

# GENESIS 2:26

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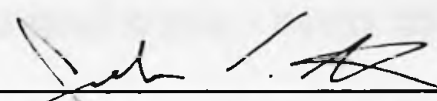
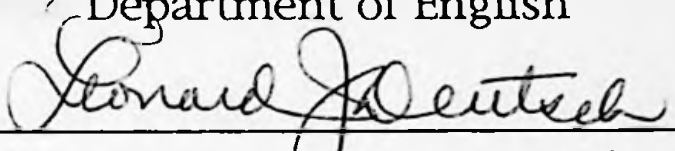
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*On the eighth day, God sighed.*

*The noise rumbled through heaven and earth. The cherubim were silenced; the seraphim held their breath. Even the archangels ceased their endless activity to crane their necks and look about.*

*The earth trembled. Volcanos erupted, the great continental plates divided. The pools of celestial ooze stopped bubbling and crackling.*

*All angels, all creatures, all rocks and trees - even the land itself waited in breathless, awful anticipation.*

*Nothing happened.*

*A rock relaxed, falling off a mountain. The volcanos grew dormant. The cherubim laughed, softly, nervously, then began to sing again, a lullaby. The seraphim continued praising the name of Jehovah. Everything went back to the way it was.*

*Only two were different.*

*Umbriel, the archangel, had heard God's sigh. It caused a strange sensation to ripple through him, though what it was he could not say.*

*Michael, the archangel, had felt God's sigh. Knowing what must be done, he went to the Tree of Life and cut a limb off of its highest branch. He began to carve the branch into something less intricate, something more designed, something never seen by angel before.*

*Umbriel went to Michael. "What is that?"*

*"It is to ease your fear."*

*"Is that what it is called?"*

*Michael finished carving the limb and went before God. "My Lord," he said bowing, "I bring thee a gift."*

*Dark nimbus clouds hid the Lord's countenance from Michael. "What is it?" the Lord asked, his voice a dull whisper.*

*"It is a part of your creation, O Lord. It is in celebration of all the gifts you have given us."*

*The Lord picked up the small wooden object. "It is called a flute," Michael said.*

*"What do I do with it?" the Lord asked.*

*"Make music."*

*"Music?"*

*"Yes, my Lord, music."*

*"Music in praise?"*

*"No, my Lord. The cherubim and seraphim are here to praise my Lord. This is to make music of your own choosing."*

*So the Lord thanked Michael and took the flute to a small island down on His earth. Slowly, He blew into the pitched wooden instrument.*

*A sonorous sound emanated from the flute. It tramped, boom-bang, boom-bang, over valleys and hills. The volcanoes trembled and blew*

enraged. The winds whipped while storm clouds gathered. The seraphim stopped praising, the cherubim stopped singing. Fights erupted; violence and chaos. And on and on the Lord sounded the low, awful note.

Only Michael and Umbriel, sitting at the right and left of the Lord's empty throne, were unaffected.

"But what is it?" Umbriel asked.

Michael's answer was sad. "It is called hatred."

## *Crossing Running Water*

I couldn't decide whether or not to kill him.

I clutched one end of the pillow in my left hand, my knuckles turning red. I could feel the tips of my fingernails digging through the material and into the flesh of my palms. My right hand clung loosely to the other end of the pillow. The soothing cloth hung between my thumb and forefinger. My other fingers dangled lifeless, unsure as they shook over his sleeping form.

I simply could not decide.

I sat down heavily on the wooden chair at his bedside, letting the pillow drop to the floor. From somewhere inside the room the din of the TV reached my ears. On some talk show the hostess tried to convince a fat, pock-faced woman to leave her abusive husband. He sat next to her, his eyes glaring at the audience as they hooted and hollered at him from the safety of TV land. He was ugly. Hair grew out of his ears; his hands were gnarled with work and age, his belly a paunch over his K-Mart blue jeans. His head was covered with strands of dark greasy hair, and his plaid shirt hung out from his pants. His dark, cloudy eyes stared out from under a domed forehead. He was a man who had been unhappy all his life and never knew it. Frankly, he never cared.

Neither did I.

I knew the woman would say she would leave him. I knew she would draw courage from the audience. Her newfound sisters would rise up and give her strength. The hostess, a woman famous, secure, and thin, would tell her she didn't need a man. The audience would tell her she didn't need a man. She would tell herself she didn't need a man.

Then she would go back.

When the lights had dimmed, when the TV hummed, when the show was over, when the hostess was safe in Beverly Hills behind her stucco fence and security systems, when the audience went back to the dullness of their lives, thinking well of themselves for having helped this poor, fat woman, she would go back. She would crawl back, crying, begging, or maybe show up one morning making a breakfast of ham and eggs. And he would take her back, and the beatings and the rapes would continue, and never stop until one of them was dead.

I know. I am her.

Not to say that I am that fat woman on the TV, no, nothing like her at all, as different as night and day, as different as different could be. I am educated, good-looking, outgoing. Hell, I'm even a man. Yet I live her story. Only now have I realized what should be done.

But I can't decide whether or not to do it.

It's not that I don't want to kill him. It's just that I'm so tired.

And he's so weak - it wouldn't take any effort on my part. Just a minute or two and that would be it.

But that's not what I want. I want a struggle - I want him to realize what is going on, to fight back, to know it is me killing him. Me. I want him to know, after he took my life, that I would be taking his.

But he wouldn't know. If he even regained consciousness, his diseased mind wouldn't comprehend what was happening. And in a day or so, he would die on his own.

I think about how much I hate him, how I loathe him. My breath quickens, and I feel some strength returning to me. I feel blood coursing through my limbs to my hands, my hands that might finally be my weapons.

He gurgles in his sleep. The spell breaks.

I lean back against the solid wood of the chair. It feels straight, supportive against my sore back. How my life has come to this point I can't remember. I had a life, once, a real one, not a talk show world. I had a face, once. Men desired me. How I had enjoyed teasing them, toying with them. I hurt so many of them without ever really knowing



why.

I had a body, once. I played golf and tennis, soccer and football. My body once moved as I mandated, muscles orchestrated in sweaty motion. The physical was never my concern. Now, I can't even control my bowel. My body is a shell coursing with the same disease that is killing him, his last gift to me.

I had a mind, once, a keen insight and a sharp wit. I had a brain, once, filled with thoughts and philosophies, papers and dissertations. I had ambitions, I had goals, I had desires, once.

I had the words, once. Words that were escape, solace, provider. Words that hid my true self from the world; words that revealed terrible secrets, dreams of hazy afternoons and white picket fences.

I had all this. Once.

Now I have nothing.

On the TV, the fat woman has declared her independence. I admire her conviction, her newfound purpose, though I know she'll be dead in two years.

I remember when I was like that.

SIX YEARS AGO brings me to a large sporting arena. The stink of

beer and sweat pervades the air. The humans are herded in, escorted to their seats, and induced to buy cheap trinkets, popcorn, and giant plastic mugs of domestic beer. Professional wrestling is not an elitist sport. The fans are those people who live in the trailer parks, the forgotten nobodies of small towns who don't vote and never drink wine. They are the backbone of America, the tax-crunching consumers off of whom the rest of us, the intellectuals and capitalists, feed. Gladly they sacrifice their time, sweat, money, blood, and children to our businesses and schools, our values and ideals.

These are the fans of wrestling. Men in T-shirts that show how big their bellies have gotten. They wear scuffed work boots, greasy hair and untrimmed mustaches; they shout obscenities and think them witty. They disgust and amuse, and they don't care. In the back roads and alleys they drink too much and fight with their brothers-in-law.

Their wives and sisters sit next to them, women who think themselves beautiful if they have big breasts and frosted blue make-up. Their nails are lacquered red, their hair held high by too much spray. They shout "Wooo!" at the wrestlers walking down the aisle, looking at their paunchy husbands and wishing, not so secretly, for a night with one of those muscular men.

In their lifetimes, some of these women will be raped and beaten by their husbands, family members, strangers. As children they were sodomized. And if they drink too much of the hard stuff in the cabinet over the refrigerator, when their garbagemen, mechanic, and farmer husbands come home, life will seem a little more tolerable.

As boys, their husbands perhaps knew the unwelcome touch of a neighbor, a pastor, a parent. As men, they struggle to feed their families, expressing their love with palms open or fingers curled, as their fathers had before them.

These are the fans of wrestling. Wrestling that was once a noble sport. In the days of ancient Thrace and Sparta, kings would vie for wrestling crowns. Combatants would die if they lost, and become gods if they won. No one here knew any of that. They knew only one thing - tonight, Shawn "The Heart Throb" Hunter was vying for the United States Championship.

Hunter was one of them, a farmer's son from somewhere in Tennessee whose looks and body had made him into a star. He was the favorite of the women. His tall, muscular build and long blond locks neatly framed a good ole boy attitude and simple brown eyes. Those women wished they could wake up with him, cook for him and clean for

him, and in the recesses of the night have him whisper that he loved them and only them. The men wished they could be Hunter. They wished their wives looked at their bodies the way they looked at his. They wished they might have his money, his life.

Of course none of them realized that the man had talent. That at thirty-one, he had worked fourteen long years in the wrestling business, starting out in back rooms for five dollars a night. That he had been beaten and bruised, taken his lumps until finally getting noticed. The climb had been difficult. He had surgery on both knees. He spent years living in dirty apartments and sometimes in his car just for a chance to make it. They didn't know he could dream better and harder than any of them, that he struggled for a decade to get where he was. That tonight was the culmination of a lifetime of pain and torture and workouts and knee surgeries and going hungry, or tired, or cold, for weeks at a time.

One shot only.

The champion he was wrestling was a fat, ugly German from Allentown, a man who had also worked and struggled and clawed to the top. This was a fight, not over a gold painted belt or thousands of dollars, but over dreams: the realization of one, the continuation of the other. This was human drama, going on under the noses of those who could

never appreciate what they would witness in that arena on that starry September night.

Only one person could have known what all this meant. Behind the seats, in the locker area, a man watched, detached from all this. He didn't fit in with the rest of the crowd. He was six feet tall, with ashen, wavy hair and violet eyes. He had the youthful look of a perpetual student. He wore small round glasses and a long raincoat over his silk tie, pin-striped shirt and wool pants. He watched the two combatants intently, studying them, yet without appreciation, as if he deemed himself better than all this.

I was that man. I was twenty-six and working on my dissertation in medieval studies. My head swam with thoughts of oral tradition and elegiac response. I didn't want to be at that arena on that night, that most important night. Yet I had no choice. My boyfriend was wrestling for the championship.

My name is Joshua Logan. I was born the only son in a wealthy family, told always to be superior, to be the best. Yet every achievement, every accomplishment, never seemed enough. I was expected to excel; when I did, I was never allowed to enjoy my victory. Instead, I was

pushed harder to do more and be better. I never won; I just advanced to the next level.

I had tried hard to be perfect, to be what everyone wanted, but it never seemed to be right, never seemed to be enough. By this time I had discovered I was gay. I also discovered that gay people are alone, born in the enemy camp, a shame to their family, an embarrassment to their friends, a platform for politicians. Society didn't give a fuck about me, so I didn't give a fuck about society. I stopped being nice, stopped being good. I worked hard and excelled. I was smart and good-looking and used everything I had to get everything I wanted. I began to think of myself as the type of person no one liked. I built a trench around myself, so deep and so dark that I could no longer remember who I once was. Yet I honestly didn't care. My life went on. Disdainful, superior, bored - that was me.

I came out to my parents to punish them, to flaunt the end of their good family name. They disowned me, but I didn't care. They had never loved me, and I had never loved them; in the end, it was easier to just stop faking it and go on with my life.

Secretly, though, a dark hard part of me longed for more. I wanted someone of my own, someone to care for me, to think me perfect

and beautiful and to tell me he loved me. I wanted to be a piece of art, worshipped and prized, valued and debated over. I wanted to be someone's reason for living. I wanted to belong to someone. Perhaps if I had faced those feelings, things would have been different. But I was a tenuous person holding onto a tenuous life. And now I was ready to find something else to cling to.

I had met Shawn seven months before, in a bar in my hometown. Initially, I found clubs and bars smoky and boring, a mass of gay men drinking and talking without saying anything. There seemed to be no challenge, nothing to stimulate me. But my good looks and body drew me lots of attention. And I liked attention. I liked it when strange guys bought me drinks and tried to talk to me. Sometimes I was nice and tolerated their company. Sometimes I rebuffed them. And sometimes I tricked them, made them feel stupid. Occasionally I went home with one of them. If I hadn't, then they would have deemed me unapproachable and the game would have ended. After a safe sexual encounter I would always depart, conveniently forgetting to leave my phone number behind.

It was into one of those bars on one of those nights that Shawn walked, just like anyone else, sliding onto a bar stool and ordering a

beer. Heads turned to look at him, and I remember feeling jealous that no one was looking at me.

Shawn was a barfly's dream - muscular, handsome, even a little famous. Imagine the secret delight of whispering to your friends that you had spent a night with him. Guys crowded around him, talking, getting autographs, trying to touch him and tell him how much they loved him. Telling him what they could do for him, what they could do to him.

Not knowing who this big upstart was, I immediately became disdainful. Then the bartender filled me in. Despite the attention he was receiving, I began to feel calmer and better. He would be gone tomorrow. I would again be the rooster of this hen house.

A beer was placed before me.

That beer represented some secret victory. I was still desired, still wanted, still the perfect little student with the perfect little body. Even the best wanted me.

Shawn came over and we began to dance.

This should be the point where I say I was completely taken with this handsome man. I should say that his kindness and gentle spirit won me over, that his daring, dashing looks captured me, that his smile



dazzled me and my heart began to turn somersaults. I should say that we looked lovingly into each other's eyes and danced the night away.

Instead I found myself dancing with a brusque, staccato man whom I found not the least bit interesting. And it quickly seemed apparent where this evening was leading.

All eyes turned on me. Would I go? They all knew my habit of refusing men, but no one thought I could refuse him. I looked into their greedy hungry eyes, all waiting to see what would happen to two people they hardly knew. When the time came for us to go, I could imagine their shallow whispers discussing what we would be doing, what they wished they could be doing. My teeth clenched at the thought of it. I looked over at Shawn drinking a beer and began to hate him. I didn't want them to talk about me like that, didn't want them to stop thinking of me as inaccessible. Would I be just another notch on this man's unending bedpost? Not tonight.

I thought in my mind how delicious it would be to turn Shawn down. I would be nice, coy, maybe dance a little bit and play it up, but in the end I was going home with only myself for company. That would give them something to talk about. They would whisper about how the stuck-up student had turned down the wrestler. Maybe one of them

would get lucky then, but it would always be me that they would remember from that night, walking away victorious, leaving my stupid prey with nothing more than a stammering good night and an embarrassing hard-on. That would be the legend I would generate on that night.

A guy came over to us, stumbling drunk. I recognized him. He always told everyone he was straight, loudly denouncing us as queers and faggots, but when drunk enough he would allow one of the older men to take him into the bathroom for a quick blow-job. His act was like mine, another way of getting attention, although mine played out much better than his.

He stumbled over to Shawn, spilling drops of beer on his leather jacket. Shawn flicked them off with his hand. "I suggest you get lost," he told the drunk in a deep, tense voice, turning his back on the man.

The drunk poked him on the shoulder, trying to reclaim his attention.

Shawn turned stonily to look at him. I could see that he was wound up inside, tense. Something was about to happen, and we all knew that. All save for that damn dumb drunk, who instead of backing away, slowly placed a clumsy hand on Shawn's shoulder, leaned over

and breathily stared him in the face, half-smiling, half-belching.

“When,” he finally croaked, “are you gonna take your bitch home?”

Shawn’s fist cracked against his jaw before any of us could react. It was so quick, I didn’t see the drunk fall.

Shawn stood over him, taking the measure of the rest of the patrons. It seemed at that moment he was ready more for combat than for love. His clenched fist would not relax. I took hold of his bloodied hand, unclenched it, and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

We had sex between the sheets of his bed in his nameless hotel room. He went at me like a fireman after a fire, experienced and with the same combative edge with which he went after the drunk. When it was over, he lay back on the bed. I slunk over to the other side, to beat my normal hasty retreat, but he grabbed me in his strong arm and wrapped me around him, my head on his warm chest. I could smell the sweat of the night on his armpits and feel the tickle of his long blond hair on my face. I ran my hand over the fine blond of his chest. I thought of the bar, of the drunk calling me a bitch, and Shawn hitting him. Everyone else I knew would have told me to ignore the drunk. This

man had defended me. I felt a lump forming at the back of my throat. I looked at Shawn, but he was asleep, so I snuggled against him, feeling somehow detached and outside my body, warm, safe, and trapped.

I awoke to the grinding of the hotel shower. It was late. Waking up in a hotel bed had a new and exciting feeling. I no longer felt empty, as I usually did the morning after. I was nervous and scared and anxious. I felt like it was the first day in a new school, and I didn't know what to do.

Shawn came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. He looked like a back alley version of David, chiseled yet rough.

"Hi," he said, the first word I remember him saying to me. He smiled as he extracted deodorant and shaving cream from a small bag. "How're you doing?"

"Fine," I said, stretching. "Sleepy." I was naked under the sheets and was suddenly unsure whether to be self-conscious or brazen. Did I want him again?

He came over and kissed me, lightly at first, but soon demanding more. His tongue went into my mouth, his long hair flopping

over his head and onto me. He tugged at his towel and climbed back into the bed. I felt his hard body on top of mine, his muscles straining and stretching. His hands were everywhere, touching, insistent, his mouth on mine, on my cheeks, my neck, my shoulder. His strong arms guided me to where he wanted, and I released myself into the moment.

Afterwards, we took a shower together. He held me under the lukewarm water, just holding me, no kissing, no love play, just his strong arms. "I'm here for another day," he said. "Stick around." Just like that. No compliments, no questions, just "stick around." Someone else might have thought this arrogant, as if he expected me to stay simply because anyone would. Simply because he was good-looking and rich and horny. Not me. I thought it normal. He liked me, he liked having me, liked being with me, liked having sex with me. He liked me more than being on the road. He liked me more than waiting all day to go to another bar for another night and another guy. He liked me more than playing the game.

He liked me more than he liked being alone.

Me, too. So I stayed.

And that's why I always stayed. No deep reasons, no hidden subconscious motivations. I stayed, always, for the simple reason that I couldn't face the alternative. I tried, but being alone for the rest of my

life somehow always seemed worse. The gay man who finds no lover when he is young and attractive is doomed to be alone for the last half-century of his life. I wasn't strong enough to be alone; I wasn't strong enough to walk away; I was only strong enough to stay and take the abuse.

Shawn and I spent the day wandering around, talking a little, eating lunch. We walked through the park and over a bridge. Sometimes he would casually slip a tight arm around me, and I would smile that this muscular arm, this thing, was mine. By late afternoon we realized the futility of wandering and went back to the hotel. We spent the evening having sex, making love. We slept for a while in each other's arms. Then we woke up and fucked again.

That was how it all started. Nothing spectacular, nothing romantic, nothing very cinematic. There was, however, an edge to it, and that was exciting. The second night, when Shawn held me against his sweaty chest and told me that I was a beautiful boy, I felt that secret little thrill that I had begun to associate with him.

We talked of our lives. He marveled at my education, though he didn't understand any of it. He wondered why I needed so much

schooling. Yet in a way he was proud of it, proud that someone so smart wanted to be with him.

He told me of his life, of his hardships and how he had struggled to make it as a wrestler. I suppose I never really listened. I really had no depth of understanding, just a nodding acquaintance to how hard he had worked. It meant nothing to me, so I couldn't understand why it meant so much to him.

He lived only one hour away. We continued a rough communication of sorts. We talked on the phone, briefly, short bursts of conversation followed by long periods of silence. Neither of us had anything to say to the other. With my professors and other students I could talk or debate for hours, but what did Shawn know of the heroic code or dead languages? For that matter, what did he care?

We got together on weekends, when he wasn't touring. These times together were nice - uncomplicated, exhausting. I began to appreciate some finer things about Shawn - the physical closeness we had when he worked our bodies as one, his desire to please, the determined way he would stand up for me as he had the night we first met.

I always wanted to ask him why he had sent me that beer that

first night. What had he seen, what had he felt, why had he done that? If the answer had simply been because I was the best-looking guy in the bar, I would not have been surprised. But I would have been disappointed.

So I never asked.

The weekends turned into weeks.

I enjoyed my times at Shawn's house. The decor was simple and based on need - what ever Shawn thought he needed, he bought.

Consequently, the kitchen lacked, while stereos, TV's, and CD equipment choked the living room. Some of the floors were hardwood, shiny and smooth, while the others had a plush beige carpeting. Once a week a service came in and cleaned, and afterwards the house smelled of pine and cleaning fluid.

Behind the house was a small tract of woods with a clear-running stream. I escaped to these woods at least once a day. Only there, among the piney air and soft forest floor, did I feel as if nothing was expected of me. The man who existed at the university was an intellectual snob, the intelligent kind that can do it with mirrors, all brain and no genius. I loved to learn, but I lost sight of that in the dusty,



greedy air of academia. Inside Shawn's house I was another man, more simple than I could ever really be, more agreeable and nice and simply not real.

Outside, by this stream, I could sit on a mossy bank, reading again my worn out copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. I would wonder what I was doing with my life. It seemed ridiculous to me that I should not be happy. I had an education; I would soon have a doctorate. I had a rich, good-looking, successful boyfriend. I had a house that was practically all mine. I had books and computers and gold cards. But all I really wanted was that little knoll by that little stream in that little tract of woods. I wanted time, not to think, but simply to read and breathe in the piney air. Deep down, I knew I wasn't happy. But for those enchanted moments, nothing like my life mattered.

Shawn came to the stream one day. He was wearing cowboy boots and jeans with a purple polo shirt that I had used his credit card to buy for him. He looked more himself in his T-shirt and leather jacket. I stood up without saying a word and smoothed his shirt. His hand caught mine and he kissed me. For a minute I thought that he would want to have sex, here, now, and I didn't want that. It would spoil this place. But it didn't happen. Instead, Shawn wrapped tight arms around

me and sat with me on the bank, my back against his chest. I could hear his breathing in my ear and it made me uncomfortable. In less than a month, Shawn would fight for the championship, and I knew how important it was to him. He had been spending every waking moment training and practicing, readying himself. I wondered what he was doing here.

We sat there for a while, him seemingly content to hold me and me wondering all the time what he was thinking. We had been lovers for almost half a year, and I couldn't read the smallest part of him. Oh, I knew when he wanted to hold me, or make love to me, or what sexual play he wanted. But at moments like this I knew nothing.

"Joshua," he whispered. He said it low and softly. I didn't know how to respond, so I made a noncommittal noise.

"I love you," he whispered again in that same voice. It was what I had always wanted to hear. Somehow, it didn't feel like I thought it would.

"I love you, too," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

He kissed me again. "Shawn," I said, to no one.

He took me by my hand and led me back to the house. I turned my back on the little stream in that little tract of woods. Within a week,

I would live here, be a part of this house. But I never went back to those woods.

I defended my dissertation five days before Shawn fought for the title. I was nervous. I didn't feel as though I had spent enough time preparing it, writing it, studying the topic. But my professors liked me, and one of them wanted me to work with him on a research project. My defense was successful, and I accepted the job.

I felt relief more than anything, more than elation or celebration. A weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I went to lunch with my professors; we talked, laughed, but never spoke of my dissertation. They knew it could have been better.

I was miserable when I got home, but it didn't matter. Shawn was proud; he called me doctor all day long. I had worked so hard for that title, but somehow, it didn't fit like I thought it would.

We celebrated with dinner and then went to bed early. Shawn was sleeping extra hours in preparation for the match. We had not had sex for several days. I should have been happy for the relief from his over-active sex drive, but I was annoyed by the lack of attention. I felt undesired. I attempted to initiate lovemaking, and found myself gently

but firmly rebuffed. It would have been better if he had been rude and pushed me out of bed. Then I would have had a good reason to go to sleep angry.

The day of the match Shawn was unapproachable. He was nervous, and rightly so, but he was also aggressive. When breakfast was cold he yelled. Winning the fight would mean much more touring, and I balked about going with him since I had just started my new position. This prompted more yelling and a fight. I tried to relieve him of some of the pressures he was facing but everything I did was wrong. I began to rub his shoulders but ended up aggravating a shoulder injury I had known nothing about. He shoved me.

I fell back on the hard wood floor, slightly bruised. I should have been upset but I was scared. Shawn had never been like this before a match. He got up and glared at me for a minute. I thought of the drunk he had leveled the night we first met. He left the house, slamming the door behind him.

I lay there on the floor, shaking. I picked myself up, looking at the door Shawn had just slammed, cursing myself for having been so stupid. My eyes watered. I ran out of the house and into the back yard. I

got halfway to the stream before hesitating; panting, I turned and went back to the house to clean up the breakfast dishes.

The phone rang. I ignored it. "Hey." Shawn's voice. "Are you there? Look, I'm sorry for what happened this morning. It's just - I mean - you just pissed me off, okay? That's no excuse, I know. Okay? I'll see you tonight. Bye." I played the message back three times before I erased it.

The match turned out to be long and tough. Eventually, the momentum shifted towards Shawn. After twenty-two minutes, he rolled up his opponent. Three seconds later, it was over.

Shawn had won.

The crowd erupted as only large mobs of drunken people can. Shawn celebrated in the center of the ring. He clutched the belt in his hands. He had fought for fourteen years to get to this point. For a second, I remembered my own dissertation, and was angry at myself for turning my victory into a disappointment.

Shawn was posing for the screaming fans. Beside me, officials rushed champagne into his locker room area. Other wrestlers crowded around, waiting for the new champion. I stood alone.

He came into the locker room, sweaty, exhausted, but exultant. His friends crowded around, the champagne was uncorked and poured over him. One of the other wrestlers grabbed the belt and placed it snugly around Shawn's waist. Cheers and screams and congratulations filled the air as the action swirled me out of the locker room.

Hours later, as we lay in bed, having made love, the belt on the night stand, Shawn, tired, smiling, held me as I softly cried into his chest. He thought I was crying because I was happy for him. He didn't understand that I was crying for me.

We hit the road in a couple of weeks. I reluctantly put off my research at the university to go on tour with him. I reasoned that he needed me to take care of the little things - reservations, keys, schedules. My colleagues were disappointed I was leaving. Dr. Pollick, the man I was to be working under, assured me of a spot when I returned.

I spent the next two months waking up in the middle of the night not knowing where I was. Shawn was winning easily. He was happy. The incident the night of the championship had not been repeated. We never discussed it, and I was sure Shawn never thought

about it. As for me, I reasoned that it had happened, but was history, dead, best forgotten.

Life on the road wore me down quickly. I became irritable, moody. Shawn sensed my moods and tried to pick me up. He surprised me by taking me camping when we toured through Colorado. We spent a week in the woods, just the two of us. Days of hiking and fishing were followed by nights of making love by the campfire and sleeping together in one giant bag.

I loathed the entire trip. I hated the woods. I hated the insects, the little animals, the night sounds and no running water. Most of all I hated Shawn for not knowing that I would hate the trip.

I made him leave Colorado a day early. I was trying the best I could, but every move he made just infuriated me. My life had become his life, and I resented him for that.

Then the fights began. Sometimes they were machine-gun arguments, quick and then over. Sometimes they lasted longer. I was afraid that Shawn would hit or push me again. Still, I acted defiant, and like a spoiled child I kept repeating the same mantra over and over: I wanted to go home.

In the beginning, Shawn was more tolerant of my moods. Then

things weren't going as well in the ring. Easy victories were replaced by tougher ones. Shawn was getting tired. In Pensacola, he fought to a one hour draw. It was like a loss to him. We argued for two hours that night.

Things came to a head in Austin. Shawn had been counted out - he was outside the ring for more than the count of ten. He was the loser, although he was still the champion. The title did not change hands on a count out.

He was angry. His opponent had cheated; others had intervened in the match. I should have soothed and comforted him. I should have played the part of the faithful, diligent lover. Yet with one month left of the tour, tonight was the night I was determined to go home. Alone.

"I can't take it anymore!" I whined. "The hotels, the traveling, living out of a suitcase. I need to go home!"

"I need you here," he said, which was all he ever said.

"I'm leaving. I booked a flight. I'm going home tomorrow." He looked at me. For a moment there was a look of inextinguishable anguish in his eyes. But it was replaced by a cold fury I saw bubbling beneath the exterior of his face.

"Just like that," he said tightly, looking down and removing his shirt. His voice tripped with anger and pain.



“I need to go back,” I said, trying to explain what I could not. “I need to go to the university. I need to be free from all this.” I paused. “It’s only for a month.”

He looked at me coldly for a second, then resumed staring at the carpet. “Fine,” he said in a voice so tight it would deflect a quarter.

I had won.

As I prepared for bed I knew that this was just what we needed. I could not wait to be home. I wanted to be away from him. I didn't want to smell him or hear him or see him. I didn't want him to touch me. I wanted - needed - time to myself.

I slipped out of my clothes and into the bed. Shawn’s back was turned to me. He appeared to be sleeping already. His back was tensed; he was angry. I hoped that, come morning, he could try to understand. Or in a month, when he returned from the tour, when things would be so much better.

I touched his back mindlessly, tracing my finger around one of his muscles. He moved. I thought he was asleep but he wasn’t. He turned his naked body around and wrapped a hand around my waist. I could feel his hot mouth on my neck, the weight of him as he climbed on top of me. So many nights had started like this. Not tonight. Not now. I had

won.

I tried to push him off me; he became more insistent. I gave him a shove, but he was too strong. I could not move him.

“No, Shawn,” I whispered. “Not tonight.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, pushing, not stopping.

“No. Please.” He looked into my eyes for a second, then grabbed my jaw with his hand. My head was thrust back on the pillow as the breath rushed out of me.

“You little fucker,” he said. “How dare you. You’re leaving tomorrow and you won’t even let me fuck you tonight.”

“Please, no... Shawn.” I was scared.

He reached down with his other hand. The weight of his chest and body was pinning me to the bed. His hand grabbed at my boxers and ripped them off. He flipped me onto my back and forced my legs apart with his. He held my wrists with one of his strong hands. “For once,” he said hotly in my ear, “you’ll do what I tell you.” I stopped struggling as he entered me.

When he was done, he rolled off me. I curled up into a ball on the other side of the bed, whimpering, but not crying.

I arrived home tired, in pain, yet glad to be there. On the plane I had thought about how I would leave him. How he would come home and find me gone, not knowing where I was. I would leave him no note, no forwarding address. I would take the computer and my clothes and maybe some other stuff, too.

When I walked through the front door, though, I felt relief. Seeing his things, in his house, only reminded me of the times before the tour. Bad times make what we always complained about seem perfect. I rationalized that once he was home, once he was back in his house, everything would be all right.

Mostly, though, I tried not to think about it. I found being back at the university a relief. I taught a freshman English course for a professor out on maternity leave. My research progressed well. Brad (Dr. Pollick insisted I call him by his first name) and I did some interesting work. Brad was everything that Shawn was not - smart, sophisticated, funny. He had reached the age where Jewish men go from young to old - there seemed to be no in-between. He was tall and lanky with dark curly hair on his head and peeping out from under his shirt collar. Both, like his beard, were speckled with gray. He had soft, crinkly brown eyes and a low, mirthless laugh. He smiled a lot.

I had always known that Brad had a crush on me. As a graduate student I had used it. Now, as a colleague, I cherished it. I enjoyed the fact that I invaded his daydreams. After long hours of computer work I would take my glasses off and rub my eyes. That was Brad's cue to come over and gently rub my shoulders, tell me I was driving too hard, scold me to take it easy. He would get us some tea and then urge me to call it a night.

I would always go home to Shawn, though, to Shawn's bed in Shawn's house with Shawn's things. Some nights I lay flat on my back, the loose sheet tucked under my chin, and stared at the dark ceiling, missing him, missing his hard body and his tight, familiar arm. Other nights, though, I would sit on the porch, looking at the stars, and think about Brad. What would it be like to kiss his lips, to have his beard scratch my neck, to have his lean hairy arms around my waist? These were the thoughts that ran through my head as I waited for Shawn to come home, as I waited for my old life to begin anew.

It happened a few days later. Shawn was due back in four days, and I had begun to dread it. I had grown to enjoy this life I had been living. I didn't know if Shawn would upset it or not.

Brad had come over. We talked more than worked. We laughed and drank coffee. We made dinner together and instead of watching TV, we sat and talked some more before getting back to work.

The glare from the computer was bothering me. I took off my glasses and stretched, rubbing my eyes. "I know what that means," Brad said as he began to rub my shoulders. I loved the feel of his warm hands kneading my back. "Mmmmm," I murmured. I took his hand between mine and brushed it against my cheek.

Then I kissed it.

I didn't know I was going to do it. But it felt good. I looked deep into Brad's soft brown eyes. I took his wrists in my hands and pulled him close to me. His lips met mine. I stood up, and he wrapped his arms around me.

We stood there kissing for several minutes. It was still my call. I could stop it now. Instead, I stood back and took off my university sweatshirt. Shawn may never have been impressed with my body, but lots of men still were.

"Beautiful," Brad whispered, rubbing his hands over my chest. "Joshua, you are so beautiful." We kissed again. I lifted his blue cable-knit over his head. I ran my fingers through the dark tangled hair

on his chest. I leaned against his chest while he kissed my neck and shoulders. His beard was rough and tickly. He ran his hands across my shoulders, down the curve of my spine, and onto my bare lower back.

We climbed into bed. He removed my pants, and I could feel his beard on my thigh. I took off his pants and rubbed my bare cheek over his skinny stomach. The sex was sweet, sensual, all touching and kissing and caressing.

Afterwards, when Brad was asleep, I asked myself if this is what I wanted. I had no ready answer, only warmth.

I awoke to the sound a door being opened.

It's amazing, really, what will wake a person up. For the past month, sleeping alone, I awoke at the slightest noise. Now, sleeping with Brad by my side, I had not heard the car pull up, the jangle of keys in the front door, or the heavy thud of steps in the hallway.

Shawn was home.

It took me a moment to remember that I wasn't alone in the bed. In that moment Shawn's face turned from amiable stone to a mask of hot-cold fury. He threw his bag against the wall so hard that the mirror shattered into a hundred spidery pieces.

Brad awoke with a start. His eyes grew wide with fear. He grabbed the blanket to cover himself and began to maneuver out of the bed.

I looked over at him. He didn't dare to glance at me. He seemed so scared and helpless that I had to look away.

Shawn came over to me, quickly. His big strong hands grabbed my shoulders and slammed me into the wall. He stared at me, angry, furious, his hands growing tighter on my shoulders. His eyes held mine like a snake-charmer. I could neither move nor speak; I remained statue-still in his heavy grasp.

He slapped me hard with the back of his hand.

Pain cascaded through my head. I could taste the red iron flavor of blood in my mouth.

My only hope lay with Brad. I turned to where he had been. In the short time after Shawn had arrived he had dressed himself. Without looking back, he ran out of the bedroom and into the day. I could hear the car screech out of the driveway. I knew that if I had screamed, screamed as long and as loud and as hard as humans can, it would have only encouraged him to go faster.

I looked back at Shawn. He relaxed his grip and released me

from the wall, only to snap slam me into it. Pain shuddered my system.

He slammed me into the wall again and again, four or five times. I began not to feel the pain anymore. He stopped slamming me against the wall and threw me to the floor. I lay there naked, shivering, my entire body bruised, but not crying.

Shawn looked like he wanted to kick me, to hit me, to kill me. He slammed his hand in frustration against the dresser, kicked the bed, overturned a chair. I cowered in the corner of the room. I stared at him, my eyes scared, hot, wet from trying not to cry with pain and fear. Shawn stopped his destruction and just stared at me. He pointed at me, accusing, and that finger said all he needed to say. He left the room, slamming his way down the hall and out the door.

My head was reeling from the pain. Blood was smeared down my face. Alone, I finally began to cry.

During Shawn's absence I cleaned myself up. I was bruised and my lip was bleeding. I was thankful I had not lost any teeth or broken any bones.

I thought about leaving, about packing and going somewhere. But where would I go? I had no friends, no family. I couldn't go to



Brad's. But that wasn't the reason I didn't leave that day. I had no rationalizations that he would forgive me, or I him. That all would be well, or forgotten, that things would get back to normal. Somehow, I felt that I would never know normal again.

But I stayed. I stayed because my work was here. I stayed because I alone knew where things were in the kitchen. I stayed because of the scissors mark I had made in the counter. I stayed because of my shoes on the back porch. I stayed because the neighbors knew I lived here, because work had this phone number. I stayed because my mail came here.

I stayed because this was my home. And I didn't have another.

Yet I never realized the other important thing I had only one of.

The next morning I woke early and made breakfast. Shawn ate it and left to train. My hands were too bruised for typing. Instead I watched television. Brad's student assistant called later in the day. The project had been terminated. She didn't know why.

Shawn came home around one. He was with a tall, thin, dark-haired young man. They walked through the front door kissing and pawing each other. When the young man saw me he gave a start. Clearly,

he hadn't been told about me.

"Who's that?" he whispered, as Shawn dug furiously into the boy's neck with his lips.

"Wha-" Shawn said, half-turning to see me on the couch. He smirked when he saw me, as if he was glad I would witness this. "Oh. No one." He turned again to the young man and took him in his arms.

The young man wriggled out of his grasp. "I thought we would be alone."

Shawn let go. "We will be, baby." He walked towards the kitchen. "You want a beer?" he called over his shoulder.

"Umm - sure," the young man said, sitting on the arm of the big chair next to the door. "I'm Kraig," he said to me. "And you are -" I was surprised by this sudden attention. I wanted to grab this man, this kid, show him the bruises I had, tell him what he was getting into, where he was and who he was really with.

Instead, I shrugged.

"No one, like he said," I mumbled, nodding towards Shawn as he returned with one unopened and one half-empty can of beer. He placed his arm around Kraig's thin shoulders and gave it to him.

"Oh come on now, Josh," Shawn smirked. He turned towards

Kraig. "Josh here is one of my oldest pals, isn't that right?" I smiled wanly. "He's just been crashing on my couch for a few days, that's all." I agreed with him. There was nothing I could do.

Kraig believed this. He took a swig of his beer as Shawn polished his off. "And," Shawn added, "he certainly understands when I have a little company over, don't you, Josh? After all, I do the same for you, don't I?"

"Sure," I mumbled in reply as Shawn took Kraig's beer with one hand and reached between his legs with the other. He slid Kraig onto his lap and began to kiss him. Kraig seemed uncomfortable at first, but, drunker than he realized, seemed to warm to the idea of someone watching. They were there a full ten minutes before Shawn led him back into the bedroom. I cleaned up the beer bottles as I heard the embellished sounds of sex coming from the open door. The next morning, I threw away the used condom.

I'm not sure when I moved back into the bedroom. Some night several weeks after Kraig and a few others like him, Shawn decided he was tired of going out for sex. He took me to the bedroom, gloriously drunk, and fucked me. I wasn't unwilling; it was easier than saying no.

I seemed to please him again. I could find moments, when he was inside me or lost in the motion of our bodies, that things seemed okay. But then he would finish and roll over. There was no touching, only coldness afterwards.

I would have been a fool to think that I was the only one. There were other men; some women, now, too, fans hanging around outside his matches. He was still the champion, still winning and still making money. He still had everything he always wanted. He was still on top of the world.

A year had passed since he had won the championship. He was wrestling at the hometown arena, a tough match against an up-and-coming young American star. He had gotten drunk and mean the night before. I had escaped with a bruise or two. I hadn't wanted to have sex with him; I was afraid he might hurt me. I should have learned to stop angering him so much.

The match was going badly for Shawn from the start. He had no momentum; he was tired from a tough schedule of wrestling and partying. It was over in less than fifteen minutes.

He handled his loss like a champion. He congratulated the winner, and the crowd gave him a rousing ovation. He smiled and

waved. Inside, he seethed with rage.

I left.

I left without thinking about it. I left without deciding to do it. I simply took out my keys, went to my car, and left the arena. I went home, turned on the TV, and sat on the couch.

I thought he would be devastated. I knew he would be mad. I felt sure he would blame me for all that had happened in the past year - all that I had done, all that had lost him his title.

He came home higher than I had ever seen him. He couldn't walk. A strange guy in leather helped him through the door, laughing and cursing and touching him.

The guy said his name was Angel. He had dark Hispanic skin and wore the loose uniform of a gang member. His face was ravaged by acne, and a mascara-thin mustache dotted his upper lip. He was playing at being a man, and that made him doubly dangerous.

Angel laughed as he dropped Shawn into a chair. He sat on his lap, brushing back his hair and covering Shawn's mouth with his own. Shawn looked blank, unresponsive. His eyes were glazed with defeat, his movements jerky, his normally sharp-edged demeanor replaced by a drug-induced haze. For a moment he looked like an out-of-place flower

child, stoned and helpless and wanting to give peace a try.

Angel looked at me, meanly. "What are you looking at?" He said the "you" like "Jew," and it made me smile. He jumped off of Shawn's lap and put his face into mine. "Why don't you get lost," he said. "I'm busy." With this he grabbed his crotch and squeezed, making a harsh umphing sound through his teeth.

I could not help but laugh at this display of aggression. I had seen the real thing; a fake like him did not impress me. "I live here," I said, turning with disinterest back towards the TV.

I had committed the worst sin possible to this angry young man. Disdain he could have handled; aggression was welcomed. But I had ignored him, and it infuriated him. I ignored him like he thought everyone else ignored him. His was a generation angry at being denied existence. In dark bars and street corners he smoked crack and talked about liberation, had sex with old white men for money and knifed old ladies for their grocery change. He thought that the only way to stand up and be counted was with a shout, a knife, a gun, his cock.

And I was ignoring him.

I heard the click of a switchblade cut through the air. Silver flashed. Angel had a knife. The problem with boys playing at men is that

sometimes they do it too well.

"Heh," he said, waving the knife and enjoying the new fear on my face. "Who's laughing now?" Angel turned to look back at Shawn, who was mumbling incoherently to himself. He turned back towards me and smiled smugly. "Well," he said, gesturing at Shawn, "I would like to have me some of dat," now pointing the knife at me, "but I guess I can settle for some of dis. Take dem pants off, boy." Angel pressed the knife against my stomach. Another centimeter and he would penetrate the skin. "Or else."

I looked imploringly to Shawn. He was drunk, half-asleep, half-gazing at Angel and me. He was gone, amused, bemused. I wanted to beg him, to say I was sorry, to scream for help. I wanted him to stand up for me like the first night we had met, like he always had in the past. I wanted to be his again. I didn't want to be thrown away. Not like this.

But I couldn't say anything. My eyes implored him, but he couldn't hear them.

Angel impatiently grabbed at my belt, unlatching it. I fidgeted. He waved the knife over my stomach, touching the point to my belly, my abdomen, my crotch. "Go ahead, I'll cut ya," he smirked. "I don't give a fuck."

I took my pants off under the knife. He took my underwear off, fondled me. He put me in his mouth, if only for a minute, to show me that he could do it. "Turn over," he said. I refused. "Turn over, bitch," he pointed the knife again in my stomach, harder. A thin stream of crimson trickled down my belly. His smile grew. "Plenty more where that came from," he said. "Over. Now."

I turned over. I heard Angel fumbling with his pants, heard a sigh of release. I felt the cold steel of the knife mingling with the heat of his flesh. I wanted to cry, to cry out, to Shawn, but I just withdrew as Angel penetrated me. I could almost see myself as I floated above the scene. I could see the little gangster boy thrusting himself into me, see the cold steel against my back, see the small blood stain on the beige carpet, see my lover sitting in the chair, half-watching, half-aroused, see the Latino boy pound his fists against my back, see me break, see Angel's face crease with orgasm, see him panting, see him fall back against Shawn, see him take out Shawn's cock and put it into his mouth. See Shawn become excited. See me cry, softly, unmoving, bleeding.

Angel left the next morning. He raped me again before he left, but I wasn't there to feel it. I had left my body. Something died inside



me when Shawn had turned away. I had belonged to Shawn. Now, I was no one's.

Shawn found me the next morning lying in the exact same spot, naked. He was angry that there was no breakfast, but he didn't hit me. He threw a blanket on me and left me where I was.

I lay there until noon. After a while, it got cliched. I stood up, still alive, back in my body. I showered and cried and made lunch, went to the store for milk and moped all day. Shawn did not disturb me. He didn't touch me or talk to me. He left me, left the house to run errands, visit his accountant, his doctor, his lawyer.

For two days I lay like this, brief periods of mundane existence interrupting a coagulating mass of self-pity and self-loathing, of anger, rage, and hate, of despair and shallow emptiness. I was prone to watching soap operas, talk shows, and sleeping, doing laundry and setting the table, vacuuming.

On the third day I awoke to a sharp pain in my neck. Shawn leaned over me. His face was streaked with moisture, his eyes wild, his hair framing his head. He trembled; for a moment he looked as though he might be scared. But Shawn was never scared.

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Shawn was holding it to my throat.

My first thought was to wonder what I had done wrong. I could think of nothing. And Shawn looked so wild, so different. I knew it was something else.

But I was still to pay for it.

I said nothing, moved nothing but my eyes. I felt the cold, mean steel at my neck. I worked hard not to panic.

I looked into Shawn's eyes. He was crying. Shawn did not cry.

Part of me wanted to comfort him, to reach in the name of our past and history together.

Part of me was also enjoying this.

But the biggest part of me was still very scared.

"What did I do?" I said in a voice lower than a whisper. I was hoping he wouldn't hear me, only see me mouth the words and assume I had said what he most wanted to hear.

"Your fault," he whispered. I was waiting for the first blow, almost wanting the familiarity of the pain and the humiliation rather than this deadly tension of waiting for the other shoe to fall.

But Shawn just stared at me. His lip quivered. His arm tensed, that tight strong familiar arm. I could see it raise in the air, see it come

down on me. I almost wanted it.

But he lacked the will, now, when he had never even thought about conviction before. The arm was tensing on its own, out of habit, but would not strike.

The knife was closer now. I could feel my artery throb against the cold steel. I could see Shawn waiting, waiting for me to yell or scream or shout or try to run, to defend myself or simply to faint or die. It was my move, my ball to play.

I did nothing.

Rather, I knew better than to try and do anything. Somewhere inside, I believed he wouldn't kill me. I wanted to believe that. If I was to survive, I needed to believe that.

Shawn swallowed, the only movement he had made in the past minute. His eyes darted furtively around the room. I lay there, prone, silent, wondering what had driven him to this.

And then I knew. After his doctor's exam, it was the only thing that made sense.

"No, Shawn," I whispered.

"Yes," was all he replied. It was tight and angry. Anger was my way out. The familiar anger. Then he would forget the knife.

"No, Shawn. It wasn't me."

He looked at me, not hearing. "Yes, it was," he whispered hoarsely. "And now it's all over."

"No, Shawn, it's not over, you'll see, it's okay, trust me, it'll be okay."

"It is not okay!" His anger flared, his hand raised. He struck me, hard. "It's not okay! It's your fault, you bastard, you bitch, you whore!"

He struck again, and I fell off the bed. I breathed a sigh of relief. I scrambled to my feet and backed into a corner. The knife had been forgotten.

"Shawn," I began, but it was unnecessary. The anger had deflated him. He hunched forward, rubbing his brow with one hand. I moved towards him, towards the knife, and threw it into the corner.

"You know it wasn't my fault," I said, quietly, demurely, defiant. To my surprise, he nodded, just once, moving his head down.

Later that day, after Shawn had calmed down and fallen into a deep sleep, I cleaned up. Cleaned up as I always did. I began to cook a dinner, a dinner like a hundred previous dinners. Tears bristled my eyes for a variety of reasons, most unimportant.

I held the knife in my hands. I had picked it up out of the room.  
Angel's knife, Shawn's knife.

I threw it away.

I cut onions for a sauce, the smell stinging my eyes. Things  
would change. I would leave.

It came to me then - just came to me. A voice, deep inside,  
tired, frightened. *Leave, it said, leave now, while you can, leave leave  
just leave. Grab some things whatever you need just go, go, go.*

Mechanically, I placed some clothes in a bag. I went to Shawn's  
wallet and grabbed all his cash. The car keys, my glasses. *Just go and  
drive and keep going and reclaim some part of your life, just go.*

I threw on a jacket and paused as I went out the door. Then I  
hurried out into the overcast day.

I got behind the wheel of the car. What if he reports the car as  
stolen? *Who cares, just go.* What if he wakes up and needs me? He's sick  
now, he needs me. *Let him take care of himself. Just go.*

Where?

One word stopped me.

The car idled. I turned off the engine.

I should have run, should have left, should have gone.

But I got out of the car and went back into the house.

I cut the bread. My tears flowed quietly. He had me now, he really did. Now, when he couldn't stop me, I couldn't go.

The knife bit my finger.

I jumped. The pain woke me up. I ran my finger under water, got a band-aid. The knife had cut me. I had cut me, like Shawn had, like Angel.

I went to the trash, mechanically. I got out Angel's knife, Shawn's knife, my knife. I flipped it open. I expected a surge of power to course through me, to feel what those little boys felt when they played with them. But I only felt the heft of the knife, the weight of the blade.

I moved towards the bedroom. He was asleep. He wouldn't feel it if it was quick. No one would discover him. I could leave then. Or bury him, in the cellar, the backyard, or down in the woods.

Sunlight streamed through the living room window. The knife glistened in the warm light.

I crept closer to the bedroom.

This surely was what I had been waiting for. What I had to do. What I was meant to do. What my suffering and the torture had steeled

me to do.

Closer to the bedroom.

What the beatings had prepared me for, what the cursing and name calling and the rapes and the cheating, the flaunting of the other men had been for. What I was prepared to do.

I stood in the doorway of the bedroom.

I saw him asleep on the bed. I heard him breathing, heavy. I saw his cherubic blond hair frame his face. He snored lightly.

I knew in that moment I never loved him. I couldn't have.

And if I never loved him, I could never kill him. I couldn't take his life now, couldn't end his suffering. Whether it was because I hated him so much or had never cared at all, I couldn't be sure.

I put the knife back in the garbage and finished preparing dinner. Shawn awoke and shuffled into the living room wearing a robe and sweat pants. He told me whatever I was cooking smelled great.

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Skip the next five years. Nothing much happened to us, and our story is almost over anyway.

I learned within the month that I, too, was HIV+. It didn't



surprise me.

Shawn's health fluctuated. He got sick a lot, mainly because he didn't take care of himself. His constant drinking didn't help. Still, he clung to his life, though for a reason I could never fathom. I took care of myself, mostly to take care of him. Sometimes I asked myself why I gave him my loyalty, but I never had an answer. Eventually, I stopped wondering why.

We spent five more Christmases together, five more Thanksgivings, five more Easters. We went through the cycle of life, but never seemed to live. We spent most nights watching TV. Sometimes I read or went shopping.

It should amaze me, if anything still could, how nothing happened to us for five years. Our life became routine. I would have guessed, back when the beatings wouldn't stop, back when I feared Shawn's temper and strong hands, that a life dull and routine would be paradise. But all it did was numb me. Five years slipped by without notice or thought.

It should amaze me that I still hated him. That after five years nothing had changed. That my hate had only grown. But that's the nature of hate. It lives inside us; it never diminishes. Outside of us, out

there, it has no power. Inside, it festers, makes us hate even more, makes us hate everything, makes us hate ourselves the most.

Shawn's health began to decline rapidly as our sixth year approached. He swung in and out of dementia. He had toxo and mono, pneumonia, and eventually, lesions and cancer.

And as always, I was there, victim of routine, cooking and cleaning and taking the abuse, the name-calling and - when he was strong enough - the punching, hating him, seeming to go through life at a reduced speed, slower than most, but never stopping.

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The pillow lay beside me.

I had never stopped blaming him for what had happened. As I cooked and cleaned, I waited for his death with impatience. With fury. With denial. Now, as it loomed closer, I grew terrified.

I still had no place to go. And now I would be alone.

I looked at him. I had given him everything: maid service and meals; my education and my Ph.D.; my years and my life.

And he had given me only one thing.

Now, as he lay there dying, there was one thing I could still take from him, one thing he had to give, one thing that was mine, one thing I

deserved.

His life.

I felt that surge of hate and power that had been missing from that knife so many years ago. Imagine feeling power from a pillow.

The hate coursed through me; it raged, it was terrible and good and strong. AIDS coursed through me, fury coursed through me, and I didn't care, cared about nothing, cared only about striking now, now that I knew he couldn't touch me, couldn't hurt me.

I looked over at him. He had stopped breathing.

He was dead. He had robbed me of this, too.

I tore the sheets off his lifeless body. I pulled his hair, throwing tufts of it around the room. I overturned the night stand. I hurled a lamp. I pitched the mirror to the floor. I ripped at the light on the ceiling. I whirled in a frenzy, falling to the floor, beating the cold hard wood with my tired red fists. I lay there, crying, sobbing, panting, finally ceasing.

I looked around the room. It was a mess. I stood up slowly, and one last sob escaped me. I went over to the bed, tugged at the sheets. I began to make it again.

And then I saw it.

Out of the little broken window, with its curtains fluttering in an unfelt wind, I saw it. Down past the porch, into the backyard, beyond the little tract of woods, I saw it. I knew it was there.

I ran out of the house and to the woods, to the grassy green knoll. I kicked off my shoes along the way, threw off my pants.

I waded in.

The stream was cold, biting my bare legs with its pure clear water. I shivered as I sat in it. It was deeper than it had been in years. I was sure the cold would do me no good.

Of course, it could do me no harm.

I let the water babble against me, running by me. I dipped my hands in and threw it up, high, ducked my head under, feeling wet, feeling cold, feeling water, feeling something, feeling anything.

Somehow, feeling alive.

*Months passed.*

*The Lord stopped.*

*The winds died, the volcanos ceased, the earth stilled. The seraphim and cherubim were silent and confused.*

*The Lord blew the second note, higher in pitch, buzzing in the ears of all who heard it. The sound tattered and rattled the hearts of the angels. Some wept, others looked at their feet, a sight they had never seen before. The wind lagged slowly, blowing scattered plants across the ground. The volcanos belched gasses while the earth shook gently. The trees drooped, and the newly formed animals flicked reptilian tongues slowly over unblinking reptilian lips.*

*Only Michael and Umbriel remained unaffected.*

*“But what is it?” Umbriel asked.*

*Michael’s answer was sad. “It is called guilt.”*

*Being Alive***January 1983**

Jake was gay and in love with Rob Sinclair. That was all he knew as he threw back another glass of the strong punch, feeling its spiciness flush down his throat. "Another drink, Rob?" he asked, bringing the soccer player a glass of the dark brew. Jake smiled when he took the drink with a hazy, lopsided grin. Jake thought Rob was beautiful. He had wild red hair and intense green eyes. His tight jeans artfully displayed the molded flesh of his athletic legs. Jake went to the university soccer games just for those legs, watching them run and kick and move the ball around the field.

"Jake," a voice said to his left. Cecily. Jake had dragged her to the party as his date and cover, though Cecily had no idea why he was really there. Jake had known Cecily for years; they had grown up living across the hall from each other in the same New York City high rise. Though friendly, Jake had never given Cecily a second glance. She didn't have legs like Rob Sinclair.

"Let's go. I'm tired."

"Not yet!" Jake said, a hint of panic etching his voice. "Soon. Promise!" Jake whirled away from her, running smack into Rob's strong chest. "Hi," he said. "Want another drink?"

"Not right now," Rob said thickly. "Thanks anyway - uh, what's your name?"

"Weiss, Jacob Weiss. People call me Jake, though. I'm in your -"

"Yeah, thanks, Weiss, whatever," Rob said, dismissing Jake with a wave of his hand.

*He noticed me!* Jake thought. He sat happily in an armchair, keeping his eyes firmly on Rob's strong legs. Jake began to fantasize about having those legs wrapped around him. "Yeah, Jake," he imagined Rob saying as he kissed him with his unshaven mouth. "I've been wanting to tell you, man, how much I really like having you around." Jake closed his eyes, enjoying the vision.

Just then Jake thought he heard his name. "Weiss, ya know, over there." It was Rob. Rob was pointing at him! Why would he be pointing at him? "Been hanging around....yeah, I know....fucking faggot, probably."

Jake's world fell. "Jake!" Cecily whined. "Can we go now? Please?"

"Yeah, sure," he said numbly. He stared at Cecily's round face and pretty smile. Suddenly he grabbed her and kissed her. "Jake!" she said. "I -"

"Why are you in such a hurry to go, Cecily? Why don't we stay longer," Jake mumbled, looking straight at Rob as he lead Cecily to an

upstairs bedroom.

### **June 1983**

“Here’s to the happy couple!” Dr. Weiss said, raising his glass. “May this be the first of their many years together!” Jake drank to his father’s toast, feeling the warm champagne bubble down his throat. Next to him, Cecily drank sparkling grape juice, her swelling belly filling the white dress she had chosen. Next week Jake would start his new job with Cecily’s father’s firm. He knew nothing about the business, but, as his father told him, “Jacob, getting married and having a baby means adding on new responsibilities. It’s not about you anymore.” Jake put his glass down, smiled at Cecily, and felt his stomach lurch.

### **December 1983**

Keene’s first Christmas. Jake yawned as he made his way through the aisles of the crowded department store. Between his job, night classes, and his new family, Jake had little time for sleep, and even less for himself.

It was all too much for Jake. He tried to love Keene, but he couldn’t understand why he should. He knew Keene was his child, but all Keene did was cry and eat and poop his diapers. Jake just didn’t feel attached to his



son. Cecily - well, when Cecily saw Keene, her face changed, much more than when she ever saw Jake. Jake knew Cecily loved Keene. But he wasn't all that sure he did.

Jake knew what he was doing was wrong. He knew he didn't love Cecily. Some days he couldn't even stand to be in the apartment with her. And even thinking that he didn't love his son made Jake feel terribly guilty. And men! Jake could not stop thinking about men.

"Can I help you?" a clerk asked him, smiling. The clerk had mousy, tousled hair and bright brown eyes; he appeared to be about twenty years old. His smile reminded Jake of Cecily.

"Uh, yeah, sure you can help me. I'm looking for something for - my nephew." Jake wasn't sure why he said that.

"Certainly. How old is your nephew?"

"Umm - a few months. Four."

"Well, he's a little one then, isn't he? Let's see what we can find. Were you thinking of some toys, clothes, or what?"

Jake shrugged. "Both, I guess."

"Both!" The clerk was still smiling. "Careful, you'll spoil him. Then again," the clerk said, nudging Jake in his ribs, "that's what uncles do, right?"

A half-hour later Jake's shopping was complete. "Is there anything else I can help you with?" the clerk asked.

Jake was about to say no, then hesitated. "Actually, there is. I was just going to go get some dinner, but I have to eat alone. I hate eating alone. You wouldn't want to join me, would you? You've been such a help. I don't know what I would have done without you. I would like to repay your kindness." Jake knew he was babbling, but his churning stomach made it hard to hide the desperation in his voice.

The clerk smiled. "Sure," he said. "I have a break coming up. Give me a minute."

"Well, I got to make a quick call first," Jake said. "How about if I meet you at the fountain in five minutes?"

"Sounds great." The clerk turned to go. "By the way," he said, turning back, "my name's Chris."

Jake extended his hand. "Hi, Chris, nice to meet you."

Chris waited expectantly. "And you are - "

Jake swallowed. "Tom," he said.

**January 1985**

The divorce had been amicable. After his fling with the department

store clerk, Jake had come home crying. He stepped into the shower and for an hour, as hot water poured over his lanky limbs, he vowed never to do it again.

Six months later, after his second straight night with a college admissions counselor, Jake had come home crying again, and, between sobs, told Cecily the truth. It was two days before their first anniversary. Cecily was neither surprised nor disappointed. Calmly, she told Jake she understood, but was firm that she was to have custody of Keene.

Jake was relieved she took him. When Cecily and Keene, all of ten months old, had packed off for her parents' winter home in California, Jake felt calm. But his stomach was still for only one day. Jake soon discovered Cecily and Keene's departure could not erase the guilt he felt for betraying them.

Now, six months later, he was in Miami, preparing to return to school full-time. He had left New York purposefully, getting as far from all aspects of his former life as he could. The day was sunny and warm. Jake felt sweat bead on his forehead as he walked into the campus bookstore. He headed for the psychology section, his new major. At age twenty-two, he reflected, he was starting over when most people seemed to be starting for the first time.

June 1993

*Happy Birthday dearest*, the card read in her elegant handwriting. And underneath, in his sloppy cursive scrawl, *Happy B-Day Dad! The Big 3-0!*

Thirty. Jake sighed as he put the card back in his suitcase and pulled out the ticket that had accompanied it. He remembered his father's thirtieth birthday. Jake had been ten, and he had discovered a horrifying thing: his father's bald spot. To a ten-year-old boy who believed his father a superman, a bald spot was a clearcut sign of old age.

Thirty. It felt old. Jake even had the same name as his father now. "This way, Dr. Weiss," the bellhop said as he led Jake to his cabin somewhere in the great ship's mid-decks.

Jake had balked at the cruise. Cruises, he thought, were for honeymooners and old people. Not single gay men. "Jake," Cecily had said, "you need this cruise. You need a break. All of Miami's depressed and repressed will be fine for a week without their favorite psychiatrist."

"Funny, Cecily, funny," Jake murmured, realizing with a sinking stomach that he was going to lose this argument.

"Keene and I thought long and hard about what to get you for your

birthday. This is what we decided.”

“Where is Keene? Can I speak to him?”

“He’s at a ball game with the Oldfields. He’ll be home late. He’s getting awfully adult now, Jake. He won’t let me give him a kiss when I drop him off at school anymore.”

Jake laughed. “He’s almost ten, Cecily, practically a man.” Jake paused. “Are we getting old, Cecily?”

Cecily paused. “You are. I’m not. That’s why you should go on this cruise.”

“Sir?” the bellhop said, bringing Jake back to the moment. “Yes?” Jake said, feeling foolish when he saw the young man’s upturned hand. “Oh,” he stammered, digging through his pocket for some money. The bellhop left, happy, and Jake turned to unpack and dress for dinner. After all, he mused, knowing Cecily, he was going to be having dinner with the captain every night.

Jake had only been on board for a few hours, but he already hated the cruise. Dinner had been a bore. He was seated next to an elderly couple from New Jersey (“Have you ever been to Paramus Mall?” the woman asked of every guest at the table) and a pair of honeymooners from Tulsa.

All the happy couples around him made Jake feel that much more single and alone.

After dinner, he avoided the crowded casino and dance floors, instead wandering the ship, walking in and out of lounges, theaters, shops, even a library. Rounding a corner, Jake found himself in a gym. In the corner, a lone man was busy working out with a set of very heavy-looking barbells. Jake's eyes went wide at the sight of the man. His T-shirt could barely cover the muscles of his chest; thick, strong legs protruded from a small pair of blue shorts. Jake smiled at the sight, and turned to go.

"Hey! Wait a sec!" a deep voice said. Jake turned to see the gym hunk walking toward him, a white towel draped over his broad shoulders. He was even better-looking up close, his blue eyes gleaming under close-cropped locks of reddish-blond hair. He couldn't have been more than twenty. "Can I help you?" he said eagerly, and Jake saw by his T-shirt that he worked for the cruise line.

"No, thanks," Jake said, smiling. "I was just wandering the ship. I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"No problem," the hunk said. "I'm here to be interrupted. As you can see," he added, "it gets a little dull here at night." The hunk extended a hand. "Todd Miller, ship's physical trainer."

Jake shook Todd's hand. "Jake Weiss."

"You work out, Jake?"

Jake smiled, somewhat embarrassed. "Uh, no, actually. I don't have the time. I'm a psychiatrist," he added, immediately feeling stupid for saying it.

"Well, there's no time like the present to start," Todd said easily.

Jake looked down at his suit. "I'm hardly dressed for it."

Todd waved a hand dismissively. "We just need to assess your fitness level first. Then we'll set you up on a work-out plan. Sounds good, right?"

"Sure," Jake said. "How about sometime tomorrow?"

"Great!" Todd brightened. "We open here at 6:00. I get here at noon."

"I'll come in at noon, then," Jake said, staring straight into Todd's eyes. Was it his imagination, or did Jake see a small blush creep across Todd's cheeks?

"Cool." Todd sat down on a weight bench, taking a swig out of a plastic water bottle. "Have a seat, if you like," he added, indicating another bench. Jake sat. "Are you having a good time on the cruise?"

"Yes. Well, not really. Not a lot of people my age, it seems."

Todd nodded knowingly. "Yeah, I suppose most of the young people

here are working, not cruising.” He paused. “So you’re a psychiatrist?  
Sounds exciting.”

Jake smiled. “Not really. Sounds pretentious. At least the way I said  
it.”

“Not at all! It was fine, really.”

“Thanks,” Jake said, smiling again.

“Where are you from?”

“Miami. Well, New York originally, but I live in Miami now.”

“Me, too. I go to school at the U. This is my summer job.” Todd  
paused. “You married?”

Jake shook his head. “No. I was once, briefly, but we had a big  
problem. We both liked men.”

Todd started. “Oh,” he said.

“I hope that’s not a problem?”

“No! Not at all! I - I like guys, too. God! It’s never easy to say that. It  
just sounds weird. ‘I like guys, too.’ I mean, why shouldn’t I? But I still  
have to say it to everybody. It’s a pain, is all. I’m sorry,” he laughed, “I  
know I’m just going on and not saying anything at all.”

Jake shrugged. “You said what I hoped to hear.”

Now Todd did blush. Jake continued. “I know this is forward, but



when you finish work, if you'd like to get a drink or something, that would be nice."

"Sure," Todd said. "Sounds great." And they both smiled.

"I don't normally do this," Todd said later after they had made love in Jake's cabin. "I just want you to know I don't normally do this." They were lying together on Jake's small bed. Jake marvelled at Todd's strong presence; it filled the room. Jake could not stop himself from touching Todd's chest or kissing his skin for the one hundredth time.

"It's just -" Todd took a deep breath. "Oh, never mind," he said.

"What is it? What do you want to tell me?"

"It's nothing, really. It's stupid."

Jake persisted. "You can tell me. I - I want to hear it."

"Do you? Really?"

"Yeah."

Todd's voice was a whisper. Jake almost thought he could hear a tear in his voice. "I like you, Jake. I don't know why, really, I just do. You're different. I just feel - easy, comfortable with you. It's easy with you. Shit. I can't explain it. I mean I just saw you and - oh, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm just screwing things up. I'm sorry. I had a really good time

tonight.” Todd stood and started dressing himself. Jake watched him from the bed. “Jake, you’re a great guy, and well, I’m just feeling these things, but they’ll go away. Thanks for being nice. You probably think I’m nuts or something. Like one of your patients. I’m sorry. I should go. I just wanted you to know.” Todd kissed Jake on the cheek. He felt a drop of water caress his mouth. “Bye,” Todd whispered, turning to leave.

“Wait.” A tremor filled Jake’s voice. “I think I love you, too,” he said, pulling Todd close to him, stroking his hair as Todd wept on his shoulder.

## July 1993

Todd watched the sun dip below the tops of the neighbor’s palm trees. He was grateful for the relief from the intense glare, but he worried at the hour. Jake was usually home by now. What was keeping him?

Todd took the moment to reflect on the past month. So much had happened since the night he had met Jake on the boat, including Todd leaving the ship and moving in with Jake. Everything had been perfect - almost too perfect, he thought ruefully.

Todd paused to swat at a fly. I’m just jumpy, he thought to himself. Waiting for the other shoe to fall. Why can’t I just be happy?

Because it was crazy. Crazy to be so in love with a man he had

known for only one month. Crazy to think that somehow, it would all work out.

A car sounded in the driveway. Todd began to walk back toward his and Jake's house. *His and Jake's*. He met Jake in the kitchen. Without a word, Jake embraced Todd and kissed him forcefully, pushing him against the counter and squeezing him tightly. "I missed you," he said softly.

Todd smiled. "That's quite a welcome," he said, kissing Jake back.

## December 1993

"No, Cecily, it's not that at all. It's just our first Christmas together. I know I promised last year that Keene could come to Miami. Cecily, really - I know that! Come on, you're not being fair. I'll make it up to him, I promise. It's - it'll just be easier this way. It's only this one time! Oh, thanks a lot, Cecily. What? Sure. Put him on.

"Hi Keene. It's Dad. I'm fine. I miss you, too. I can't believe it's been a whole year either! Well, son, I've got to go. Besides, I think your mom wants to talk to you. What? Oh. Yeah, I love you too, Keene. Okay. Bye-bye."

"Who's that?" Todd asked, walking into the kitchen.

Jake shook his head. "Nothing important," he said, putting his arms

around Todd and burying his face in Todd's shoulder.

## June 1995

Both Todd and Jake felt their stomachs lurch as the plane landed in San Diego. Yet it wasn't the flight that bothered them. Todd was nervous about meeting Keene for the first time. He was desperate to make a good impression. Jake was also nervous about seeing his son. He hadn't seen Keene or Cecily in over two years. The old familiar guilt crept slowly into Jake's mind. Every trip to California was excruciating for him. Would his son want to see him? Would he be angry? As the plane skidded to a halt on the runway, Jake took Todd's hand and gave it a gentle but firm squeeze.

Cecily at thirty-two proved to be a plain but effusive woman. "You look great," Jake said as the two embraced in the airport. "And this," he added, putting his hand on Todd's back, "is Todd."

Todd looked at Cecily and smiled. He suddenly felt shy. "It's nice to meet you," he mumbled, extending a hand. Cecily laughed gaily and grabbed him. "A hug please. After all, we've both been married to the same man!"

"I told you he was shy," Jake ventured.

“Yes,” Cecily responded. “You did. But he’s so handsome! If only I could do half as well.”

“How about if I go get the bags?” Todd said, starting off without an answer.

“Where’s Keene?” Jake asked.

“At a ball game. He’s very serious about his baseball, for a twelve-year-old.”

Jake smiled. “And I bet he’s the star pitcher, too.”

Cecily laughed, linking her arm with Jake’s. “Spoken like a father,” she said as they both quickened their pace to catch up with Todd.

Dinner was a sumptuous affair of fresh cod and summer vegetables. Todd offered to help with the dishes, but Cecily waved him off. “Nonsense,” she said. “Why don’t you go outside with Keene? Jake and I can handle the dishes.”

“Really, I’d like to help. I insist.”

Cecily shook her head. “Nothing doing. Don’t argue with me - you’ll never win.”

Jake laughed. “That’s true, Todd. Better run along.”

Todd walked out of the French doors and onto the porch. Keene was

busy trying to hit a ball with a bat. He kept throwing the ball up, only to miss as it dropped back down.

Todd was astounded at how much Keene looked like Jake. He could see that Keene was going to have the same lanky build and dark, wavy hair. He'd inherited his mother's blue eyes, though, and her round face.

"Hey," he called out after Keene missed the ball again. "Need a hand?" He could hear the huddled voices in the kitchen die to a minimum. "I could toss you the ball, maybe show you a few batting pointers," he said cautiously. "I used to be pretty good at this game."

"No," came the stubborn voice which, to Todd's surprise, sounded a lot like Jake's. "I don't want your help! Leave me alone!" Abandoning his bat, Keene fled around the corner of the house. Todd sighed and returned to the porch. The voices in the kitchen continued, a little louder now.

## June 1997

Todd glanced out the window as rain pelted the glass pane in front of him. Lightning zig-zagged across the sky as thunder shook the house. He grabbed an umbrella and his car keys before streaking out the door.

Despite the rain, it was already unbearably hot in Miami.

Perspiration clung to Todd's brow. The rain was not refreshing; it only

made him feel grimier. Jumping into the car, Todd cranked the air conditioning before heading towards the train station.

He still couldn't believe Cecily was dead. He remembered seeing the news of the plane crash on television, but never imagined that anyone he knew was on board. Cecily. He remembered the first time he had met her, and the big hug she'd given him. It was the only time they had hugged, but he could still remember her light, flowery perfume and earnest squeeze. Since then, they'd become friends of a sort, oftentalking on the phone. The two would sometimes gang up on Jake, especially on matters concerning Keene. These matters were never serious, but it allowed Todd to feel more like a part of the family. He had come to appreciate her good advice and earthy sense of humor.

And now she was dead.

Jake's train would be at the station in an hour. He had been gone for a week, flying to San Diego for the funeral, closing Cecily's house and affairs before bringing Keene back to Miami by train. Keene refused to fly. Couldn't blame the kid, Todd mused. He didn't feel much like flying right now himself.

I should have gone, Todd thought. They had planned on Todd joining Jake after a few days, but then Jake had called from California. They

talked, and decided it was a good idea for Todd not to come.

It was because of Keene, Todd knew, though Jake tried to tell him otherwise. Why else would Jake not want him to come?

Keene was to live with them now. Todd didn't like that idea, but he kept silent. Truth be told, Keene had nowhere else to go. And he should be with his father.

Todd shook his head as he pulled into the Amtrak station. Things would change, that he knew. How much, he couldn't say. But it made him uneasy. He knew that Keene, especially now, after his mother's death, would need all of Jake's attention. And Jake would need Todd.

And what about me? Todd thought as he watched Jake and Keene alight from the train and start walking towards him. Todd ran forward to grab Keene's largest suitcase.

## July 1997

Keene had been here one month and hated every minute of it. He hated Florida, hated his father's house, hated having to leave his friends and life and mother behind in California.

He moped in his small bedroom. It was sparsely decorated, with only a small bed and a cherry-stained desk. The carpeting was thick and always



gave Keene a shock when he touched the doorknob. The only color breaking the beige-colored wallpaper was a small, framed photo of Keene and both his parents that his dad had put up a couple of weeks ago.

Most of the time, Keene forgot his mother was dead. It just seemed as if he was on a long, boring trip to Miami, and that soon, he would take a plane and be back home, where he belonged. But then he would see his dad's face, trying to be strong, and know that he was stuck here.

It was raining again. Todd had said that in the summer, it rains every day in the late afternoon. Another day almost over. Todd kept telling Keene that things would be better when school started. And it would be his first year in high school. Isn't that exciting? Keene could hear him saying. And then he would offer to take him shopping for sneakers or school clothes, or make him a tuna-salad sandwich.

Keene knew he wasn't very nice to Todd. Mostly he ignored him, or glared at him before running off to his room. Keene knew it wasn't right, but he was so sick of Todd trying to do things for him. He just wanted to be left alone. Or spending time with his dad. Jake was the only person who made him feel a little less alone.

Keene headed downstairs for dinner. He paused by the landing. "I'm sorry," he heard Jake saying to Todd. "I'm just so worried about Keene."

“Keene will be fine. He’s a strong kid. He’s just still in shock is all.”

Jake sighed. “It’s not even that. It’s just that - well -”

“What is it?”

Jake swallowed. “I don’t know how to be a father.”

“Sure you do, you’re a good father. You love your son very much.”

Jake shook his head. “You don’t know. You don’t know what I’ve put him through.” He looked at Todd, but a blank expression met his gaze.

“How many times have I seen him over the past ten years? Four? I’m his father.” Jake paused. “When I married Cecily, I knew I was gay.”

Todd shrugged. “So?”

“Don’t you get it? I’ve been fucking that kid’s life up since day one. Now all of a sudden I’m supposed to be a father!”

“Just love him, Jake. That’s what he needs from you.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It is easy.”

“No, it’s not! I don’t even know him. I don’t know what he likes, what he dislikes, anything about him! How can I love someone I don’t know!”

Todd stared at Jake. “Of course you love him.” He paused. “What’s really going on?”

Jake turned his eyes to the floor. “I think we should send Keene

away to boarding school.”

“Send him away! Jake, that’s the last thing he needs.”

“Well, I don’t know what else to do.”

“Be his father, for Chrissakes!”

“I - I don’t know how.”

“Well, you better figure it out pretty quick. That kid needs you. He needs his dad. He doesn’t need some boarding school. Jake, look at me. Look at me. My father left when I was four. Never called, never wrote or anything. Maybe he was scared too. Maybe he felt guilty. Maybe he didn’t give a shit. I don’t know. All I do know was that I really wanted my dad to be there. I didn’t care how; just being there would have been enough.” Keene could hear his father crying. “I know you’re scared. I know you feel bad over the kind of father you’ve been. Well, stop thinking about yourself. That boy needs whatever you can give him.”

Keene coughed before coming down the stairs.

“Hi,” Todd said, trying to sound bright while Jake wiped away one last tear. “What do you want for dinner, huh?”

Keene shrugged. “Not hungry.”

“Hey,” Jake said, his voice still a little shaky. “How about we go get some fast food, huh? We’ll be bad this one time, just you and me. Sound

good?"

Keene mulled it over. "Okay, sure."

Jake stood up. "Just let me get an umbrella." He left the room. Keene stared at Todd in silence. "Let's go," Jake said, ushering him out the front door.

## December 1997

One thing Keene liked about his dad being Jewish was that he got out of school early for the Christmas break. Today was his last day, when the other students would have to go for two more days.

He waited at the front of the school for his dad to pick him up. He was doing well in school, but even after five months he still felt like the new kid. And high school was different. The other kids all seemed so much bigger and older. He didn't have any friends, not really. He wasn't playing baseball anymore. Most people just thought of him as the quiet kid in the back of the class.

"Hey, Jew boy," a nasal voice said. It was Will Belanger, one of Keene's classmates. Will was a popular athlete who had never spoken to Keene before. "Think you're pretty cool, don't ya? Getting out early and all."

“No,” Keene mumbled while Will’s friends Scott and Tony joined him. All three were on the school’s football squad, and Keene suddenly felt very small.

“Is that why you have such a weird-ass name, anyway? Cause you’re Jewish?” asked Scott with a sneer.

“No. It’s just what my mom named me.”

“Your mom. She’d be a Jew-ess, right?” All three of them laughed.

“My mom isn’t Jewish,” Keene said, his face flushing red.

“Aw, so then you’re some kind of half-breed, then, Jew boy? I don’t think so. He looks like a little Jew boy to me, don’t he, guys?”

“Leave me alone, Will.”

“Leave you alone, little Jew-boy? I don’t think so.” Will and his friends each pressed around Keene, cutting off any escape. “No, I don’t think so. See, you prance around like some little faggot Jew-boy who thinks he’s better than all the rest of us. That’s why you don’t talk to anyone. You think you’re better than us. Isn’t that right, Jew-boy?” Will sneered, balling his fists. Keene paused for one moment before making a desperate attempt at escape. He didn’t get anywhere. Strong hands grabbed him and pinned his arms to his side. “Maybe we got to teach you a little lesson, Jew-boy,” Will said, spitting in Keene’s face. Keene kicked his

feet at Will, but Will blocked them with his arm. "Now I know we got to teach you a lesson."

"Leave him alone!" a deep voice thundered from behind the group of boys. Afraid it was a teacher, the boys separated, dropping Keene to the ground. When they saw the speaker was a guy only a few years older than them, though, their cockiness returned. "Listen, dick-bite," Will ventured, "this isn't any of your business. Why don't you get lost."

"It is my business," said the guy. Now that he was closer, Will and his friends could see he was well-muscled. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes, making him seem more intimidating. "Why don't you three get lost instead, huh?"

Will sneered. Even if the guy was big, he wasn't going to show how scared he was. "Make me," he said. "Make us."

The guy glared at the three bullies from behind his sunglasses. "C'mon, Keene," the guy said. "Let's go." Keene stood up to go, but Will pushed him back to the ground. "He's not going anywhere," Will said.

"What are you going to do," said the big guy. "Jump me like you did him? There's three of you and one of him. Real brave guys you are."

Will sneered. "You're pissing me off, asshole," he said. He and his friends moved between Keene and the guy.

The guy took a deep breath. "Last chance, guys." Before he could say another word, Will let out a yell and jumped the guy. His friends were right behind him.

It was over in eight seconds. While Will and his friends lay sprawled on the ground, the guy walked over them and helped Keene to his feet. "Let's go," he said. Before he left, the guy stooped in front of Will and grabbed him roughly by the collar. He took off his sunglasses and bore his ice-blue eyes into Will's. "And if you ever fuck with my friend again," he said, "I'll be back."

"Are you okay?" Todd asked Keene when they returned to the car. Keene nodded. "I can't believe you did that," he said.

Todd blanched. "Are you mad at me?"

"Mad? Are you kidding? You were awesome!" For the first time, Keene gave Todd a genuine grin.

"Yeah? What was that all about, anyway?"

Keene's eyes went to the floor. "They were picking on me cause I'm missing school."

"For Hanukkah?" Keene nodded. "They were picking on you because your dad is Jewish?" Todd sounded incredulous. "God, what jerks. I thought - well, you know, that they were teasing you because - of your dad and

me.”

Keene shook his head. “No one at school knows about that.”

“Oh. Well, I mean, that’s what I figured.”

They drove in silence. “I don’t mind, you know,” Keene said.

“Mind what?”

“You know. About you and Dad. I - I don’t mind. It’s okay with me.”

“Oh. Well, cool.”

“Can you do me a favor?” Keene asked Todd.

Todd looked over at Keene for an instant. “What is it?”

“Don’t tell Dad about what happened today. He’d just freak, and nothing really happened, so -”

Todd nodded. “It’s a good idea. It would just worry your father. Besides, I don’t think Jake would approve of me beating up high school students.”

“They started it. You were only defending yourself. And me. You were so awesome, though! What was that, karate or something?”

Todd smiled. “Judo, actually. That’s where I go every Tuesday night. I teach judo.”

“Oh.” Keene sighed. “I probably should have known that.”

“That’s okay.” With a shy smile, Todd reached over and ruffled



Keene's hair.

"Can you teach me?"

"Judo? Sure. It's great for defense, in case you ever get in another situation like that again. It'll also help you get into shape, build some muscle on your frame. You're too skinny, just like your father."

"Cool," Keene said, leaning back on the chair and closing his eyes.

## June 1999

Even when the sun went down it was still hot. Sweat clung to his t-shirt as Keene clambered up the willow tree growing in the backyard. He climbed the tree until he reached a comfortable perch, turning his eyes to the box of light emanating from the back of the house.

Keene could see Todd undressing. Jake was gone, spending the week at a conference in Atlanta. As Todd took off his t-shirt Keene marvelled at his strong limbs and broad chest. His muscles clung tightly to his large frame while his shoulders blocked the light from the window. He stooped to remove his slacks, revealing an ordinary pair of white underwear.

Todd moved absently around the room, slipping his hands down the front of his shorts to scratch, completely unaware he was being watched. Now he removed them. Keene gasped at the sight. He watched as Todd

began to slowly stroke himself, lazily enjoying his own caresses. He sat on the edge of the bed and Keene could only see his shoulders, hunched in concentration, and his face, creasing slowly with effort and distraction. He could see the shoulders moving up and down, up and down, while the face turned red from exertion. Suddenly his face exploded, clenching tightly for an instant before slackening into a mask of relaxation.

As Keene stirred to move out of the tree, he discovered his own hand was wet. He felt a sticky spot on his shorts and realized he was panting heavily into the sultry night air.

July 1999

“C’mon, Dad,” Keene implored, his elbows bent and his chin on his hands. “Please!”

“Yeah, c’mon, Dad,” Todd mimicked, striking the identical pose.

“Pretty please!”

Jake threw up his hands. “I give up.”

“Yeah!” Todd and Keene exclaimed, exchanging a high-five.

“This is gonna be so cool!” Keene said.

“Just remember,” Jake intoned, “half of the money you make goes into your college fund.”

“Yes, Dad,” Keene said, then, grinning, added, “and the other half goes for a car!” He gave Jake an impromptu hug before running out of the room.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Jake asked Todd.

“Absolutely.”

Jake eyed his lover critically. “And they really need a new assistant down at the television station?”

Todd’s smile revealed the truth. “That’s what I thought,” Jake said.

Todd put his arms around Jake. “Relax. The station can afford it. And we can always use another hand. Every sixteen-year-old should have a part-time job. It’ll be fun. And educational. Right?” He kissed Jake lightly on the lips.

Jake sighed and rubbed Todd’s forearm. “Do I ever win these arguments anymore?”

“Nope.” Todd grinned and playfully punched Jake’s chest. “Then again, you never did.”

“He’s growing fast, isn’t he? Pretty soon it’ll all be dating, girls, proms.”

Todd smiled laughingly. “You really think so? The girls, I mean?”

Jake’s eyes narrowed. “What? You mean, you think he’s gay?”

“A regular chip off the old block.”

Jake leaned forward. "Did he tell you?"

"Not in so many words, but, you know - I just read between the lines."

"Wow." Jake sat back, slightly dazed. "Are you sure about this?"

Todd shrugged. "We'll find out sooner or later," he said, snuggling back into Jake's arms.

## June 2001

"Smile!" Todd snapped a picture of Keene and Jake in the hot afternoon sun.

"Now one of you two!" Jake called out as he ran to switch places with Todd.

"Dad!" Keene said exasperated. "This robe is getting hot! Can't we go back inside?"

"In a minute," he said, taking a picture. "One more!"

"Malcolm, save me!" Keene said.

A dark young man on the porch laughed. "Sorry, babe," he said.

"You're on your own. Don't expect me to cross your father."

"Thank you, Malcolm," Jake said. He turned back to Keene. "Hey, it's not every day my son graduates from high school."

“Well, if I can’t get out of this hot robe soon, you won’t have a son anymore! I’ll just melt in the backyard on your azaleas!”

“They’re my azaleas,” Todd said, grinning. “Jake, you’re forgetting to turn off the flash.”

“Thanks. Hold still.”

The camera clicked. “Thank God.” Keene climbed onto the back porch and pulling his robe over his head. “Ahhh, air conditioning,” he said, feeling a cool blast breezing in from the kitchen. He slid his arm around Malcolm’s waist. “Let’s go inside,” he said, leading his boyfriend into the house.

Jake watched his son disappear into the house. He liked Malcolm. When Keene had come home from the station talking about nothing except the new intern, Jake had to admit he was - concerned. But Malcolm proved to be charming, courteous, and devoted to Keene. Still, Jake mused, to see Keene with a boyfriend - well, it made Jake feel -

“Old,” he said aloud. “Were we ever that young?” he continued, watching his son wistfully. Todd clapped Jake on the shoulder. “I still am,” he said. “But you, no, you never were.” They laughed as they walked arm-in-arm back into the house.

July 2001

Malcolm stood awkwardly in his black suit. Even indoors, with the air conditioning turned on high, he still felt hot and uncomfortable.

He was unsure what to do now. He wanted to comfort Keene, but he couldn't find him anywhere. He had disappeared after the service. All during the funeral Keene hadn't moved at all, except to turn furtively to glance at Todd sitting beside him.

Next to him, Malcolm could hear Jake's lawyer talking quietly to Todd. "I wouldn't do this now, but there is a question of guardianship. He's not eighteen for a few more months, and the courts need a name. According to Dr. Weiss' will, that would be you, but there could be complications." Todd nodded numbly while the lawyer continued.

He doesn't need a guardian! Malcolm wanted to shout. He needs his dad! But Jake wasn't there; he was lying in the box that had been in front of Malcolm all morning.

Malcolm had been at the house when the police arrived. It was the lights he had noticed first, the red and blue flashes across the wall. Todd sprang up quickly and raced to the door, as if he had been expecting the police all night. Malcolm could only sit and stare as the cop told Todd about the drunk driver.

Todd was stunned; Malcolm wasn't even sure he breathed for the

first few minutes. Keene shut down instantly, and for the first night he looked more thirteen than eighteen. Malcolm shuttled back and forth between Todd and Keene, trying to comfort, trying to console. But neither spoke, nor moved, nor wept, and the house was filled with a stony, unbearable quiet. Malcolm turned on all the televisions in the house just to cut through the silence. It didn't help.

Now, Keene was gone. Todd still had the same expression on his face as he had that night. And Malcolm wasn't sure it would ever go away.

## December 2001

As Malcolm came through the front door he heard someone crying. Slowly, he crept up the stairs and could hear Todd sobbing through a closed bedroom door. It was like this every weekend. During the week, it seemed as if Todd was functioning, going through the motions of living. And every weekend Malcolm came to the house he could hear Todd weeping for Jake to come back to him. Malcolm crept slowly back down the stairs.

Keene was in the lowest branch of the willow tree, staring absently at the winter sun. He saw Malcolm approach, but didn't smile. Malcolm kissed him lightly on his cheek.

“Hi, babe,” Malcolm said. “How are you?” Keene didn’t answer.

Malcolm took his hand and stood next to the tree. “They’re up there, you know,” Keene said after a while, absently. “Mom and Dad. They’re up there. I don’t have a Mom and Dad anymore.”

“Oh, baby,” Malcolm said, squeezing Keene’s hand. “You must be feeling all alone.”

Keene gazed at Malcolm. “But I’m not alone,” he said evenly. “I have Todd.” He paused. “Listen.”

Malcolm listened. “I don’t hear anything.”

Keene smiled faintly. “I do. Todd. I know he’s crying.” Keene turned to look at Malcolm. “I’m not alone. But he is.”

Malcolm dropped Keene’s hand. “I love you,” he whispered.

Keene looked at Malcolm sadly. “I know you do.”

Malcolm sighed and turned his eyes downwards. He saw a lone black ant crawling up the trunk of the tree. “You love him, don’t you?”

Keene nodded once, slowly. “What are you going to do?” Malcolm asked. “What can you do?”

Keene shrugged. “Do I betray my dad? I loved him, too, and mom. I loved them all. I love them all. Why is it so wrong to love?”

“It isn’t, baby. It isn’t wrong to love.” Malcolm paused. “I wish you



loved me.”

Keene grabbed Malcolm’s hand in his. “Me, too,” he said. “Me, too.”

## January 2002

Keene was preparing scrambled eggs. The first batch had turned out too dry. He hoped these turned out fine, because there were no more eggs left in the refrigerator.

Todd sat at the kitchen table. His eyes were still vacant of life, but he had ceased the endless nights of tears. He was worn and numb, and sitting solemnly at the kitchen table, Keene saw the defeated hunch in his shoulders.

Keene set the eggs on the stove and sat opposite Todd. “Hey,” he said gently, taking his hands and squeezing them gently.

Todd slowly looked up at Keene. “How?” he asked hoarsely. “How can you do it?”

Keene was puzzled. “Do what?”

“Sit there,” Todd said. “Sit there and pretend as if nothing happened.”

“Todd,” Keene said slowly, “I’m not doing that. But we can’t spend the rest of our lives mourning.”

“Why!” Todd said loudly, slamming his hand to the table. “Why the

fuck not!”

“Todd.” Keene took Todd’s hands in his again. “Look at me.” He did. “We will get through this. I promise. Things will get better. I am not going to leave you.” He paused. “I love you.”

Todd sniffled once, then twice. A strange sound escaped his mouth. “Your father,” he said finally, “would be very proud of you.” He paused, sniffing the air. “What’s that smell?” he asked.

“The eggs!” Keene said, racing for the stove.

**June 2002**

“Oh my God,” Todd said, falling back on the bed with a *whoomph!* “Where do you get your energy from? I’m exhausted!”

“I can’t help it,” Keene said grinning, sliding slowly onto the other bed in the room. “How many years have I been in Florida? Five? And I’ve never been to Disney World before! This is so fun!”

“Hey now,” Todd said, waving a mischievous finger at Keene, “I offered to take you to Disney World years ago.”

“Yeah, but I was a teen-ager then. I didn’t want to do anything.”

Todd’s laughter died down. He sighed. “I’m glad we did this. This has been fun. Too bad we have to go home tomorrow.”

Keene shrugged. "We'll come back, sometime." He paused. "Did you ever come here with my dad?" he asked cautiously.

Todd smiled ruefully. "No. No, we never made it here."

"Then this is our place." He sat on the bed Todd was lying on. Todd rolled onto his stomach. Keene began to knead his shoulders.

"Ah," Todd said, "that feels good. After the way you've run me ragged, I've got some very stiff muscles."

"I can tell," Keene said. He continued to rub Todd's shoulders.

The two sat in silence for a while. "It's been a tough year."

"Yes. You could say that."

"You've been wonderful, really. I could never have done it without you. If it wasn't for you, well - I don't think I'd even still be here."

"Let's not talk about it."

"No." Todd sat up and faced Keene. "I want to, really. You - I just can't thank you enough." Todd smiled gently. "You know, for a while there, I was your guardian. But it was you taking care of me, wasn't it?"

"Well, I just didn't want you to take advantage of being my guardian. You could have sent me away or something," Keene joked lamely.

Todd grew serious. "I would never do that," he said looking Keene squarely in his eyes. "You know," he mused, "you really do have your

mother's eyes. When I look right into them, I see nothing of your father."

"Is that good or bad?" Keene asked quietly.

Todd smiled. "They're beautiful eyes."

Keene kissed Todd.

The kiss was sweet - nice - long and short. In the three second span Keene felt his stomach flip and settle again. In those three seconds, Keene felt Todd's strength flow into him, felt his strong hand on the back of his neck. In those three seconds, Keene felt his world change.

Then Todd broke away.

He had a look of panic on his face. "We shouldn't have done that." He tried to get off the bed, but Keene held his hand.

"Todd," he began, but stopped when he saw the fear in Todd's eyes.

"Please," Keene said simply. "I love you."

"No," Todd said, freeing himself from Keene's grasp. He moved towards the door. "This is not happening."

"It is happening!" Keene said desperately. "Please, Todd, don't do this."

"Keene, this is wrong."

"Wrong? It's wrong? I love you. I've always loved you. From that first moment when you stood up for me that day in school -"

“Oh, God.”

“Listen to me! You stood up for me! No one had done that before! And no one ever has! You’ve always stood up for me! Even to dad, you stood up for me!”

Todd held his hands up in front of him. “Keene, listen to me -”

“No, Todd, listen to me. Please. You loved my dad. I know. So did I. I know I can’t replace him. I don’t want to! I just want to be with you!”

Keene paused. “You love me. You know you do.”

“I love you like - a brother! That’s all.”

“Oh, now you’re lying to me. That’s the first time you’ve ever lied to me. You were dead six months ago. Dead! And I breathed life into you. Not because I’m your brother! But because I’m a part of you. You once asked me how I could go on, how I could wake up in the morning, how I could survive without dad. Well, I could do all that because I had you! Because you needed me! And I needed you!” Keene moved closer to Todd. “Mom and Dad are gone. I loved them. Still do. But I need you now. And you need me.” Keene paused. “Search your heart. You know you love me, too.”

Todd shook his head wildly. “You’re wrong.”

“You know I’m right.”

“Fine! Fine, you’re right! Happy? It doesn’t change anything!”

Keene sighed. "It changes everything."

Todd opened the door. "He was your father, for Chrissakes! And I loved him!" he said, slamming the door.

July 2002

Todd wiped dirt off the grave of his lover. "I know I haven't been coming here as much as I used to," he began. "Sorry for that. I've had stuff on my mind. I guess I came here today looking for an answer. I'm not going to get one though, am I?" Todd peered at the grave, as if waiting for a response. "Jake," he said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper, "help me. What do I do? Jake, I love your son. I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen." Todd knelt in front of the grave. Tears streamed down his cheek. "No. None of that," he said, wiping the tears from his face. "I've done enough of that to last me a lifetime." He stood again. "What do I do, Jake? You're the one who taught me to say what's in my heart. Do I do it again?"

Todd heard a branch break behind him. Keene stood there. Todd had hardly said a word to him for a month, and now he felt guilty for the way he had been acting.

"Keene -" he began, but Keene interrupted him. "I didn't come here to see you," he said. He crouched in front of the grave. "Dad, I need to talk

to you. I love Todd. I didn't mean for it to happen. I didn't even know it, really, until just a while ago, after you left us. It was weird. I was really sad you were gone, but I also wanted to protect him, you know? Save him from his pain. Is that how it was for you?" He paused before continuing. "I probably should feel bad for coming here like this. But I don't. I'm not ashamed of how I feel. I don't think you'd want me to be. And, dad, I need your help. You see, I think Todd loves me, too. And, well - I need you to let him go for me, Dad. You had your time with him, but you're gone now. I love him, Dad. You'd want us to be happy, wouldn't you?"

"Keene -" Todd began, but Keene continued without hearing him.

"We're a family still, Dad. You'd be proud. But we're alive, Dad, and I need him now like you had him then. I know it's selfish, but that's the way it has to be. So please, Dad, let him go. He deserves to be free and happy."

Keene paused. "So do I."

Todd waited a moment before speaking. "Are you done?"

Keene rose to his feet. "Yes," he said, wiping the grass off of his knees.

"Good." Without another word, he grabbed Keene and kissed him.

"What?" Keene started.

"Look," Todd interrupted, "I know it's not going to be easy. But - I

want to try. I want to work at it. It was just hard, you know? It felt like I was cheating on your father. And with his son! But Jake would want us to be happy. He'd want me to take care of you. He'd want me to love you.

What I'm trying to say is -"

"Todd," Keene said, interrupting. "I love you, too." The two embraced.

"Are you sure you want to try this?"

"No, not really. But it feels right, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"We can't be controlled by our past, I guess."

"You're right. I know that. Not easy, though, is it?"

"No, it's not."

"But it's worth it."

"Definitely."

"I love you. I will always love you. Let me pledge that right here and now. I wish I could find something else to believe in but love right now, but I can't. I don't really know what's going on or what's going to happen. All I know is I love you."

"I love you, too. It's enough."

"Think so?"

"It's all there is."



"Yeah. It's all there is. Nothing else matters, ultimately. Right?"

"Right."

*A year passed.*

*The Lord stopped.*

*The Earth stilled. The sun shone through hazy clouds. The seraphim and cherubim looked up and saw it.*

*The Lord blew the third note. It was shrill, shrieking through the night air. The wind whistled in reply; thunder and lightning zoomed across the sky. The volcanos shrank back into the earth. Stars fell. The dinosaurs died. The seraphim and cherubim clung to each other's robes; no one moved.*

*Only Michael and Umbriel remained unaffected.*

*"But what is it?" Umbriel asked.*

*Michael's answer was sad. "It is called fear."*

### *Courting Disaster*

from the November 12, 1977 *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*

BORN: to Stewart and Zoe Winterbourne, a son, Jeremy, 8 lbs., 11 oz.,  
at Strong Memorial Hospital, at 11:33 am, November 11

from the June 8, 1987 *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*

### LOCAL PRODIGY WINS TENNIS SCHOLARSHIP

Henrietta, NY: by Bill Harris

Most parents are happy to see their children leave home to attend school. Most children, though, don't go until they are eighteen.

Jeremy Winterbourne is only nine.

Jeremy, who until yesterday attended St. Agatha's Elementary School in Henrietta, has received a scholarship to attend the Broken Sound Tennis Academy in Saddle Vista, Florida. Jeremy will leave for the academy shortly before Labor Day, almost at the same time his nine-year-old friends report for the fifth grade.

"He's a little scared about leaving home," said Jeremy's mother, Zoe Winterbourne. "but he's also very excited. Now he gets to play tennis everyday."

Last month Jeremy became the youngest player to enter the National

14's tournament. Previously, children Jeremy's age played the National 12's tournament, but the United States Tennis Association (USTA) eliminated the 12's two years ago.

According to former tour professional Drew Hutchinson, who heads Broken Sound, Jeremy's drive to the quarterfinals of that tournament heralded future greatness. "For him to have such a complete game at that age...(he's) definitely a future number one."

At the Academy, Jeremy will continue his studies while taking up to five hours of tennis lessons a day. "It was the only way," said Jeremy's father Stewart Winterbourne. "With the winters here, and no courts, for Jeremy to continue to improve, he had to go south."

Mrs. Winterbourne will accompany Jeremy on his trip to Florida and plans to spend two weeks there. "It's going to be difficult for him," she said, "but it is the best thing to do for his tennis."

from the January 7, 1989 *USA Today*

TENNIS PRODIGY SIGNS WITH AGENT

Broken Sound, FL: by Dave Jones

In an unprecedented move, eleven-year-old American tennis prodigy Jeremy Winterbourne signed a contract with National Management

Consortium (NMC) to represent him. "We're very excited to sign Jeremy," said the president of NMC, Bill Bagby. "He's got a great future ahead of him."

While many young women and international male players sign agency contracts at young ages, no young American male has ever signed so early. This is mainly because many American male tennis players will spend one to two years playing college tennis, honing their game in the NCAA. Having signed with an agency, Winterbourne is now ineligible for college tennis. "It was a tough decision, but it seemed the right choice for the Winterbourne family," said Bagby. "Tennis is expensive. This way, NMC can aid the Winterbournes in financing Jeremy's future."

Tennis analyst Stacy Thorndyke agrees. "It is very costly to raise a tennis champion nowadays," she said in a telephone interview. However, Thorndyke was quick to add, "I hope this is a legitimate attempt by the Winterbournes and NMC to help young Jeremy and not cash in on him."

In related news, former touring professional Derrick Slate has been named as Winterbourne's new coach.

from the July 11, 1994 *Kalamazoo Standard*

TENNIS ACE WINS SECOND NATIONAL JUNIOR

Kalamazoo, MI: by DeeDee Connors

Jeremy Winterbourne, 16, continued to live up to his potential by winning his second straight Junior National Championship here yesterday. Winterbourne defeated South Carolina's Matthew Moliene in the final, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4.

"This is unbelievable," Winterbourne said. "I'm on cloud nine."

Winterbourne is the first player to win back-to-back junior nationals since David Hong in 1987-1988.

Winterbourne, who earlier this year won the Australian Open junior championship and reached the final of the Wimbledon juniors, will now receive a wild card into the main draw of the U.S. Open. Last year, Winterbourne became the youngest player to win a main draw match in ten years. "I hope to do even better this year," he added.

While Moliene has already announced his intention to play for Stanford, speculation ranges on when Winterbourne will turn pro. Most pundits agree that he will probably turn pro at the U.S. Open. "No comment," said Margaret Dornado, Winterbourne's agent. "Right now Jeremy is just enjoying his victory here."

Rumors are also circulating that Winterbourne is preparing to sign a multi-million dollar clothing and shoe endorsement contract with Reebok.

“The numbers I heard were unbelievable,” said tennis analyst Stacy Thorndyke. “Still, kids are getting signed younger and younger these days for more and more money. It’s unreal.”

The U.S. Open will be played August 24-September 6 in Flushing Meadows, N.Y.

from the August 31, 1994 *USA Today*

WINTERBOURNE CHARMS NEW YORK

Flushing Meadows, NY: by Dave Jones

Dashing, daring Jeremy Winterbourne has charmed the difficult New York crowd like no other prodigy in tennis. “I love playing here,” said Winterbourne, who reached the third round before losing to number-one seed Jack Richter in four sets. “The crowd is fantastic. They throw off so much energy.”

Winterbourne needed that energy in his second-round match, a tough five setter against Italy’s Diego Pescosalido. “The crowd won that match for me, definitely,” Winterbourne said. “I was out of gas in the fifth set.”

Many of the female spectators have taken notice of Winterbourne’s wavy blond hair and movie-star looks. Signs in the New York stands

included "King Jeremy," "Jeremy Is Soooooo Cute," and "Jeremy Will You Marry Me?" Winterbourne takes it all in stride. "Please!" he laughs. "I'm only sixteen. I haven't even been on a date yet."

While speculation ranged that Winterbourne would turn pro at the Open, this has not been the case. "I want Jeremy to finish his schooling first," says Zoe Winterbourne, Jeremy's mother. "Then he can play the tour." According to Mrs. Winterbourne, Jeremy should be finished with school as early as January.

August 31, 1994 11:14 am

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Margaret Dornado

Maggie - What's this I read in the paper? The kid isn't turning pro?

What the hell? Bill

August 31, 1994 12:32 pm

fax from Margaret Dornado to Bill Bagby, President of NMC

Bill - It was just as much a surprise to me as you. It's that damn mother. Nothing much we can do now. Margaret

from the March 1, 1995 *USA Today*



## WINTERBOURNE TO TURN PRO AT LIPTON

Key Biscayne, FL: by Dave Jones

Tournament organizers for the Lipton International Players' Championships (LIPC) have announced that Jeremy Winterbourne, 17, has asked for a wild card entry into their tournament. "He's using one of his ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) wild cards, so that means he's turning pro," said LIPC chairman Bryce Kidman. "Frankly, we're very excited to be the site of his first professional tournament."

from the March 21, 1995 *Key Biscayne Herald*

## WINTERBOURNE WINS IN PRO DEBUT

Key Biscayne, FL: by Michael Menendez

Jeremy Winterbourne, 17, won yesterday 6-4, 7-5 in his professional debut. His opponent was Kenneth Fjornsson of Norway, 26, the number seventy-second ranked player in the world.

Winterbourne served extremely well but sometimes had trouble staying with Fjornsson off the ground. "He's worth the hype," Fjornsson said after the match. "He played better on the big points than I did."

"This is really exciting," Winterbourne said in his post-match press conference. "The fans were great, everyone's been great. I'm really excited

to be here.”

In the next round, Winterbourne plays Daniel Wheelan, 23, of Montana, the sixteen seed and a former top-ten player. “It’ll be a tough match,” Winterbourne said. “He’s got a big serve and a huge forehand. But I’m confident, and win or lose, it’ll be a great learning experience.”

In related news, an unidentified source at Reebok leaked that Winterbourne’s contract is worth an estimated three million dollars a year, with the possibility to peak at eight million a year should he reach number one in the world.

“That’s amazing,” said Fjornsson. “I’ve been playing the tour for six years and have yet to make a million dollars. That kid was a millionaire before he even struck a ball as a pro. Unbelievable.”

from the March 24, 1995 *Key Biscayne Herald*

#### WINTERBOURNE LOSES THIRD ROUND

Key Biscayne, FL: by Michael Menendez

Earlier this week, tennis prodigy Jeremy Winterbourne won his first two matches as a pro. Today, Winterbourne lost his first match.

“It’s been a learning experience,” Winterbourne said of the Lipton Championships. “I hope to come back next year and play better.”

Winterbourne lost to France's Cedric Davides, the number fortieth ranked player in the world. Davides' steady, consistent play was too much for the error-prone youngster.

"I really had a good time here," Winterbourne said. "I'm having a lot of fun on tour."

Winterbourne's next two tournaments take him to the Orient, where it is said he is negotiating several million-dollar contracts. After that, he returns for the United States clay court circuit. "I hope to get my ranking high enough to get directly into the French," he said. Currently ranked 168, Winterbourne adds that "my goal for the year is to be ranked in the top forty." No rookie pro has ever been ranked higher than 41.

from the August 24, 1995 *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*

WINTERBOURNE CONFIDENT OF REACHING GOAL

Schenectady, NY: by Bob Estes

After winning his first tournament yesterday, Rochester's own Jeremy Winterbourne, 17, is confident that he will reach his year-end goal of a top forty ranking. After his victory in the OTB Open, Winterbourne is ranked forty-eight.

"It's been a great summer," Winterbourne said. "I knew I could play

this well, and I am glad I could prove it.”

After losing in the first round of the French Open, Winterbourne reached the quarterfinals of a tournament in Rosmalen, the Netherlands, and the fourth round of Wimbledon. From there he reached the quarterfinals at Washington and Toronto before winning in Schenectady. “I’ll always remember this as my first tournament victory; first of many, I hope,” Winterbourne said after his 6-2, 6-2 drubbing of second-seeded Daniel Wheelan in the final.

Winterbourne could reach his goal as soon as next week. Should he reach the fourth round at the U.S. Open, like he did at Wimbledon, Winterbourne will be ranked thirty-nine in the world.

August 24, 1995

telegram from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Jeremy Winterbourne

Jeremy,

Congrats on the first tourney! Keep it up kiddo! While you’re at it, see if you can win the U.S. Open, huh?

Bill Bagby, President, NMC

from the September 5, 1995 *New York Times*

## WINTERBOURNE STOPPED ON SUPER SATURDAY

Flushing Meadows, NY: by Beatrice Smith

American Jeremy Winterbourne was defeated in the semifinals today by Russia's Eugeny Kalashnikov, the number three player in the world, 7-5, 7-5, 5-7, 5-7, 7-6 (11-9), in the longest match in US Open history.

The match, which took seven hours and one minute to complete, was considered by Stacy Thorndyke to be "the best match ever at the US Open. Period."

Winterbourne's amazing run to the semifinals, including a stunning upset of world number one Jack Richter in the opening round, has really put the young American into the spotlight. "It's been a great tournament," he said before the Kalashnikov match. "Making it to the final weekend, it's like, wow - who would have thought?"

Winterbourne had one match point in the fifth set tiebreak, but hit a backhand into the net. Two points later, Kalashnikov won the match on his sixth match point. "I would like to have that point back," Winterbourne said. "But overall, I think I played okay."

"It was unbelievable," said Kalashnikov of his win. "After he had that match point after I had five match points, I thought, it must be his day.

But it wasn't."

Kalashnikov will play Ireland's Jim Ives, the number-two seed, in tomorrow's final.

Despite the loss, Winterbourne has now achieved his goal of a top forty ranking. When the rankings are announced on Monday, his new ranking will be twenty-four in the world.

September 6, 1995

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Jeremy Winterbourne

Jeremy - Close enough. Bill Bagby, President of NMC

from the December 1995 *Tennis Magazine*

OUR ROLEX ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: JEREMY WINTERBOURNE

by Walter Wingfield

No single rookie has ever had the impact Jeremy Winterbourne has had.

Consider his record: one tournament victory (Schnectady); two tournament finals (Brisbane and Stockholm); four semifinals, including the US Open; fourth round of Wimbledon; victories over the number one and number two players in the world; and a year-end ranking of fourteen.

And what does the Rookie of the Year have to say for himself?

“It’s not bad,” Winterbourne says with a sly grin. “I think I did okay this year.”

Okay? Winterbourne was amazing. For years, tennis fans have been hearing all the hype surrounding the now eighteen-year-old from Rochester, NY. And with so many phenoms in the past amounting to little, we were perhaps right to feel a bit jaded about tennis’ latest young star. But Winterbourne more than lived up to the hype; he impressed us all, both with his intelligent all-court game and with his bright, sensitive, lively manner. In a game ruled by dour, serious tennis players, Winterbourne is a breath of fresh air.

“I love tennis,” he says. “If I didn’t love this game, I couldn’t play it.” And his goals for next year? “I am thinking both next year and long term. Next year I’d really like to make an impact at the Grand Slams; that’s when tennis really counts. Long term, I want to win more Grand Slams than anyone. I want to be a part of tennis history. I want to be the best ever. Period.”

And he’s off to a very good start.

from the April 1996 *Tennis Magazine*

INTERVIEW WITH JEREMY WINTERBOURNE: TENNIS' NEWEST GRAND  
SLAMMER SPEAKS

interview by Walter Wingfield

Tennis Magazine: Jeremy, last year for you was incredible. But so far this year you've surpassed last year by leaps and bounds! What's been the difference?

Jeremy Winterbourne: I think experience. It took a while to get used to the tour and Grand Slam format. I am feeling much more comfortable out there now.

TM: When you went in to the Australian this year, were you thinking, I can win this?

JW: Um, yeah, to be honest, I was. I had just won the week before (in Sydney) and was feeling confident and fit. I spent the month off working on my fitness. I was seeded, so, I knew I had a chance.

TM: You played Kalashnikov in the semifinals. Were you thinking of the match at the Open last year?

JW: A bit, yeah. I didn't want to be remembered only as the guy who lost that match!

TM: Now you won't. You'll be remembered as the youngest-ever Australian Open champ.



JW: Yeah. That's pretty cool, huh?

TM: The French Open is coming up. Your thoughts? Can you win it?

JW: Well, I'm number five now, so I should get a good seeding. There are so many tough clay court players, you never know what kind of a draw you're going to get. Clay has never been my best surface, but if I want to be the best ever, I have to master it. Derrick (Slate, Winterbourne's coach) and I have been practicing movement and stuff like that. Eugeny (Kalashnikov,) Jack (Richter), and Jim (Ives) are all tough on clay. We'll see. I'm going to play my game and see what happens.

TM: What do you do when you have time off?

JW: (laughing) What time off?

TM: You must have some free time.

JW: A little. The tour's tough that way; there's always another tournament the next week. I love it; I love to travel, but it can wear on you. That's why I always take time out to enjoy whatever city I am in that week: visit museums, see the sites, stuff like that. I don't want to just live for tennis.

TM: Derrick Slate says you can be number one within a year.

JW: Well, Derrick should know! That's what I pay him for! (laughing)  
Seriously, I am trying to take it one match at a time. If that happens, great.

TM: Are you working on any changes in your game?

JW: I want to beef up my serve a bit, and improve my movement, too.

There's always something that can be better.

TM: Finish this sentence: Jeremy Winterbourne is a guy who \_\_\_

JW: Jeremy Winterbourne is a normal guy doing abnormal things. Period.

from the July 4, 1996 *London Daily Times*

WINTERBOURNE NEW NUMBER ONE

Wimbledon: by Stephen Hallett

It was only a matter of time.

After winning the Australian, the Lipton, and the French, Jeremy Winterbourne was considered the number-one player in the world by everyone. Everyone except the ATP Tour computer, that is. But by making the Wimbledon final, whether he wins or loses, Winterbourne will be the new number one when the rankings are announced next Monday.

"It's amazing," Winterbourne said. "So much, so fast. I almost don't believe it."

Winterbourne will be the youngest number one player in the history of the game. "That's pretty cool," he said in his typically candid, cheery manner.

After a tournament in which nearly every top-seeded player was

upset, Winterbourne, the number three seed and number two ranked player in the world, will play unseeded Hernando Gunerra of Chile in tomorrow's final.

from the August 1996 *People*

#### OUR FIFTY MOST BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE: JEREMY WINTERBOURNE

It's those violet eyes. The wavy blond hair. The goofy grin. The athletic body. The millions in the bank.

"It's everything," says Pamela Howards, the lucky girl who gets to play mixed doubles with Jeremy Winterbourne. "He's absolutely gorgeous. It's almost disgusting how cute he is. And he doesn't even know it."

Winterbourne, 18, the reigning Australian Open, French Open, and Wimbledon champion, and the youngest-ever number one in tennis, has been sending female hearts a-fluttering ever since his first pro match a little over a year ago. "He's very cute," says Margaret Dornado, Winterbourne's agent. "I'd say 90% of his fan mail comes from smitten young women."

And what is Winterbourne's best beauty tip? "Good genes," he quips in his typically goofy manner. We prefer him in his white tennis shorts.

August 8, 1996

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Margaret Dornado

Mags - Good work getting Winterbourne into that People spread.

Love that smitten young women line. This should squelch that gay

rumor that's been circulating in the office, huh? - Bill

from the August 11, 1996 *New York Times*

WINTERBOURNE GEARS UP FOR GRAND SLAM

Flushing Meadow: by Beatrice Smith

No man has won tennis' Grand Slam since 1969. That may come to an end on September 5, if Jeremy Winterbourne can win the US Open. If he does, not only will Winterbourne win the Grand Slam (winning all four major championships in one calendar year,) but he'll be only the third and the youngest man to ever do so.

"I never thought I would be going for the Grand Slam so early," tennis' number one man said in a recent phone interview. "It's unreal. But exciting." Is he nervous? "Nope. I know what I've got to do, and I know I can do it. If it happens, great. But if not, there's always next year. I have to take it one match at a time."

Tennis analyst Stacy Thorndyke is amazed at what Winterbourne has

accomplished. "He's very young, but he has incredible poise. He has a very intelligent all-court game. The Open is the perfect venue for him. I think he'll do it. He'll make history and win the Grand Slam."

One would be hard pressed to find any one betting against Winterbourne. "I could lose in the first round, ya know," he says with a smile. "But I hope not. I hope to win the whole thing." Only time will tell if Winterbourne is to join history.

from the September 3, 1996 *International Reporter*

WINTERBOURNE IN GAY SCANDAL: TENNIS' NUMBER ONE'S SECRET  
REVEALED

New York: by Sue Stringham

An *International Reporter* photographer who happened to be walking down a New York City street with his camera snapped this photo of Jeremy Winterbourne, tennis' number one player, leaving a New York disco known to be frequented by gay men.

The photographer, who requested anonymity, reported that Winterbourne, 18, appeared drunk and incoherent. The photographer also reported that Winterbourne was in the arms of a "big Italian-looking man. He had on sunglasses but I still recognized him."

The photo at left clearly shows Winterbourne outside the bar. "I was shocked," said the photographer. "I mean, he's been Mr. All-America and everything."

A source close to Winterbourne, who asked not to be identified, said that Winterbourne has been leading a double life for years. "He lives in fear that the public will find out his secret."

Winterbourne, currently playing the US Open, could not be reached for comment.

September 3, 1996, 11:33 pm

transcript of a phone call from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Margaret Dornado (typed by Priscilla Short - to be marked confidential)

Bill: Maggie. Have you seen this shit?

Margaret: Seen what?

Bill: Hold on. I'll fax it to you.

*fax noises*

Margaret: Oh, God.

Bill: Is it true?

Margaret: I don't know. I don't know!

Bill: Where is he?

Margaret: In his room, I guess. He plays mixed early tomorrow.

Bill: Default him. Get him in your room and keep him there. No talking to anyone. The semis are only two days away. We got to do some serious damage control or we stand to lose a bundle. Hear me?

Margaret: Yeah, Bill.

Bill: Anyone there with you?

Margaret: Just Hanson, the new guy.

Bill: The guy right out of school? Well, this'll be an education for him. Send him in a car to get Winterbourne. I'll be in New York in a few hours.

Margaret: Bill. Do you think Jeremy knows?

Bill: Who cares? Just get him there.

September 4, 1996, 7:31 am

transcript of a meeting between Bill Bagby, President of NMC, Margaret Dornado, Bo Hanson, and Jeremy Winterbourne (notes prepared by Priscilla Short - to be marked confidential)

Bill: OK, Jeremy, we got to know what we're working with here. Is this true?

Jeremy: No.

Bill: Is that your picture?

Jeremy: (pause) Yes.

Bill: How did you get there?

Jeremy: I was in the club. But I wasn't drinking! I was hardly incoherent. It's a bunch of bull.

Bill: Were you with this guy?

Jeremy: I don't know what they're talking about.

Bill: So you were in the club. Big deal. You didn't know it was a queer place. That's what we tell the press.

Jeremy: I did know.

Bill: You did know. OK? So? You go to a queer club, doesn't mean you're a faggot, right?

Margaret: Bill.

Bill: You are, aren't ya?

Jeremy: I'm not sure. Maybe.

Bill: No one heard that. That does not leave this room.

Margaret: Bill.

Bill: Listen to me, here's what we're going to do. We're going to deny it. You were photographed outside the bar, right? Well, you were just walking along and some jerk took your picture. He ain't got no proof



you went inside. Everyone knows those rags lie. You understand me, Winterbourne? You ain't a faggot.

Margaret: Bill!

Jeremy: I can fire you, you know.

Bill: Go ahead. Anyone else will tell you the same. It may not seem like it, kid, but I'm the best friend you got.

Bo: If I can say something....

Bill: What?

Bo: We don't have to hide it. We can market it.

Bill: Yeah, right.

Margaret: Let's hear him out.

Bo: We market him. Think of it. He'll be the only gay male athlete with any type of q rating. That's a 25 million market in America alone. Not to mention Europe. It could be big.

Jeremy: You mean - admit it?

Bill: I like a kid with ideas. But it won't work. Christians will kill us. It's hard to market against Jesus, you know? Politicians will have a field day. Parents won't want their kids to go to tennis lessons. And we'll lose the Japs like that. No, we gotta deny it. It's the only way.

Flat. Across the board. Agree? Mags?

Margaret: It'll blow over. Like you said, Bill, this picture doesn't say much.

Bo: I guess so. It should work.

Bill: Jeremy? C'mon, kiddo, I'm the money man. This is what you pay me to do.

Jeremy: OK.

Bill: Good. Hanson. You're Winterbourne's new assistant until this shit blows over. Get him into practice. Smile and be happy, but no interviews. Only tennis questions. Tell them we'll have a formal statement shortly. I'll get some of our reporters posted to the post-match conference. And make up an injury for dropping mixed, ok? Hey. We're still gonna win it, aren't we?

Jeremy: Yeah. Sure.

Bill: That's the spirit. (Winterbourne and Hanson leave.) Jesus, Maggie, he's a queer. Why does this shit happen to me?

Margaret: You could have been more sensitive, Bill. He's only 18. Think of what he's going through.

Bill: Sensitive? That one article is going to cost us millions.

September 4, 1996 post-match interview with CBS-TV

CBS: That was a tough match, Jeremy. Are you being distracted by what the *International Reporter* reported yesterday?

JW: The media has been unrelenting. But you heard the press release. I have no further comment.

CBS: Your thoughts on tomorrow and playing Kalashnikov.

JW: It's been hard to focus, but I'm going to do my best. That's all I can do.

September 4, 1996 post-match press conference

*Tennis* magazine: You served well in the clutch today. Was that the key to winning this match?

JW: Yeah.

*Tennis de France*: We read your press statement from yesterday, stating you were not drunk and that the photographer invented the entire story.

JW: Right.

*TdF*: But you neglected to actually say whether or not you are a homosexual? Are you - what is the word in English - gay?

JW: I'm not even going to answer that question.

September 5, 1996 - Press Release from the United States Tennis Association (USTA) to all assembled media and press:

Regarding Jeremy Winterbourne, if at any time the questions at his post-match press conference stray from tennis and the US Open, the conference will be immediately terminated. Thank you.

September 5, 1996

excerpt from CBS-TV's coverage of the U.S. Open men's final

Tim Ryan: Another shaky forehand! Game to Kalashnikov.

Mary Carillo: Tim, Winterbourne is playing scared tennis. I don't know if it's the thought of going for the Grand Slam or the recent questions surrounding his sexuality, but he's definitely playing scared.

John McEnroe: And Kalashnikov knows it.

from the September 6, 1996 *USA Today*

KALASHNIKOV WINS; WINTERBOURNE LOSES GRAND SLAM

Flushing Meadows, NY: by Dave Jones

In a see-saw battle yesterday, Eugeny Kalashnikov upset top-ranked Jeremy Winterbourne for his first US Open crown, 4-6, 6-4, 2-6, 6-0, 7-5.

Winterbourne, possibly distracted by speculation earlier in the tournament regarding his sexual orientation, played a distracted match, falling only two games short of winning the Grand Slam.

“It’s disappointing, obviously,” he said. “Everyone was counting on me, and I blew it.”

Kalashnikov was thrilled with his victory. “This is great,” said the two-time French Open champion. “Last year, I reached the final but lost. To win today, against so favored an opponent, is amazing.”

Winterbourne refused to comment on whether the reports that he is gay, printed earlier in the week by *International Reporter*, affected his play. “He was not playing as well as he was earlier in the year,” tennis analyst Stacy Thorndyke said. “Obviously this has distracted him.” Winterbourne has pulled out of his next tournament, in Switzerland, citing a shoulder injury.

from the October 1996 *Advocate*

WINTERBOURNE SHOULD STAND UP AND BE COUNTED

by Leah Renetti

We need Jeremy Winterbourne. Never in the history of the gay/lesbian rights movement has so public a figure come out. To do so had been unthinkable. But thanks to the *International Reporter*, Winterbourne doesn’t have to make that decision.

But he’s been wavering. He won’t say he is gay. He’s pandering to the

right. He's protecting his endorsements. He should stand up and be counted; he should be proud of who he is. But he isn't. Instead, he cowers with the enemy. I say, shame on him. And for every teen-ager he could have saved by coming out, but who instead kills him or her-self, I say their blood is on his hands. Hey Jeremy, who do you think you're kidding, anyway?

from the October 7, 1996 *Tonight Show*

Opening Monologue: Two guys walk into a bar. But not Jeremy Winterbourne. He can't decide whether he's in or out.

excerpts of October fan mail for Jeremy Winterbourne:

*Dear Jeremy,*

*I used to think you were soooo cute! But now I guess you're not. I took your poster off my wall! Thanks a lot!*

*Jennifer, age 15, Ranchos Palos Verdes, CA*

---

*Dear Jeremy,*

*My family and I are going to pray for you and the redemption of your soul and hope that you can re-discover the path towards Jesus Christ.*

*Candy, Ashland, KY*

---

*Dear Jeremy,*

*Wow! I knew you were gay from the moment I saw you! I think we would have so much in common! We should meet! I love you!*

*Rick, Montpelier, VT*

*PS I included some naked pictures of myself.*

---

*Jesus tells me to kill all faggots so I'm going to come to your next tournament with a gun and shoot you in the head you fucking faggot.*

from the November 1996 *Advocate*

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

I think what Leah Renetti said in her column last month was unforgivable. I know that Jeremy Winterbourne has been receiving a lot of flak in the gay press, but what he really needs is our sympathy. After all, he is only eighteen. How many of us were ready to come out and face the world at eighteen? We should give Jeremy some space for now.

Bo Hanson

Arlington, VA

*(Editor's Note: Mr. Hanson works for Winterbourne's agency, NMC)*

November 9, 1996 12:49 pm

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Bo Hanson

Hanson: You're fired.

November 9, 1996 4:14 pm

fax from Jeremy Winterbourne to Bill Bagby, President of NMC

Fire Hanson and I walk.

November 9, 1996 4:29 pm

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Bo Hanson

You're re-hired.

November 10, 1996

fax from Bo Hanson to Jeremy Winterbourne

Thanks. And Happy Birthday tomorrow.

If there's anything you need, let me know. Bill's assigned me to you permanently for now. Hey - trust me when I say I understand.



November 11, 1996

fax from Jeremy Winterbourne to Bo Hanson

Thanks for the letter to the *Advocate*. And thanks for telling me about you. Maybe I'm not alone.

November 12, 1996

fax from Bo Hanson to Jeremy Winterbourne

You're not.

November 13, 1996

fax from Jeremy Winterbourne to Bo Hanson

I don't think I can keep doing this.

November 14, 1996

fax from Bo Hanson to Jeremy Winterbourne

Hang in there, champ. You're doing just fine.

November 15, 1996

fax from Jeremy Winterbourne to Bo Hanson

No, I'm not. And I don't know how much more I can take. I feel like I'm just sitting around all the time, waiting. Scared.

November 16, 1996

fax from Bo Hanson to Jeremy Winterbourne

Waiting for what?

November 17, 1996

fax from Jeremy Winterbourne to Bo Hanson

I'm not sure. That's the scary part.

from the January 31, 1997 *Melbourne Examiner*

Melbourne: by Jason Greer Allens

#### WINTERBOURNE OUSTED IN QUARTERS

Number-one seed Jeremy Winterbourne lost today to former number one Jack Richter in the quarterfinals of the Australian Open.

"This is great!" Richter said after the four-set victory. "I think I'm going back to the top, now."

Richter's ranking had dropped after knee surgery last spring. "It took me a while to get back to form, but I think I'm there now. If I can beat

number one, I can win the tournament.”

While Richter's star is rising, Winterbourne's seems to be falling. The number-one player and current Australian Open champion has won only ten matches since last September, including four here in Melbourne.

Experts disagree over what is causing his decline. “It was losing the Open,” says his coach, Derrick Slate. “That really stung. But he's a champ. He'll get over it.” Tennis analyst Stacy Thorndyke disagrees. “Obviously, that scandal last September (when Winterbourne was photographed allegedly coming out of a gay establishment) and the continued backlash he's been receiving is wrecking his game. Frankly, I can't understand why anyone would care what his sexuality is, but it seems to have fascinated the world. And it continues to bother him more and more every day. He hasn't won a tournament since August, and he won't unless he starts to play a lot better.”

from the March 15, 1997 *Nightline*

Topic: How the media has affected Jeremy Winterbourne: Too Much?

Ted Koppel: How has the media affected Jeremy Winterbourne?

Stacy Thorndyke: The media has distracted him immensely. His game has not been the same since September. He obviously can't focus

any more.

Leah Renetti: It's not the media affecting Jeremy Winterbourne. It's his own conscience.

TK: Could you explain that, Ms. Renetti?

LR: He got outed, and now he's trying to hide it. But I think it's interesting that he has never come out and said, "No, I am not gay." Obviously, he is struggling with his conscience.

TK: Ms. Thorndyke, if Jeremy Winterbourne did come out, how would that affect his career?

ST: It's happened before, Ted, with Martina, so tennis is prepared to handle it. I can't say how all of his sponsors would react, but I think most of them wouldn't drop him because he came out.

LR: I disagree. No major male sports figure currently playing their sport has ever come out of the closet. This is uncharted territory. We can't say for sure how anyone would react. But if you look at how advertisers and sponsors reacted when ABC created a television show starring a lesbian actress, you can see that Jeremy Winterbourne has a lot to worry about when it comes to his endorsements.

TK: What do we do? Should we leave him alone? Is his sexuality an

issue to be discussed?

LR: Of course it is. It's important. It's more than him. It's a global issue. We need him.

ST: Yeah, but does he need you?

April 12, 1997 1:56 pm

fax from Ed Ott, entertainment agent, NMC, to Bill Bagby, President of NMC

Bill: I thought of a way we could exploit this whole Winterbourne media blitz. We got this young actor, Damon Peres. He's hot and gay and out. Let's hook him up with Winterbourne. Peres needs the exposure; it'll help his career immensely. Hey, they don't even need to be seen together, let me just leak something to the press. Let me know ASAP. Ed

April 12, 1997 2:34 pm

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Ed Ott

No.

April 12, 1997 2:41 pm

fax from Damon Peres to Jeremy Winterbourne

Hey man, I'm a big fan of yours. I totally know what you're going through. Maybe we should get together and talk some time?

April 12, 1997 2:50 pm

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Damon Peres

Please leave Mr. Winterbourne alone or you will be looking for a new agency.

from the May 15, 1997 *USA Today*

KALASHNIKOV NEW NUMBER ONE; WINTERBOURNE FALLING FAST

Rome: by Dave Jones

With his second round loss at the Italian Open, Jeremy Winterbourne drops from the number-one ranking for the first time in almost a year. Winterbourne has suffered through a dismal year so far, and it only seems to be getting worse.

"There's a hiccup in there somewhere," said Pamela Howards, Winterbourne's mixed doubles partner. "He's just not the same guy."

Winterbourne's loss is Kalashnikov's gain: the Russian now becomes the first man from that country to be number one. "This is amazing, unbelievable" he said when reached by phone. "I've worked so hard for so

long, and to finally receive the fruits of my labor is great.”

Winterbourne needs to defend a lot of points in the next month, at the French Open and Wimbledon, to avoid dropping out of the top ten altogether.

from the July 7, 1997 *London Daily Times*

WINTERBOURNE FALLS IN FIRST ROUND: DROPS OUT OF TOP TEN

Wimbledon: by Stephen Hallett

Defending Wimbledon champion Jeremy Winterbourne, 19, lost today in the first round to Daniel Wheelan in straight sets, 6-3, 6-3, 6-3. The loss drops Winterbourne out of the top ten.

Winterbourne has yet to win a tournament this year. The continuing media frenzy surrounding the questions of last year's scandal continue to flare up wherever he goes.

“It's been very hard on Jeremy,” said Winterbourne's coach Derrick Slate. “He's just a kid. He can't understand why people won't leave him alone.”

Winterbourne has spent the year avoiding all media contact. He has done no interviews and his post-match conferences are reduced to one or two word answers and reflect only the state of his tennis.

Winterbourne is slated next to play in Washington, but many speculate that he will skip the summer circuit and may pull out of the US Open.

from the August 1997 *Tennis*

MY POINT: by Walter Wingfield, assistant editor

I am ashamed to be a member of the press.

The media is obsessed with Jeremy Winterbourne. In the name of amendment number one, we are torturing a nineteen-year-old kid who seems to be struggling with his own sexuality. Is Jeremy Winterbourne gay? I don't know. He hasn't said yes or no either way. Fine. Can't we accept it that way? Is it really necessary to hound the poor kid?

I remember last year, when I asked Jeremy for an interview for this magazine. He said yes readily, but only on the condition that I accompany him on an excursion to Mt.-St. Michel in Normandy, France. How many tennis players have ever gone on a full-day excursion in the middle of a Grand Slam? None, that I know of. Except Jeremy. And he won that tournament, too, in a big upset. Now he can't even leave his home or hotel for fear of the paparazzi.

Why is America so obsessed with sexuality? Should all the writers



for this magazine list their sexual orientation next to their by-line? Of course not. So why should Jeremy? He shouldn't. He should be granted the same privacy and respect the rest of us deserve.

Jeremy has received nothing but flak from the gay press for being afraid and not being the leader they need. (A leader? At nineteen?) I hate to tell the gay press, but even if Winterbourne came out, he probably wouldn't have time to do much of anything until after he retired. Martina was the same way; tennis came first. Now she can devote more time to her causes, but before her retirement, she needed to practice and prepare for tournaments.

I have a daughter who is Jeremy's age. If even her best friend asked her the type of questions Jeremy Winterbourne is asked every day, she would, in her own words, "just die." Why is it we always fail to see a nineteen-year-old tennis player as a nineteen-year-old kid?

What we always used to write about Jeremy Winterbourne was that he was always smiling, always laughing, always happy. Even when he was number one, he seemed to love it. That was his greatest gift to tennis. I can't remember seeing him smile at all in the past year. All the constant press attention has done for Winterbourne is turn a cheerful, happy guy sour and sullen. It's not his fault; it's ours. We took his happiness from him.

I for one will no longer be a part of it. I will no longer report another item of note, tennis-related or otherwise, on Jeremy Winterbourne. Not until I see him smiling again. As a member of the press, it's the least I can do.

*(The views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of TENNIS magazine)*

August 17, 1996 9:03 am

fax from Margaret Dornado to Bill Bagby, President of NMC

Bill - This isn't working. Margaret

August 17, 1997 9:45 am

fax from Bill Bagby, President of NMC, to Margaret Dornado

Mags: No shit. Let's get together. Bring Winterbourne and Hanson.

- Bill

August 18, 1997

transcript of meeting between Bill Bagby, President of NMC, Margaret Dornado, Bo Hanson, and Jeremy Winterbourne (prepared by Priscilla Short - to be marked confidential)

Bill: How's it been going, Jeremy?

Jeremy: My mother talked to me for the first time last week.

Bill: Let's get down to business. This thing isn't going away. I think what we need to do is prove that you're straight. We'll get some model, promote her, then you can date her. That should settle it. You'll get roasted in the gay press, but they don't affect shoe sales much.

Jeremy: I won't do it.

Bill: Well, we can't keep things going this way.

Margaret: I think he should come out, Bill.

Bill: Mags, c'mon! He'll be roasted!

Margaret: It's never been done before, Bill. It's the only left thing to do. You know that.

Jeremy: Wait. Don't I get a say in this?

Bill: You should have thought about that before you got yourself photographed by that rag.

Margaret: Bill.

Bill: You up to it, kid? You want to become the great gay crusader?

Jeremy: Are you serious? You want me to come out?

Bill: Looks that way.

Jeremy: I don't know.

Margaret: I know it won't be easy.

Jeremy: I can't do it.

Bo: I'll be there. All the way.

Jeremy: I can't!

Bo: It'll be okay.

Bill: What's going on between you two?

Bo: Nothing, Bill. Just friends.

Bill: Another one. Great! All right, gang, let's get ready. When we gonna do it?

Bo: Right before the Open.

Bill: Are you nuts? We should be quieter about this.

Bo: We can't be quiet about this. It's too big. Do it at the Open. It'll be exactly one year to the day it all started. It'll be huge. Tons of press. We might as well take advantage of the free publicity.

Bill: I like it. Hanson, you may have a future here after all.

from the August 23, 1997 *New York Times*

Flushing Meadows, NY: by Walter Wingfield, special reporter to the *Times*

Jeremy Winterbourne: Is it on?

Walter Wingfield: Yes, it's on.

JW: Here's my statement. Print it word for word, wherever you want. A daily. *The Times*, if you can. That's a real paper at least.

WW: I'm listening.

JW: OK. Here it is. I'm - I'm gay. There. Speculation's over. Print it to the world.

WW: Why are you telling now?

JW: It has to be told. Think they'll leave me alone?

WW: No. It'll probably be worse.

JW: It can't be worse. And Walter? Thanks for the column last month. I cheered for you, even when everyone else criticized you.

*And as he left, he gave me a rueful smile. -WW*

from the August 31, 1997 *USA Today*

ONE WEEK LATER, WINTERBOURNE SURGING

Flushing Meadow: by Dave Jones

One week after announcing to the world that he is gay, Jeremy Winterbourne is doing something perhaps even more unexpected: playing good tennis.

Winterbourne, the number twenty-two player in the world, has made it to the second week of the US Open by upsetting the number two

seed, Jack Richter, in four sets in the fourth round today.

“It’s about time,” Winterbourne said. “I haven’t played that good of a match in a year.”

The catharsis started in the first round, when Winterbourne was playing the number twelve seed, Phillippe Chenault of Andorra. Down two sets to love, Winterbourne hurled his racket a good thirty feet and shouted “I’m a better player than this!” Winterbourne came back to win in five. The next day, his brief interview revealing his sexual orientation was printed in the *New York Times*.

“There’s still a lot to be said, a lot to be thought upon, a lot to be done. Now, it’s time to concentrate on tennis. I can win this tournament. That’s my goal. One match at a time.”

If Winterbourne does win the tournament, he will be the first man since Rod Laver to have won all four Grand Slam tournaments.

from the September 6, 1997 *USA Today*

KALASHNIKOV-WINTERBOURNE FINAL SET

Flushing Meadow: by Dave Jones

With his straight set victory over number four seed Manolo Santiago of Spain in the semifinals, Jeremy Winterbourne has set up a third straight

match with number-one Eugeny Kalashnikov at the US Open.

Last year, it was Winterbourne who was the heavy favorite and Kalashnikov the upstart. This year, Kalashnikov, who has not lost a set en route to the final, is the heavy favorite and Winterbourne the upstart. But since last year it was the upstart who won, perhaps this year will be the same?

“I’ve got one more to win,” said Winterbourne, looking more focused than he has in a year. “That’s all I have to say.”

“Obviously, he’s back, and he’s dangerous,” said Kalashnikov. “But I’m confident and I have been playing well. It should be a good match.”

September 7, 1997 3:33 pm (before the final)

telegram from Bo Hanson to Jeremy Winterbourne

Hey champ! I’ll have some champagne chilling in your room.

from the September 8, 1997 *USA Today*

front page headline: HE’S BACK!

subtitle: Winterbourne thrashes Kalashnikov for the US Open title

In a stunning display of powerful all-court tennis, Jeremy Winterbourne defeated Russia’s Eugeny Kalashnikov 6-2, 6-0, 6-2 for the

US Open title.

“I’m here, I’m queer, and I’m ready to kick ass!” Winterbourne quipped in his refreshingly candid manner that had been absent most of the year.

What Winterbourne did was hand the world’s number one his worst loss ever. “I’ve never been beaten like that,” a dejected Kalashnikov said after the match. “He was just too good today.”

“I don’t think I have ever been more focused and in control. I was definitely zoning,” Winterbourne said. “This feels good. A big weight has been lifted off of my shoulders, for sure.”

“This whole past year has been awful, but this makes it almost all worth it.”

from the December 1997 *Advocate*

The Advocate Interview: Jeremy Winterbourne

by Walter Wingfield, special to the *Advocate*

At this time last year, we were all wondering whether he was or not; everyone had an opinion. The only one who didn’t know was the man himself. “I wasn’t 100% sure,” he says now of last year. “It was a tough time.”



But the tough times have passed. Now, the reigning US Open champion and number one player in the world is back on cloud nine.

“Things have definitely turned around,” he says, and more, in his typically open, candid manner.

WW: Let’s start with tennis. You have simply dominated the last half of this year. You haven’t lost a match since Wimbledon. Did coming out cause all this?

JW: Partly. It was a matter of finally accepting myself, of saying, “It’s okay to be gay.” In that whole year, no one ever told me that.

WW: Well, it’s obviously okay now.

JW: Yes, but it was something I had to come to on my own. I didn’t realize that then, and it made me pretty bitter. But I realize that now. Like all gay people, I had to start out on my own. It sucks, but that’s the way it is.

WW: Let’s go back to the US Open last year. What did that photographer see?

JW: I had gone to this bar I heard some other players talking about. Not a bar, but a club, really. I could get in at eighteen so it couldn't have been that bad. I was curious, exploring. I hadn’t really connected that I was gay yet, just that there was something drawing me to this place.

WW: So you didn’t even imagine you were gay until -

JW: Until I read it in the newspaper. Scary, huh?

WW: Wow. I can't imagine what that was like.

JW: Unreal. Like, uh-oh, now the whole world knows before I even know.

WW: And then - the year from hell?

JW: Well, it wasn't pleasant, that's for sure. I felt so alone. There was no one to turn to. Every time I read anything - magazines, newspapers, even fan mail - someone was either criticizing me or wanting something from me. No one cared about Jeremy anymore. If it hadn't been for one person, well, I would have gone nuts.

WW: So what made you decide to come out, eventually?

JW: I had to. It wasn't going to go away. I did it for me, to alleviate the pressure. It might have some beneficial ripples elsewhere, but I had to do it for me. Ultimately, we all have to come out for ourselves. Then we can help out.

WW: Has the press eased off any?

JW: Yeah. Some. I guess I'm old news now. That was the goal all along!

WW: What's in the future for Jeremy Winterbourne?

JW: Well, my tennis career is just getting started. I've got many more miles to log before I'm done. I've got a lot of Grand Slams left in me. After all that's happened to me, it's tough to realize I just turned twenty a few days

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ago.

WW: What about Jeremy Winterbourne as gay tennis star?

JW: Ouch. You said it. That's my new name from now on, huh? Well, I can live with that. As far as helping out with gay rights and stuff, I'll do what I can, when I can, but tennis keeps me pretty busy. And I'm learning about what it is to be gay. There's tons I don't know.

WW: Here's a question everyone wants to know: is Jeremy Winterbourne single?

JW: (smiling broadly) Not anymore.

WW: And?

JW: And what? You'll have to read all about it the next time I'm in the *International Reporter*.

WW: Complete this sentence: Jeremy Winterbourne is a guy who \_\_\_\_\_

JW: Still a normal guy, only now I do normal things, too.

*Years passed.*

*The Lord stopped.*

*The earth sprang forth new life; warm and intelligent. Seasons began.*

*The cherubim and seraphim clung happily to each other.*

*The Lord blew the fourth note, loud and strong, rich and blaring.*

*Birds flew higher, as high as they could fly. The chests of the mammals swelled. The mountains grew. The cherubim and seraphim stopped holding each other and began to sing, a cacophony of unmatched voices, disharmony, each one trying to out perform the other.*

*Only Michael and Umbriel remained unaffected.*

*"But what is it?" Umbriel asked.*

*Michael's answer was sad. "It is called pride."*

*Going Before the Fall*

My life's defining moment was the day I met Trevor.

God, that looks more shallow when I write it. I'm sorry for that, but it's true; you see, that was the moment my life began again.

You know how some moments are so clear in your head, no matter how much time fades? Some days you can't even remember what you had for breakfast, but a specific, important incident from three years ago still feels so damn real to you that you can still smell it, taste it, touch it, it still causes more pain and pleasure and all that? That's the day I met Trevor.

When he walked into the meeting room on that first day, no one moved. No one spoke, no one breathed, no one did anything; you see what I'm saying. We all just sat and stared, open-mouthed, like a bunch of dazed chimpanzees. And Trevor - well, he just casually surveyed the room, smiling dazzlingly, as if taking stock of all of us, like professor to student, before sitting confidently in the front row.

"*Who is that?*" Murphy asked when he regained his voice. I didn't have an answer. The room began to buzz finally, and everyone was talking about Trevor.

And why not? He was more than gorgeous. He was male beauty: tall,

flawless, perfect. Everyone there freely admitted it. His short, dark hair and ice blue eyes combined with classical features and a ready smile to make him seem at once open yet terrifying. It was quite an effect; I shivered, Murphy swore several times, even the lesbians took note. A god had entered our midst; of that I was sure.

Our reverie was disturbed by the entrance of our group president, Ernest Fenton. Poor Ernest! How could a skinny, straw-haired beanpole with acne and chicken legs compare to this deity, this Ganymede amongst us? By kissing the god, which is exactly what Ernest did before crossing the room and starting the first meeting of our college's gay, lesbian, and bisexual group.

Tears wet my eyes. I swear they did! The disappointment was so intense, I could do nothing else. "Damn, shit, damn," Murphy swore next to me. "How does a skinny geek like that get a stud like him?" I agreed with Murphy, though I didn't approve of the word "stud"; it was too common, too vulgar for Trevor.

The meeting was brief. "Next week, we need to name a chairperson for our upcoming Pride Week," Ernest was saying. "So be thinking about volunteering, peoples!" The meeting was over, and we broke into our cliques and groups. But everyone was discussing the same thing.

Do I sound like I'm exaggerating? I'm not. Perhaps it was his newness that excited us; perhaps his smooth masculinity, his assured confidence; maybe it simply was his incredible good looks. But Trevor coming into our little group was like dropping a magnet into a pile of iron filings; everyone was bound to be attracted to him.

"Hey," Murphy said, peering over my shoulder. "He's coming over here!"

"Who?" I demanded.

"*Him*," Murphy whispered in my ear as a warm, strong, confident, hand fell on my shoulder.

"Hi," a baritone voice said. I looked up to see his ice-blue eyes boring into me, his lips parted into a shit-eating grin. It's a very unnerving effect, to see him smile and stare at you concurrently; it made him look like a man-eating shark, or a vampire mesmerizing his prey. It worked on me.

"Hi," I managed to get out.

"You're Dave, right? I'm Trevor Callahan."

"Dave McGowan."

"I know." Still smiling, still staring, my stomach still doing flip-flops.

"Is it true? You're a math tutor?" I could only manage a small nod. "Great." More smile, lots of teeth. "I'm taking a calculus class I know is going to be



difficult. Can you help me?"

"Sure," I muttered. Yes! I thought as I watched Murphy's face cloud in jealousy.

"Cool. Thanks. Maybe we can meet Thursday, say, three o'clock?"

Three o'clock Thursday was my weekly appointment with my physical therapist. "Yeah, sure," I said, physical therapy be damned.

"Great. I'll meet you in the library lobby." And he left.

"You lucky son of a bitch," Murphy said.

"Wow." It was all I could think to say.

"Maybe you can steal him from Ernest."

Reality sank in. "Yeah," I said, patting my wheelchair. "I'm sure he finds this really attractive." With that, I wheeled myself out of the hall and into the sunshine.

Thursday saw me at the library at a quarter to three. Trevor was already there. We got a small study room on the first floor. I was prepared for quadratic equations, but not for Trevor's first question to me.

"So, how did it happen?" he asked me, indicating my wheelchair.

I was surprised by the question, so my response was not forthcoming. "I'm sorry," he added, his voice not changing, "if that question

is too personal.”

“No,” I said, regaining my own voice. “I was just surprised, that’s all. No one’s ever asked me so directly before. Most people try not to notice it.”

Trevor leaned across the table. “It’s kind of hard not to notice.”

I laughed nervously. “True. Well, there’s not much to tell. My senior year in high school, I was in a car accident. Hit by a drunk driver. When I woke up, well -” I shrugged.

“And you were an athlete before that, right?”

I nodded. “How did you know?”

He smiled. “I can tell. Your upper body is still in good shape, and your leg muscles haven’t fully atrophied. In fact, they still look limber.”

“Physical therapy, once a week,” I said.

He nodded. “I see.” He paused. “Do you miss sports?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so. I miss football and tennis especially. I was ranked, in the state, before the accident.” I blanched. “I’m sorry,” I added. “That sounded like bragging.”

“Not at all,” he said. “You should be proud of an accomplishment like that.” I could tell he meant his words, and I found myself relaxing.

“A question for you,” I said, sounding more confident than I felt.

“Shoot.”

“Why Ernest?” I said, then realizing how awful that sounded, added, “I mean, how did you two get together?”

Trevor only smiled. “I met Ernest at an orientation program at the beginning of the summer. I was transferring in and didn’t know anyone, and we hit it off.”

I nodded, a bit glumly. “Lucky guy.”

Trevor was paying no attention. “Can you feel that?” he asked. I looked down. His hand was on my knee.

My eyebrows shot up. “No.” But I sure as hell wished I could.

“I see.” He took his hand off my knee. “I hope you didn’t mind. I just wondered what you could feel.”

“No sweat,” I said, though I was actually beginning to, just a little, right under my scalp line. Kind of stuffy, those study rooms.

I didn’t see Trevor again until next week’s meeting. Attendance had jumped in the week since he had joined, so I found my chair parked on the opposite side of the room from him.

“So,” Murphy asked, dragging a chair beside me, “how was the tutoring session?”

“All business,” I lied with a grin.

Murphy rolled his eyes at me. "Knowing you, Dave, it probably was."

"Okay, folks!" Ernest was saying from a podium. While he continued, I imagined Trevor kissing Ernest's thin, acne-covered face, wrapping his sleek muscular arms around Ernest's skin and bones. I couldn't picture it, but I supposed if I hung around the two of them enough, I wouldn't have to.

"We need a chairperson for Pride Week," Ernest said. "Who wants to volunteer?"

Now this shouldn't have surprised me, but for some reason, it did. Trevor raised his hand. Was it because he was Ernest's boyfriend? I sighed in defeat and general disgust.

"Dave McGowan and I will co-chair," he said. Now *that* was a surprise. I wasn't expecting that at all. Murphy eyed me curiously, but I was too shell-shocked to worry about what Murphy was thinking.

"Dave?" Ernest asked, looking over at me. What could I do? The god had directed. I could but nod in deference.

"Great!" Ernest said. "We have our chairpeople." Trevor turned to me and grinned, and I wondered, perhaps, if instead of a god, maybe there wasn't a bit of the devil about him.

“Dave! Dave, wait up!” Trevor was running to catch up with me.

“Hey,” he said, not a bit out of breath, “hope you don’t mind what I did back there. I thought it might be fun.” His eyes searched mine.

“No, I don’t mind,” I said, “but a little advance notice would have been nice.”

“Can I wheel you somewhere?” he asked, indicating my chair.

Normally, I hated it when someone offered me help. I don’t need anyone’s pity. With Trevor, though, it sounded more like taking a ride in a new car than helping a cripple. “No, thanks. Haven’t you done enough for me today?”

Trevor grinned. It split his face into northern and southern hemispheres. “Next time then. This is gonna be fun. Best Pride Week ever, right?” he said, spinning hastily off to class.

“How about a table at the cafeteria?”

“What for?” Trevor said, lazily stretching out over the arms of a chair in my dorm room. We were meeting to discuss our plans for Pride Week.

“You know, information, stuff like that.”

“Do we give out condoms?”

I shrugged. “I don’t care.”

“Okay, then.” He looked bored.

I sighed. This had been his idea. “What do you think we should do for Pride Week?”

His eyes lit up, and he positioned himself facing me. “A dance.”

“A dance?”

“Yeah. Can’t you picture it? All of us, straight and gay, at a big campus wide dance. Wouldn’t it be great?”

“If anyone would come.”

“They’ll come. We’ll have door prizes, give away some cool stuff.”

“I don’t know -”

“Look, Dave,” he said, interrupting me. He took my hands into his. This I could feel. “Leave the dance all up to me. Food, everything. You take care of the table, posters, whatever else. Get a speaker or two, a film. But the dance is mine.”

Like I could say no. “Okay.”

“Great,” he said, letting my hands go. Perhaps I should have demured longer.

“Who could we get to speak?” I asked, but before Trevor could answer, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey.” It was Murphy. I could hear splashing in the background.

“Where are you?”

“The pool.” Murphy was on the swim team. “I had to call you. You’ll never guess who’s trying out for the swim team.”

“Who?”

“Ernest Fenton.”

“You’re kidding!” Murphy was an atrocious gossip, but I didn’t mind a good scoop now and then myself. “Why?”

“Beats me. We were all pretty surprised when he showed up.”

“Is he any good?”

Murphy paused. “He’s okay.” The tone of his voice told me he was better than okay. “Pretty amazing, huh? And that’s not all. I heard something pretty good about his boyfriend, too.”

I didn’t want to hear anything about Trevor. “Uh, yeah. Look, Murphy, I got to go.”

“Just a second, Dave. This’ll only take a minute. Another guy trying out for the team just transferred in from Keystone, where lover boy used to go. Apparently he has quite a reputation for lovin’ ‘em and leavin’ ‘em.”

“Really?” I said, trying to sound disinterested.

“Yup.”

“Look, Murphy, I got to go.”

“Yeah, sure. Just wanted ya to hear it here first. See ya.”

“Bye.”

“Who was that?” Trevor asked innocently.

I saw no reason not to tell him. “Murphy. He was telling me that Ernest is trying out for the swim team.”

Trevor smiled. “I didn’t realize it would be such big news.”

I coughed. “Well,” I stammered, “it just always seemed that Ernest wasn’t exactly - well, athletic.” That was a diplomatic word. Skinny geek didn’t sound quite nice enough.

“He’s not,” Trevor said. “But I coached him and encouraged him to join the team.”

“You put him up to it?”

Trevor shook his head. “Not exactly. Ernest always wanted to do it. He didn’t have the nerve. Thought he was too unathletic. So I put him on a weight program and we hit the pool every day for the summer.”

“You sound more like a coach than a boyfriend.”

Trevor shrugged. “Why not? Besides, I like helping guys reach their potential.”

I stared at him smiling. “What does that mean?”



Trevor smiled devilishly. "Nothing."

I shook my head and wagged a finger at him. "Why do I get the feeling," I ventured, "that you are a dangerous man, Trevor Callahan."

Trevor smiled again. Always smiling, same damn smile all the time. "Well, Dave," he countered, "I would never tell a guy to go against his feelings."

It quickly seemed apparent why Trevor had volunteered me to help him organize Pride Week; with me running everything else, he was free to concentrate all of his efforts on the dance.

"A trip to Mardi Gras? Donated?" Murphy said incredulously when Ernest told us what Trevor had arranged to be the grand prize at the dance. "With airfare and everything?"

"Yup." Grinning stupidly, Ernest put his arms awkwardly around Trevor. "Isn't he the greatest?" Yes, I wanted to shout, but only smiled.

"How the hell did he manage that?" Murphy demanded as he left for swim practice.

"Quite a coup," I told Trevor after Ernest had left to catch up to Murphy. "How *did* you manage it?"

Trevor smiled. "I guess I can be persuasive."

“No shit,” I muttered under my breath. Trevor didn’t hear me; he was looking at my plans for the rest of Pride Week.

“Good work,” he said approvingly, and of course I was pleased at the compliment. “This week is gonna kick ass!” he exclaimed as I pushed my chair faster to keep up with him.

Pride Week began simply enough; Murphy and I were running an information table at the cafeteria. The kick-off speech had been poorly attended, and only two people had stopped by our table all afternoon; tickets were selling out for the dance, though.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” Trevor said, sidling up to the table. Heads turned.

Murphy scowled. “Sucky. It’s been dead.”

“Well,” Trevor said, “why don’t you take a break and get some lunch? Dave and I will run the table.”

Murphy did not have to be asked twice, and soon Trevor and I were working the table alone.

Do I have to even write what happened? It sounds like a horrible cliché, but when Trevor came to the table, other people began to stop by. Not a lot, but a respectable number.

“How do you do it?” I asked him, but he only smiled at me.

“So,” he said after a while, “how long have you and Murphy been dating?”

If I had been drinking milk it would have gone up and out my nose.

“We’re not dating,” I said hastily.

“Oh? Really? I’m sorry. It’s just that the two of you are always together.”

“We’re just friends, really.”

Trevor’s smile faded, but didn’t extinguish completely. “So, who are you dating?”

I looked down. “No one. Since the accident, I haven’t really dated anyone.”

Trevor looked at me. His face didn’t look sad, just expectant, as if he already knew what I was going to say. It was a strange look, but I found myself liking it much better than the pity I normally received. “What about before the accident?”

“Dating? Beforehand? None. I mean, being in high school still and all.”

I paused. “Well, there was this one guy.”

Trevor smiled. “Ah. I knew there must be something. Tell me.”

“Once, in high school, I met this guy. It was the weirdest thing! It

was a few months before the accident. I was at K-Mart buying - " my voice went lower and my cheeks flamed " - a jock. For ball, you know? And this guy just started talking to me."

"What was he like?"

"Older. Early thirties, I guess. He had this thinning brown hair and a hairy chest. I could see the hair creeping out over his collar. Anyway, pretty soon he said he wanted to see me in the jockstrap. Something like that. I don't remember exactly what he said." I was lying. I remembered everything that man said to me. "Well, he said we couldn't go back to his place, because he had company staying, and we couldn't go to my folks, so we went to a hotel.

"We got there and he had me go to the bathroom and put on the jock. I went in there and freaked! I was like, what am I doing?"

"But you went ahead with it."

I nodded once. "Yeah. I mean, I was horny, and stupid, and he was kind of cute."

Trevor smiled and spread his arms out wide, a gesture that made him seem almost spiritual. "You don't have to explain anything to me."

I shrugged. "Anyway, I came out in the jock and he was already naked. And - we did it."

“What did you do?”

I looked at Trevor. “It,” I said, as if this would satisfy him and explain everything.

“What?”

“He - I - he sucked me for a while. A few minutes. Then I did it to him. Then he put on a condom and - fucked me.” I paused, remembering. It seemed like yesterday, clear as a bell. “It hurt. It hurt bad! But he didn’t stop till he came. I guess I liked it. Anyway, he gave me his number and told me to call him. I did a few nights later.”

“And?”

I shrugged. My lower lip trembled. Was I going to cry? “It was the number for a pizza place.” Humiliation flooded me. I fought back hot, wet tears.

Trevor had a strange question. “Did he kiss you at all?” I shook my head no. “Ah, Dave,” he said, holding my hand. I felt comfort flow from him into me. I felt his warmth surging through me. Mostly, I felt better.

I sniffled. “I’ve never told that story to anyone before.”

Then Trevor said something fairly mysterious. “I know,” he told me, squeezing my shoulder. “I know.”

The dance was a huge success. Over nine hundred people; no one could remember so many showing up at any Fisher College event, ever.

“Congratulations,” I said to Trevor. As good as he looked in jeans and a polo shirt, he looked that much better in a suit. I honestly didn’t think any man could have ever looked any bit more handsome than he did at that moment.

He mumbled something back to me. He seemed distracted. Excusing himself, he went to find Ernest. Murphy sat down next to me.

“Hey bud,” he said, obviously enjoying himself. “How’s it going?”

“Fine. And you? You and Frank Josephs seem to be awfully chummy.”

Murphy grinned. Trevor’s grin made him irresistible; Murphy’s just made him look goofy. “Uh-huh,” he said. “I’m thinking long term here.”

“You?” Murphy had a new “long-term” boyfriend every month.

He lightly punched my arm. “Thanks for the support, Dave.” He looked over at Ernest and Trevor. “I heard something about those two.”

“Oh? Are they getting engaged?” I said, perhaps a bit too bitterly.

“No. Just the opposite.”

Did I hear correctly? “Really?”

Another wolfish, goofy grin. “That’s what I heard. Poor Ernest. Just when he was getting interesting, you know.”

I wasn't paying any attention to Murphy. "Are you sure?"

Murphy eyed me critically. "How bad do you have it for golden boy, Dave? I mean, he's good looking, but he's not all that great."

I didn't bother to correct him. "He wouldn't want me anyway."

Murphy didn't believe my sentiment. "Look over there," he said, pointing to a stout, bespectacled young man. "You should talk to that guy."

"Why?"

"Because he's one of golden boy's ex-boyfriends. Apparently, 'Trev' dumped him like a hot potato."

I bristled. "Murphy, you are being ridiculous. Just because some stranger got dumped, Trevor's a bad guy? More likely, this guy is just jealous."

Murphy shrugged. "Maybe." He paused. "Probably." Another grin. "But it doesn't make good gossip."

"Get out of here!" I said, jokingly shoving Murphy back to his date. I saw them go to the dance floor and watched as they moved out of rhythm with the song. Behind them, I saw Ernest waving his hands towards Trevor. No one was yelling, but it seemed they were having an argument. Suddenly, Ernest burst into tears and ran out of the gym. Trevor stood where he was. I wheeled over to him.

“Trevor?”

“Dave,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

We went over to the small campus daycare. Trevor sat on a swing, gently rocking back and forth over slick wet grass. I watched him from my chair. I wanted to hold him, but I couldn’t reach him.

“Trevor,” I said, getting his attention. He looked up to me and smiled wanly.

“I’ll be okay, Dave. I just feel bad about breaking up with Ernest. But it had to be done.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t love him.”

“How do you know?”

Trevor bored his ice blue eyes into me. If I could have felt my toes they would have been shivering. “Because I’m in love with someone else.” He got off the swing and kneeled in front of me. “Dave,” he said, taking my hand. “You’re a great guy. I’ve never met anyone like you.” My life flashed in front of my eyes. “I think you feel the same as I do.”

“Yes,” I finally whispered thickly. I was crying, softly. I wished to God I wasn’t, but I was so stunned, I couldn’t help myself.



“Oh, Dave,” he whispered, putting his hand on my face. Our eyes locked. “Let me save you.” He wiped my tears away with his thumb. “Hey,” he said softly, “hey. Didn’t you tell me that guy never kissed you?” And before I could say yes, his lips locked onto mine. It was everything I had imagined it to be, and more; it was warm and inviting and romantic and horny and beautiful.

We went to my dorm room. I don’t remember the trip. I just remember wishing I had legs so I could run. We finally got to the room and he kissed me again. Wrapping my hands around his shoulders, he lifted me out of my chair and onto my bed. “Tell me, Dave,” he said softly in my ear, “how to make love to you.” I was crying freely now; I couldn’t stop. “Just keep kissing me,” I said. And he did. He slowly took my tie off, my shirt and shoes and socks and pants and underpants. He kissed my neck, my chest, and my scarred legs. He took his clothes off and I finally saw the bronzed god, complete and natural before me. I could have died at that moment and been perfectly happy; as it was, I didn’t, and was even happier.

When I awoke the next morning I was alone. This did not surprise me; last night had been a dream, and to imagine it had been anything

corporeal was foolish. But when Trevor stepped out my bathroom, freshly scrubbed and drying his hair with a towel, I heard my heart stop. He had been beautiful when I first saw him; beyond description at the dance last night; and now, fresh and nude and wet from the shower, he appeared as Phoebus in his orb, enough to cause this Phaeton to fall.

“Morning,” he said, dropping the towel to the floor and grinning at me.

I pulled myself up to a sitting position. “Now why are you doing that?” he said, grabbing my hips and sliding me down on the bed. He climbed on top of me and began nibbling my ear. “Trevor,” I said, putting my hands on his shoulders. “Trevor!” I said again, a little more urgently.

“Hmm?” He looked at me, eyes wide with innocence.

“Look - last night was - incredible. But - I mean - oh shit. What the fuck is going on?”

Trevor stared at me. “Dave, what are you talking about?”

“With us! How did this happen?”

Trevor’s eyes clouded and he looked at the bed. “Are you sorry about what happened?”

I hesitated. “No, no, of course not. It’s just, well -”

“What? What is it, Dave? Tell me what it is and I’ll fix it.”

"Can you fix these!" I suddenly burst out, gesturing at my useless legs.

"No," he said softly. He placed his open palm on my chest. "But I can fix this," he said, indicating my heart. He kissed my chest through his hand. "Dave," he added softly. "I don't know what you think happened last night. For me, well, it was the first night of many." He leaned in close to me. "I like you, Dave. I've never felt this way before. Please. Don't turn me away."

How did he always know the right thing to say? "Trevor," I began. "It's just - I don't know. This stuff just doesn't happen to me."

He took my hand and kissed it. "It is happening to you, Dave. Don't fight it. Just - just be with me."

"But why?" I whispered, my voice barely audible. "Why do you want me?"

"Oh, Dave," he said softly. "If you have to ask that, then you don't see you like I see you." His fingers stroked my cheek. "I promise, Dave, by the time I'm done, you'll see what I see." And he kissed me. And for only the third time in my life, and the second time in twelve hours, I made love to a man.

"You did *what*?" Murphy said when I told him the good news the

next day.

“You heard me,” I said, grinning like the village idiot.

“Dave, I’m real happy for ya and all, but are you sure about this?”

“Of course,” I said, a bit hurt. “What, don’t you think someone like Trevor could love someone like me?”

“Love?” Murphy said, grabbing onto that one word. “Did he say he loved you?”

“No. He said he liked me. Happy?”

“I still don’t know about all this. That guy is bad news.”

I stared at Murphy aghast. “What’s your problem, huh? I’m finally happy - finally dating someone - and all you can say is that he’s bad news.”

Murphy shrugged defensively. “Well, I think he is.”

I set my jaw determinedly. “And I just think you’re jealous.”

The look in Murphy’s eyes told me I was right, at least partially.

“Whatever,” he said, holding up his hands dismissively. I wheeled away from him in anger and disgust.

“I have something for you,” Trevor said, carrying a large, gaily wrapped box.

"You didn't have to do that. What'd ya get me?"

Trevor laughed, solid gold clinking on a silver floor. I loved that laugh. We had been together a month, and I still thrilled to hear that laugh.

I tore open the box. It was a tennis racket. "Umm-" I was amazed at the gift.

"I know what you're thinking," Trevor said smoothly. "But listen for a second. Remember how you told me you missed tennis a lot? Well, a lot of wheelchair athletes play tennis. It's booming. Now, I arranged it all with the athletic department. They're going to purchase a wheelchair especially designed for tennis players. Then, after some practice, you can represent the college at local and maybe even national wheelchair tennis events." He smiled broadly. "Everyone's a winner."

I was stunned into silence. "Dave? Are you OK?"

I slowly shook my head. "I don't know about this."

Trevor knelt in front of me. He took my hand in his. "I know it's scary." How did he always know? "But I'll be there with you. Every step of the way. It's like riding a bicycle. With a little practice, you'll be great at it!" He looked into my eyes. "What do you say?"

I could not refuse him, no matter how scared I was. "Okay. I'll give it a try."

“Yes!” he said, kissing me first in victory, then with more intent.

I was pretty sure I was going to hate being a wheelchair athlete. Every time I saw those people on television I thought they were pathetic ex-athletes trying to grab onto some glimmer of who they used to be, when they had legs.

But wheeling onto that shimmering green court was magic. I had loved this place; I had known and adored every one of those painted white lines. God, tennis - tennis was something I thought I had lost, something from before the accident. I had stopped thinking about it. Now, something dead within me stirred when I wheeled onto the court.

Trevor and I rallied, just trying to get the ball back and forth to allow me to get used to the new chair. I quickly discovered I couldn't attack the ball, but instead had to wait and be patient, waiting for an opportunity to arise.

After an hour I wheeled over to Trevor. For the first time since the accident I was sweaty from athletic activity; my hair was wet and when I shook it, droplets of sweat flew off my head. I felt so damn alive that I had to yell out of mere happiness.

“What do ya think, coach?” I asked Trevor. His face beamed with

pride. "I think," he said deliberately, "that I was right. You were magnificent. Are you up for some more?"

I checked my watch. "Can't. I've got to tutor." I wheeled off the court and headed for the locker room, whistling.

I was tutoring a guy named Mick. Mick turned out to be one of those ubiquitous returning students. He was in his mid-thirties, and though very eager to be returning to school, had completely forgotten even the most basic principles of math.

Tutoring Mick was frustrating, mainly because I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be on the tennis court, or more accurately, I wanted to be with Trevor. I had been spending most of my waking (and sleeping) hours with him. I rarely saw Murphy anymore, but that didn't matter to me. Every time I saw him he just tried to warn me about the mistake I was making.

Mick told me his life story in the first fifteen minutes of our tutoring session. Caught by his wife with another man in bed, he had been kicked out of his house at the age of thirty-five and told never to return. Cut off from his daughter, Mick had determined to go back to school and earn some respectability, in hopes that the court might allow him to see his

child and perhaps even share custody. I sat there, trying hard to look interested, but thinking only of tennis and Trevor.

At Mick's next tutoring session, Trevor came along. They were in the same section of calculus, and though Trevor was way ahead of Mick as far as math skills go, I figured this way I could still tutor Mick and get paid for it while also spending more time with Trevor.

Trevor agreed and next week's session went off without a hitch. Mick and Trevor got along famously, and Trevor and I got to spend more time on the court together. I was getting pretty good at this wheelchair tennis; Trevor estimated that I might even be ready for competition before the season ended. I was elated, content, happy as any man could ever be.

November loomed; Trevor declared I was ready for my first competition, a low-level indoor tournament an hour from campus; we were preparing for the Harvest Ball, an annual dance at the university; and in general, life was good. And, oh yeah, Mick was spending more and more time with us.

I know what you're thinking; how stupid could I be? But how could I think a graying, aging whiner would steal the heart of the man I loved?



But then again, how could Ernest have ever thought a shy, wheelchair-bound student from the back row would take his boyfriend, either?

I saw Ernest, about a month after he and Trevor had split. He looked better than ever; being on the swim team certainly agreed with him. He had a new boyfriend, someone he said was closer to him than Trevor ever was. But I could still see the hurt and the longing in his eyes, and I only felt sorry for him.

I was busy preparing for the tournament; I really thought I had a shot to do well. Trevor coached me every day; so when the opening round loomed, I felt nervous, but ready.

Before I took the court, Trevor took me aside and told me, softly, "No matter what ever happens, I will always love you." I winked at him, and to the cheers of a small crowd, wheeled onto the court.

I was demolished. My opponent was a top seed who had been playing wheelchair tennis for three years. I won three games. I threw my racket. I was never playing this sport again.

And then I saw Trevor. I remembered what he had said. Not before I went on the court, but months ago, when I first started playing again. "Haven't you missed tennis?" he had said. Yes, I had. A lot. And now I had it back. I smiled at Trevor and shrugged. He shook a fist at me. And next to

him, Mick waved a hasty hello.

Looking back, I was so damned stupid. Just stupid. But I saw nothing, except my boyfriend, looking resplendent in a rented tuxedo. We had been at the ball an hour and danced a little. Mostly, Trevor seemed distracted.

We took a walk outside. It was crisp, but no snow had come yet. Trevor had his hands in his pockets, and for the first time I could ever remember, he wasn't smiling.

"Dave," he said, sitting on a stone bench and facing me, "there's something I have to tell you."

Silly me. I thought he wanted to marry me.

"Dave, there's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to come out and say it. I've met someone else."

I was reminded of a line from my Shakespeare class; *Does no man's dagger here have a point for me?*

I couldn't speak. My eyes blurred. "I'm sorry," he said, walking back to the dance.

An hour later I was still in the same spot. I thought about finding Murphy, but I didn't want to hear any I-told-you-so's. Instead, I wheeled

slowly back to the dorms. The air was turning very cold now, but I couldn't feel it.

Rounding a corner, I saw Trevor. And Mick. And they were kissing.

Back in my room, the tears came. I threw my alarm clock against the wall, but my heart wasn't in it. I wanted nothing more than to go to bed, but now my bed would seem so empty and alone. Removing my bow tie, I saw my new tennis racket in the corner of my room. I wanted to toss it out the window, but when I picked it up, I remembered the feelings I had when I was on court. Those had had nothing to do with Trevor. They were mine now. I put the racket down and resolved to practice first thing in the morning.

Months passed. I continued practicing and improving. I repaired my friendship with Murphy, who even admitted he had been missing me. I went out again, and even made some new friends.

But at night I missed Trevor. At night I felt most alone. At night I missed his tinkling laugh and his warm hands. I cried a lot, at night.

Soon, the annual Spring Fling loomed. I didn't want to go, but I let Murphy talk me into it. I even cracked a joke that Trevor should be dumping Mick about now. My new friends got a big laugh over that.

Yet I was right.

Here's what happened. I saw Mick and Trevor leave the dance. And then I knew. I simply knew. But why? I had to follow. And I did.

I kept a distance until I heard a howl followed by a sob. Mick ran past me. I felt truly sorry for him. None of this had been his fault.

Trevor walked by me just then. He was very surprised to see me. "Dave. Hello. How are you?"

I was angry. I felt powerful, masterful even. He had no idea what was going to hit him. "You slimy prick. Why? Why do you do it?"

Trevor looked at me. I could tell from his expression that he knew exactly what I was talking about. "Listen, Dave," he said evenly, "obviously you're still angry over what happened between us."

"Damn right I am! You're a miserable shit, you know that? But I don't care about that right now. I just want an answer to my question." He started to walk away. I wheeled after him, furious. "Don't you dare walk away from me! You are going to stand there and answer my question!"

He turned at me. I could see he was starting to get angry as well. "What question is that, Dave?" he said, getting right into my face.

This was going to be good. "I want to know why you pluck one supreme loser from the sea of losers out there - like me, Ernest, Mick - and

build us up. Take us to the height of heights. Grace us with your fucking presence, then just drop us like we're shit. That's my question."

He had grown quiet under my accusing voice. "You're not a loser, Dave."

"Yes, I am!" I laughed when I heard myself say that, but kept going. "Answer the question. Are we just some big ego trip for you, is that it?"

"I don't want to have this conversation." He started to walk away. I lunged for him, missed, and hit the pavement with a thud.

"Dave," he said, rushing to me and trying to help me back into my chair. "Leave me alone!" I yelled at him. "Leave me alone, you shit! Get your hands off me! I don't want you touching me, you hear!" And with effort, I pulled myself back into my chair.

Trevor stood guiltily in front of me, watching his feet. "You wanna know why?" he said. "You wanna know? All right, fine. Sure, I pick out a loser to date. I pick the guy who doesn't normally get picked. And you know something, Dave, maybe I do them a bit of good, too, huh? Hey, I just read in the campus paper that you won two rounds in a tournament last week. Do you think you'd have ever done that without me, huh? What about Ernest, huh? Don't you think I did him any good, huh?"

"What, you like playing Saint Trevor or something? Because frankly,

this martyr thing is crap.”

Trevor shrugged. “I don’t care what you think. I made your life better. I took you in when no one else would. And you’re the better for it, one way or the other. I don’t care if you thank me or not.”

“Thank you? You want me to thank you? You made me fall in love with you. Me! Do you know what that was like? Me, who couldn’t even get a date, me, who couldn’t even get some guy to suck his cock! All of a sudden, here I am, dating - dating a dream. My dream. My fantasy has come true. My life is a fairy tale. A fucking fairy tale.” I choked back a sob. “And then it’s all over, before it even starts. Life sucks again. I’m a loser again. Great. Well, gee, thanks a whole hell of a lot, Trevor.”

Trevor shrugged. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Dave. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Liar!” I said, rounding on him. “That was your plan all along. You meant to dump me. How the hell was that supposed to feel? Good?” And before he could say another word, I wheeled off into the night.

I read about Mick’s death a few days later. The paper didn’t list a cause of death, using only the word “sudden”. Somehow, I knew what the cause was. I felt guilty. Instead of yelling at Trevor that night, maybe I

should have been reaching out to Mick.

There was a knock at my door. Without even looking, I knew it was Trevor.

He appeared wild and crazed. He looked at me with hazy, luke-warm eyes. He was breathing hard, as if he had been running from someone. "You wanted to know why," he said between pants. "Well, I'm gonna tell ya."

"Trevor -" I began.

"Shut up!" he screamed at me. I began to feel a little scared. "You wanted to know, I'm gonna tell ya. I've always been perfect. I know, sounds egotistical, but it's true. Perfect looking, perfect grades, perfect athlete. Popular, respected, just the whole nine yards. Parents so damn proud of me. But then, when I was fifteen, I realized I wasn't perfect after all. Wasn't the perfect student, wasn't the perfect guy. You see, I just couldn't get interested in girls. I didn't like them. I liked guys - their bods and the way they smelled - everything.

"I liked guys and there was nothing I could do about it. Am I supposed to fight genetics? But I wasn't perfect anymore, Dave, I was flawed. I was all fucked up. My parents, my friends - everyone would have hated me if they found out. Hated me! You understand what I'm

saying? So no one could ever find out. No one could ever know.

“But - I was lonely, Dave, God, I needed someone, I needed a guy to hold me and to kiss and fuck around with. You know what it’s like! I could have any girl I wanted, but I didn’t want them! Everyday was just another fucking day without a guy. It wasn’t fair!

“And then I met Curt. At a gym, over the summer. I was sixteen. He was in his thirties. God - just to meet someone who liked me was so awesome! It didn’t matter that Curt was old, or ugly, or even a jerk! He wanted to know me, wanted to be with me. I was so damn desperate by this time, and there he was.

“We began to see each other - secretly, of course. I was so damn stupid! I was a kid. I didn’t know what I was doing! We never used a condom. He would just fuck me and I would just lie there. It hurt like hell! Afterward, he would just drive me home or something. He never said he loved me, or even liked me. He just - fucked me.

“Oldest story in the book, right? It was a month after all this that he told me. God, I remember that night crystal clear. Crystal clear. He just took me to a burger joint and told me he had AIDS. God, I’d been so stupid! The signs were all there, but I was too damn fucking stupid to even see them.



"I went numb. I wanted to cry but I was in public, so I just got up and ran away. I never saw Curt again.

"I went to a clinic a few months later and got tested. Sure enough, I had it. I couldn't tell my parents - I just couldn't! I just had to swallow it all and still pretend to be the perfect son I had been pretending to be all along.

"For a really long time I just wanted to die. But then it kind of hit me. I couldn't let this happen to any other guy. All of us young guys were gonna get fucked over like this unless I did something about it! I could meet a guy, date him, make him want something better. Make him hold out for something more than some old AIDS-infected piece of shit. Make him wait for something - good.

"Hell, it was great! Those guys, they all worshipped me. Stupid, dead me! I never did anything dumb. Never had real intercourse. Well, you know," he said, indicating our sex life. I did remember. It had been all touch and warmth. It had been wonderful. "Was it so bad, what I did? Was it so bad? I made life better for all of them! For all of them! For a while, all their dreams came true." He paused to wipe his eyes. "That was more than I got." He wiped his nose. "Now, well - I really fucked up, huh? I really fucked up. I'm dead, Mick's dead. We're all dead, Dave. Just like your legs.

We're all dead." And he put his head into my lap and cried.

It's too bad epilogues aren't in fashion. Jane Austen (was it Austen? Being a math major, I'm not so sure) would have had a field day with what's left over. Two years later saw me winning the national wheelchair championships. I got to be on television, and there's talk of making it an Olympic sport. Just thinking about being in the Olympics makes me shiver. There's something I would never have dared dream.

Trevor had a breakdown after that day in my room. No surprise, huh? I saw him about six months later, when he got out of the hospital. We had been keeping in touch all that time, writing letters and occasional visits. His parents had disowned him when they found out what caused the breakdown, so we moved in together. He had no where else to go.

He got sick about a year later. The disease progressed quickly, as it sometimes does. He had no will to live, not anymore, not after everything that had happened to him.

There were about ten people at the funeral. I took care of him before then. Every day of his life he apologized to me; he would grab my arm and beg me to forgive him, refusing to stop until I told him, as I always told him, that I had forgiven him long ago.

Truth was, though, there was nothing to forgive. Well, his actions had been deplorable, but he paid for those. The last two years we spent together were peaceful and, in a way, uncomplicated, me taking care of Trevor, him getting sick, then getting well. He said he loved me everyday. I had no reason to believe him, but still, somehow, I did.

He made me dream again. Before him, I lived like a robot, going to class, thinking and not feeling. He made me dream, made me alive. He took me to the depths, but he brought me to the heights. He was right. His kiss had awakened me from a mournful sleep; it was only fitting that I be there to kiss him when he slipped into his own dark rest.

I loved Trevor. Told him that every day. But I wasn't sure it was enough, so I had it carved on his grave. Maybe he won't see it, but everyone else will. I know it sounds shallow; but somehow, it seems important.

*Decades passed.*

*The Lord stopped.*

*The animals sighed. The seraphim and cherubim ceased their noisy singing. Silence ruled in heaven and earth.*

*The Lord blew the fifth note. It poured forth slowly, softly, gently, like liquid beauty. The sound reached every ear, every valley and mountain, every soul. A star danced. The earth smiled. Young were born. The cherubim and seraphim sang as one, praising and rejoicing. Man was born of this note, created by its rich sound, springing to life from the wishes and tidings of the entire universe.*

*Only Michael and Umbriel remained unaffected.*

*"But what is it?" Umbriel asked.*

*Michael's answer was not sad. "It is love." And taking Umbriel's hand, he kissed him on the lips.*

*Getting Down to the Business of Living*

*Plaza Hotel  
New York City*

I did it. I actually did it. After everything, I did it.

I won the goddamned U.S. Open.

I let the water run over my face, opening my mouth and then spitting out the warm liquid. I began to cry again; I don't think I ever stopped shaking. I just stood there, crying and shaking and singing and laughing, letting the water stream down on me.

I had showered after the match, of course, but now, after the press interviews, telegrams, and phone calls, I needed some time alone. My hotel room was crammed with family, friends, and deal makers. The bathroom was my only respite.

I turned the silver knob and the water stopped. Silence met my ears. Putting on a fleecy white robe and cautiously peeking around the door, I saw that everyone had finally left my hotel room. Everyone except Bo, who sat on the edge of one of the beds, watching the evening news.

"Hey champ," he said, looking at me and smiling. "The evening news just named you their person of the week. They called you a hero."

I smiled back at him. "Beats being a heel," I quipped.

Bo nodded. "I sent everyone downstairs. Bill rented out one of the conference rooms. We're going to have a party. Celebrate. So get ready."

I padded over to my closet, selected an outfit for the party. Bo turned his back as I began to dress. "You know," I said, "I keep thinking it's Saturday."

"What do you mean?"

I let out half of a laugh. "I just keep thinking today is Saturday, and tomorrow is the final. I feel like I have one more match to play. You can turn around now," I said as I finished buttoning my shirt. "I just can't believe it's over. I can't believe I did it," I added softly.

Bo stood facing me. He placed his hands on my shoulders. "Jeremy," he said, "you did do it. You are the U.S. Open champ. I know the kind of hell you've been through. I know what it took to win this. But you did it! And no one can ever take it away from you." He paused, then continued in a softer voice. "There's nothing to be afraid of anymore."

"I know, I know. It's just -"

"What?"

"I can't get this tie right," I said, my mind distracted. Bo took my hands away from the tie and began to tie it himself. His tall frame lumbered above me. The top of my head came to the bridge of his nose.

"You never did do this right," he mumbled. "The knot was always too big."

"Maybe you should tie all my ties from now on," I said lamely.

"There." With one short yank, my tie was all set. But Bo didn't take his hands away from me.

"Jeremy," he said. "The people will love you again. Most of them already do."

"Do you?" I asked, my voice quavering. Where had that come from?  
"I'm sorry," I added quickly, looking down. "I -"

Bo placed one finger directly under my chin and brought our eyes together. His lips moved, and I waited for the response, for the yes or no that would either way change my life.

But no sound came. Instead, he moved his head towards me, slowly. I could hear the air escaping him as he exhaled, could smell the cologne he used to cover up the sweat of the humid New York day.

And then he kissed me.

I had never kissed a man before. I had kissed a girl once, back at the academy, a lifetime ago. It had been awkward and greasy from lipstick. Now, I felt only the pressure of Bo's lips, their rough edges and smooth interiors, their action as he moved them slowly against mine. I heard a soft sound escape him, and, finally, I felt my own lips respond, moving against

his and pressing back against his mouth. I felt his hands wrap around me, one, then the other, felt my hands wrap around his neck, felt him pull us closer, so close that nothing was between us, as he continued to kiss me.

When he stopped, I felt as if I had won the U.S. Open all over again.

“Yes,” he said thickly, his face one mere inch from mine.

I was dazed. “Yes, what?” I asked faintly.

He smiled. His lips split his round face. “Yes, I love you.”

“Oh.” I had forgotten I had asked. “Me, too.”

His grin grew wider. “You love yourself, too, huh?”

“No! I mean, I do, I mean - you know what I mean.”

“Say it.”

“I love you, Bo. No one has been there for me, ever, like you have. No one’s cared for me like you have. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Bo cupped my face in his strong hands. “Jeremy,” he said, “you don’t know how long I have wanted to hear you say that. I’ve been in love with you from the moment I laid my eyes on you. It took all I had in me not to just stand up and shout ‘Love me! Yes, me!’ every time I saw you enter a room.”

“How come you didn’t?”



He shook his head ruefully. "It wasn't a good time. With everything going on, you didn't need me complicating things any more than they already were."

"And now?"

Bo shrugged. "Now, you know how I feel. It's all up to you, champ."

"I like it when you call me that."

"Oh, you do, do you, champ? Do you like it when I do this?" He wrapped his arms around my waist and drew me close to him again.

"Yes. But I especially like it when you do this." I grabbed his tie and kissed him again.

"Mmmm," he said between closed lips. "What else would you like?" he whispered in my ear. Embarrassed, I wriggled from his grasp.

"I don't know," I finally said. "I've never done anything like this."

Bo looked at me, puzzled at first, and then understanding. "Do you mean that you've been out - sort of - to the entire world, practically - for a year - and you haven't done anything about it? That you're still a virgin?"

I felt my cheeks go red. "I never even kissed a guy until now," I stammered.

"It doesn't change anything. Why should it? I love you. Is it okay when I say that? Is it okay to say I love you?"

"Oh, yeah," I said nodding eagerly. Bo laughed.

"Come on," he said, grabbing me by my hand and dragging me towards the door. "We should get to your party."

"Screw the party. I don't want to go to the party."

"But it's for you."

"I want to stay here. With you."

"Okay. For a little while longer."

We stood in silence for a moment. Bo was staring at me. "What?" I finally asked.

"Nothing, I - I can't believe today is happening. I've thought about what this day would be like. Well, fantasized would be the right word. I never thought - never believed -"

"Believe," I said. Our arms found each other again. "And in these - fantasies of yours, what are we wearing?" My cheeks were red.

Bo grinned. "Not a hell of a lot. But hey, I know you probably want to take it slow and easy. That's cool with me."

"Let's do it."

"What?"

"Let's do it. Right now."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

"Jeremy, I -"

"Bo, please. Don't you think I've thought about this? About you? About us? Do you think you were the only one with fantasies? I've been thrown in with you for a whole year. From the moment I got that fax from you - the one where you told me about you - I've been in love with you. And thinking about you. Dreaming - fantasizing. Whatever you want to call it. Everything you've ever thought about me I've thought about you."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I don't want to be the only Grand Slam champ who's still a virgin." It was a ludicrous sentiment, but somehow, he understood exactly what I meant.

"Okay." Gentler. "Okay."

We stood, staring at each other, as if waiting for our clothes to fall off of their own volition. "Someone has to do something," I said.

"Right," Bo said. Awkwardly, he put his arms around me and kissed me softly. The kissing became more urgent. I could feel my pants begin to swell and a heat between my legs. Bo's tongue parted my lips as his hands traversed my back.

We did this for a full ten minutes. "Shouldn't we take some clothes

off?" I said.

Bo looked at me. I wondered what he was searching for. He removed my tie, the beautiful Windsor he had created, and unbuttoned my shirt. He slid it off my shoulders and removed my white t-shirt. A cool blast of air conditioning hit my skin, making it feel even jumpier than I felt. Bo kissed my shoulder, then slowly began to kiss my chest before returning to my mouth.

It was my turn. I removed Bo's tie and shirt and threw them in a heap on the floor. I removed his t-shirt and saw a forest of brown hair splayed over Bo's chest. I ran my fingers through it, smelled it, tasted it.

He began to kiss me with more purpose, his lips parting mine and his tongue darting in and out. His hands rubbed my ass, and my eyes began to swim with pleasure. He slowly undid my belt buckle. I watched as he unfastened the belt, and gasped when I heard the button on my slacks pop open.

I did the same to Bo. We both stood facing each other, our slacks undone, catching glimpses of boxer shorts. Then Bo did something I never expected him to do.

He laughed.

He laughed so hard that he had to sit on the edge of the bed. He chest

shook, his stomach rippled, and his mouth grew wide with sound.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded, but this was only met with more laughter. Angry, I grabbed my shirt and headed for the bathroom. My cheeks felt red-hot with shame.

“Wait!” he said, grabbing my wrist. “Don’t go!”

“What’s so funny?” I asked again, trying to free my wrist from his grasp.

“Not you, champ, I swear. It’s just - all this. It’s unbelievable! It’s not at all like how I pictured it.”

“How did you picture it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, champ. Honest! Different, I guess. I never thought it would happen.” He wrapped his arms around my waist, his mouth at intervals kissing my stomach.

“So why were you laughing?”

“I don’t know, champ. I guess because I’m so damn happy right now.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, champ. I love you, Jeremy.” He paused. “Am I forgiven?”

“I guess.”

“Have I ruined the mood?”

“I think so. A guy doesn’t like to be laughed at right before he takes his pants off.”

“You’re beautiful. Don’t worry, champ. I’ll get you back in the mood,” he added as he slowly slid my pants down off my waist, past my knees and on to the hotel floor.

*Bayberry Cemetery  
Bayberry, Maryland*

Martha Washburn slowly set the small orange begonia next to her husband’s grave. She was an elderly woman; eighty-eight, to be exact, proud that she had lived that long. Her skin, once a shiny coffee color, had faded over the years to a sallow-tinged brown. Her hair was mostly grey, tied back this morning in a neat bun. She wore a simple flower-covered summer dress, thick, rolled down support hose and white canvas shoes. Sophia Loren glasses covered her brown eyes, but if anyone cared to look into them, a warm spark of intelligence would have looked back.

Martha sat gingerly on the stone bench next to Charles’ grave, letting out a loud “umph” as she fell back on the cold stone. It was the first of the month, which meant it was time to visit Charles.

Charles had died eight years before. The two of them had been

together sixty years, but Martha saw little reason to spend the rest of her life “mourning for a man who could never put down the dang toilet lid.” Martha was, by nature, a caretaker; after Charles’ death, she still had six children, seven grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren to take care of. And from what Martha saw, they needed a lot of taking care of; especially her grandbabies, growing up in a world that changed so fast that Martha never bothered to try and keep up.

Like this afternoon, for example, when her granddaughter had dropped her off at the cemetery for her monthly visit with Charles. This was her eldest grandbaby, and Martha was sure Lynette was having problems at home. Lynette didn’t want to discuss them. Martha knew that she was wishing the old lady would just shut up and get out of the car. But Martha saw how simple the solution was: Lynette should just leave her husband. But Lynette didn’t want to hear it, and had politely left Martha at the cemetery while she ran errands.

Martha didn’t care much for divorce; but she cared even less for Tony, Lynette’s husband. Tony was a drunk, and a mean one at that. “Grandma,” Martha could hear Lynette say, “you just don’t understand.”

“But I do understand, Charles,” Martha said aloud. The only response was the steady *rat-tat-tat* of a nearby woodpecker. But Martha knew

Charles heard her.

Charles was probably the only person left who listened to Martha. And that, she knew, was only because he couldn't talk back. When he was alive, Charles had been a college professor, a teacher of mathematics, conditioned to people listening to him. Martha had been a housewife for sixty years; she wasn't educated, but she had sense, something she no longer saw in the rest of her family. Lynette was educated, Martha reasoned, and was still dumb enough to stay with her husband. Martha took pride that she would have left a long time ago.

Martha told all this to Charles, but silently, in her mind. She told Charles of the new great-grandbaby and the two on the way, of Daryl's college graduation and Marcus' new job. Oh, she didn't believe that Charles cared to hear such things. He never had in life. But it got her out of the house, and she could come see Charles' grave, wipe it clean of the grass cuttings and the bird doo and the what not. She was still a caretaker.

When Martha was finished she looked around the green cemetery. She watched the people crying or solemnly leaving flowers beside the graves of loved ones. Only old people came to cemeteries, she thought. Young people are too busy living to go to cemeteries. Scares 'em to death to even think about it. Foolish, Martha mused, to fear the dead. They don't do



nothing, 'cept maybe look on, and help out a bit when they want to, she thought.

She stood slowly, using her four-footed aluminum cane for support. She would have loved to take a walk around the lush cemetery, enjoying the flowers and admiring the richly carved marble. She would have loved to go back to the Civil War Memorial that stood at the center of the cemetery, but her knees would not allow it; instead, Martha hobbled towards a stone bench some twenty yards away.

The going was slow, and Martha softly cursed her knees. Yet, about ten feet from the bench, Martha saw a sight that made her apologize to her knees. Lordy, Martha Washburn, she thought to herself, what rights has you got to be complaining now?

What Martha saw was a young man, no more than twenty-five, in a wheelchair. He was slight, with straight brown hair combed in the style that is never in fashion and yet never out of it either. He wore a simple red sweatshirt with some college's name on it, though the letters were too distant for Martha to read. Around his neck he wore some kind of ribbon; Martha couldn't tell what it was.

He was staring at a small, plain grave in a row of small, plain graves. He wasn't crying, at least not that Martha could tell. He just sat there,

staring, like a stone, at the stone, Martha thought. It was a sad sight.

Martha shuffled over to the young man.

He heard her approach, and turning his chair a bit, gave her room to pass. But Martha moved to another small bench about five feet from the young man. She sat down with another loud “umph” and rubbed her sore knees.

“Hello, young ‘un,” she said slowly. “How do you do?”

The young man seemed puzzled by the attention. “Hello,” he replied evenly. “How are you?” Now that she was closer, Martha could see that the ribbon was attached to a silver-colored medal. In his hand, the young man held a folded piece of paper.

Martha looked at the grave. The lettering was small, but Martha thought she could make out a name. Trevor. She couldn’t see the dates, but at the bottom, she saw in bolder words, “I love you.”

“Nice day, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes,” the young man replied. “Sunny.”

“A little brisk, though. We gonna get some rain, too. I can feel it.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“I am.” Martha stared at the young man. “Friend of yours?” she said, indicating the grave.

The young man hesitated, then nodded. "Did he die young?" Martha asked. "I don't see so good, so tell me. Did he die young?"

The young man nodded again. He seemed on the verge of tears.

"That's a real shame, then, yes indeed. A real shame. People shouldn't die young. People should live till they're old, like me. Guess how old I am, young man. C'mon, how old am I?"

It worked. The question distracted the young man. "Forty-nine," he said with a small, sly smile.

Martha squealed in delight. "Oh, you're a charmer! I see that now! Yes, you are a charmer! Not like my Charles, over there, no, he wasn't a charmer at all. He was a solid man. You know? Just solid. Good husband material. But not a charmer, nope, not at all."

"I'm sorry about your husband."

"Well, thank you, young man, but it's been eight years now, so I can handle it. It was tough at first, you know? But we got to get back down to the business of living, that's what I always say. You want to know how Charles died? He was shot. Killed in a convenience store robbery. Yup, something terrible it was. Picture of health, too, for eighty-two that is. Not like me. I got the bad knees and the bad hip and my eyes aren't too good. But Charles - never been sick a day in his life. Then one day, he's just

gone.”

“That’s awful.”

“Well, young man, yes it is, yes it is indeed. But he had a full life, and we was together some sixty years. Had six kids, we did, and seven grandbabies. Course he’s missing out on the great-grandbabies now, but that’s part and parcel, I suppose. What did your friend die of? An accident?”

The young man shook his head. When he spoke, he was barely audible. “AIDS.”

Martha nodded. “Ah, I saw that on the news. That’s a terrible disease, just awful. All those young men, just dying like that, and women, too, now, I suppose. All those young people. It’s awful. Just terrible, yes it is.” Martha re-read the words at the bottom of the grave. “Those your words?” she asked.

The young man was startled. “Yes,” he finally answered thickly. “We were together two years, before -”

Martha took the young man’s hand in her gnarled hand. She was surprised at how warm it felt. “It’s okay, there young ‘un, just let it out. I understand.” She handed him a handkerchief.

“Thanks,” the young man said, blowing his nose. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, I understand. For years after Charles’ death I would just burst into tears, all the time. Not a lot, mind you, just every now and again. Place like this bound to make a body weepy, right? Better now?”

The young man nodded. “Thanks. And - thanks for not minding - about Trevor and me.”

Martha waved her hand dismissively. “Lordy, child, I’m too old to care about stuff like that. I don’t profess to understanding it, but it’s all love, and if it’s love, the Lord don’t mind, that’s what I say. And if the Lord don’t mind, honey, I sure ain’t gonna.”

The young man smiled wanly. “Thanks.”

“What’s that medal?” Martha asked, nodding towards the silver disk around the young man’s neck.

“This?” the young man asked, holding up the medal as if seeing it for the first time. “Oh. I won it last summer. At the Olympics.”

“The Olympic games?” Martha was surprised. The young man nodded. “Lordy, you mean the real-life Olympics? Are you one of those wheelchair athletes or somethin’?”

The young man smiled. “Wheelchair tennis, second place, silver medal.”

Martha chuckled. “Well, goodness, I saw you all on the television! It’s

amazing what you do, yes indeed. Just amazing!”

“Thanks. I just - I brought it to show to Trevor. Stupid, huh?”

“No! Why do you say that? He’d be proud of you, surely, for winning that. I bet he’s glad you brought it.”

The young man smiled ruefully. It was a strange look, Martha thought. “He would have been proud,” he finally said.

“It’s a shame he had to go away like that. You obviously loved him very much.”

The young man smiled the same strange way. “I did. Though I was never sure if he knew it.”

Martha squeezed his hand. “I’m sure he did, baby, I’m sure he did. He’d have stayed if he could have. Remember that. But he’s at peace now. No more pain.”

“Do you ever wonder - no, never mind.”

“What? Go on, baby. Out with it.”

“Do you ever ask yourself why it was your husband who went to that convenience store and not someone else’s?”

“Nope. I know why he went to that convenience store.”

“Why? Was it his destiny?”

Martha laughed. “No, honey, he went to get me some ice cream. We

had just finished dinner, and I had mentioned that I wanted some ice cream. He went to go get it for me. Now, I know what you're gonna ask next. Do I feel bad over that? Well, I did. But, baby, it wasn't my fault he went there that night. It wasn't Charles' fault, either. I guess it wasn't anybody's fault. It's just chance."

The young man frowned, softly, but then smiled again. "You are very wise."

Martha laughed again. "Good lord, honey, I wish you could say that to my granddaughter when she picks me up. She thinks I'm an old fool."

"She's wrong."

"What's that in your hand, sugar?"

The young man looked down at the piece of paper. "Oh. Just something I read at the Olympics."

He offered the paper to Martha. She took it and read it aloud with a shaking hand. "He had a heart that could have held the empire of the world; but instead he had to content himself with a cellar.' A heart that could have held the empire of the world. That your man?" The young man nodded. "Sounds like a fine young man to me."

"He was." Suddenly the young man started, as if realizing something. "Do you know," he said, "that here I sit, pouring out my heart, and I

haven't even introduced myself? My name's Dave. Dave McGowan."

Martha extended her hand slowly. "Martha Washburn. Nice to meet you, Dave."

"Same here, Mrs. Washburn." The young man paused for a moment. "I really did love him."

"I know, baby."

"Do you suppose - I mean, do you think - did he love me?"

Martha wrapped her arm around the young man's shoulders. "I'm sure he did, baby. I'm sure he did."

*Summerhill Memorial Hospital  
Buffalo, NY*

Abe Michaels hated football.

Sure, the 6'4", 250 pound lineman knew football had gotten him to college in the first place. No school would have given him any money for schooling unless, of course, he could mow down a few members of an opposing team every Saturday. But Abe was good at playing ball, and had thrilled both his mother and his guidance counselor by getting a full scholarship to the local state university.

But this was exactly why he hated football - at least at this moment.



Football had gotten him into college, and it was a college class that brought Abe here. To the hospital - on a Friday, no less - to of all places, an AIDS ward.

He could still hear his sociology professor. "Abe," Dr. Everly had told him in her chirpy British accent, "it is not my fault that you have waited until the last minute to complete your volunteer assignment. I am sorry, but it's the only one left. It's either that or you fail the class, which means you are off the team."

And off the team meant out of school. No more ball, no more frat parties, no more women - and his mom would kick his ass. So Abe went.

But that didn't mean he was going to like it.

He walked through the shiny doors into the starchy white ward. Nurses fluttered here and there, like hummingbirds, Abe thought, only with better legs. An especially good looking blond nurse, with huge tits, came up to Abe. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah," Abe mumbled, suddenly remembering why he was here. "I'm from Dr. Everly's class. I'm a volunteer."

"Great!" the nurse said, taking Abe by the hand and bringing him to an older black woman behind a desk. "Mary, this guy's the volunteer. I'm sure we have something he could do, don't we?"

Mary looked at Abe appraisingly. "Sure we do," she said, sounding tired.

"I don't have to clean or anything, do I?" Abe asked.

"No, sweetheart," Mary said as Abe watched the pretty nurse walk away. "Mostly you'll just visit with the patients, maybe run a few deliveries for us."

Visit with the patients. "You mean - in there - with them?"

Mary levelled her gaze at Abe. "Yes, with them. The patients. This is an AIDS ward, you know."

"I know."

"Good. Remember that these are people and treat them with respect. And also remember that Dr. Everly lets me give you your grade. If I get any complaints from any of the patients about your attitude, it's a one-way ticket to 'F'-ville. Got it?"

"Got it," Abe mumbled.

"Good. I'm glad we understand each other. Follow me." Mary motioned Abe over towards a row of doors. "That's Mr. Mooney, Mr. Dempsey, Mrs. Lionels, and Mr. Logan. That's all we have right now. The first three tend to have regular visitors, but no one ever comes in to see Mr. Logan. Maybe you can start there."

Mary turned to leave. "But what do I do?" Abe panicked.

Mary sighed. "Just talk to them. They're people - they like to have someone to talk to. If you don't have much to say, you can always read to them. You can read, can't you?"

Abe's cheeks flamed. "Yes."

Mary folded her arms in front of her. "Good. And remember what I said. These are some seriously sick people. Do not show any sort of disgust or anything. Sometimes we get a college kid in here, pulling an attitude, who can't handle it. All that does is upset the patients. So don't show anything. Understand? It's not contagious. It's not gonna get you."

"I know," Abe said sullenly.

"Good," Mary said, walking off. She turned one last time before leaving. "Who knows? Maybe you'll even learn something."

Abe walked slowly down to the last door. He opened it slowly. Lying on the rumpled bed was a mere wisp of a man. He appeared fifty. His hair - what little there was - was streaked with grey. His face was shrivelled, and Abe estimated he could not have weighed more than 130 pounds. His limbs were like sticks. Abe could clearly hear his labored breathing but could barely look into his hollow, sunken eyes.

"Hi," Abe said, trying to sound cheerful but failing. "My name's Abe

Michaels. You're Mr - uhh - Luger, right? I'm here to visit you."

The man smacked his lips together slowly. He reached a skinny hand out for a glass of water and drank three big gulps down before rasping a satisfied "ahh" and sinking back onto the bed. "My name," he said irritably, "is not Luger, but Logan. L-O-G-A-N. And it's not Mister - it's Doctor. I wish those nurses would remember that."

Abe gulped. "Sorry, Mr. - Dr. Logan. I'm kind of new at this."

The man levelled his gaze at Abe. His gaze was cold and empty. "Uhhuh. And what college class are you doing this for?"

Abe saw no reason not to tell him. "Sociology."

The man nodded. "Sociology. Now there's a useless field. Abe - that was your name, correct? - Abe, please tell me you are not a sociology major."

Abe shook his head. "Business major."

The man smirked. "Business. Well, it's a living."

The man motioned for Abe to sit in the green plastic chair next to his bed. Abe did so, but instinct made him push the chair back a few inches. "Well," Abe said, "I'm not really smart enough to be a doctor like you are."

The man scowled. "Firstly, though I am a doctor, I am not an MD. I am a PhD - do you know what that is?"

Abe nodded, annoyed. "Yes."

The man smirked again. "Good. My PhD is in medieval studies. That may not seem important to you, but it was everything to me - once." He paused. "A long time ago."

Silence hung in the air. To Abe, it felt as if someone had already died.

"Sorry," he finally mumbled.

The man turned to gaze at him. "Why are you here, young man? Why don't you disturb someone else?"

"Well, the nurse told me -"

"I don't care what the nurse told you, Abe. I am not here merely to grant you extra credit. I am a dying man, Abe. Do you realize that? And I don't want to spend my last days staring at your blank face."

Angrily, Abe stood to go. "No offense, Dr. Logan," he said, hitting the word "doctor" especially hard, "but you're an asshole." With that, Abe stormed out of the room. And straight into Mary.

"What are you doing out here so soon?" she said.

Abe gestured back towards the room. "He's a jerk!"

Mary turned Abe around. "I don't care what he is. You're working for me."

Abe used his strength to stop Mary. "Look, lady," he said. "I didn't

come here to take his abuse.”

Mary sighed. “Fine. Do what you want. But he’s all alone in this world. He’s dying and he’s alone. Maybe you wouldn’t be so nice about it, either.” With that she stormed off.

Abe stared at the door of Logan’s room. “Oh, fuck it,” he finally said and went back in.

“Look. I don’t care what you want. I’m here and I have to visit with you for now. So deal with it. We can talk, or I can read to you if you want. We can watch television. Whatever.”

Logan pondered this for a long moment. “Very well,” he said. “If I must. I would really prefer it if you read to me, then. My eyesight is not what it used to be. One of the wonderful side effects of AZT.”

“Fine.” Abe was surprised the old man had given in so easily. “What do you want me to read to you?”

Logan sighed. “I don’t suppose you can read Middle English, can you?”

Abe’s brow furrowed. “You mean like Shakespeare?”

Logan looked as if he would lose his temper again. “No, Abe,” he finally said. “Not Shakespeare. Chaucer. Do you know Chaucer?”

“*The Canterbury Tales.*”

“Right. It is - my favorite piece of literature. Would you mind?” he said, handing Abe a worn and tattered book.

Abe opened the book. “I can’t read this! It’s not even English!”

“Yes, it is,” Logan said, much more patiently than before. “Try sounding it out. It isn’t that hard.”

Abe began, but was no more than seven words into the first passage when the man on the bed began to laugh. It was a surprising sound, and Abe wondered how someone so frail could make such a loud noise.

The pretty nurse entered the room. “It sounds like you two are having a good time.”

“Yes, we are,” said Logan, still chuckling. “Abe here is just destroying a classic.”

“Isn’t that nice?” the pretty nurse said, not paying any attention. “Time for your medicine, Mr. Logan.”

“Dr. Logan,” Abe corrected without thinking. The nurse ignored him. Abe watched as Logan swallowed an endless number of colorful little capsules.

They were both silent as the nurse left the room. “You like her,” Logan said.

Abe nodded. “She’s hot. Don’t you think so?” Abe realized what he

was saying. "Oh. Sorry -"

Logan interrupted him. "What makes you think I'm gay? Just because I have AIDS?"

Abe nodded. "Yeah. I guess so. Sorry."

Logan smiled. "That's okay. As a matter of fact, I am gay."

Silence again. "Do you ever watch professional wrestling?" Logan asked suddenly.

Abe almost burst out laughing, the question was so absurd. "I used to, when I was a kid. Why?"

"Do you remember a wrestler named Shawn Hunter?"

"Sure. Why?"

Logan smiled weakly. "Just wondered. I wondered if anyone remembered him, that's all."

Abe shrugged. "I do. He used to be really cool."

Logan looked sad again. "Yes, he was." He stirred, as if waking from a dream. "So you play ball?" Abe nodded. "And let me guess - you must be on the line."

Abe nodded again. "You know ball?"

The man smiled genuinely at Abe. "I was a quarterback in college."

Abe was surprised. "Really?" he asked. It was hard to imagine this



man ever doing anything athletic.

The man seemed to read Abe's thoughts. "I know, you can't imagine a bookish queer like me being a jock. Once, though, I was like you. Abe, how old do you think I am?"

Abe squirmed in his chair. "I don't know."

"Be honest with me, please. Honest Abe. Bet you've heard that one a hundred times. Seriously. No one will tell me anything. I don't have the strength to get out of bed and look in the mirror. How old do I look to you?"

Abe shrugged. "Fifty?"

The man grimaced in pain. "I'm thirty-three.

Abe was stunned. "Thirty-three? No way."

The man reached out with his skinny ancient hand and grabbed on to Abe's wrist. Abe was scared. "Please, do me a favor. Take the mirror off the wall and bring it to me. It's heavy, but you're a strong guy, you can do it. Just hold it over me, so I can see."

Abe hesitated. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Please."

Abe tugged the mirror gently off the wall and held it over Logan. His eyes were closed. "Okay."

Logan opened his eyes. His breathing stopped; Abe could see his body tense. Logan looked for one long moment, up and down, his eyes ravaging his own wasted body. "Okay," he finally said. Abe put the mirror back on the wall. "Are you all right?" he asked.

The man shook. "Fine. I - I'd like to be alone for a while. Okay?"

Abe walked towards the door. "I'll see you next week?"

"Yes. Fine." Abe turned to leave.

"Abe?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Abe nodded and walked into the colorless white hospital ward.

"I thought maybe today you could teach me how to read *The Canterbury Tales*."

"Do you think I have enough time left on this earth?"

"Funny. I just thought it would be educational for me to learn some Old English -"

"Middle English. It's Middle English. And, well, I don't seem to have anything better to do...."

For forty-five minutes the two men practiced and re-read the first

few lines of the prologue. "I think I'm getting the hang of this," Abe said.

"You must have been a really good teacher."

Logan sighed. "I never was a teacher, really, not for long anyway."

Abe took out a sandwich from his pocket and began to chew on it.

"Here, I brought you something," he said, throwing a candy bar on to the bed.

"Chocolate? I'm not supposed to have this."

Abe shrugged. "I won't tell if you won't."

Logan smiled. "Thanks."

"So how come you were never a teacher?"

The man shrugged. "It's a long story."

"I got time."

"I don't know where to begin. I got involved, I guess."

"With the wrestler dude."

Logan was startled. "How did you know?"

Abe shrugged. "I figured you had to be asking about him for a reason. So, what was it? This great romance?"

Logan looked sad. His eyes cast down, towards the bed. "No," he said finally. "Not quite. We - he - it was a bad relationship from the start. He was abusive. I - I stayed. Maybe I shouldn't have. I don't know."

"I'm sorry."

Logan smiled bravely. "Shit happens, huh? Anyway, it's all ancient history."

"Did he give you - you know - AIDS?"

Logan shrugged. "Probably."

"Didn't you wear a condom?"

Logan looked down again. "Sometimes he didn't give me the option."

"Oh." Abe didn't know what to say. "Is he - gone?"

Logan nodded. "He died a few years ago."

"I'm sorry."

Logan shrugged. "I never loved him, I guess. He never loved me anyway. It was - wrong. Bad." Logan turned to look at Abe. Tears rimmed his eyes. "I've never loved anyone, you know? Not anyone at all."

"Your family?"

Logan barked a short, ironic laugh. "Family? I haven't seen them in years. When they found out I was gay, I was quickly excommunicated." He continued to look straight ahead. "Nope. I've never loved anyone. Not even myself, really. And no one's ever loved me in return."

"Now that's not true."

"Please, Abe. You don't know. You weren't there. Don't patronize me."

He paused. "You're young; you don't understand."

Abe shrugged. "I guess I can cut you some slack; you're the sick one, after all."

Logan laughed, a short ironic bark. "It's not AIDS. Life is the disease, Abe. And death is the only cure."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

Logan sighed. "Maybe I'm the one who should apologize. My life hasn't been good. But I have only myself to blame."

"Why blame anyone?"

Logan appeared puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Abe shrugged. "I don't know. I just wondered why you needed someone to blame. Especially yourself. If you're gonna blame anyone, blame your family, or that guy you were with."

"It's not their fault, Abe. Don't you see? I'm the one responsible for it all."

"What are you responsible for? For wanting to love someone? You didn't hit yourself. You didn't dump on yourself. That was them. And you weren't born hating yourself either."

Logan paused. "So it was them? I should hate them?"

Abe leaned over and stared into Logan's eyes. "Listen. When I make

a crappy play on the field, I get mad at myself. Always. Then I get mad at the guy who made an ass of me and scored. Ultimately, though, I just go on to the next play. If I stop and think about it, I'm not going to be ready the next time around."

Logan listened intently. He stared at the strong, powerful face inches from his own. "What do you say, for next week, you practice the opening monologue of *The Canterbury Tales* and come in and read it to me? After a week's practice, you should be quite good."

Abe nodded softly. "You're on."

Logan smiled. "I should like it hear it one more time."

Abe smiled. "You got it."

Abe was late. Dashing through the hospital, he raced to Logan's room. The bed was empty.

"Abe," a voice said behind him. It was Mary.

"Where did Dr. Logan go? I was supposed to read to him today."

"He's gone, Abe."

"He went home?" Abe asked, but even as he said it he realized what she meant. "God."

"He died last night," Mary said. "I tried to call, but no one answered."

She walked over to Abe and put a consoling arm around his waist. "I know you two were - friends. He talked about your visits a lot. They really brightened up his last days." Abe did not reply. "Oh," Mary added, indicating the night stand. "He left that for you." She turned to go. "In case you were wondering, you're getting an 'A'."

"Thanks," Abe mumbled, distracted. On the night stand was Logan's *Canterbury Tales*. Abe picked it up. Inside, he saw four lines underlined in a shaky scrawl. He was sure the words weren't meant for him, but he opened the book and softly, to himself, began to recite, in the proper Middle English:

*And smale fowles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the night with open ye -  
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages -  
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.*

*1512 Canada St.  
Miami, FL*

*Hi Honey!*

*Happy 79th Birthday! Just a quick note to wish you well. I left for the office early today, so I should be home early this evening. Then we can*

*celebrate quietly, just as you requested. OK?*

Todd was eighty, but only he knew that. He had been lying about his age for so long that no one, not even Keene, knew it for sure.

He liked having secrets from Keene, even if they were small ones. He enjoyed knowing something about himself that no one else knew. He couldn't honestly say why; he just liked having a part of himself for himself.

Eighty. Todd had never imagined, not ever, what life would be like at eighty. It seemed such a ridiculous milestone that it never crossed his mind. And yet, looking back, it all went by so fast. Todd could still remember being young, his reddish-blond hair glistening in the sun as he worked his taut muscles in sweaty athleticism. Now he had no hair, and his muscles had begun to sag, just a bit. He tried to keep in shape, but looking in the mirror, he saw only an old man, his mouth puckered with age, his eyes dim, his skin wrinkled like ancient parchment. It was himself, yet every time he saw the reflection, Todd felt surprised. In his mind, he was still twenty, still a youth in cut-offs and a tank top running down a field with a ball in his hands.

Todd walked out the front door and slowly, cautiously, bent over to



weed the flower bed hugging the house. Eighty. To be alive for eight decades - he still couldn't fathom it. No one he knew had ever lived to eighty. Jake hadn't, Keene was only seventy. Todd was outliving them all. It didn't bother him, but it seemed strange; he wondered why he had been chosen to live this long.

Eighty. He snorted. Didn't seem like eight decades. He could still remember so many moments from his past that seemed as clear as this morning. His marriage to Keene. Their first meeting. Jake and the cruise ship.

Jake. Todd thought about Jake every day. If things had been different, it would have been Jake who had reached eighty. He would have handled eighty well, loving the attention and declaring himself ready for another ten years. Jake was practical that way.

Todd leaned back gently on his knees. Eighty. Had it been a good life? He had loved Jake for ten years. He had loved Keene since, showing a ferocity of devotion even he wasn't aware he was capable of. After Keene graduated from law school, they had travelled, lived how they wanted. Vagabonds, Keene used to call them. Gypsies.

Then at the age of thirty-five Keene wanted to have a child. Todd was forty-five, and fifty, which had seemed another distant milestone in

the past, was looming. Todd balked, but Keene insisted, and as in so many other battles of will, Keene won. So Marty came to them, and Todd became a father.

Keene was the one who showed Marty the most affection, staying up with him several nights a week, sometimes for no reason other than to watch him. Todd often said Keene was born to be a father. But it was Todd who acted as disciplinarian, Todd who laid down the law, Todd who took Marty to get his shots and to the dentist and for his driver's test. So Marty would always go to Todd for things - for money, for advice - while it was on Keene Marty lavished his affection and attention, as if to ask Keene for something would have broken his heart.

To be honest, though, Todd didn't mind at all. He was suited for taking care of the details, for day care boards and the PTA. They made good parents, and Todd could no longer imagine his life without Marty.

Marty and Keene. At age eighty, Todd looked back and saw only two people he had loved. Marty and Keene. And Jake. And the twins, of course, Willa and Owen. Todd's grandchildren. And his daughter-in-law, Karyn, a woman who reminded him so much of Cecily that to see her host a dinner party made him smile in remembrance. Keene never saw it, but then he only remembered his mother through twelve-year-old eyes.

Family. After eighty years, Todd had his family.

“Dad,” he heard a voice say. Marty. Todd had been so busy remembering he had not heard him pull up.

“Dad,” Marty continued, “you really shouldn’t be out in this sun without a hat on.” He helped Todd up to his feet.

Todd waved an annoyed hand at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. I never wear a hat.”

“Well,” Marty said authoritatively, “I’ll have to talk to Pa about that.” Pa was Keene; Todd had always been Dad, the more practical version of the name.

“C’mon,” he said. “I’m taking you out to lunch.”

They went to lunch every year for Todd’s birthday. Just the two of them. It was a ritual Todd had grown very fond of. “Where are we going?”

Marty grinned impishly. “You’ll see. Let’s go inside and get you ready.”

Lunch was in a restaurant overlooking a horse track. “Your father would kill us if he knew we were betting like this,” Todd said as he waited for the race to start.

Marty smiled. “It’s a special occasion.” He lowered his voice

conspiratorially. "Besides, I won't tell if you won't."

Marty had bet on horse number seventy-eight, because, as he said, "It's your seventy-eighth birthday, Dad. It must be an omen." Todd found himself remembering Marty's eleventh birthday, the year Keene had insisted on buying Marty a pony. Todd didn't like the idea, but Marty had begged. Keene was adamant, however, that Marty wear pads and a helmet. On his first time riding, though, Marty had fallen. He wasn't wearing his pads and his knee was badly scraped. He had begged Todd not to tell Keene, and Todd agreed. It was another secret they shared.

Todd stared at his son. He felt a surge of pride run through him, that the boy in his memory had become this man. Marty caught Todd staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"You're my son," Todd said.

Marty seemed bemused. "So?"

But Todd only smiled.

They were driving in the car through a summer storm. Todd remembered another drive in another storm, the day Keene came to live with him and Jake. He'd been afraid to see Keene then; now, it seemed as if he lived for it.

He hoped Keene would be home when they got there, though it would still be early. Todd wanted Keene to retire, so they could travel and spend time together. Turning eighty had made him acutely aware of the little time left. But Keene never thought like that. He never imagined things would end. Todd often wished that it was Keene who would die first, to spare him the pain of losing another loved one.

Eighty. Todd felt alone in turning eighty. He wondered if he should tell Marty the truth, tell Marty he was eighty. Yet to Marty numbers didn't make a difference. To him, eighty was the same as seventy-eight.

The driveway was empty when they arrived home, and Todd felt a surge of disappointment. Keene would be home soon, he hoped, as he opened the door with a shaky hand.

"Surprise!" a chorus of people yelled. Todd was startled. For one split second he recognized none of them. Then faces began to distinguish themselves - Karyn, the twins, yes the twins, and Karyn's parents, a well-dressed couple in their early sixties. A few neighbors, some friends from work he'd kept in touch with, and there - in front of them all - Keene.

"Happy Eightieth Birthday," Keene said with a grin, coming over to Todd and kissing his cheek. "Did you honestly think you could fool us?"

"You were planning this all along," Todd finally said.

Keene nodded. "Yup. Marty took you out to lunch just as a ruse to get us all in the house and get everything all set. We parked around the corner so you wouldn't see our cars."

"But how did you know I was eighty today? I thought no one knew."

Keene's laugh was full of delight. "I've known all along you've been lying about your age. I just let you get away with it. Come on. There's cake and presents. Everyone wants to wish you well."

Karyn was there. "Happy Birthday, Dad," she said, hugging him loosely. The twins clamored at his feet. "Grandpa!"

"Would you like to know what I got you?" Keene asked. Todd smiled. He knew Keene was dying to tell him.

"Of course."

"I'm retiring." His eyes sparkled. "And you can choose any place you want for our first trip." Keene placed his shaking arms around Todd.

"Thanks for fifty years, husband."

"You're welcome," Todd said, opening his arms to try and engulf his entire family in one grand hug.

*Millenia passed.*

*The Lord has not stopped. Nor will he. And though the memories of the first notes linger, it is the final sound that ultimately triumphs in heaven and in earth. For this was Michael's gift; to God, and to us.*

*Amen.*