak. Any moment now I may be gone. I think I'm having a heart attack," responded Reardon.

"I'm sure the seven cans of soda pop earlier this evening didn't help any."

Reardon at first couldn't think of a quick response and therefore chose to ignore Kane's unhelpful witticisms, concentrating instead on feeling for his pulse. He had grown so addicted to vast quantities of Diet Mountain Dew that he had trouble getting to sleep at night and frequently woke up, heart set racing by periodic overdoses of caffeine. His heart had begun to occasionally skip beats, pausing to rest a panic-stricken extra half-second. Always somewhat high-strung, Reardon's nervousness worsened because of an uncertain, steadily increasing, indefinable unhappiness. Pumping himself full of over-the-counter medications, Reardon couldn't pinpoint exactly why he felt so dissatisfied with everything as well as nearly everyone around him, but he tried to solve his problems with larger and larger doses of caffeine and aspirin, coupled with many listless hours lying in bed while staring blankly at the alarm clock.

Reardon spoke at last, after Kane had given up expecting an answer. "All right already. I drink too much caffeine it's true, but I could really use some sympathy just now. If I were to die, you'd wish you hadn't underestimated my aches and pains."

"I'm sooo terribly sorry Reardon. It's just that I happen to know you. I know you're a fledgling hypochondriac, and I simply don't want to encourage these tendencies. You're already practically addicted to Nyquil to put you to sleep. No wonder your body is so screwed up; you charge it full of drugs it doesn't need."

"I can't feel my left forearm--it's all tingly."

"Even that can be accounted for. Where has your arm been for the last hour and a half?" asked Kane, not waiting for an answer. "Securely tucked under my shoulder of course, where it always is when you complain of pain in your arm."

Ever so slowly settling down, Reardon acknowledged the possibility. "You've got a point," he admitted. "You needn't, however, dismiss my attacks as purely imaginary. I'm convinced something is dreadfully wrong."

"You're sooo melodramatic. That's what I love about you."

Hoping to calm himself, Reardon abruptly changed the subject. "Tell me a story," he implored.

"I don't really know many worth telling."

"That never stopped you before!" announced Reardon sarcastically. In actuality he had never heard Kane talk about his family life, or even, for that matter, any event connected with his past. It was as though Kane lived solely for the moment in the here and now with no regard for things gone by. Kane had never been much inclined to sit idle. He had, in other words, never been much of a storyteller.

"Very well then," said Kane, "but don't blame me if I run out of things to say."

Kane began: "ONCE UPON A TIME...."

"No no no no no," Reardon interrupted. "Don't you know that kind of contrived beginning went out with the dark ages. I was hoping for a real story, one with substance and character. I want a story grounded in actual facts."

Kane replied. "Most of the real stories I know happen in unreal settings. I can't think of any others offhand."

"Apparently not, or you surely would have started off better," quipped Reardon.

Kane laughed along with Reardon. "Perhaps you had better begin. You've always been better at telling stories than I have. I'll take notes while you talk."

"When I was three years old," Reardon whispered, "I was visited by a ghost."

Ignoring Kane who was preparing to protest, Reardon continued undaunted. "My parents had been worried for a long time that something was severely wrong inside my head, because I hadn't spoken a single word beforehand. Sure I made sounds and gurgled appropriately when I saw a bottle about to be shoved down my throat, but I saw no compelling reason to share what was inside me with anyone else."

Unable to suppress a laugh, Kane interrupted. "Oh come on, you expect me to buy all this. It's even more fantastical than my ONCE UPON A TIME beginning."

"Honest to God, I'm telling you the truth. Do you really think I'd lie about the most important event of my life?"

"All right," Kane answered warily. "This better be good," he warned.

"As I was saying, I saw a ghost when I was only three. I had known I was destined for greatness ever since I was born; I simply waited for a definitive sign before I decided to join the world of ordinary, everyday conversation. I could find no compelling reason to speak until then...."

"But you haven't been able to stop since," noted Kane, finishing Reardon's sentence for him.

"True enough." Long pause. "I lay in my crib, searching for that ever elusive comfortable sleeping position as I passed the time studying my mobile of slowly revolving clowns. I guess I must have drifted off--this part has gotten a bit fuzzy. I distinctly remember the occurrence, though, because I became suddenly, inexplicably aware of someone's presence, a foreign presence, in the room."

"Are you absolutely sure you weren't just dreaming?" Kane asked. "Or maybe it was a real person, someone standing in the doorway, and your mind has just convinced you that since you didn't recognize the person, it had to be a ghost?"

"No, it was a ghost sure enough. Black. That's the first thing I saw. Immense blackness. And dark evening shaded veils obscuring the soft, pale skin. At the time I wouldn't have been able to describe her very well. Now as I look back, it's funny, she's as clear in my mind as if she were Boosey. I remember skin the color of yellowed ivory piano keys on the Grand in my parent's living room. I guess you could say her skin looked jaundiced, but not ugly. And the heels. She strode across the room vibrantly. No, that's a lie. She drifted, softly, slowly, silently until she stood before me. I couldn't help but notice the long, razor-sharp black heels firmly fastened to her frame. They were the only things about her which unnerved me. She knew something was wrong.

"There's no need to be frightened by me. I won't hurt you,' she assured me. Then, carefully removing her shoes, she flung them violently against the opposite wall as if she were somehow destroying all the possible evils in the world in one gesture.

"Is that better?' she asked. 'Please don't let my heels disturb you.'

"I came back because I wanted to see my great-grand nephew,' the woman said by way of explanation. 'I wanted to see for myself the one everyone is talking about, the one destined for great and wonderful things. I wanted to be sure you were really and truly okay.' My child's mind, still open and free, caught and held the meaning, even when the words ranged beyond by capabilities. Funny, usually incidents get fuzzier with time. Not in this case.

"She started shouting all of a sudden, yet she could barely be heard. As her voice faded fast, she grew immense and awful looking, yet even then she didn't frighten me. 'Remember always,' she said, 'that I love you and will watch over you. Don't be afraid of death; it doesn't matter in the end.' And last, as she left: 'Know that you are someone special to whom greatness will come.'

"The next day my parents took me on my first trip to the zoo where I saw many wild things. Towards the end of the long day, I sat contentedly in my stroller, watching the world go by as I looked into the sky. It was then that I spoke my first word.

"Glancing over at the vender's cart, I saw a red spark escape into the heavens, and I could no longer hold back the pent up emotion of the past day and a half. Ba Ba. Balloon, I shouted in ecstasy.

"That's right honey. Balloon. That's right,' my parents condoned approvingly, amazed that my first word should be so complex.

"Balloon, I repeated to myself."

"Wow," said Kane.

"Yeah. Wow is right," Reardon replied. "Let's go to bed. I think I'll be able to sleep now."

NETWORKING AT THE GROCERY STORE

Saturday--Reardon and Boosey's weekly shopping ritual. Toting separate grocery lists, they divided the cart into two sections, Reardon habitually filling up the front while Boosey took over the back part, including the extra basket for small perishables. The two best friends looked forward to the late afternoon trip to the grocery store as a necessary getaway, offering them the opportunity to dish the latest town gossip as well as fill each other in on their own lives. This particular weekend excursion meant something extra. Not only did Reardon need to shop for that evening's dinner party, Boosey also had a secret agenda. While Reardon pondered the problem of how to introduce his lover to his parents, Boosey busied herself planning an extravaganza of her own, namely Reardon's surprise birthday party.

"Stop it, Reardon! Your constant fidgeting drives me batty," said Boosey.

Discovered absentmindedly filing through his hair with his fingernails once again, Reardon snapped to attention. "I couldn't figure out what kind of shampoo would help most. I've been using Nexus designed for thinning hair, but it's not helping. It's getting worse, in fact."

"Quit worrying so much. Think of it this way--It's a hell of a lot worse losing your mind than losing your hair."

Reardon, feeling suddenly insecure and disagreeable, argued back. "If you lose your mind, at least you can stop caring about looks."

Boosey wondered why his hair loss worried him so greatly, particularly now. "So what," she said. "You'll have your hair a good long time yet. Besides Kane will love you no matter what, even if you do thin a bit on top."

"I'm not so sure," said a disheartened Reardon. "I'd like to think he'd stick by me, but I can't imagine him wanting me when I'm bald. He is, and always will be, four years younger. Those years matter more as you lumber on past thirty into old age."

"Oh Reardon, don't be silly. Pick up the Pert and lay off the philosophy for a while," suggested Boosey. "Buying shampoo needn't be so traumatic."

Crisis number one completed, they headed to Dairy Products to compare yogurt brands. "What do you suggest?" Reardon queried. "I need to marinate the shish kebobs for tonight, and mother always uses Dannon. Says it makes the meat taste better, guaranteed."

"I can't see that it matters all that much. Plain yogurt is plain yogurt, the cheaper the better."

Reardon, in an effort to sort out the contradictory advice, shook his head like a horse snorting and bucking at the starting line, the bit clamped uncomfortably in his tender mouth. He decided to stick with the tried and true name brand out of sheer nerves, then looked up to notice a grocery cart wheeling past.

Normally a natural born sucker for children, especially someone else's kids, Reardon didn't give the little girl in the cart more than a momentary sidelong glance. He focused so intently on the cart that he even forgot to appreciate the look of the determined mother struggling to push her contented daughter for a ride. "Balloon," he remembered as he blinked to avoid staring at the red and green objects tied to the passing grocery cart handle. "How I miss that red balloon!" He started slowly wandering down the aisle after the balloons, caught up in reliving his first trip to the zoo.

"Mommy, when can I visit Daddy?" overheard Reardon.

"Right after we get done shopping, I'll take you to his house," the mother promised.

"Reardon, dear, condoms are next on my list, unless you have something to get first," called out Boosey, seeking to divert his attention.

"I always wondered where the balloon went in such a rush," he thought. "What kind of pressing engagement could a balloon have?" he continued to himself while silently pondering the dangling helium globes tied to the cart.

"Have they gone and moved the rubbers out of pharmaceuticals!"

"Too bad I can't be young again. It would mean so much more to me this time around, if only I had another chance."

"Which do you prefer, Reardon, ribbed or unribbed? What's the difference anyway? I don't understand the fuss about this receptacle tip thingy."

"What?"

"I was just trying to decide what kind of condoms to buy."

Realizing he was being directly addressed, Reardon responded. "Why buy any when you can scam all you want free at the nightclubs. Walk into any gay bar and pick them up, no cost at all. The bars even separate them nowadays depending on whether you want them for oral sex or something more intimate."

Unconvinced, Boosey argued that they weren't the same; they just didn't feel right, she reasoned. Anything free had to be cheap by definition.

"I want to tell you about a dream I keep having. It's been haunting me lately," said Reardon, getting off track.

"You're spewing off more dreams, and I'm stuck in a quandary about condoms. Thanks for the help."

"I wake up, sometimes three, four in the morning, shivering and shaking, only I'm not cold; I don't know what it is. I feel lonely nearly all the time, even though

Kane stays right by my side at night, except when he's at his parent's, which isn't often."

Boosey inquired what Kane had advised.

"He means well," continued Reardon, "but he brushes it off, convinced that I must have eaten something disagreeable which is upsetting my system."

"Have you been eating greasy food again?"

"I've had gas recently, but the nightmares don't come from gas."

Boosey instinctively understood that her best friend had been doubting himself once again, and it frightened her. Never overtly religious in the orthodox sense, Boosey nevertheless collected all the faith she could find and channelled it. Ever since he had started suffering twitches of insecurity like pesky head lice invading his skull, she had single-handedly bolstered the both of them by sheer force of will, and she wasn't about to let doubt destroy them now.

"Let's go squeeze some out of season melons," joked Boosey to lighten the somber mood. She steered him toward the produce section to take his mind off his problems.

Reprimanding him gently, Boosey informed Reardon that he had been no help at all in choosing condoms. "I figured you would be the expert after so many years of safe sex," she intoned.

"Kane and I haven't bothered with rubbers for some time now," he acknowledged with no small measure of embarrassment. "I've forgotten the subtle differences."

"What on earth could you have been thinking? Blaine and I have been dating as long as you and Kane--we met the same day, if you will recall--and yet we never take stupid chances. What could have possessed you to forget about condoms? You've got your future to think about. It may not matter to Kane, but you, you of all people, shouldn't casually toss away your life for sex."

"At this point it's a calculated risk, and a low risk the way I figure it. I don't see why you're making such a fuss, Boosey. I'm a big boy and quite capable of taking care of myself. Didn't you mention something about fruit salad?" said Reardon mischievously.

"It's only because I worry. You have so much left to live for."

"Not so very much as you might think," ended Reardon mysteriously. "Say, check out that banana. Judging by its size, it looks like it would make even Jeff Stryker envious."

Strolling by the sweet corn, Reardon briefly thought about confessing his recent, recurrent nightmares to Boosey. As they planted themselves in front of the produce to examine canteloupes, he again considered confiding his hidden fear of failure, then thought better of the idea. If told, Boosey would in all probability laughingly dismiss his nervous worrying, calling it foolish rot. On the other hand, were she to take his doubts seriously, that might actually be worse.

He waited patiently while Boosey pawed the produce, testing canteloupes to make a suitable salad. "Since you've promised to provide the fruit salad for dinner tonight, I, as host, ought to be privy to what all goes into your creation."

"You've had it before, don't you recall? The ingredients? Let's see: canteloupe, honeydew, mandarin oranges, pineapple, coconut..."

"Whoa," he whinnied loudly. "Kane can't handle coconut. It causes a violent allergic reaction."

"I'll leave off the coconut then," she replied, scratching the offending item off her list. "I must say I never heard of anyone having an allergic reaction to coconut before."

"It happens, though in Kane's case his reaction might be prompted by a compulsive need for attention," Reardon replied. "He relishes making people tolerate his quiriness, welcomes being thought of as finicky."

"Why, I wonder?"

"He thinks it makes him stand out in a crowd. Between all the attention you and I grab, he figures he must fight for any leftover tidbits he can get," offered Reardon.

"Must be difficult not to be the star in the family. I would hate not being noticed," commiserated Boosey.

They eyed the last of the season's sweet corn, their mouths watering as they contemplated roasting it with heavy butter. They remembered the lazy hazy summer afternoons spent side by side, and recollected how swiftly the long days segued into short-lived autumn, replete with tumbling leaves and a bursting sense of urgency as if their lives could be captured and held within a single moment. The radiant world glowed brilliantly and reflected their mood, riling their new-found emotions into a heightened agitation.

"Whatever happened to our first love?" Boosey inquired thoughtfully.

"Andy Ransom," they sighed simultaneously in a rush of recollection. After an exhausting pause, they returned to their cynical selves.

"Who knows?"

"Who cares?" they admitted.

"I just don't understand it," Boosey acknowledged fitfully. "Each of us thought we were so in love. Romantic love, what an idiotic notion!"

"True enough. Lovers have come and gone, and you've been the only stable element in my life. I've always been able to bank on you. The past two years I've also had Kane, and he makes a world of difference, come to think of it."

"And I have Blaine. But what good are they, really?. Don't get me wrong! I don't mind supporting Blaine. I've had the cash funds ever since Granny willed her savings bonds to me. It's just I'm beginning to realize he's more high maintenance than I am, and that says a lot. To top it off, he doesn't give anything back, not the way my gay male friends do."

"You've overlooked one major consideration. I love Kane."

"Love," she pooh-poohed, "is a dirty four letter word. I don't believe in it, no siree, not one bit, except as a manufactured emotion which deludes people into imagining the sacrifices they make are worthwhile."

"I repeat," said Reardon, somewhat defiantly, "I love Kane. I would gladly give my life on his behalf."

"Then you are a fool, suckered into a prehistoric belief system. People are in love with the idea of being in love, nothing more, nothing less."

Disturbed by Boosey's seemingly harmless prattle, Reardon suggested that they head for the check out counter. Undaunted, she refused to withdraw her attack on the already brutally battered, last surviving vestiges of passion. They teetered toward the front of the store, grocery cart in tow.

"Romantic love has died out, if it ever existed."

"How can you say that? Chivalry, romance, persecution for love, are they to mean nothing according to your revised standards?" a beleaguered, shocked Reardon called out. Much to his consternation the check out girl scrutinized him intently.

"People might as well contract lovers, for all they're worth. At least then they could broker for privileges. The only permanent, true love which stands a chance of lasting is between friends," Boosey lectured. "The rest doesn't exist or if it does, it peers out gawky and knobby-kneed, unsure of itself."

The check out girl sneered at the spectacle they created, but watched them curiously nonetheless, captivated by Boosey's cynicism, contrasted to Reardon's half-hearted rebuttals.

"If you say so," a worn down, wearied Reardon conceded at last.

He detested disagreement and sought to close the conversation, hating to defy Boosey even on small points, much less large-scale issues like love. Boosey had her share of faults, no doubt--when Boosey erred, she erred in abundance. No one dared

to dispute that--yet Reardon forgave her unconditionally. Boosey's flamboyant excessiveness added to her charm and character. To argue at this point, just when they were feeling so connected, suddenly seemed the epitome of idiocy so Reardon shelved his reservations and linked arms with his best friend, the bag boy following dutifully behind with the groceries.

BAR SCENE 101

"We warn Reardon to take care of himself. That's about all you can do nowadays," Reardon's mother, Maggie McCoy, noted.

"I tell him, boy, I say, put a raincoat on before you play in the rain," piped in his father, Mead. "I just say right out, no bones about it, you've got to put a helmet on that soldier, son."

"Sound advice I'm sure Mr. McCoy, but I think Reardon already knows all that," said Boosey. Bored, Boosey's mind drifted, considering how shocked Reardon's parents would be if they learned the truth, if they discovered how experienced their son actually was. She vividly remembered the first time Reardon met Kane: the anticipation, the excitement, the overt sensuality.

* * * *

Disco night at the bars. The boys out in force in an attempt to return to a more innocent time. The beat of the music may have been simpler, but so were the worries.

Latent exhibitionists stuck their fears in the miscellaneous file for the evening, dug through their wardrobes for an open-chested, gaudily Seventyish outfit, and hit the town, smiling a bit too widely, laughing a little too hard. The 'new, improved,' updated versions of John Travolta posed and postured as they preened in ever widening, whirling circles, hoping to out-dance the competition.

"If ya can't dance, git outta my way," one of the male couples joked to conceal the sneering seriousness underneath.

"What is she doing here anyway? I thought it was Boys' night out."

"Different rules apply for fag hags," another answered.

"Excuse me, but there is only one real queen here, and you're looking at her. The rest of you are just pretenders to the throne. And rather poor imitations, I might add."

"Besides," Reardon said, "I don't see any fag hags around. She's a born and bred all-American fruit fly."

"What's the difference?" one of the strangers wondered aloud.

"A fag hag has no personality, and instead tags along, depending upon us to give her an identity. She tries to become a gay man's best friend because she hasn't got any other outside interests. The hag tags along after us like a little child tugging at its mother's skirts. And she wonders why we haven't fallen in love with her, why we don't need her as much as she need us. But how do you fall in love with a nobody?"

"A fruit fly, on the other hand, bursts on the scene, a full blown personality and a half. A fruit fly draws us to her, and we worship adoringly. We remain friends with these larger-than-life divas long after we have cast aside the pesky fag hags. I've known Boosey since we were twelve and I can assure you, she's nobody's hag!" concluded Reardon.

The boys that night, so much like Marybella Harkin. That fussy, somewhat stuffy, ultraconservative little girl turned into a constipated twenty-five year old who toured around with senior citizen groups, volunteering to take them grocery shopping every Saturday, promptly at one o'clock. She would scour the aisles endlessly, complete with a mental list at her fingertips, looking for cut-rate bargains, and she was always complaining, never satisfied with the imperfect fruits and vegetables she settled for. The gay boys in the bar that night, just like Marybella, scanned the produce,

turning up their noses as they sniffed the melons, convinced that if they waited long enough a new shipment of goods would arrive.

* * * *

"Boosey, oh Boosey," called Maggie, drawing Boosey's meandering mind back to the conversation. "What a salad! How did you think to throw together so many unusual fruits?"

"I had help. Reardon and I went shopping," she replied more tersely than she had intended.

"Never did have coconut on salad before," Mead contributed. "Must admit it's not half bad. Wouldn't exactly say I had a hankering for coconut, but it hit the spot right where it counts."

"I had my share of doubts," Maggie added, "when you pushed Reardon to run to the grocery store just for one item, but it worked out all right in the end."

"Yeah," considered Boosey silently. "Once I figured Kane wasn't showing, I was damned and determined we'd have coconut after all."

"Where on earth could Reardon have gotten off to?" Maggie wondered.

"I'm sure I don't know, Mrs. McCoy. He dropped of the coconut and ran right out again. Now that I think about it, he did mention something about trying to track down Kane."

"Kane. Kane, that nimrod!" thought Boosey, wordlessly accusing Reardon's boyfriend of supreme, inept stupidity. "How differently it all began. . . ."

* * * *

Last call for alcohol. Last chance to get drunk enough that loneliness would lose its sharp edges and, watching the world get soft in the middle, we stumbled off in separate directions, no longer caring that mister right hadn't arrived. Though Reardon had forgotten to scope anyone out, he consoled himself with the knowledge that I had a warm, ready VCR already set up at my place, waiting for us to use and abuse. He went to get Long Islands to make sure the evening ended on a high note.

Seven minutes later the bouncer began attempting to shoo drinkless patrons out of the bar. Reardon still hadn't returned. What to do but fend off the surly bouncer with only a silly grin and the lame excuse that I had to track down my friend who had disappeared on me. Fortunately female wiles do have certain advantages; fortunately the bouncer was the only straight boy in the crowd!

Reardon sat entrenched on the bar stool next to a barely legal, altogether rumped youth who looked as though he had just wandered in from Iowa. Dark hair with an off set, uncertain smile to match his jaunty good looks, the boy looked perfectly content to remain camped out indefinitely at the bar next to Reardon. Waving as if to flag down a low flying aircraft, I made sure I was noticed, probably by three quarters of the patrons left standing around.

"Reardon, you forgot my drinky," as I strode over and feigned indifference. "Ah, here it is," as I reached across this stranger who had almost had the audacity to steal my Long Island. I forgave him on site because Reardon had offered it and, besides, this new boy was really too cute to offend to the point where he would notice my drink. Then the bouncer made a second sweep in our direction.

"Don't look now," this Kane boy whispered, "but we're about to get set out on our duff."

"Never fear when Boosey's here."

"Excuse me," our sworn adversary, everyone's party-poopers demanded.

"No, excuse me. I'm trying to drink here."

"Well all right," the bouncer named Blaine acquiesced, "but if you wanna stay longer, you gotta become part owners."

Well hell, he let us stay after all. Who was I to complain? I got a date out of the deal. Turned out neither Reardon nor I had to leave empty-handed.

* * * *

"Did anyone miss me?" Reardon called out as he returned once again, flouncing in from the cold night air and shutting the door.

"Where's Kane?" Mead demanded. "We thought you were going to fetch him."

"Plans got put on hold. Besides, I didn't realize I was my boyfriend's keeper. And for your information, I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"But we were supposed to meet this man. Isn't that what we agreed?" added Maggie in a fit of confusion. Reardon's mother had always been easily flustered, and changing the game plan rattled her already excitable nerves more than usual. During a crisis it was best not to depend upon Maggie McCoy due to her penchant for breaking down into helpless whimperings at the slightest provocation.

"We expected," interrupted Mead, "that the two of you would be equally eager to get this over with."

"Apparently I misunderstood the situation. I didn't realize that it would be such an ordeal," noted Reardon.

Maggie essayed an explanation. "Of course we've been looking forward to meeting this friend of yours."

"You could have fooled me."

"Haven't we waited two years to be officially introduced?"

"Who's fault is that?"

"No one's, I suppose. Because these sorts of things are of a delicate nature, they must be done properly, in the right setting, and we wanted to be certain that this wasn't some passing fancy, a phase, or whatnot. We wanted to believe your relationship with him was built to last," explained Maggie feebly.

"We all know how these male-to-male things fall apart," Mead sternly observed.

Reardon didn't answer, nor did he acknowledge that he himself had cause for concern. Reardon had gone to pick up Kane at the appointed hour, and had left--alone--ten minutes later. Kane, it seemed, had ditched Reardon in favor of a party thrown by long ignored acquaintances. "We're sorry," Kane's parents apologized to a very bemuddled Reardon at the door. "He left about 7:30 p.m. with someone we didn't recognize. Surely he forgot he had previous plans with you." "There must be some mix-up." Reardon tried to convince himself that he understood, but he didn't, not in the least. As he wandered away, looking lost, Reardon had called out to have Kane call him the moment he got home.

"What did I miss while I was out and about?" Reardon announced overly boisterously.

"Nothing much. I was just about to tell about the time you went fishing in the creek, fell in, and I had to wade in after you to save you," Boosey replied.

"Reardon forgot to mention that," his concerned mother pointed out.

"Small wonder you gave up fishing," Mead jabbed.

"Not fair!" Reardon interrupted. "I went to the trouble of tracking down the only late night convenience store stocking your favorite Chocolate Chocolate Chip Haagen-Dazs, and you repay me by telling Everything-You-Always-Wanted-To-Know-But-Were-Afraid-To-Ask Reardon McCoy stories."

Reardon regularly complained about being slandered, yet he secretly cherished the notion that people talked about him, even in his absence. Little did he realize the

extent of his popularity. Boosey, effervescent in her own right, artfully turned conversation after conversation to make her best friend the centerpiece. Reardon's exploits and sometimes the lack thereof, constantly formed the hot topic du jour. Boosey, however, had ulterior motives. By relating Reardon's adventures, Boosey invariably involved herself in the tales, often as the focal point. Mentioning his quirky mishaps, she told more about herself; with his notoriety, her reputation rose in tandem. Blame it on their magnetic, somewhat detrimental influence upon each other; label it pointless attraction. Call it what you will! The point is that Boosey, without knowing exactly why, returned over and over to Reardon's experiences as a favorite subject.

"So anyway," Maggie began again, with renewed fervor, "you still haven't explained Kane's absence. I thought you were bringing him with you when you went to get dessert."

"I thought so too," Reardon answered. "I swung by his parents' place but he had already left for the evening with a friend of some sort. Kane apologized that he couldn't make it. He looked forward to meeting both of you, but forgot that he had a previous commitment," Reardon lied to make himself feel better." Sensing an awkward pause, he continued. "Why don't we move so that I can listen to your conversation while I do the dishes. I don't want to miss any important background information about myself, some tidbit even I didn't know. A person leaves the room nowadays, he's liable to miss the most interesting aspect of the evening, gossip central."

As he stood in front of the sink, Reardon's mind wandered uncontrollably. Tuning out the chit-chat around him, he got so stuck in the muck of his private worries that he didn't hear Boosey speaking.

"Reardon, what on earth is causing that hideous noise!"

Returning to reality, Reardon heard a far off train which had been thrown off its tracks, incapacitated, whistling forlornly in the empty darkness, then realized the sound

issued from a hobbled cat, limping dejectedly along, hoping to attract attention and sympathy. Always taken in by the anguish of animals, Reardon inevitably rushed to their aid.

The moment he glimpsed the stray's eyes which gleamed from the headlights of a passing car, Reardon stepped outside to save the tomcat. The creature welcomed the warmth and comfort of a well lit kitchen, finding the offerings equally inviting. Never one to turn down Starkist Tuna, the cat played on Reardon's sympathies by stroking his injured front paw gently with the regular, rapid lapping of the rough and ready tongue. Reardon cradled it in his arms and, returning to the kitchen, adopted his latest mercy case without question, simply because it demanded more attention than he did--a rarity indeed.

"Reardon takes in every alley cat that wanders the streets alone," said Boosey.

"How do you think Kane and I ended up together," whispered Reardon acridly to his best friend.

"Remember the time you insisted we pull over in the middle of the interstate to pick up that miserable fleabag some idiot had practically knocked into tomorrow," Mead wondered aloud. "Christ, with all that racket in the back seat I had to take the next exit, turn back to find the blasted thing, and scoop it off the pavement to place in your arms where it could proceed to bleed to Kingdom come."

"I never heard this one," Boosey noted with interest.

"Nothing would do but for us to rush it to the hometown vet where we were told the poor thing didn't have much of a chance. Reardon pressed on, though, insisted the doc operate, no matter what the risk."

"Eleven year olds don't understand much about suffering," Maggie said.

"'Better let the poor thing die in peace than monkey around with God's plan,' I told him. Still Reardon badgered me, promising to pay with his paper route money.

So I told my wife, 'Marge,' I said, 'if that's how the boy wants to spend his cash, who am I to say no?! Damn silly notions kids take into their heads nowadays!'"

"But what happened to the cat, Mr. McCoy?"

"Reardon collected it after the operation, and promptly named it Moxy, on account it was a born fighter and all. Sure enough he brought the doped up pussy cat home, and cut away part of a cardboard box for a temporary shelter. I give the boy credit where credit is due. Reardon sat by Moxy the entire night, looking out to be sure it didn't stumble off and get lost in its new surroundings. Roundabout 5 a.m. matters took a turn for the worse."

"I woke up," said Mead, "to make my nightly trip to the bathroom when I heard a muffled wheezing coming from the living room. Reardon sat silent as trout hooked on a stringer, waiting for the cleaning knife, while he watched his precious stray give up its struggle for air. The poor thing didn't die right away, mind you. It spat up all over and started choking on its own blood. Reardon sat there, shaking his head, clucking while the cat slowly but surely croaked.

"'I'm awful sorry,' I told him, mighty unhappy myself. I even offered to pay for the operation, seeing as he had wasted his money on a dead cat, but he said 'No,' he took the chance, he had to pay the price. It just goes to show that some things don't work out, just 'cause you want them to. Some things are beyond our control."

"Why did you do it, Reardon? Why did you take on all that responsibility for nothing?" Boosey asked.

"No creature deserves to die alone on a roadside with no one to help, or at least to try. I took that stray in because someone had to do it. It might as well have been me," Reardon reflected.

"We should get going," Maggie piped up.

"Do you mind if I hitch along? I left my car at my apartment, and don't like walking by myself through the downtown district," said Boosey.

Always pleased to see more of Boosey's company, Mead McCoy readily agreed. Boosey influenced his son more than anyone else. If she took a dislike to someone, Reardon immediately grew suspicious of that person as well. She heard more secret confessions from Reardon than most priests heard from their congregation during Lent. If anyone could convert Reardon, it would be Boosey.

* * * *

Boosey and Reardon had been friends since they were both thirteen, both battling for Andy Ransom's affections, both concealing feelings they didn't fully understand. Boosey discovered that Reardon monopolized Andy's free time, and she soon figured out why. They both secretly admired the athletically bronzed, violet-eyed fifteen year old for the exact same reason. Not only cute, Andy was, in a phrase, to die for, or so it seemed to the prepubescent Reardon and Boosey.

Though Reardon fought valiantly, he couldn't compete with Andy's budding interest in the opposite sex. Reardon, feeling like a sideshow freak inside, cajoled his parents into inviting Andy on all outings, all camping trips, baseball games, picnics at the zoo--and they happily complied, glad Reardon was finally discarding his crippling shyness. Even Reardon, however, couldn't compete in Boosey's arena. While Reardon concentrated on becoming friends, strictly minor league ball, Boosey went to bat in Yankee Stadium.

Arousing Andy's attention, Boosey informed the unsuspecting boy that she had the extra set of keys to her father's liquor cabinet. He showed up without hesitation and they proceeded to get sloshed together. Unused to the effects of alcohol, Boosey promptly passed out, leaving Andy to stumble home by himself. After Andy's parents smelled alcohol on his breath, he whipped up a convincing lie, unfortunately portraying Boosey as a floozy.

Andy took out his frustrated anger by nicknaming Cassandra Evans 'Boosey.' Far from being offended, however, Boosey relished the special status her new nickname gave her, especially among older students.

When Andy later bragged about his imagined exploits to fellow classmates, Reardon and Boosey joined forces. Neither had succeeded in capturing their former idol. Both simultaneously lost interest when they realized that Andy culled popularity at the expense of others. They recognized a valuable asset in maintaining a friend of the opposite sex.

"Own and capture are pirate's words," the young Boosey pronounced. "I just want to be your friend."

Reardon agreed, and they remained lifelong friends long after they forgot the particulars of why they had come together in the first place; they must have remembered some vague detail of their initial in-fighting, though, because they pledged never to argue over the attention of a mere boy again.

COMPLICATIONS: A BOY NAMED CONRAD

When in doubt, go to bed! As he grew up, Reardon believed in the security of sleep above all else, burying his body under mounds of cushy pillows to avoid everyday responsibilities. Asked to scrub the bathroom tub, forced to confront the perplexities of mathematics, Reardon found himself suddenly exhausted, achy, and anxious. Instead of commanding his dead tired body to perform the latest task at hand, he slumped under the down comforter to shut out the unfriendly world around him. Reardon used to withdraw into the reassuring prospect of a long, drawn out nap to solve his problems, but recently he had been rolling restlessly across his covers, unable to feel comfortable. Jumpstarting with snorts and a fit, Reardon felt the pillows wrapping around him, pinning him down. Just yesterday he had opened his eyes to stare out at a gauzy, multi-colored world of filtered sunlight. Confused, he had wrenched his head free of the death grip of the pillow case. The world conspired against his plan for greatness, or so it seemed. Even formerly innocent objects reared up to smother his potential, attempting to deny him his destiny.

Rather than subject himself to another night's torture in the bedroom, wondering if he would die of suffocation, Reardon steered himself to the kitchen table to think through his dilemma.

Kane had not called. Reardon feigned indifference at being stood up, but ushered his parents out the door shortly after dinner. He begged exhaustion to disguise his mounting irritation. Boosey, on the sideline, watched Reardon maw the Haagen-Dazs mercilessly, not enjoying his embarrassment at all. She, realizing plans had

misfired, lingered in the hope of talking with him after Mead and Maggie left. He put her off by slurping his ice cream nonstop. He mechanically commanded himself to remain cheerful while scooping spoonful after spoonful into his mouth in a last ditch attempt to rush his guests by example. They refused to be hurried, however, so it was well past eleven before they deigned to make for the door, Boosey in tow.

Finally alone, Reardon squinted bitterly and half-turned his head, resting it gingerly on his shoulder, to check on his newly adopted pet. The alley cat stalked the crevices and nosed into cupboards, unconcerned with Reardon's agitated state of mind. At 2:24 in the morning, the phone rang apologetically. A sloshed, sleepy Kane struggled to talk coherently. Reardon, simply waiting to explode, erupted violently.

"How dare you disregard my dinner party. I went to so much bother to introduce you to my family, you didn't even call to cancel," accused Reardon.

"I forgot." Long silence.

"You forgot?"

"I'm sorry."

"I see." Click.

The phone rang back almost immediately, but Reardon ignored it, letting it buzz irritatingly until he could stand the racket no longer.

"What do you want?" Reardon asked.

"Don't shut me out, Reardon. Let's talk this thing through."

"I wish you wouldn't lie to me. I can stand anything but an outright lie," said Reardon.

"I never lied to you."

"Your parents told me you went out with a guy they didn't even recognize."

"That's right." Pause. "I told you I forgot. I forgot I made plans with Conrad I couldn't break. Conrad's an old friend."

"I'll bet. How come I never met this Connie-girl?"

"Conrad and I haven't seen each other for ages. We're old high school buddies. I couldn't dis him."

"So you dis'ed me instead," said Reardon. "Don't you know that I've sat here, waiting for you to call for the past three hours. Your line has been busy non-stop; I was left to sit here and stew. It was Tough luck, Reardon. You know damn well I hate organizing other peoples' lives, and I went to a lot of trouble to make sure my dinner party came off right. To have it preempted by Connie-girl, a total stranger, hurts a lot."

"I understand your irritation but Conrad needed to talk."

"Did it cross your mind I needed to talk, too? For the past three hours I've wanted to talk. Why should he suddenly be more important than me?"

"He was in the middle of a crisis."

"My entire life has been one crisis after another. I'm a blob of chaos from hell. How dare you compare his petty concerns with my worries. I'm busy having a full blown trauma," added Reardon dramatically.

"I simply want you to understand," said Reardon, "the embarrassment you caused me by not showing up. My parents badgered me like a tag team duo. Just as one let up, the other started in, hinting around about delinquent boyfriends."

"Boosey especially wanted you to be here so you could jointly organize the surprise party I'm not supposed to know about," Reardon continued.

"Reardon! If it's a surprise, how come you know already?"

"Tradition, my dear Watson. Every three years since I was fifteen, Boosey outdoes herself, hosting the wingding of the season on my behalf."

"When exactly will this take place?" asked Kane.

"Look, if you can't remember my birthday after being together two years, you might as well not show up."

"No, No, No, that's not it. I just didn't know if the wingding, as you call it, will take place on your B-Day, or if it will be held that weekend." In truth Kane couldn't recall Reardon's birthday.

"My B-Day falls on a Friday this time around. My, you're getting awfully absentminded Kane!"

"Of course, of course. Look, it's late and I'd better get to bed. I'll call Boosey in the morning, and figure out how to keep you occupied while she decorates the apartment."

"Sounds good," said Reardon.

"Okay then."

"Kane?"

"Yes, Reardon?"

"I'm only going to ask once. Did you by any chance fool around with him?"

"With who?" said Kane evasively.

"You know damn well with who. With whom, actually, but that's besides the point."

"You mean Conrad?"

"Who else? I only want to find out if I have reason to worry."

"Don't be ridiculous, Reardon. You don't really believe I would miss meeting your family for a fling?"

"I suppose not," said Reardon. "I never doubted you before. It's just the circumstances seemed so silly."

"I understand."

"You would tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

Long breathing pause.

"Love you."

"I love you too," Kane answered.

"Okay then. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See ya tomorrow."

Head drawn down, Reardon scuffed against the carpet as he sauntered sheepishly to bolt the door. Previously unimagined notions itched at the outer edges of his consciousness.

"Yaow," grumbled the alleycat. "Yaow," it repeated, requesting release to return to the much more practical pastime of rummaging through other people's garbage, digging out the most delightfully noisome stink possible, similar to busybody bar flies who nose dived into excrement with automatic, unfair relish, detecting a most obnoxiously appealing smell indeed.

Guarding his hurt feelings, Reardon lectured the cat. "Wild creatures want to roam tonight. Who am I to stop you?" The eager cat roped his tail back and forth in agreement with Reardon's assessment as he made his grand exit.

"It must be a full moon," Reardon whispered to himself as he shut out the stairwell light for the night.

* * * *

Reardon laid listlessly in bed a full forty-five minutes the next morning. He struggled valiantly to drift off again, but couldn't, for some reason, command himself to sleep. "It's too early to get up. Much too early to be out and about!" Reardon reasoned with himself to no avail. Last night's argument with Kane wagged his mind like a cat's tail, persistently thumping. Irritable, he gave up trying to sleep and drew a bath to soak away his early morning grogginess. Before pouring himself into the sudsy water filled with bubble bath, Reardon checked the time. A bit early yet, but he

figured he could justifiably ring Boosey. "Please pick up," he muttered as he listened to the phone tone three, four times. On the fifth ring, she answered.

"Hello Reardon," she called out, knowing that only her best friend would dare to call so early. She didn't mind, though, because she also realized her best friend wouldn't wake her without a good reason.

"I don't know. I just don't know," he confessed to the phone.

Guessing Reardon's frustrated confusion, Boosey didn't ask for explanations. "Do you want me to come over? I can stop by for coffee before you leave for work, if you like," she promised.

"I'd like that," he acknowledged gratefully.

"Give me five minutes to throw on some rags and I'll be right over," she ended as she hung up.

Reardon listened to the click on the line, then dialed Kane, wanting to clear up their massive miscommunications. Abruptly he changed his mind and hung up mid-ring, determined not to come across as a weakling. He flipped on the stereo, listening to Billie Holliday croon her last recording. "Don't worry 'bout me. I'll get along." He sung along, tripping lightly over the notes as he clambered into the tub. "I just don't know if I could," he thought. "You adopt this lifestyle long enough, you start to wonder: could I leave it now, even if I wanted to? I don't know, I just don't know if it's worth it," he struggled inside. "Is this really me or just a part I'm playing?" He dunked his head underwater and dismissed his questions until he could sip coffee with his best friend.

"Must be problems on the homefront. He never would have called so early otherwise," guessed Boosey correctly as she tugged on a resistant pullover. "Difficulties with Kane cropping up at long last. Relative marital bliss and now this. Well, the honeymoon's over, that's for sure," she considered thoughtfully. Wondering how they would weather the impending crisis, Boosey debated whether Reardon's

recent decision to allow Kane to transfer most of his belongings to the apartment had been a mistake. Over the two year course of their relationship, Kane had slowly been moving in on the installment plan, bit by bit, starting with the books, working up to the television and finally the VCR. Reardon had always considered that he was leasing with an option to buy, testing his relationship with Kane, a trial run. Boosey silently applauded each time he stalled, convinced that Reardon would outgrow Kane, given enough time.

"People inevitably compromise themselves. The trick is to compromise yourself least, in whatever way makes you happiest," she often advised him as a general catch-all whenever he questioned her about the complexities of relationships.

"The compromises Reardon has had to make just to be who he is," sighed Boosey regretfully to herself as she locked the door and headed to the car. Turning over the car engine, listening to the grumbling tut-tut of the motor, Boosey reviewed Reardon's predicament. She recalled his half-whispered ambitions, confessed to her only after a solemn vow to maintain utmost secrecy.

"He used to want so much. Kane makes him settle for less than he deserves," she decided, defending her best friend's overwhelming ambition.

Reardon had originally wanted to make a significant difference as a politician, she remembered. Working diligently, Reardon earned a position as chair on the mayor's task force commissioned to study health care options for AIDS victims, but soon found himself pigeonholed solely into gay-related causes. After serving three consecutive terms as advisor to a gay bashing network, without effecting any serious resolutions for change, Reardon grew disgusted. Boosey advised him to cast aside his political aspirations.

Certain that her best friend would become an artiste extraordinaire if he bothered to develop his natural flair for acting and writing, Boosey pushed Reardon to excel in the artistic community. She toted him from audition to audition on a series of cattle

calls, but he failed to prosper as an actor. His writing career floundered simultaneously. Because he detested the solitary isolation required for creative work, Reardon never bothered to distinguish himself as a writer. He was content simply to plunk along and write only at those rare moments of inspiration.

"Reardon just never gets any of the breaks," Boosey reflected. A year and three-quarters on the acting and writing circuits had produced only one small local commercial for Stanley's Innertubes and the vague promise of a short story acceptance.

"Hang it all, Reardon. Choose something else for the time being," Boosey reconsidered. "You can always return to the artistic community when it's ready to recognize you." Reardon took her suggestion, forsaking his creative intentions. The artistic community never did offer him an in-road.

Desperately hunting for a related career, Reardon settled on the fashion industry, determined that he had discovered his niche at long last. Boosey did her best to support him, contacting all her connections. But the industry, heaped in a slumping pile of dirty clothes and worn out, reused, retread fashion design, didn't welcome newcomers. Reardon eventually landed in the men's department of Neiman-Marcus, peddling retail. Terribly unhappy Boosey kept her objections to herself and didn't announce the obvious: Reardon's talent was being wasted; his prospects were drying up in the sunlight of each passing day.

"Don't you fret," she boisterously bolstered. "Just you wait. It's bound to happen for you soon." Sensing despair looming on the edges of her friend's crinkling forehead, Boosey rushed to his aid once again.

"Everyone compromises," she reassured. "Your compromises and disappointments will mean more to you when you can look back and laugh after you've hit the big time."

As she drove the three blocks to Reardon's apartment, Boosey lingered on her thoughts, searching for comforting words to reassure her best friend in his latest crisis.

"Stupid Kane! How dare he disturb Reardon's concentration just when he needs it most," thought Boosey as she pulled up in front of the apartment.

She faltered while fumbling for her set of keys to Reardon's place. For just a moment she hesitated, wondering how matters would differ if Kane were not part of their lives, nostalgically reliving in an instant the years when it had just been the two of them, Reardon and Boosey, without the bother of extraneous love interests. "If all else fails," she considered, "at least we still have each other. Reardon and I have always gotten along just fine without hassling over the trivialities of romance." She smiled sadly at the unhappiness people create for themselves, waiting for love. Then she shut the door and headed up the stairwell to the apartment.

A SMASHING SURPRISE

To call Reardon's thirtieth birthday party a smashing success would be an egregious error. Smashing perhaps--for indeed more broken promises cluttered the second-hand coffee stained carpet than at any time since Hitler swore not to invade Czechoslovakia and then went ahead and did it anyway--but the party certainly didn't qualify as the success, the wingding of the century, it had been prophesied to be. Even Neville Chamberlain, had he attended the soiree, might have warned Reardon to avoid repeating the British Prime Minister's biggest mistake: relying on someone else's honor to preserve one's own integrity makes about as much sense as going ice fishing in the Bahamas. It might happen by some freak of nature, but it's not likely under current conditions.

Reardon miscalculated monumentally that evening. He wrongly assumed that his boyfriend held the same established high standards of social conduct; he discovered instead the good fortune of those few, lucky individuals who manage to stumble upon only one friend to trust explicitly, one person during a lifetime to love unconditionally.

One hundred or so of Reardon's friends packed the apartment to celebrate the passing of three decades and the beginning of a fourth. Flooding the duplex apartment designed to comfortably accommodate half the number, the last few stragglers, accustomed to entering majestically just as events kicked into high gear, discovered themselves at a loss for a place to sit. Far from put out, these carefully calculated showpieces of haute couture behaved royally by alternating abbreviated jaunts down the

center runway, cleared specifically to highlight the shockingly provocative wardrobes of the best and brightest.

Boosey's attempt at an apology was waved away with a slight tut-tutting accompanied by a dismissive motion of the fingertips.

"Not at all, I like moving about," explained Austin.

"At some point you'll need to sit, and I will disinherit some fellow of his throne right then and there," said Boosey.

"No need," answered Martin. "The point is to have fun no matter what, or, failing that, at least pretend to be having the time of your life!"

"No man has been forced to fake anything with me so far, and I'm not about to let you start," she retorted.

"Fair enough."

Boosey, it must be acknowledged, suffered one major inconvenience, namely her boyfriend Blaine and his friends who had never exposed themselves to the more fabulous elements of society in such large doses. Nervously herded into small clusters of twos and threes on the sideline, Blaine's self-invited heterosexual guests commented on the queer mannerisms of the vast majority.

"Earrings in both ears, how disgusting!" put in bullheaded Earl. "And take a look at that hand."

"How precious," his wife Judy answered.

The boy in question lounged with his lazy palm upturned, gently cupping a cigarette flicked back with a delicate, sensitive air. His stylishly small gold hoops dangled tauntingly from his lobes.

Catching snippets of conversations, Boosey overheard the tail end of their comments, just enough to be offended on behalf of her friends. She thought she detected an embarrassed silence in Blaine's corner and rushed to console him.

"Who invited the breeders?" said Boosey, applying the most disparaging remark she could think of to those heterosexuals who wished to shock the gay community by marrying and bearing children.

"Look," started Blaine defensively, "they can't help it. They don't know these people like you and I do. They've never come into contact with so many gays at one time."

"Well they stink something fierce, like barnyard animals which ought to be let out!"

"Cut them some slack! And another thing while we're talking about my friends you dislike so much. I don't want you telling them where I work."

"What!?" asked Boosey incredulously.

"They know I work as a bouncer," noted Blaine, "but they don't know where. They have no clue I bounce in a gay bar and would disown me if they found out, so just keep quiet about it, 'kay?"

"You can bounce them right on outta here for all I care," returned Boosey.

"They're my friends. I can't kick them out."

"I don't see why not. They're gawking like they just paid top dollar to see the circus. I hate to break it to the breeders, but people acting like that, they're the real clowns," added an infuriated Boosey. "Oh Lord," she stopped, "too late now!"

Reardon sashayed regally through the door, swooping up imaginary folds of cloth as he waltzed into his apartment.

"Surprise. I have finally arrived," he announced. "Let the party begin!"

Though never officially declared a costume ball, the event allowed the extremely fashion conscious to exercise their talents, flaunting their ability to accessorize on command. Reardon, understanding the importance of the evening, out-dressed the others, donning Eighteenth-century Parisian evening wear, complete with a frilly lace jabot in front, full-length gold gilt tunic, and cream silk stockings. The undisputed hit

of the evening, Reardon circulated contentedly, collecting congratulations on his clothing choice as he maneuvered toward Boosey to check her response.

"Reardon," she declared, "how on earth could you have known? I stole around secretly for a good two weeks to make sure you wouldn't find out. I certainly didn't expect you to show up all decked out. Who let the cat out of the bag?"

"Kane told me the other night," he fibbed. "When we were talking on the phone, it just slipped out that he had planned to meet with you, and I put two and two together."

"That little fink stood me up! After all my planning, he never even showed. I guarantee that's the last time I put him in charge of anything, especially the cake. I wanted it special ordered, and he plain old forgot, the fuddy duddy. I was forced to bake it myself; trust me, Reardon, I don't think my kitchen will ever fully recover. I sure wish he hadn't blabbed the news about the party."

"Even if he hadn't, I would have known by all the flyers littering the clubs. People came up asking where I'd had them printed," said Reardon.

"Oh dear, I suppose the flyers were awfully colorful. They tended to attract attention, you know. That was the point. I just wanted to be sure none of the important people would miss out."

"But including the directions to my place on the back, phone number and all, wasn't that going overboard?"

"It does tend to take the surprise out of a surprise party, but I couldn't help it. I think we should go down in history as doing everything bigger and better than anyone else in our era. This party is as good a launching pad as any."

Speaking of bigger and better, the troupe of male strippers, referred to as exotic dancers, showed up just then in full force, ready to entertain the birthday boy with low, sensual hip thrusts performed to a simple beat which even muscle bound men with a limited range of motion could execute without difficulty. "I'm as much a man as they

are, maybe more, only I don't dance around trying to prove myself," he thought.

"While they make a living, I make a life for myself," he added, trying not to be haughty, wanting to convince himself. Whereas the strippers studied masculinity until it became an art form, Reardon concentrated on feeling artistically liberated as a consolation prize for not feeling particularly manly. Casting aside these reflections, he honed in on a subject closer to his home turf.

"You're apparently not interested in admiring my outlandish outfit," Reardon said, practically pleading for a compliment.

"I meant to tell you how fabulous you look. You're your usual dashing self, magnified times ten," Boosey answered appropriately. Neither dared broach the subject of Kane's conspicuous absence. Each consciously avoided considering the possible ramifications which errant, negligent boyfriends would have on their relationship. Both were world-weary tired of supporting what they perceived as the last at bat for the visiting team in a ball game already extended into extra innings. The fast fading daylight snuck behind the shrouded treetops like a weary runner stealing home, knowing that the park wasn't equipped for night games. The outcome undetermined, the players remained uncertain whether they cared enough to slug it out any longer. Boosey, for her part, was downright pleased to have played shortstop, the center of the action, for so long. Now she only waited to pack up her cleats and move to a new ballpark, to head for a better location more conducive to night play.

People made themselves fall in love, according to Boosey, so they wouldn't face the emptiness of their own lives alone. Always pragmatic about affairs of the heart, Boosey made up her mind that her relationship with Blaine had dead ended and sought the easiest avenue out. No one had understood why free-spirited Boosey would have tolerated the undermining anti-gay bias of the straight boy bouncer in the first place.

She and Blaine had first collided the same evening Reardon and Kane had met, in the same club, within a few hours of each other. If she somehow predicted

Reardon's sudden attachment to another male for the first time in his life, she never let on. Rather than openly battle for Reardon's affections, she momentarily let herself drift quietly into the background until he and Kane had established contact. She secretly believed Reardon suffered from some violently contagious flu, and therefore left him alone until he had worked it out of his system. When Reardon requested advice regarding his relationship with Kane, she remained silent. Whether she steered clear of the subject out of a lack of interest or whether it was out of self-interest, she wasn't certain herself. Now that Reardon sulked, however, Boosey took action. Less than coincidentally, as Reardon prepared to dump Kane, Boosey simultaneously took similar action, bailing out of her relationship with Blaine.

"It's over, baby. That's all there is to it," she announced as she walked up to the always happy-go-lucky Blaine.

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Never more certain."

"I hope this won't ruin our friendship?" he asked.

"Of course not," she replied. They shook hands and parted on good terms.

Fortunately for her sake, Boosey never truly plumbed the depths of her emotions. While Reardon thought and thought and thought about his moral obligations to leave a lasting impression, a mark of greatness on the world, Boosey lived simply and vibrantly, searching out the seamy underbelly lying beneath the humdrum mediocrity of everyday experience. That, in part, explained her tendency to discard old boyfriends as if they were worn out toothbrushes. She had gone through a series of flings before she met Blaine; she was ready to plunge out on her own once again.

Reardon, the honored guest, learned the steadfast rule regarding popularity that evening. Partygoers have short attention spans; once the focus shifts, the displaced star never recovers a foothold. The moment Kane barged in unexpectedly after everyone had forgotten his existence, Reardon realized he had been replaced as the center of

attention. Compared with Kane's authentic Scottish kilt, black combat boots, and matching black eye liner, Reardon's outfit looked desperately dated, a veritable walking death sentence for one of the fashion elite.

"Kane, however did you design your get-up, and all by yourself too! Quite an accomplishment, considering your difficulties coordinating your socks in the morning, much less matching your belt to the rest of your ensemble," cried out Reardon cattily as he wound his way to the entrance.

"Now, now, Reardon, just because you work in the men's clothing department doesn't entitle you to be condescending," returned Kane fretfully.

"I'm head fashion consultant, thank you very little."

"Yeah, well, whatever. That just means you match ties to suits correctly."

"At least I don't live off welfare, waiting for my boyfriend to swing by on the off chance he will treat me to dinner."

"I never asked you for anything."

"Not verbally, no, but you made clear exactly how I was expected to act toward you from the beginning! The worst part is I followed suit, and bought into your scam."

"To get back to your question, you're right. I did get help planning my outfit. Reardon, I'd like you to meet my best friend Conrad," said Kane, stepping aside to reveal an unruly youth, looking altogether awash in the stir his creative effort created.

"What do you mean by dragging this stray and abandoned poster child to my party?"

"He had nowhere else to go," said Kane softly. "I figured you'd want to know my favorite high school hang out buddy."

"I should get going. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Conrad butted in.

"No, No, Conrad, now that you've bothered to come you might as well introduce yourself around," Reardon wryly insisted. "I wouldn't want this blowout between me and my soon-to-be-former boyfriend stand in the way of your social

advancement. If I walk up to her," he added, referring to Boosey, "and tell her you're a special friend of mine, she will make certain you circulate in the right direction, in the proper pecking order to meet those who can help you most first."

"Are you sure?" Conrad asked.

"Never more positive."

After disentangling himself from his uninvited extra guest, Reardon turned once again to deal with Kane.

"What needles me most is that I thought I had a chance to be somebody with you. Now you go and prove otherwise. What am I, a nobody?"

"Of course not," said Kane. "What's all this talk about breaking up?"

Reardon ignored Kane's question, and carried on as he had before. "You made me feel real, more real than I've ever been, and now that's disappeared. I walked around in a dream before I met you, now I'm stuck again in the same fog."

"I don't know what to say," interjected Kane. "I just don't get how things went wrong so fast."

"I see you've deserted me just like she has."

"What are you talking about?"

"The woman in black. The ghost. She promised me I would be someone extra special. She lied. You lied too. Just too many lies to keep living with," said Reardon, feeling as if he were speaking, trapped, inside an upside-down water glass. He couldn't make sense even to himself, much less explain his confusion to Kane.

"I didn't cheat on you," Kane attempted to assure him.

Reardon smiled sadly, then turned to go.

"Don't leave me. Don't leave me hanging here," cried out Kane desperately.

"You left me long ago, before I even realized it. I tricked myself into thinking I mattered to you, but you could care less. I've had my share of losers, but I never counted you among them, until now."

With that Reardon, cocktail glass in hand, half-waved across the room to Boosey without really seeing her, and stepped gingerly down the steps into the street, feeling like a turtle which had abruptly been set on its back. Only he wasn't sure who was responsible for putting him that way or what to do to get out of his predicament.

FALLOUT SHELTER

"The problem is more is never enough," muttered Reardon. He careened down the street dizzily, wanting to head home, deliberately waiting until the last extraneous guest had filtered out before turning in that direction. He continued babbling in disjointed outbursts to himself. "I feel like a savings bond, cashed in before I came due."

He swaggered back to his apartment door feeling giddy and stupid. He flick, flick, flicked the light switch, listening to the empty clicking.

Boosey had waited alone in the apartment for Reardon to reappear. As she heard him fumble with the switch, she padded to the door, correctly assuming that he would feel discombobulated and not understand why she had stayed.

"Careful, Reardon, the light at the top of the stairs is broken. I hope you don't mind I waited around for you," Boosey explained.

"Busted like pretty much everything else in my world."

"It burned out right after you left," she explained.

"How appropriate."

"You're better off without him?" she offered.

"Perhaps. I'll miss him anyway."

She paused a long time, certain that Reardon would launch into a diatribe about love, but he just stood there, content for the moment to study her without saying anything.

"Come on in, Reardon. It's late. It's cold. Besides, it's your apartment. You shouldn't be standing outside like a stray," she said. Looking down at her best friend from the top of the stairwell, Boosey felt strong and in control. Her emotions scared her, particularly because she could tell how easily Reardon could be dominated. "What a fool I've been! Reardon has been the one I've wanted all along," she thought. Boosey mentally flogged herself for turning into a hypocrite. She had preached long and hard about the illusions of romance but had gone chasing after the dream of romantic love anyway as a cheap substitute for the relationship she had originally wanted with Reardon, but feared she could never have. Boosey briefly considered the possibility of dominating Reardon as she had nearly every other man in her life but she knew she wouldn't.

"Whatdyasay we bake chocolate chip cookies," she recommended. "That always makes me feel more up to par."

"The problem is more is never enough," Reardon repeated to himself, loud enough for Boosey to overhear.

"Whatdyamean?" she queried.

"No matter how much I gave Kane, it was never enough. He drank me up like a bottle of Diet Coke, then returned me for the refund deposit."

"Do you want me to leave?" she commented in a confused tone. "You sound as though you'd rather be left alone."

"No, don't worry. Just don't leave me please," he ended plaintively.

"Of course not. I wouldn't do that to you."

"I'm sorry I stomped out in such a huff before the party ended."

"You don't have to apologize to me, Reardon."

"I don't have to apologize to anyone," vented Reardon, unintentionally misdirecting his anger.

"I didn't say you did."

"Point taken."

"I don't like seeing you hurt, Reardon. Come in out of the cold before we both start sounding sappy."

"I hate men," erupted Reardon volatily. "I absolutely detest every member of the male race."

"Sounds like quite a quandary for a gay man."

"I have a good mind to give up altogether. My sexuality costs me too much. I'm taxed to the hilt as it is."

"But you would never give up dating men, would you?"

"I don't know. I'm awfully tempted."

"If you decide to switch, be sure to let me know. I might actually be interested in making a play for you myself," Boosey joked to hide her serious intentions.

"Oh Boosey, you're incorrigible!" Reardon responded. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Reardon had a nagging question left. He hesitated briefly, and then in a final surge of energy bursted out, "I ask one thing only. Help me replace the light at the top of the stairs tomorrow."