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6.1 - THE NEW YEAR'S SNOWSTORM

Being an illegal alien here in America has been a very trying experience for me. I have never been accustomed to other than being of the highest, most privileged class in my own country of India, yet here I dare not even make my existence known in any way, especially to be noticed by police. I can claim no rights, no redress of wrongs or injustice, or for that matter offer any opposition to however I am treated by anyone.

My experiences on the trips to Chicago and then to New York I would much prefer not to remember, the way I was shunned by fellow passengers on busses. Of course I have nothing but the utmost compassion for the oppressed Negro race, and they are very friendly with me, but I could not but feel fury that these stupid white Americans cannot understand that no one should be less equal than they.

The time I spent looking for employment in those cities was perfectly degrading. Always green card, green card. I would explain I only wanted to earn something for a short time, but all the offices were very rude. The only places I found myself accepted simply as a person were the bars in what they call the slums. There no one worried if I had a green card or not. Naturally both times I ran out of money very quickly, though I can live by spending very little. In New York I lived in the house of my cousin. His American wife was very kind, but he was an asshole, telling me that I should go home to India. So it was very soon that I rode on the bus back to New Orleans where I knew I could at least find friends.

In spite of all the problems, I continue to feel I must stay in this country for as long as possible. The difficulties now with China have made it most unattractive for me, socialist as I am, to return. My political ideas would not be popular with the family. And, I must add, there is no doubt that within fifteen days of coming home, my father will be arranging a marriage for me. I refuse to fall into that trap, to sink into the cultural abyss of India. Not after this experience here in America where life is so much more sane, if not ideal in any respect, and some people have the freedom to be different. How can I go back to those hopeless masses? Back to those millions who cannot be helped and disappear among them? Here in America are millions also, but they are not without hope, even though their President Kennedy is assassinated.

My good father well understands my wanting to stay in this country as long as I can, and he continues to send me small amounts. But the exchange rate is so miserable that there are only a few dollars for so very many rupees.

When I returned from New York, I was seriously depressed. I wandered around the university area streets with my little suitcase, afraid to go see Felicia or Tommy. Wondering why either really would want to see such a person as me again. Finally I decided to go to the University Center to find my old friend probably at his cash register. I turned off Broadway onto Freret, and in no more than ten seconds there was a shout from a passing car. It was Tommy in the window waving. I must say, our stars are crossed. It seemed fated that Tommy should see me

and pull me back into the familiar circle. Over beers with him in La Marina, I knew it was no use resisting, and so the next day I went to see Felicia on Audubon Place.

As soon as she saw me at the door, she started to cry and didn't say anything when I said I'd come back. She put her arms around me, and we made love right away. Only afterwards did she ask, "What will you do now?" I told her I'd like to live with her again because I still wanted to become married. Felicia still insisted we had to go to India to be married, and I couldn't tell her why that was impossible. At least she let me live with her again and told me if I was serious to think about the India option. In only a few weeks we moved to a smaller less expensive apartment on Broadway Street.

Because I became worried that I would somehow be discovered, I stayed inside for many days on end reading a great number of books. When I thought I would go crazy living like that, I began to look for work, at first cautiously. There was no choice but to live and let whatever would be happen. The other reason was that Felicia could not really afford to pay all the rent and food for both of us like before.

Wherever I inquired for work around the docks, they wanted to see the damned green card, and even when I looked to find a job in my field of civil engineering in an office, even as a clerk or assistant, they were suspicious that I had abandoned my studies in the subject. So there was nothing. Several friends said I should work as a bartender in the French Quarter, but I think such work is disgusting, like being a waiter. I do not fear hard labor, but I will not serve.

In not too long a time, however, I found a job in the Jax Brewery, right across Decatur Street from La Marina, working night shift as a janitor. It is hard and menial, like most jobs for desperadoes like myself, but I am resigned to it as a source of income which demands no more from me than physical labor. So with this brewery job, we were financially okay, and life became very contentedly domestic again. I must admit that I very much need to be cared for by a woman, someone to wash my clothes, cook my food, and make love with me.

On the other hand, the job is also a good insight for me into the lives of poor Americans and makes me feel even more concern for our untouchables in India. My companions with the mops and buckets in the brewery are certainly of a very low class. One, by the name of Bo is an older alcoholic American who does almost nothing but give orders to the rest of us, even though he is only a janitor too. But I believe he is a charity case of one of the managers, and relying on that, and the fact that he considers himself the only "white" on the shift, he plays at being boss. The two other workers are truly black, one an American named Woodrow, full of hate for whites and consequentially very friendly to me. The other is another illegal, a Haitian named Pierre who tries very hard to learn English from Woodrow. Obviously I have very little to talk about with any of them, and I keep busy with my scrubbing. It is a very good exercise in self-abnegation.

This job, which unfortunately supplies me with so much free beer that I am starting to grow even fatter, is also a lesson for my political thought. This country of America, which is supposed to be a classless society, is nothing of the sort. Here, instead of caste, what matters is the size of the bank account. That's what determines how people live. Of course, the blacks are the equivalent of India's untouchables. This giant corporate America has so many oppressed and ignorant workers. How do the other janitors manage to live on the very small salary we earn? I can only manage because of money from my father and living in Felicia's apartment.

Of course, the other mainstay of my life now is my dear Norman—Tommy. Sometimes when I look out my second-floor window at the brewery, I see him on the other sidewalk passing between La Marina and the Mill. I often find him when I go across Decatur to his sailor bar on a break from my work, and there dancing amongst the dark crowds he always seems so bright,

almost incandescent, growing more and more every day into a perfectly beautiful man who at times looks uncannily like a woman with his long blond hair. (This fall his bosses at the cafeteria made him cut his hair shorter, but it is still well over his ears in what they call a “page-boy.”) While I was away in New York, I managed to transcend that strange desire I felt for him and now can look on him thankfully as my true friend, a very special being (who more than once has claimed to be the Greek god of debauchery, Dionysus).

Naturally I can understand Felicia’s generosity to me because we make love, but all the things Tommy has done for me over these years are hard to understand because we do not. He never speaks of his charity, but I know it is of a truly noble source, and each gift is like a treasure to me. It is clear that Tommy no longer desires me now that my body is getting heavy, but I can always feel the love that he rarely mentions. How strange it is that in all my time in this country, the most beautiful person I’ve met is this young homosexualist, my only true friend. When eventually I must go back to India, I would like so much for him to come to stay in my house, and I would find him beautiful boys so he would not be lonely that way.

For I know that he is lonely, although he sleeps with so many fellows, such as that boy from China, or the one from Colombia whom he met soon after I returned, or that rich red-haired guy this fall whom I could not stand. He was so supercilious about the “filth” in La Marina and the Gin Mill. Tommy also told me about his affairs with his roommate Joel and with someone named Mark, and then... Too many. Perhaps I was a little jealous about him sleeping with all those other men, but I never said anything. Now he has decided to be celibate for a year in honor of JFK, which to my mind is a rather unusual memorial.

So this is the remarkable young man who is now my primary social companion. At various times during the late summer when he was recuperating from an illness, I visited at his parents’ home on the edge of the city near the river. He wanted my company because he didn’t feel very comfortable there doing little more than reading and wandering on the riverbank. I can understand well why Tommy prefers to spend as little time there as possible. Several nights we slept together in his sister’s bed and never touched. During the days I took many rides along the levee on one of his sister’s horses and found it great fun. So much riding also produced some bad pains later in my bottom. We also went fishing along the river. Once, while we sunbathed naked among the willows, Tommy told me the sad story of being there years before with his first love, a boy named Pete, and how terribly much he had loved him.

For the various holidays Felicia went again to her family’s home, and for Thanksgiving Tommy took me home with him again. It was a wonderfully traditional American ritual meal, and I ate far too much. The horseback ride later almost caused me to regurgitate. We also spent a couple days there at Christmas, and by that time I had developed a good rapport with Tommy’s mother. I couldn’t tell if she shared my political leanings or was just too polite to argue. With Tommy’s father, I generally reminisced about places and important people in India, and with his sister, I could only exchange sincere smiles. She clearly adores her older brother. The exposure to this family was comforting to me and made me think more fondly of my own. Already so long that I have not seen them, my father, my mother...

On New Year’s Eve Tommy came by the Broadway place to make sure we would go to La Marina together that night. It has become something of a ritual for us now, our third holiday, the dawn of 1964. He would never be anywhere else on that special night, he said, and I also cannot imagine celebrating elsewhere. In the Third Room the crowds were as overwhelming as ever, the music perhaps even louder than usual, and people clearly a lot more drunk. We were soon washed up into a corner by the great whirlpool of motion near the omnipotent jukebox, and

I huddled there observing the madness while Tommy forced his way to the bar to buy us beers.

On one such trip, he returned with a stool for me. How he found it, or maneuvered it through the dancers was inconceivable. I was most grateful, since I've noticed that as I grow heavier, I do not enjoy standing very much. Tommy stood close by most of the time with his arm around my shoulder as though protecting me. I suddenly remembered that last New Year's Eve he had taken a striking Peruvian student home. As I sipped my beer, I considered how unfair it was that I could not make love to him, and how unfortunate that he should still love me so.

Quite soon some friends of his showed up, including that very strange girl named Leah with such large eyes. He was quickly dancing with her as wildly as possible in the crowd. I do enjoy watching Tommy dance because his body has such a fluid motion in the Latin rhythms, and he so obviously enjoys the movement. Still I do not greatly appreciate this music. It is definitely more appealing than the rock and roll, but not quite so much as the Greek songs in the Gin Mill. Perhaps I do not understand the western music. The only piece I truly enjoy is the one by Mozart called the Jupiter Symphony.

Between dances, Tommy always returned to me to see if I needed more beer, and even though his friends were all around, when the magic hour arrived, he was by my side. Taking my hand, he wished me a Happy New Year and softly kissed me on my cheek. The touch of his lips, so tender and chaste, made me somehow sad. Or perhaps it was the effect of all the beers.

Within another hour I was feeling completely depressed, suddenly overcome with an unreasoning homesickness for India and discontent with my life here in New Orleans. Every time I thought of my janitor work, I felt sick in my stomach. Soon, not wanting to be a specter of gloom in the corner, I told Tommy I was going home. He was ready also and forged a path through the crowds for us. Once into the relative quiet of the Second Room, he asked me to come stay at his place since Joel was gone for the holidays. For auld lang syne.

We picked our way through the revelers across the First Room and out onto Toulouse. What a surprise to find that it was snowing heavily! Having been to the Himalayas, I know snow, but this was the first time I had seen it falling here in New Orleans. The thin layer of white on the sidewalks and along the tops of walls muffled the sounds of the dark street. Flurries of flakes glittered as they drifted past streetlights, and there was a strange new, cold fragrance everywhere. I exclaimed and rushed out on to the curbside to gather up a handful of the cold white, while Tommy stood back under the balcony grimacing in disgust. Soon we were laughing and tossing snow at each other on the way through the blowing snowstorm to Canal Street and the streetcar.

It had been very chilly in the early evening, and now after all the handling of snowballs, we were both shivering terribly on the street corner. Tommy stood close up behind me while we waited. After the light-hearted fun of our walk, I suddenly felt the depression returning. The wait for the streetcar was mercifully short.

Once on the car, out of the wind and snow, Tommy and I tried to warm up again, sitting on our numb fingers. In the quiet, almost empty car we huddled together in silence, broken only occasionally by Tommy's "Oh, shit, it's cold!" Several blocks along, he asked in a half-whisper if anything was the matter with me. I explained that I didn't feel very happy about wasting my time the way I was. And I couldn't find a better job without a green card. And the knowing that someday they would find me and I would be sent back to India.

"I've got an idea!" Tommy exclaimed. "You could become a guru! You know—one of those spiritual teachers."

"You're out of your mind!" I laughed at the incongruity. Certainly I am a Brahmin and know the writings, but the thought was ludicrous. "I am no holy man," I protested.

“Sure you are!” Tommy insisted. “You could just wear a beard and Indian clothes. You’d be famous in no time.”

“To be a teacher one must have something to say and live an example,” I protested.

“You’ve got lots to say,” Tommy persisted. “I remember all those long talks we’ve had about the self and God and all that. You’re my guru, and...”

“No,” I interrupted, alarmed that I could have played such a role for dear Tommy, not with my confused politics and ego-centric religion.

“...and I love you,” Tom continued, as though not hearing.

We were silent and close the rest of the ride to Audubon Street, but my depression had for some reason become less dark. The few blocks to Tommy’s apartment were wondrously quiet in the falling snow, a hushed world of white on the lawns and fences, but they were also quite cold. The last short way we almost ran, and coming up to his door through all the bushes covered us both with snow. We had to shake and brush off before going inside. Tommy flicked on the light in the little room with its odd elephant head stand and ranks of bookcases.

“Jesus!” he groaned, “it’s no warmer in here!” I made my way through the basement to the bathroom to relieve my bladder after all that beer, and when I returned to the front room, Tommy was stripping Joel’s bed. “We’ve only got two blankets, and we’re going to have to sleep under both of them—together.

He gave me a soft sweater, a pair of Joel’s sweatpants, and some heavy socks, and was wearing a similar outfit. We were quickly curled up together on his small bed on the platform, warm at last under the two blankets, Tommy with his back to me. “We call this spoon-fashion,” he explained as I held him close. His hair was fragrant, still a little damp from the snowflakes. “Goodnight,” he said softly and apparently fell asleep immediately. I lay awake in the dark for some time, feeling this boy in my arms, so much different than Felicia’s softness.

In the night I dreamt a strange thing. As though I were lying in that same bed, the same way with Tommy close. But it was warm, and we were both nude. In the dream I smelled again the fragrance of his hair, and the heat of his body seemed to envelope me, as though I were penetrating him. The way I once imagined that we would flow together. But when I awoke afterwards, I found that it had not been a wet dream at all. Tommy was peacefully asleep in the cold night, both us still swaddled in our sweaters and other warm clothes.

In the morning Tommy rolled over to face me and said, “I dreamed last night that you made love to me.” That didn’t surprise me, knowing that he was queer. I hesitated—because I’m not—but admitted that I had also dreamed such a thing. He nuzzled his face into my throat away from the chill of the morning, and the closeness began to excite me sexually. But then he suddenly rolled away and sat up, squealing, “I’ve got to pee like nobody’s business!” He raced away to the bathroom.

I too got up from the bed to find my shoes, wondering at that amazing dream and feeling relieved that the temptation was over. Tommy soon came back and was delighted at the snow outside. We peered through the glass panes of the door out under the bushes bent low with mounds of snow on their branches. The street was a smooth white expanse that glistened in the morning sunlight. He hugged my shoulders and laughed, “This just doesn’t happen in New Orleans! I bet they’ll call it the Great New Year’s Snowstorm of 1964!”

There were some inches of the snow drifted up against fences. Very quickly we wrapped up in jackets, scarves, and cloth work gloves and went outside. It was difficult walking in the snow over the tops of our shoes, but we trudged along in the cold for the block into Audubon Park. Tommy asked me to help him to build a snowman, which turned out to be a round figure

made of three balls of snow stacked one upon another. Our gloves became quite wet, and my fingers were freezing. He decorated the snowman with twigs of green live oak leaves for hair, bigger leaves for mouth, eyes and nose, and sticks for arms, with a scarf around its neck. I thought it was unique and somehow monumental sitting so white surrounded by tall green trees.

Next we tramped through the snow over to St. Charles Avenue to catch the streetcar down to the Quarter. As we waited and shivered at the stop, a blue sports car without a top, I believe they call it a Corvette, stopped on the street and honked at us. It was Tommy's strange rich friend Raph, and we climbed in with him. Raph was also going to the Quarter for breakfast, so we had a cold and slushy, but glamorous, ride down the Avenue, with occasional bunches of snow falling on our heads from the branches above.

On our slow ride down Royal Street, where everyone was slipping and sliding around on the sidewalks, we were suddenly bombarded with snowballs thrown by several nuns laughing like children on a balcony. Tommy salvaged enough snow on us to make a new ball, and it hit one of the nuns on her black shoulder. Soon those walking on the street started merrily throwing snowballs at each other and at us. We were quite a mess by the time Raph found a parking place on St. Ann and were wet through and through when we finally got to the Coffee Pot restaurant.

We sat at a table by a window, and Raph said breakfast was on him, wishing us a happy New Year. Raising his still empty coffee cup, Tommy made a toast, "Last night in the midst of the Great New Year's Snowstorm, in a truly immaculate conception, a new me was conceived! In just nine months I will leave New Olympus and be reborn on another planet!"

"What's that?" I interrupted, "Another planet?"

"He's talking about going to graduate school," Raph explained in a stage whisper.

Tommy kept his cup raised. "In a mere nine months a new me will break out of this old me, out of this cocoon. How I've dreaded this year of my ordeal! But now it's here. What the hell! Here's to 1964!"

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6.2 - ANGELS DON'T APPEAR

Well, here it is finally Ash Wednesday, and the good old Gin Mill is of course much quieter now that Mardi Gras is over. My God, it's over! You can actually get in the door, and there's even hope to find space at the bar to order a drink from huge Jackie. Of course it means you can now see the drab, peeling walls of the squalid place, and its filthy floor. But then who cares? It's the people and the music in a place that matter anyhow, and they're both hot and wild. But those mad Mardi Gras hordes were largely rank amateurs at carousing with their forced merriment and low tolerance for booze. And now they're at home exhausted.

Not so our decadent debauching team. We're professionals, the four of us. Sweet Beth with her bouncy curls is my "lady friend," and I am Raphael, called Raph, rhymes with 'laugh.' And then there's Beth's friend Michelle, with a thin, attractive face and generous womanly proportions, who's "escorted" by my friend Tommy from school. I call him Tomahawk because he's part Indian, but a striking blond with hair almost as long as Michelle's. Myself excluded, of course, we are quite an eye-catching bunch of depraved roués in the dives of Decatur Street. And no one has a clue how warped our relationships really are!

So here we four are, ignoring the solemnity of Ash Wednesday, even though I am feeling a little sick, like coming down with something, and Beth says she's bone tired. Tommy and I met the girls here this evening after his shift at the Snack Bar for this, our 45th night—yes, 45!—in a row of the Holy Carouse. And the few hours of sleep this morning after I took the "dates" home last night was my first in two days. I mean, one just doesn't sleep during the peak frenzy of Mardi Gras. The T says last year he was up for four days and nights straight, so to speak, but I think he actually did sleep some on Sunday night too.

This year Beth and Michelle had made us each an ancient Grecian costume called a *chiton*, (pronounced 'key-ton'), full-length pink for the girls and blue, just above the knee, for Tommy and me. And nothing underneath! With ivy in our hair, we were something right off a piece of Wedgwood! The Tomahawk really turned heads in his skimpy getup.

The whole of yesterday, Fat Tuesday, seems a confused blur of the Rex and Comus parades, strange parties and dancing in La Marina in the middle of the afternoon, Fong food and Café du Monde beignets in the evening, and struggling at every moment and everywhere through shoulder-to-shoulder crowds. A moment to savor happened on Bourbon in the afternoon near Dixie's where a lot of drag queens were parading. Some guy in a bra and yellow boa dropped down in the pushing crowd and burrowed up under the front of my *chiton* to give me head, not quite enough... The *chiton* also made it very easy for many strange hands from the crush to explore pubic areas. I'm not complaining, mind you. The girls had less problem with longer skirts. Our Dionysian costumes were most appreciated, of course, when we got to the Gin Mill after dinner. The sailors were in ecstasy over us, and I don't think I've ever seen the T look so happy. It was the perfect culmination of our long ritual carouse.

You see, the T got us going right after New Year's, proposing that we really celebrate Mardi Gras all the way from Twelfth Night to Fat Tuesday, and it sounded like a kick. Forty-four nights in a row. Let me tell you, it's been no mean feat, something for the record books. His constant energy kept us up and dancing when we were simply zombies.

And tonight is the 45th! Beth and I are presently sitting in one of the grungy yellow vinyl booths working on our Dixie beers, while Michelle and the T are out on the floor dancing with a few swarthy sailors. Beth is playing with one of her curls and looks sad.

"Why tonight too?" she whines. "After all, we made it to Mardi Gras."

"It's the momentum," I explain it to myself. "Takes a while to stop the carousel."

She looks at me askance. "Very punny, darling. I'm ready to jump off." She puts her head down on her arms and moans, "I could go to sleep right here."

I have to admit that for a girl Beth is really rather pretty, and I'm almost sorry that we can't be lovers. But we can't. Because I've been totally gay since fifteen, and I've never had any desire whatsoever to do it with a woman. The rub is that I'm sort of weird looking with a big square jaw and wild eyes, and guys don't ever seem to be interested. Oh, sure, some of these sailors here ask me sometimes, but I don't want that sort of thing. Even the T only used to go with the real young and pretty ones.

I say "used to" because back in November our carouser-in-chief took a vow of celibacy. A vow of idiocy, if you ask me. I can testify that celibacy is nothing to write home about. He's been running around saying "Carne vale!" and extolling the joys of virginity renewed. That's what's driving Michelle crazy. She knows he's queer, but she's been waiting because she's sure that given the chance... I think Tommy may be a little bit attracted to her, sick as that may seem, I mean, since she's got those gross things on her chest. Oh, well, I have to go to the john.

Crossing the room, weaving through the dancers, I feel queasy again. Maybe the stench of cigarettes and beer, or the dingy darkness of the Sin Mill. The rudimentary toilet could turn anyone's stomach. I can only do my business if I try to ignore the stained urinal trough, close my eyes, and imagine pissing into a bed of flowers. Works almost every time. While washing my hands, a truly futile effort in this hole, I am momentarily concerned about our mid-term test tomorrow in German. Tommy's not worried, naturally. Can you imagine? He's taking Deutsch, Russian, and ancient Greek at the same time! Then again our teacher Wulf and the T had an affair long ago. *Scheise!* There are no towels! *Was kann mann tun?* Dry them on my jeans.

I see that Michelle is now over in the booth with Beth, and the T's still out on the floor dancing one of those solo things with arms and legs akimbo. I'm so skinny and gangly that I often feel like that when I'm simply walking along. Back with the girls, I find that Michelle has tears in her eyes. "He's driving me crazy!" she mutters and stares at her paper cup of beer.

Beth pours some of her beer in my nearly empty cup and explains, "Tommy's being just awful about A-aron again."

So it's that. The two of them met this Israeli sailor last week in La Marina. Beth and I got introduced, but that was all. You say his name like 'ah-ah-rohn,' which I think is rather lovely, but nowhere near as beautiful as he is. He looks like an ancient Greek statue with those lips and nose and eyes. Not to mention that body in his tight Italian pants, enough to make Michelangelo swoon. The T's always a pushover for a pretty face. I mean, look at that cute Robin, and the way he carried on over that black boy Adam. I won't torture myself by wanting the unattainable. I'd settle for a nice homely man. Oh, well.

Michelle swallows a big swig of beer and whispers angrily across the table at me, "He thinks that since this is A-aron's last night in port, I should take him home with me!"

"Why not?" I laugh. But I'm having another spell of queasiness. Maybe another Newport will take the edge off.

"You're awful too!" Beth snaps.

"Wrong. I just feel awful."

"He keeps raving about how beautiful A-aron is," Michelle snaps, "like taunting." She looks at the T over there all engrossed in his dance and starts crying again.

"It's just because he wants him so much, but can't have him," Beth explains again and adds with a snicker, "Mister Celibacy, hah!"

I wonder, "Wouldn't you like to make it with A-aron?" Michelle nods. "So," I now wonder, "what's the big problem?"

"Oh, shut up!" she sniffs and hands me her empty paper cup.

I tear off a piece and chew it thoughtfully. The wax has a slightly hopsy flavor, nowhere near as tasty as a 7-Up cup, but it will do. What can I say? It's not fattening.

Anyway, this pretty sailor has been around all through Mardi Gras, and the two of them have been making over him like bitches in heat. I can imagine that the guy wonders what they're up to since neither will put out. Real prick-teasers. The T's fascination is easy to understand because he's an artist. Last Friday in his sculpture class he made a perfectly exquisite bust of the sailor that looks exactly like him. But he calls it Antinous, who was the lover of the Roman emperor Hadrian and became a god. However, I think there's something just a bit sinister about the sailor himself, like a hood or some such. Mysterious danger.

Michelle is calmed down by the time the T has finished his dance and comes over to sit with us again. They almost glower at each other. I've never seen him look so stern. Lighting one of my cigarettes for me, Beth breaks the silence with, "Well, what shall we do now?"

"How about some more Fong flied lice?" I suggest. After all it's two o'clock in the morning, and my dinner was a long time ago. Another shred of paper cup as an appetizer.

No one else is interested. Instead Tommy heads to the bar for more beer. Immediately a dark little Greek appears to ask Michelle politely to dance with him. She accepts angrily. I sure wish those two could be calm and congenial like Beth and me.

"Boy, am I pooped!" Beth sighs and leans against my shoulder. I slouch beside her. "You know, we've been at this longer than Noah was in the Ark!" We stoically watch Michelle slow-dancing with the sailor, who is shorter than she. "And I think Tommy has gone a little crazy."

"He started out that way," I figure. Ever since I met the T a couple years ago in bowling class, I've thought he's unusual, a bit off-kilter, you know. But he's so much fun to run around with. I tagged along like an ugly duckling. His friends all accepted me right away. Not like the guys in the dorm at school. They know I'm gay and treat me like a leper. But the T makes no bones about being gay, and nobody gives him any lip. He's got the reputation around school of being a tough Quarter character, and everyone's probably afraid of him.

Beth directs my attention to the door and a new group of sailors. Among them, in a red shirt open nearly to the navel, strides the infamous A-aron. He marches in like he owns the place. From the bar, he waves to Tommy and Michelle, who both become transfixed, like birds before a serpent, while he orders a beer from Jackie. It's hard not to stare at that suggestive little patch of curly hair showing in his open shirt.

"That's disgusting!" Beth remarks. "He looks so trashy!"

"If you mean incredibly sexy, you're right." I think Beth is so disapproving because she's afraid to admit that the Israeli turns her on, and she's afraid of that. As a matter of fact, I think she's afraid of sex, and that's why we get along so well. You might call her a fag-hag, but that's terribly unkind to us both. I wonder which will break first, Michelle's stubbornness or the T's vow. Oh, well, we're not going to Fong, so I start on the T's empty cup.

A line dance is starting, and A-aron moves right in between the two of them, one by each hand. Go to it. The A looks lasciviously first at the one and then at the other. Why don't they just do a 3-way and get it over with? "Here we go!" I say to Beth, who shrugs in feigned boredom at the three of them out there skipping around to the crazed bouzouki music.

I head to the bar for more Dixies. Jackie glides down the walkway behind the bar like a 300 pound ballerina with a bottles for me. What would we wayward youths do without these

great mother figures who make sure we're well swilled and not overly much molested by the rough old sailors? "Baby, you don't look so good," she croons, "Sick?"

At that moment Michelle appears at my shoulder. "We're all sick!" she answers for me. "I'm so sick I could just scream."

Jackie laughs in her maternal way. "Then you must need some strong medicine!" She nods at the A leaning on the back wall talking to the T. "I bet one dose would do the trick."

I offer poor Michelle a cigarette and light one myself. Using the opportunity, I advise, "I really do think you should screw A-aron."

She looks sharply at me, but there isn't any anger in her blue eyes. "God, I want him so much my thighs hurt! But I want Tommy even more!"

Always flippant, I comment, "Your thighs are bigger than your whatchamacallit."

Fortunately Michelle manages a sad chuckle. "Why in the fuck does he have to be celibate? It's crazy! And now this stupid Israeli..."

"Look at it this way," I suggest, "Because of his vow Tom can't help you out, Michelle. So he's offering you a spectacular substitute. No strings attached. They sail tomorrow."

Michelle chugs some of my beer before she responds. "Oh, shit! Anyway I decided tonight's the end—all over tonight." I pat her on the back in the big brotherly way I'm so good at with girls, and she adds, "So maybe I ought to take A-aron and run?"

"I sure would," I say truthfully. Out on the floor a paunchy sailor, about as homely as they come, starts making a fool of himself by dancing around with a full cup of beer balanced on his head, not spilling a drop. Everybody else falls back and claps for the dancer, and Michelle takes the opportunity, without another word, to make her way over to the T and A in the crowd.

This is my signal to go back to Beth in the booth. She's feebly fending off a persistent, but polite young sailor who's been after her the past three nights. "See, Nikos," she says to him gently, "here's my boyfriend, and I can't dance with you."

"Okay," he replies sadly and backs off, smiling apologetically at me as he retreats to the other booth where his friends are sitting.

I slide into the booth. "Get ready for the show," I warn. "I think Michelle's going for it."

"You can't be serious!" Beth is aghast and turns to see Michelle hanging on A-aron's arm, smiling at him seductively. Tommy stands nearby wearing a smile of satisfaction. "Well, I still think it's disgusting," Beth mutters.

"Why?" I might as well confront some of this attitude.

"It's like being a whore," Beth says, "like fat Alice over there." Alice is a long-time friend, who, in spite of no front teeth, or perhaps because of that, is popular with the sailors.

"You're not a whore if you give it away. Just a trollop. Ah, to be a trollop!"

"Oh, shut up! You don't understand at all." She broods over her beer cup. "Why does it always have to come down to sex?"

"Not always," I reassure her and put my arm around her. "Look at us."

Just as that raucous song finishes, who appears, making her timid way past the jukebox, but the camera lady Georgette. Almost any night she pops up in the dives, making the rounds with her trusty Polaroid camera to take pictures of the drunken bums in their revelry. The T says she's the wife of the hotdog vendor who pushes the big cart up and down Decatur. Georgette sure looks like she could use some hotdogs, she's so emaciated it's incredible, and lots of us get her to take pictures, just hoping she'll use the money to eat something. Well, wouldn't you know it, A-aron wants his picture taken with the bunch, gesticulating to Georgette to that effect. They motion for me and Beth to come over and join in.

We go over to the table where A-aron has taken a ceremonious seat next to all the beer bottles crowding its tiny top. Michelle is perched affectionately on his lap. The T stands behind with his hand on A-aron's magnificent shoulder, and Beth and I bend in close on each side. This means I am peering like an imp over the beer bottles. Georgette blinds us momentarily and rips out the photo, only relinquishing it after A-aron gives her the two dollars. She'd do well to sell roses on the side, like those urchins with their little bouquets.

The couple minutes it takes for the Polaroid to develop—modern miracle—we all hover around A-aron. swear, that exquisite body is like a magnet. The details of the photo slowly emerge. As usual, I look awful, but the sailor's arresting beauty dominates the whole thing. Michelle looks for all the world like a dramatic vamp draped across him with her hand inside his red shirt. Beth is a disapproving chaperone, and the T seems to be blessing the whole thing. Thank goodness, I think as A-aron puts the snapshot into his shirt pocket, at least it will never make it into the local papers. I overhear the T tell him, "*Du bist so schön.*" Here I am worrying about tomorrow's test, and this son of a bitch gets to practice with this hunk, who doesn't speak English. Michelle says she uses fractured French to talk to him.

Back at our booth, Beth shakes her head. "I'm so embarrassed." She looks away from them—Michelle still on the lap and the T dancing deliriously again in a solo—and plays with my lighter. "Why can't Tommy just blow him and be done with it?"

"How disgusting!" I chortle in mock dismay, and Beth laughs too. Meanwhile Michelle has suddenly walked away from A-aron and pulls Tommy from his dance toward the corner by the jukebox. She seems furious again and he taken aback. "Uh-oh," I worry, "something has gone awry!" Drowned out by the blaring of an incomprehensible song, Michelle appears to be shouting at him. "It doesn't look pleasant."

"Keep your nose out of it, Raph," Beth cautions, grabbing my arm. Just then Michelle hauls off and slaps Tommy in the face. She stamps off to stand by herself at the bar. A-aron and his sailor friends immediately head for the door.

"Must think he's run into a couple of real nut cases," I comment sadly.

Beth snorts. "Well, he did!" She looks concerned. "They're driving each other crazy, Raph. We've got to do something."

I try to calm her. "Michelle said it's all over anyway. Besides, someone just said we should keep our noses out of it."

With a burst of energy, Beth pushes me out of the booth and tromps over to the T, who's standing by the juke box looking like a repentant bad boy. She shouts, "That's it, Tommy! I've had enough! Forty-five nights in a row is too much! This is totally crazy!" From behind the bar Jackie applauds, and the sailors pick it up, though most don't understand what she's saying. The T simply stares at the once-meek Beth in amazement. She turns and grabs Michelle's arm. "We're going home." With a glance at me, she adds, "See you tomorrow, Raph."

"Sure," I nod, and they're gone out the door.

The T is thunderstruck, but recovers quickly, flashing me a sheepish grin. "Let's have another beer," he suggests, steering me to the bar where Jackie waits like a smiling blimp.

This time I balk, simply too worn out to party anymore. "No, let's go home too."

To my surprise, the T doesn't argue, but with waves to Jackie and Alice, follows me out onto the foul pavement of Decatur. He's silent as we start walking up the block. The car is parked on Chartres past Jackson Square.

"I guess you're all ready for the test tomorrow?" I venture, jealously.

“Huh? Oh, sort of...” He walks along preoccupied. “Thank God that’s over! You know, I can’t for the life of me remember how we got started, and I didn’t know how to end it.”

“I can’t believe you were trying to get Michelle to fuck that sailor for you! You must be out of your mind!”

“Raph,” the T pleads, “I found her a perfect man to give her the animal thing she wants.”

“Oh, and you don’t want any of those animal things, Mr. Chastity Belt?”

“Umm,” he hesitates, and then, “I’m not sure how to say this.” For the first time in my experience the T looks crestfallen. “Looks like I’ll just have to start all over again.”

“You’ll what?” I choke and stumble on the corner curb. “How? Who? I mean, when?”

“You know who, last night.” The T looks away, hand over mouth.

I can’t tell if he’s ashamed or amused. Last night has to have been after the girls and I left him in La Marina around four o’clock. “Okay, T, now I want the whole story.”

“How much of the whole story?”

“All the gory details, of course.”

“Then I’m going to have to sit down,” he announces and plops down right there on the curb, feet in the gutter. While I’m awkwardly sitting down, he contemplates his toes in his leather sandals. The T has absolutely the most beautiful feet I’ve ever seen, perfect with those patrician second toes. “Oh, wow!” he sighs. “Rose and I used to sit right here and rest like this on our walks from La Marina in the early...”

“No reminiscing,” I cut him off. “Let’s have it. No, wait a minute. Is this why Michelle slugged you?”

“Yeh, she found out from A-aron, unfortunately.” He rests his forearms on his green corduroy knees and begins. “Okay, hold on to your hat. I was on my way to the Mill, and then for the streetcar home. And it was right around here I ran into him walking the other way heading for La Marina. Well, A-aron started in on how much he wanted me, in German, of course, and kept grabbing me under the *chiton*, and I kept reminding him about my vow.”

“Dolt!” I couldn’t restrain myself.

“So he gets insistent—in a nice way—and pushes me up against the wall back over there and kisses me.”

“More,” I demand.

“Lots of tongue. Nobody else on the street at that hour, and I thought he was going to hump me right here on the sidewalk. He was clearly in no mood to take no for an answer. After the kiss, I felt stunned, and he half-dragged me...”

“I can’t stand it!”

“...across the street down beside that building over there.” He points at the vast abandoned brick warehouse building that looks like something out of a Fellini film. All of its windows on the several floors are bricked shut. “There’s a dark place in the back there behind some bushes and an abandoned car, and he got right down to business.”

“More!”

“I figured I’d better make the best of it and surrender, one might say, conditionally. Like I always do with all the sailor boys, I told him he can have it, but only if I screw him first. And he agreed! I couldn’t believe it when he dropped his pants for me.” He wiggles his bare toes in obvious ecstatic recollection. “Well, A-aron bent over that old car in the shadows. He’s just a bit hairy, you know, down there in the crack...”

I moan. The image makes me dizzy. “What if someone saw you guys?”

“Nobody around back there to see anything,” the T laughs. “And if somebody did... Hey, Vive Mardi Gras! So now I’ve got to start all over again.”

“You’re a mad woman!” I exclaim. “And then?”

He looks at me with a mischievous eye. “Sure you want to know?” I nod enthusiastically. “Well, then A-aron pushed me up against the brick wall back there in the dark—with my legs up around his waist, you know—and did some really spectacular business. A *chiton* is great for that! It was splendid—being lifted completely off the ground, skewered all the way...”

“*Das ist ganz genug!*” I cry in anguish. I can’t take any more! I now look at the strange old building with a new respect. It’s all too gloriously degenerate. “And then?”

“And then he went to La Marina, and I went to the streetcar. A-aron told me he really wanted to fuck Michelle too, and I said I’d see. Almost managed. She doesn’t know what she missed!” He clammers creakily up from the curb. “Let’s get moving. Test tomorrow!”

God, it’s three o’clock in the morning, and German is at ten. The T doesn’t say anything more as we walk another block down the street. Then he remarks, “You know, I’m not sure which was better, the desire or the consummation.” He does a little hop-skip in his step as we cross St. Louis. “I mean, before, when I was celibate, every time I’d touch him, it was like a sweet knife through me because I couldn’t have him. I adored that feeling!”

“You truly are deranged, Tomahawk!” Such masochism has no appeal for me. “Well, it would seem you ate your cake right up.” That is the extent to which I will philosophize on this latest adventure of the T, who laughs at my witty summation.

Down the block across Toulouse, our wonderful La Marina sits, a wreck of a building pulsating with rhythms coming from its dark and demented innards. “Let’s have another beer,” the T suggests again with a slight merengue on the sidewalk. He is incorrigible, the music is infectious, and I am powerless to resist.

Inside the swinging door you’d never know Mardi Gras was over, what with people dancing, drinking and laughing everywhere, all bathed in the supersonic decibels of the jukebox. I’m willing to bet not one of these debauchers has said, ‘Carne vale!’ The T glides through the crush, heading for our inner sanctum, the Third Room. Stepping out of one sphere of roaring music to another, I immediately notice that A-aron is here. But then, what did I expect? Oh, well, I’ll just hang around and see what happens with Michelle out of the way. The T and I belly up to the bar and order Falstaffs from the frowsy new barmaid. And by then A-aron has moved in on the T like a fly to honey.

“*Ich warte auf dich, Thomas,*” he says with an odd slurring accent.

“*Du wartest auf nichts mehr, mein schatz,*” the T replies, not looking at him. “*Ich habe dir schon gesagt, das es die einzige zeit war.*” I’m hovering in the shadows, figuring this is at least some weird kind of practice for tomorrow’s test.

A-aron is persistent, leaning in close, hand on the T’s side. “*Aber du bist allein...*”

The T laughs. “*Gar nicht! Hier stehe ich mit meinem Freund, Raphael. Du hast ihn schon bekannt!*”

The sailor looks truly abashed, but even more exquisite with his confident manner a little shaken. “Please excuse me.” His English essentially exhausted, he remains silent.

“*Es macht nichts,*” I excuse him. After all, why should he remember? To be civil, I attempt more conversation with, “*Wie geht’s?*”

A-aron’s eyes light up at my German. “*Sehr gut, danke,*” he responds with a smile that nearly knocks me over. “*Diese ist meine letzte nacht im New Orleans.*” With the intensity of his

beauty turned toward me like this, I have an intimation of what the T meant about sweet knives. When he turns away, insisting on paying the barmaid for our beers, I can suddenly breathe again.

After a toast of thanks to our host, the T notices his Indian friend Raj coming into the room. *“Bitte, schatzchen,”* he says, stroking A-aron’s cheek, *“Ich müss mit jemand sprechen. Später.”* With that, he bounces over to his Indian, leaving the two of us there, one might say, *allein zusammen*. I’ll never understand what fascination that chubby fellow holds for the T, but whenever he’s around, he has time for no one else.

“Er ist ein alte Freund des Thomas,” I explain. *“Das ist alles.”*

“Ja,” A-aron almost sighs. His sadness makes him even more heartrendingly lovely as he turns back to me. *“Wo sind die Fräulein?”*

“Nach hause.” Sorry to disappoint him on that score too. I’m not sure this kind of German conversation is going to get me very far on the test. Maybe I should try some more serious practice. I laboriously start asking A-aron, *“Wozu geht dein Schiff nach dieser Stadt?”*

“Zum Houston,” A-aron tells me as he leans closer, his voice almost a whisper. The air has gotten thick with some kind of sweetness so I can hardly breathe. *“Wie schade, das ich so allein bin.”* His tone makes me weak as I play with my beer bottle. I must be imagining this. Things like this don’t happen to me. Angels don’t appear like this. In my overwhelmed silence, A-aron’s voice, almost hypnotic, caresses my ear. *“Willst du mit mir schlafen?”*

I can only croak out a weak, *“Ja wohl!”* and steady myself against the bar. The fragrance of him hits me like a hammer. How in God’s name did the T withstand this for almost a week?

A-aron’s fingers slide in between the buttons of my shirt, and my knees are about to buckle. He leans even closer, the heat of his chest in that red shirt like fire, and his voice so tender, *“Es gibt eine kleine Platz...”* I have no doubt that he’s referring to a little place in the bushes behind an abandoned building, and I’m equally certain he has no intention of sleeping. But I’m too far gone to say anything at all. *“Also, gehen wir nun?”* A-aron asks innocently.

I leave my beer half-full on the bar and with A-aron close beside, lurch toward the door past the T and Raj. I can say only, *“We’re going. See you im Morgenschein!”*

“Auf wiedersehen,” A-aron says with a wave.

The T smiles at us blissfully. *“Schlafen sie nicht, meine Liebchen!”*

###

6.3 - DUCKS

Lord knows, the Green Wave these days wasn't what it once was, but small-town Indiana jock, Tim Mahoney here chose Tulane for its football team. But mostly because I wanted to come this incredible city. I'd heard that it was an unusual place with palm trees and beautiful houses and had great nightlife in the French Quarter—and had a drinking age of eighteen!

Of course, we athletes couldn't do much drinking because of training, but Coach couldn't keep track of us all on weekends. Some of us guys snuck off down to Bourbon Street, mostly to Pat O'Brien's, a place on St. Peter Street with singing and piano playing. And the Hurricanes there will knock you on your butt. A far cry from anything back in Lawrenceburg. In nearby Cincinnati I once saw prostitutes, but no sexy strip-teasers like Jada or Tempeste Storm.

What with training and classes, they gave us jocks private rooms so we didn't have much distraction. I also started weight-lifting in high school to define my muscles and now went to the gym here for workouts. I've got a pretty good chest and thighs, but a couple of the other jocks were a lot better built than me—like Lloyd Pringle, whose stomach looked like a washboard.

The whole first semester was too busy to think about dating. So by the time Mardi Gras rolled around in late February, I was pretty horny. The whole day on Fat Tuesday we drank beer and wandered all over Canal Street and the Quarter, watching parades and laughing at outrageous costumes. Of course, we wound up in the evening down at Pat O'Brien's again.

I got myself a Hurricane and fought through the crowd back outside. I leaned against the wall with my pink drink, feeling really blotto, and then staggered off toward Royal Street. At the corner I bumped into somebody on the sidewalk and fell down.

It was my English teacher Dan from last semester, the short guy with glasses. "Why, Mr. Mahoney," he laughed, "you're drunk!" He helped me sit up, and I mumbled about needing to get home to the dorm. "Can't let your coach see you like this," he said and invited me to his place on Burgundy to sleep it off. Even leaning on his shoulder, I had a hard time getting up the stairs to his apartment, where he said, "Let's get you into bed, young man. Come on."

"I can just sleep here," I mumbled and flopped onto his sofa. He took off my shirt and shoes—then my blue jeans. When he pulled at my underpants, I tried to stop him, but Dan still got them off. Next thing I knew he was sucking on my cock. It felt so good I didn't complain. I'd heard about cock-suckers in dirty jokes, but it's no joke when your cock's in somebody's mouth, and I was already so horny. Only took a moment to shoot off and then pass out.

In the morning, Dan was standing in the kitchen making coffee, naked, fairly thin and not bad for an old guy in his late twenties. "Top o'the morning to you, Mr. Mahoney," he said in a fakey Irish brogue. "Would you be taking cream and sugar now?"

With a quilt over my shoulders, I came into the kitchen for the cup and explained, "I've never done anything like that before."

"Well, don't wait so long next time!" Dan said, and before I could say Jack Robinson, he was down on his knees sucking me again. I had to hold onto the counter to keep from falling over. When he stood up again, he said, "Thanks for breakfast!"

I thanked him for the great blow jobs and said, "But you don't look like, you know, any different from other folks." I could tell how stupid it sounded.

He laughed, "There's lots of us around! I bet even some of you macho jocks are gay! Statistically somebody's bound to be!" Seriously doubting that, I quick got back into my clothes to go on home. We had this Ash Wednesday off from classes, but I wanted to swim. Coach told me it would be good for stretching, you know, to balance out the weight work and keep me from

getting muscle-bound. Dan gave me his phone number and walked me to the door. He said, "You can bring your little friend up to see me anytime!"

When I got back to our dorm, Robert Sharp Hall, I lay down, still shocked and confused by what happened with Dan. In the early afternoon I woke up, got my gear, and went swimming at the UC pool. Undressing in the locker room, I went for a hot shower first and some other guys were in the shower room, laughing and talking around the other sprays. One was that blond cashier from the Snack Bar that folks said was queer. When I came in, they quieted down some, and I soaped up trying to ignore them, but I saw the queer guy had lots of curly blond hair on his chest, real masculine. Rinsing off, I imagined him sucking on my cock, and it got half-way hard! I turned to the wall to hide it and only swam twenty laps for a starter.

Some hours of Math and Psychology later, I headed over to dinner at the Fresh, the dining hall for us freshmen. We football players eat a lot, you know, to keep up the weight, and I loaded up with steak and potatoes and sides of chop suey and fried chicken. I sat with a bunch by the window. Everybody talked about how their drunken Mardi Gras finished up last night.

Wallace passed out on the sidewalk and woke up when garbage trucks showed up—beer cans were two feet deep. Harry got lucky and went home with a woman on Iberville. Lloyd said he just came on home. Since that was going to be my story too, and since Lloyd lived just down the hall, I threw in a long walk to sober up. Ronnie couldn't remember anything between seeing a parade on Royal Street and waking up this morning hung over something fierce in his own bed.

After dinner, as Lloyd and I walked toward Robert Sharp, I thought how truly handsome he is and imagined him sucking me. "Boy!" he exclaimed, "I can sure see why we shouldn't drink. I've been wiped out all day." Funny, I hadn't felt any problem. Lloyd tossed his arm round my shoulder and said, "You must hold your booze pretty well, buddy!"

I closed my door and sat on the bed trying to figure out what was going on in my head. Why was I suddenly looking at Lloyd like that? And this feeling like my body has suddenly come alive... Somebody sucks my dick, and now I'm even thinking about Lloyd doing it to me!

Rather than think about that anymore, I started on "The Great Gatsby" for English class. Concentrating on my studies kept the confusion down, and when I called it quits around ten, I was feeling calm and hungry again. Too late I realized the blond queer was probably working in the Snack Bar, and I almost turned around. But hunger overruled my qualms.

"Hi there, Tim Mahoney," he said with a huge, open smile.

I was confused again. "How'd you know my name?"

"Something reminded me of it," he laughed and winked. "I know everybody's name—I used to work breakfast at the Fresh last fall. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. That's right," I recalled. "What's your name?"

"Tom Youngblood." He rang up \$1.37 and did it all, making change included, without taking his brown eyes off mine.

I knew he was thinking about my hard on, and so was I. Since he was queer, maybe I could get him to suck it. I took a chance and said, "Let's get together sometime and talk."

"Sure! Hang on, and I'll take a break." I carried my tray to a table, shocked at my boldness, and nibbled on my grilled cheese sandwiches. Tom brought a cup of coffee to my table and pulled up a chair beside me. "So what do you want to talk about, Timmy?"

"Well, I know you're queer, and I was wondering..."

"And how do you know that?" Tom broke in.

"Well," I mumbled, embarrassed at my rudeness, "everybody says..."

"Can't believe everything you hear," he said, then smiled and added, "But I am indeed."

"I just thought maybe you could..." Embarrassed, I switched gears to say, "...you know, explain it to me, what you queers are like."

Tom laughed, "Well, let's see, we queers have two arms and two legs and..."

He made me laugh in spite of my embarrassment. I took a swallow of my milkshake and said, "Maybe you could come over to my room tonight and..."

His hand rested on my arm, and he said, "And what? Do you want me to deflower you?"

"I guess so."

"I'm honored. But don't you think we should at least fall a little bit in love first?"

"What do you mean?" I was suddenly terribly confused.

"I mean, would you just go up to some girl you don't know and ask her to come to your room and fuck?" I was too embarrassed to answer. "No, you wouldn't. You'd ask her out on a date—probably on several before you'd try to get her into panties."

"I'm sorry, Tom. I didn't mean to be rude."

"That's all right, Tim. Anyway, I couldn't come over tonight because I've got a date. I'm sorry." It had never crossed my mind that maybe he was involved with someone. "So tell me about when you first thought about queers?"

"Today."

"Oh?" Tom was silent for a moment. "I see you're one to take the bull by the horns, so to speak. And what happened today?"

I lowered my voice. "Well, last night somebody sucked my cock."

He laughed and whispered, "You tramp! Has this ever happened before?"

"Oh, no, never!"

"And one blowjob put you in this state! Who was it? No! I don't want to know. I'd hate him forever!" I didn't dare say it was two. "And do you often expose yourself in an ithyphallic condition in public?"

"No, no!" I protested. "Today was the only time. I'm sorry!"

"Don't be! But Rob and Leon were scandalized."

"Weren't you?" I couldn't believe my forwardness.

"Not at all. I was enthralled! I'd love to see your pretty penis again, but I'm going to have to get to know more about you first."

I leapt at the opportunity. "Can I see you tomorrow? Like maybe have lunch?"

"Now that's more like it, Mr. Mahoney! Let's meet at noon on the steps out front and have a romantic picnic in the park."

The next day after morning classes, I sat on the UC steps till Tom showed up. It felt so stupid just asking how he was. He locked his bike to a frame. "Pretty pooped. Late night! Must have been about five when I got home. German test at ten, and I'm just out of Ancient Greek."

"Did you have fun on your date?"

"Oh, that," Tom grunted tossing a green book bag over his shoulder. As we headed up the steps, he answered, "Michelle and I finally broke it off." What was this about a girl and him queer? "Anyway, 45 nights was definitely enough." I didn't feel right asking more about it.

For our picnic in Audubon Park we strolled across the campus, talking about where we were from, family, and all that. In the Park, we got on to what we're studying, like me an English major. Turns out Tom was a senior, majoring in Russian and had an interview this next Monday for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship for grad school in Seattle in the fall.

We strolled in the spring sun to a lawn that slopes down from live oaks to the bayou, ducks in a quacking crowd down a ways. Stretched out on the grass, as we unwrapped our sandwiches. I shyly asked, "Am I going to have to kiss you and stuff like that?"

"Well, I think that would be splendid—but not on our first date! And not right out here in the middle of everything! What kind of a guy do you think I am?"

I turned to my sandwich and the ducks quacking around the water and asked what I'd been wondering, "When did you find out you were queer?"

"When I found out it was possible to be gay," he answered, starting on his own sandwich. "I mean, I never knew of such a thing until my freshman year when I met this kid from Houston who was gay. From the get-go it felt just plain right for me. You know, suddenly I understood why guys always seemed so much prettier than girls."

I agreed with him there, but we were surprised by a sneak attack of ravenous ducks that had seen our food. We ran away, the ducks following raucously, and sat up on the low walls of a white gazebo out of duck range. Soon I asked, "Have you ever been in love?"

He actually blushed. "Way too many times. How about you, big guy?"

"I don't think so, really," I admitted. "What I felt for Emily certainly wasn't like the kind of love you'd see in the movies, even if we did wind up screwing."

He grinned at me impishly. "Well, I'd say it's about time then, don't you think?" After a moment's silence, he said, "Let's look at it this way—plenty straight guys get their dicks sucked. Even girls do it. Feels great. No problem. Don't sweat it."

"Maybe you're right," I sighed in relief. "It just felt so great. But I'm not queer."

"On the other hand," he said in his joking way, "if you're straight, who invited me to his room last night?" He threw his arm over my shoulder. "Or did you want to talk about football? Oh, dear, maybe you really did!"

"No," I laughed, "I wanted you to... You know..."

"I do know! But I should tell you that I don't generally suck cock. Only as foreplay."

Now I was really confused. "You don't? But if you're queer...?"

"That's not the question here," he said. "What's your fantasy when you jack off?"

I was taken aback but answered, "I usually think about girls' boobs."

"Good grief! How Neanderthal! So tell me about how you first discovered sex."

"When I was about ten I saw some folks screwing in the back seat of a car," I recalled. "I peeked in the window because we saw the car shaking. Couldn't see much, though. My big brother explained what they were doing."

"And what was your first sexual experience?"

"I guess when I was about 12, and a neighbor girl felt me up in their garage."

"What a nasty little girl!" Tom laughed. "You know, Timmy, there's not much here that looks like you might be gay. Unless there's something you're not telling me. Is there?"

"I got a feeling of electricity when I looked at you naked." I took ahold of his hand. "And even right now touching you."

He looked at me closely. "And do you feel this kind of thing with other guys too?"

"Yeah, like when my friend Lloyd puts his arm around me."

"Ooops! Well, you just forget about Lloyd Pringle, darlin'." He stroked my cheek, and said quietly, "So we'd better get back. I've got a language lab to teach."

"Can I see you again tomorrow?" I blurted.

"You can even see me this evening," Tom said sweetly as he packed up our lunch trash. "I'll be working in the Snack Bar again. You can take a study break."

That was how my first 'date' with Tom Youngblood ended. On my way to practice, I admitted to myself that during our picnic I'd wanted to kiss him. He was so handsome and close. And then it didn't help to go into the locker room full of naked jocks. Now I was aware of lots more of that electricity with the good-looking ones. I'd never noticed before what round buttocks Ronnie had, and Rick, or what a nice cock George had. I recalled Tom's talking about simply discovering the possibility. Of course, I didn't dare let myself get excited. Lloyd showed up late, hurrying out of his clothes, and I couldn't take my eyes off his perfect body. Maybe, I began to wonder, I'm the one that Dan said statistically...

But I quickly lost myself in workout and classes until dinner, as usual with the guys. I stayed pretty quiet, thinking about Tom. Tom-Tom. It was more now than just wanting him to suck me off. I was supposed to ask him for dates like with a girl—that electricity of his hand in mine. A little after ten I took my suit and went for a late swim. Right there on the other side of the glass wall was Tom sitting in his island.

I went up to the glass wall and waved to him. While stretching, I felt his eyes on me, and it made me feel beautiful—and careful of my form. My timing was perfect. I was dressed and into the Snack Bar a few minutes to eleven to order grilled cheese sandwiches. Tom grinned at me as I brought up my tray. "Nice swimsuit," he said.

"Thanks. I figured I'd get the swimming done and see you when you got off work."

"Oh, I see," he chuckled. "Are you going to try to lure me back to your room again?"

"Well, no..." I quickly checked that no one was nearby. "I thought maybe we could take a walk, you know, in the moonlight."

"I know your kind," Tom snorted as he handed me my change. "You just want to get me off alone in the dark and do naughty things." He slapped my arm lightly. "So go eat and I'll be there as soon as I check out."

Eating my sandwiches, my mind whirled thinking about doing naughty things with Tom. I'd thought walking in the moonlight I might be able to kiss him. He joined me in only a few minutes. Leaning back in his chair, he stretched up his arms, yawned, and then sighed, "Thank God, tonight I can go straight home to my little bed."

"I can walk you home."

"I know what you're up to," he laughed. "Besides I'm on a bicycle."

Surprising myself, I said, "But I want to do 'naughty things' with you."

He looked me seriously in the eye. "Timmy, you're playing with fire." In a soft voice, he asked "Have you heard of an ancient city called Sodom? Like in Sodom-me and Sodom-you?" What Tom was talking was more than just naughty things. "Listen, Timbo," he went on, "Thinking about naughty things is first step onto the long and slippery road to that city."

"But don't want to do that kind of stuff," I said.

"Then maybe we shouldn't be seeing each other." His voice was flat, disappointed. "Well," he sighed with a pat on my hand, "you're really a sweet guy, Tim, even if you are straight. See you around." And he was gone out the door. I sat there stupidly, crushed, and then jumped up and raced after him. He was already biking away down the Drive in the moonlight.

Distraught, I walked around the moon-bright Quadrangle. I let myself tentatively imagine the physical details of sodomy, and in theory it didn't seem all that much different than sticking your cock into a girl, not all that far-fetched. But then I remembered Tom saying 'Sodom-you' and yesterday's 'deflower.' My virginity clenched up at the thought. So I went straight home to bed for the ultimate anesthetic of sleep.

All day on Friday, I felt numb and didn't think too much about Tom except at lunch when there were no ducks. In the later afternoon I went for another swim and found him in the pool with his two friends. He waved like any old friend and kept doing the back stroke. At the end of the pool I did my stretches. Just as I finished, his little dark-haired friend climbed out, walked by me dripping, and said, "Sure is a shame you're straight." I was incredibly embarrassed. Jumping into the pool was my only refuge, and I swam several frantic laps. At nine I stopped to catch my breath and found Tom sitting on the edge of the pool.

"How's it hanging?" he asked nonchalantly and kicked to splash on me on purpose.

"Why'd you go and tell them?" I pouted. "People didn't need to know."

Tom grinned innocently. "I just told them you're straight. So?"

"Oh. I thought... Look, Tom, can we just talk some more?"

"What about? Football?" I looked at him pleadingly. "Okay," he said, "See you tonight in the Music Room, after work." Jumping up, he added, "Got to get ready for it now!" And he was off to the dressing room with his friends. As much as I wanted to see him naked again, I stayed and finished my forty laps. Heartened by our new date, I really pushed it on the speed and was worn out afterwards.

I went through the Snack Bar, and Tom winked at me with, "Colonel Mustard in the Music Room with a screwdriver!" To wait for him, I sat on a dark sofa in the UC Music Room with only the moonlight shining in the big windows. Some guy was by a lamp reading to sad-sounding violin music. It was frustrating. When Tom came in, he stopped and spoke to the guy. "Hey, Larry, there you are! Dave came in a little while ago looking for you."

"Hey, thanks," Larry responded, leaping up with his things. And he was gone.

Tom turned off the lamp and violin. "Let's try some Vivaldi, like these double concertos." Then he sat beside me at a careful distance. The music was out of this world.

"Do you like me at all?" I asked, pitifully.

"You're okay," Tom answered begrudgingly, thumping on my chest. "But I think we're here to talk about how much you 'like' me, aren't we?" I swallowed hard and was silent.

To the flutes and violins, I asked, "Does it hurt? I mean, for a guy to..."

"Not if you do it right. Why do you want to know? One wonders."

"I've been thinking about you and me," I mumbled and reached for his hand.

"But you don't do that kind of stuff, do you?" He took his hand away.

"Can I just kiss you?" That was what I hungered for, his mouth, his sweet mouth.

"Why do you want to do that? I already told you..." Instead of arguing, I grabbed him and kissed him more forcefully than I'd planned. It turned into a mind-boggling mixture of his mouth and the glorious music and my hands on his body. Eventually he sat back up again, straightening his shirt and remarked, "Someone might come in."

He was right. I tried to calm down. "God," I groaned, "kissing you is so great!"

"Well, remember what I said," Tom laughed and stroked my cheek. "It's a slippery road." He played with my fingers. "You want to go to a party tomorrow night?"

"Sure."

"I'll meet you by the Fresh around seven, okay?" He stood up again. "But I've got to go now. Some folks to meet in the Quarter." I stayed there listening to the beautiful music and wondering what in the world made me think I was ready to start down that slippery road.

Saturday's classes and workouts were haunted by the memory of that kiss. By time to wait outside the Fresh, I was pretty calm. Tom would know how to do it right. He showed up shortly with a friend named Raff or some such, a strange-looking fellow I've seen around

campus. We waited for another of Tom's friends, a girl named Beth, to get there with her car. Tom said Raff had a Corvette, but it wasn't big enough for the four of us. Raff said Beth was cool about gay guys and then said, "Oh, sorry, I guess you're straight."

Beth pulled up in a little blue car and waved us inside, Tom and I piling in back. She was a small cute girl, like an elf, who gave me a smiling hi. As we took off, Raff explained the party was at a place called Lost River up near Baton Rouge. Some friends of Beth from Southeastern in Hammond. Someone named Loony Leah, back for a visit from California, and an old friend called Alex. As we rolled through the city heading for the causeway, I took ahold of Tom's hand, but we must have gotten very quiet because Raff called like a disapproving parent, "Okay, kids, what's going on back there?" I was terribly embarrassed.

"Never mind, Raff" Beth said, "Tim's straight." I was even more embarrassed and looked out the window at the sunset. It was rather pretty over the lake as we rolled along the bridge. Imagine 24 miles of bridge! As it got dark in the back seat, Tom was saying something to those in front, and his fingers crawled up my thigh. I giggled. Then I snuck a tickle that made Tom squeal, and Raff told us to cut it out. In about an hour we turned into a dark drive of trees to the party. The whole time my raging hard on caused a terrible pressure in my balls.

The posh house sat in a wide lawn and trees running down to the shore of a lake, really beautiful in the moonlight. Tom-Tom explained that Lost River was a bend of the Mississippi that got cut off when the river changed course. The big house was full of people dancing and talking and making out all over the place, some in surprising combinations.

At the drink table, we found their friend Leah from California, a definitely demented young woman who looked me over with an approving eye. Next we found Alex, a tall thin fellow, with a fat old guy named Val who looked like he was going to eat Tom up.

To cut that short, I suggested we take our drinks on a walk down by the lake. There was a small bonfire down by the water with people around it, most nude in the moon shadows of the trees. It was tremendously exciting, and I took off my shirt. Tom whispered, "I'm not getting naked with you out here! You'll try to hump me under a bush."

"No, I won't," I promised, "Scout's honor..." But he wouldn't. Down by the end of the lawn where thick bushes came down to the water, I put my arms around him, pressed my erection against his hip, and nibbled his neck, muttering, "Oh, Tom, I want you so much!"

He pushed away. "Is that all you've got to say for yourself?" I was lost again. What did I do wrong? I stared out across Lost River. "You want me! Is that all?" he grumped.

I ran my hand down his side and tried. "Tom, I..." He looked at me with open expectant eyes, and then I actually said. "I... love you!"

"Now you're talking!" he crowed, skipping around the moonlit grass. I chased him and pulled him down onto the ground in an embrace. But he pushed away again and said, "Now, Timbo, you've just got to make me believe you."

"How? What am I supposed to do?" He smiled at my confusion. I nuzzled into his neck again with, "I love you, I love you..."

Tom laughed. "That's good. Repetition helps!" He rolled away and lay there looking at me with an enigmatic expression. Finally he jumped up and said, "Let's go get our drinks."

Disappointed, I followed him back along the shore, and with our drinks, we went over to the bonfire. Various naked people were sitting around on pieces of log. Bare couples of mixed sorts were doing some heavy petting in the shadows. It was hard to take my eyes off two guys tightly wound up together. Tom introduced himself and me around to the naked guys and girls, and we took a seat on a vacant log, fully clothed, warming our toes near the fire.

The general conversation was something about a war in some jungle in Asia. Not even self-conscious, I put my arm around Tom and hugged him, right there in front of everyone. Nobody batted an eye. Tom snuggled against me and whispered, "This helps too."

We moved over to lie on the grass in the moonlight. There was no question in my mind now that I loved Tom. And it felt right to do that. The desire was almost overwhelming. For a moment I thought I was going crazy. I kept trying to think of ways to prove it. That led to another question, which I then put to him. "What about you, Tom-Tom? Do you love me?"

He gave me a stern look. "That remains to be seen. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I love you. Well, I do."

"Good. That's starting to sound sincere."

"Kiss me!" I begged, and when he refused, I pounced on him and stole many.

That was when Raff and Beth came out of the house and found us in each other's arms. "Come on, you perverts," Beth laughed. "Oh, I forgot, Tim's straight!" We all laughed. They wanted to head home, and so we staggered to the car. Tom curled up into my shoulder, and so utterly happy holding him, within two minutes I fell asleep.

Suddenly Beth's voice rang out in the darkness, "Wake up, you fairies! We're home!"

Tom gave me a little kiss, and they left Raff and me off on the sidewalk. "Well, sleep tight, Tim. Sweet dreams..." Raff said with a wave. Suddenly, with panic, I remembered that we hadn't talked about when I'd see Tom-Tom again. Then I realized I could always find him at the cash register. In spite of the long nap in Tom's arms, I slept like the dead.

Sunday morning I got up feeling so happy. A huge breakfast and hours of studying for mid-terms, then lunch with Lloyd and the guys telling them about the party with the naked girls. I let on that I got one of them down by the lake. The afternoon's workout and evening's swim, but to my grief, Tom wasn't in the Snack Bar. I wandered into the Music Room and pulled out a record at random, something called Ravel's Bolero. The pulsing music was amazing, and thinking about Tom gave me a serious hard on.

Monday morning was jammed with classes, two of them mid-terms. They went fine, I think. It was only on coming out from History at eleven that I remembered Tom had that fellowship interview at nine this morning! Of course that didn't explain his disappearance yesterday, but at least I knew what he'd been doing during my earlier Psychology class.

Dejected, I ate lunch with Ronnie and Lloyd, both very stressed about a Math test tomorrow, and so we weren't lively company. At times I looked at Lloyd appreciatively. And again in our afternoon of workout and practice. It was nearly six when I raced to the UC to check. Tom wasn't in either the cafeteria or the Snack Bar! I was at my wit's end. And dinner with the jocks afterwards didn't help much. Wallace pumped me about Saturday night's conquest at the naked party, but I flatly told him it was none of his business. Ronnie remarked on my bad mood, so I apologized to Wallace. Lloyd caught my eye with a concerned, questioning look.

Another evening with nose to the assigned reading grindstone, and I finally let myself go to the UC for snacks, not daring to hope. Tom was at his register! As calmly as possible, I walked up behind on his right as he dealt with a customer on his left and waited till he was free. Then, though no one was near, I spoke quietly, "I love you!"

Tom jumped in surprise and turned to me with an expression of supreme delight. Then his face fell, and he said, "Oh, it's you. Hi." I was crushed. "Timmy, Timmy, I saw you reflected in the window. I'm just jerking your chain, sugar!"

My relief was so great I didn't even get nervous about him calling me Sugar. I burst out, "I've missed you so much! Where have you been? I mean, what happened with the interview?"

"You are amazing, Timothy Ma-honey!" Tom exclaimed and raised his hands in mock wonder. "I almost believe you! Now go get something to eat. I'll take a break." Soon we were together at a table off by ourselves. He'd barely pulled up beside me when I whined, "I've been wanting to see you so bad! Where were you yesterday, Tom-Tom?"

"Well," he began as though thinking hard, "I slept pretty late and then did lots of laundry and wrote a long letter to a friend all about you, and read in a Turgenev novel and then..."

"I mean, I wanted to see you!"

"But you never told me..." Tom sighed. "I thought maybe you were tired of me..."

"No, I... I mean, I kept looking for you here. I even went to the Music Room. I was so crazy I couldn't even go to sleep!"

Tom leaned in close. "This is beginning to sound fairly authentic! I don't know what I'm going to do with you, young man. What do you suggest?"

"I want to kiss you right now!"

"Don't you dare!" He leaned back in his chair out of range of a kiss. "Anyway, to answer your earlier question, my interview went splendidly, I think. I was out very late the night before with a friend. A couple hours' sleep, had my roommate trim my hair a bit..." It did look a trifle shorter. "...ironed a white shirt, and there I was. They just wanted to talk about things in general, so it was no sweat. I think they liked my jokes."

I was happy for him and thrilled to be with him again. "When do I get another date?"

"Let's not beat around the bush, eh?" he laughed. "It depends, Timbo. Are we talking business or pleasure?"

"Both," I replied emphatically and looked away blushing. That was when I noticed Ronnie and Lloyd coming in the door. "Oh, no," I choked, "it's Lloyd!"

"I told you to forget about him."

And I did, immediately. I leaned closer. "When are we going to make love?"

"From the sound of things," Tom answered with a confidential pressure of his knee on mine under the table, "it may be sooner than later. You're pretty convincing, I must say." A couple sips of his coffee and he added, "Just a few nagging doubts..."

"What do I have to do?" I tried to keep my voice down, but the madness was adding an edge to it. "Please come over to my room tonight, please, Tom-Tom."

"Step into my parlor..." Tom laughed. Then he became very business-like. "I can't tonight, Timmy. There's packing to do!"

"What?" By now you'd think I'd have become accustomed to bombs being dropped.

"Yeah," he chuckled at the effect. "Raff found an apartment in the Quarter today—on Governor Nicholls. Move in Wednesday. Lots to pack. Let's do a picnic again tomorrow."

"But nowhere near those damned ducks!" I insisted.

"And no bushes," Tom added pointedly. Before going back to his register, he whispered, "See you later!" I watched him leave with an insane mixture of emotions. Lloyd and Ronnie were passing with their trays, and nodding at them in true jock-fashion, I made a quick exit.

I waited for Tom on the UC steps, and he came gliding up the sidewalk on his bicycle. As we ambled across the campus, I asked about his two friends, Rob and Leon, and got the whole story of those former romances, though he didn't tell me why they'd broken up. We sat on the grass by the dark bayou, not a duck in sight, palms clustered near the water. A small white bridge down the way. Perhaps plaintively, I asked, "Will you be gentle with me?"

"I may have a hard time doing that," he purred. "Depends on whether you fight or not." We ate in silence. Tom finished first and remarked, "But I promise to try to be gentle."

"I want to kiss you again!" I stated perhaps too loudly for the situation. But there were only a few walkers on the drive a hundred feet away. At last driven over the edge, I leapt up and pounced on him on the sunny grass. I forcibly achieved my purpose right there in front of the world—not giving a damn. At least no ducks were scandalized. Tom surrendered completely under me, and when I stopped, he turned his head away. He was crying. "Oh, Tom-Tom—did I hurt you? I'm so sorry! I love you..."

He sobbed and mumbled, "No, I'm okay... It's just that... It's so awful."

I gaped at him. "What's awful?"

Tom turned huge, sad, wet, brown eyes to me. "Because I can't make love to you!"

"You can't?" I nearly shouted. "Have you got some disease or something?"

"No." That was an enormous relief. "Because I've taken a vow of celibacy."

"Are you out of your mind?" I shouted. "Or are you trying to drive me crazy?"

Tom stared at the grass, answering my questions, "Could be. Not really."

"Why... Why?" I sat down again at a distance from him in total desolation.

"For President Kennedy!" Tom replied. "As a memorial for a tragic hero."

"I can't believe this! Why are you doing this to me?"

"But I didn't think you'd really..." Tom began, but I didn't stick around to hear the rest, stamping off in a fury. He followed me at a distance all the way back to the UC. The rest of the way to the field house I missed knowing he was behind me but was still angry as hell at this stupidity. So furious I paid no attention to the guys in the locker room. I went to swim around four so as not to see him at work—he usually started at five or seven. I decided I'd simply stop thinking about Tom in particular and guys in general. Life would be a lot simpler that way.

Already well stretched out from practice, I dived right into an open lane and swam with a vengeance. Twenty exhilarating laps later, my mind was calm. I'd erased the whole past week and was once again the guy I was before... How incredibly lucky I was to get out of that before Tom... I had to stop for a breather at the end of that lap.

The swimmer in the next lane was already at the end resting. It was Tom's friend Leon, who winked at me and said, "Hi, Tim. I'm Leon. You've got good form, big guy."

"Thanks," I sputtered. It seemed odd to be talking to this strange guy and already know such intensely personal things about him. "I like to do things right."

Leon gave me a look of naked lust and drawled, "I bet there's some other things you know how to do right too. Oh, but I forgot—you're straight. So sad," he clucked. "And here the Tomcat's head over heels..."

"I don't care. He can go to hell!"

"Let me guess," Leon smiled at me sympathetically. "He told you about his vow?"

"God damn it, yes!" I knocked my forehead on the blue tiles.

"Isn't it the fucking dumbest thing you've ever heard?"

"Yes!" My anger at Tom was definitely coming out in the open.

"And about that sailor?"

"What sailor?"

"Oh... He didn't tell you about that. Anyway, don't worry," Leon reassured me, patting my shoulder. "At this rate Tommy will fall off the wagon again very soon. Just be there when he does. Third time's the charm!"

"Third?!" I exclaimed, horrified. "Who else?"

"Ooops," Leon giggled, pulling on his goggles. "Forget I said that." And he pushed off down the lane with barely a splash. Talk about good form.

I started on the next set of twenty. It took me several to balance the renewed anger, the intense pleasure of Leon's saying, "He's head over heels," and my firm intention to stop thinking about Tom. I finished up the forty and added on ten for good measure, pleasantly exhausting myself. Then I made it out before Tom might come to work and see me through the big window.

Burning with anger at Tom fueled my studies all evening. When snack time rolled around, I resolutely did not go to the UC, but ate a bag of chips and some candy bars I keep stashed in the closet for emergencies. Around midnight when I finished with everything needing done, I undressed for bed and took my stuff down the hall to brush teeth and all. In the otherwise empty bathroom at the third sink down, there was Lloyd, also wrapped in a towel, just about done shaving. I took the second sink with, "Hey, Lloyd, calling it a night already?"

"Yep," he said carefully as he slid the razor in a swath up his raised throat and chin. The ripples of his stomach disappeared into the tucked white towel. Between swaths, Lloyd went on, "So what were you doing talking with that queer guy over in the Snack Bar, Timbo?" I couldn't move or speak with the brush in my mouth. "Was he hitting on you, fella?"

"No," I mumbled around the toothbrush, grateful to tell the truth. I spat into the sink and added a lie, "We were talking about what foreign language for me to take next year."

"Oh," Lloyd said, wiping his face. "So, what were you saying about ducks?"

Suddenly I felt up against the wall as I frantically brushed my molars and stared into the sink. Blessed time to think up a plausible answer by the time I spat again. "I don't remember."

"Well," he said, undoing his towel to dry his face. "You gotta watch out with queers, Timbo," he mumbled through his towel. Wetting my own washcloth, my eyes were riveted on his dark cock, hanging there with a wicked arch. "He might try to feel you up."

"I doubt it," I replied, again truthfully, washing with my special face soap. Eyes closed, I rinsed the cloth and I went on, "He's a smart guy, already accepted in grad school..."

Lloyd draped his towel around his neck and stood there watching me as I also undid my towel to dry. With my face buried in the towel, I was totally unprepared for the sudden feeling of his warm hand on my cock! I didn't pull away. Over my towel I saw his dark eyes twinkling, and I reached over to touch his—like velvet and lifting... "Come with me," Lloyd whispered.

We rushed across the hall into his room. Inside, he pressed me up against the door, his smooth face in my throat. He rubbed up against me. Crushed together like that, we jerked each other off. In a moment Lloyd stepped back, smiling sheepishly. "For God's sake, Timbo—don't tell anybody!" He stumbled backwards and sat on the bed, head hanging down.

"Don't worry, pal," I reassured him. "After all, we're buddies, aren't we?"

He smiled at me weakly and reached for his towel on the floor. "Our secret?"

"You bet!" I agreed eagerly, and then chickened out. "I better get to bed. See you tomorrow, guy." I drifted in a trance down to my own room. Sleep came instantly.

Over a quick breakfast by myself early Wednesday morning, it became clear to me that Tom's vow was actually for the best. With Lloyd now I wouldn't ever have to even think about sodomy. I could really get off the slippery road. We could just fool around like guys, buddies. Never have to talk about loving each other or kissing. Suddenly all my anger at Tom melted away, and I perversely wondered what he must be thinking about me now. Especially if, as Leon said, he's... And he was crying, when he... It was also suddenly clear that I needed to find him today and apologize. We can just be friends and not worry about his stupid god-damned vow.

So I plowed through the morning's sessions and into History at ten—which I shared with Lloyd sitting across the room. I gave him a little wave and smile coming in, and his worried look became a bright smile. During the class, several times our eyes met. Thank goodness, he didn't

seem so frightened now. I certainly didn't want to scare Lloyd away! On the way out of class we finagled to meet in the flow by the door. "Hi, bud," I greeted him with a shoulder nudge.

"Hi," he replied, responding in kind, and was silent with a slight grin as we walked down the hall. Outside on the walk, he asked a little tentatively, "See you at dinner, Timbo?"

"Sure thing!" As I watched him heading across the green to the Chemistry building, I wondered if Lloyd realized he'd asked me for a date. Next for me was to the Library for reserve book reading, where another advantage to Lloyd came to mind. He wouldn't drive me crazy the way Tom-Tom did! We could just be guys and not have to go proving this and that to each other!

On the way to lunch I stopped by the UC to look for Tom, but to no avail. That meant keeping all the things I was feeling corked up inside all through the afternoon's practice. By about 3:30 on my way back to the dorm, I ran into Raff on the sidewalk by the Fresh.

"Hi there, Tim!" he waved brightly. "Get over Saturday night yet?"

"Oh, yeah." That seemed so long ago. "You know where Tom is? I haven't seen him."

Raff offered me a cigarette, which I declined. "He's over at his place waiting for Beth's car to take his stuff..."

"Where's that?"

Raff laughed at my intensity. "Hold on, Timmy. I'm going over there now. Come on. You can help carry stuff." He led me along the Quad to his bright blue Corvette convertible. Some boxes shoved in, but room for me too. He asked, "Are you still mad at him?"

"No," I said, not wanting to go into it. "But who ever heard of taking a vow of celibacy? What a dumb-ass thing to do!"

"Thou hast said it. The Tomahawk's insane, you know. The divine madness."

Zipping down St. Charles, wind in our hair, I savored that nickname for Tom-Tom. Tomahawk. Leon had called him the Tomcat. He didn't seem insane to me, just complicated. Soon we pulled up at a house on Audubon Street. So this was Tom's old apartment.

Raff led me back behind bushes to a glass-paned door, and we simply walked in. "Hey, Joel," he said to someone. My eyes weren't adjusted yet from the bright outdoors.

Pulling me past a post in the middle of the room, Raff said, "This is Tim."

"Ciao, Tim," a velvety voice spoke. I began to make out a guy on a bed in the back of the room. "Have a seat," he motioned to the bed under the window. Suddenly I realized that he was lying there stark naked in a regal pose, emanating a sexual energy that made my knees weak.

Tom appeared in the doorway and stopped. "Well, look who's here! Hi, Timbo!"

"Hi, Tom," I responded, abashed. "I'm sorry about yesterday..."

He put his finger to my lips. I remembered the others in the room. "Good!" Tom exclaimed, "You can help me with these boxes. Beth will be here in a few minutes."

Before everything was out to the sidewalk, Beth arrived. I was there when she saw Joel on his bed and said, "Hi, you patriarchal pig!" He replied, "Hi, you matriarchal cow!" When everything was stashed, Tom bid his roommate goodbye, and Joel said, "So long, Tommy."

I rode in Raff's car down to the Quarter since Beth's was so full of Tom-Tom's boxes and him and her. Of course we couldn't talk much in the convertible breeze, but that was just as good. I had to think about how I was going to talk to Tom, and how to tell him about Lloyd.

The new apartment was on Governor Nicholls on the rundown block up from Decatur. Across the street was a three-story old house almost falling down with balconies collapsed, a real ruin. Their place was back a dark tunnel to a patio with banana trees and up steps to a third-floor entry through the kitchen. The front rooms, bedrooms, had great French doors onto balconies—with no floors! Just wrought-iron railings sticking out there in the air.

“Look, Tomahawk!” Raff called to Tom, pointing down to the street where a wild-haired woman in a tattered wedding dress was strolling past the ruined building, followed by three ducklings. “That’s Agnes, the Duck Lady,” he explained to us, “an eccentric neighbor.”

We did a few trips carrying up boxes and getting them into proper rooms. The center room was the living room with a big couch in front of a huge fireplace and bookshelves where the many boxes of books went. While we tramped up and down the steps, I kept worrying about how to get Tom off alone to talk. As soon as we were done, Raff and Beth took off for the Italian grocery on Decatur to get something they called muffaleta sandwiches. The moment I was alone with Tom, I took his hand and began, “Tom-Tom, I’m so sorry for getting mad yesterday!”

“You just abandoned me,” Tom whimpered like a puppy. “But you said you loved me.”

“I do! It’s just that...” Was this the time to tell him?

“Well, I’ve got some good news,” Tom chortled and sidled up to me.

“Wait,” I begged, “I’ve got to tell you something first.”

“No, me first. My vow is over with! I’m free!”

“What? Why?” I was knocked over. “Are you trying to drive me crazy?”

“You asked that before. Not really. We’ve been saved by a real *deus ex machina*! My vow was revoked by divine decree. You see, my roommate Joel, otherwise known as Zeus, King of the Gods, insisted on saying goodbye last night with the full rites of the Bronze Eye.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Anyway, it was the last time,” Tom sighed. “And now I’m free!” He yanked on my shirt and pulled me into a frantic kiss.

All thought of Lloyd gone with the wind, when we stopped to breathe, I muttered, “I love you, I love you!”

The kitchen door opened and then slammed. It was Raff and Beth, who shouted, “Cut it out, you two! There’s food!” They brought out four huge, round sandwiches full of meats and cheeses and a remarkable olive salad and two six-packs of Jax beer. We dived into the dinner, and with a couple beers, I started feeling really mellow.

We’d hardly finished eating when other folks started showing up. First came an Indian guy with a white girl, Raj and Felicia, and then a black-haired girl named Gia with a guitar and a handsome blond boyfriend named Max. Tom whispered, “Max says he’s going straight with Gia. Too bad, huh?” Last came a couple named Ben and Rose, and I found her really attractive. For a house-warming, we drank gin and tonics while Gia played on the guitar. Pretty soon we were singing Joan Baez songs. Not half bad. Then Tom, Max, Rose and Beth sang Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Annabelle Lee” to the tune of “That Good Old Mountain Dew.”

Laughing so hard I could barely breathe, I suddenly realized that it was getting dark outside. I’d missed dinner at the Fresh—and my date with Lloyd! For a moment I felt awful, but then Tom sat beside me, snuggling close. Maybe it was the gin and tonic. I kissed Tom-Tom’s ear and excused myself to the bathroom. While in there peeing, I worried about how late it was getting already, probably after eight, missing all my study plans for the evening. Then I laughed at myself and how stodgy I was. Here I was so close to heaven with Tom-Tom—the Tomcat—the Tomahawk... What the hell! I could certainly goof off for an evening once in a while.

There were a few more strange guys standing around the living room like waiting for something, and Tom was off in his bedroom, the one on the right, talking to some older guys by the gaping balcony door. The men were pointing around the room and outside to the street below. They left, brushing past me in the doorway, very business-like. Tom explained, “They

want to shoot a movie!" My frustration quotient went right through the ceiling with this additional, totally unreal obstacle to my desire.

We went out to the kitchen for drinks while in the living room Raff and house-warming guests sat around gabbing and listening to records. It was a moment for us more or less alone. Mixing drinks with lime, Tom asked casually, "So did Lloyd Pringle, that big jerk, have anything to say about seeing us together in the Snack Bar?"

"He just asked what we were saying about ducks." Needing to defend Lloyd from being called a big jerk, I said, "He's a real sweet guy—I don't know why you call him a jerk."

"Of course you don't, sugar. You've got a lot to learn before you tangle with Lloyd."

I took a nervous sip of my drink. "I'm never going to tangle..."

"Don't never say never, Timbo. You don't ever know. Only the Oracle knows."

"What Oracle?"

Eying me over the rim of his gin and tonic glass, Tommy said, "Consulting oracles can be dangerous, darlin'. They tend to be ambiguous and deceptive. Best not even think about it."

We sat at the table while the same two guys came back through with armloads of lights and wiring. Tom took a sip of his drink. "First, you should learn some basic facts. You see, gays aren't born—we're laid! In transparent eggs. And one day we hatch, break out of that invisible shell. Hatchlings. Like ducklings. Right now, Timbo, you're hatching"

"So what do I do now?"

"First thing is to get a hatchling to kiss you as soon as possible. That's for imprinting—like with ducklings—and it purges lots of residual inhibitions."

I was glad to be taking Psychology. "Like you did me?"

"Correct. Encourage by discouraging. Second is always make it seem the hatchling is taking the initiative. This builds his self-confidence and provides a hatchling the comfort of being in control. And use whatever tricks and wiles necessary to make a hatching think it was his own idea." The guys passed through going back out.

"Is that what you did with me?" I was stung by the implication.

"Hardly! You take more initiative than anyone I've ever seen! It's fabulous! Anyway, third is never to frighten, alarm, torment, or attack a hatchling in any way. He is a very skittish creature, and fragile. Easily spooked. Handle him with kid gloves. Be gentle."

"Wait a minute!" I leapt on that. "All you've done is scare and confuse and torment me!"

"These are general rules. You needed special handling. Anyway, fourth is to always be supportive; encourage him in everything. Let others tell him it's stupid. He can hate them." Back came the two guys, this time carrying a really dumb-looking dummy.

"Am I really going to need all of this with Lloyd?" I accidentally wondered aloud.

"In all likelihood," Tom sighed and kissed me lightly on the lips. "This and more. And especially rule number five: Always use lots of lubrication." I laughed in spite of my virginal discomfort. He jumped up from his chair. "Come on, let's see what they're doing."

So we peeped into Tom's bedroom where they'd propped the dummy up on his brass bed. Bright lights shone up from across the street and into the open French doors on it. More lights were shining from the corners of the room. We had to stand back because they were shooting from down below in the street. Next, the guys in black picked up the dummy, and at a shout from outside, tossed it straight out the door into the bright lights. We could hear it fall plop in the middle of the street. From Raff's room we saw it lying all crumpled up on the pavement. "Too bad," Raff remarked sadly. "I thought he was cute. Didn't you, Tomahawk?"

When the movie guys finally left with their equipment, Tom and Raff were each fifty dollars richer. That obstacle was out of the way, but there were still the several guests. Tom and I sat on the stone ledge of the fireplace. He suddenly stood up and announced, "Hey, y'all! Thanks for helping us move in! Stay as long as you want. More booze in the cabinet and refrigerator. But if you'll excuse us, this young man and I have some private housewarming ceremonies to take care of. Goodnight to one and all!"

With that he pulled me into his bedroom and shut the door on the rest. I heard some laughter and then just the buzz of chatter again. It had all happened so fast I didn't have time to be embarrassed. Tom stood by his now-famous bed unbuttoning his shirt. I reached out to touch the curly hairs on his chest. "I love you, Tom-Tom," I whispered.

"Just a minute." He turned away. "I feel like Mozart flutes!" While he put the record on his phonograph, I opened my own shirt and tried to remember to breathe. He turned back to me with his arms open as the music began and said gently, "So, Timbo, this is it!"

"I know," I said timidly and pulled my shirt off completely.

He took hold my hands. "Are you, Tim Mahoney, bonafide virgin and football hero, of sound mind and body?" I assured him as far as I could tell I was. "And are you ready, willing, and able to join with me, Tom Youngblood, certified seducer, in coital activities and mutual behaviors of a carnal nature?"

"I am." My pants were already falling around my feet.

"And do you solemnly promise to use the amazing super powers I am now about to bestow on you solely for the greater good of mankind and the advancement of universal love?"

"I do." Now for Tom's pants. The fabulous flutes mixed with ripples of laughter from the living room. I soon forgot those sounds. But maybe the folks still partying out in the living room could hear it when I thrust too hard, and Tommy moaned so loud. With Tom in me, I bet my moans were just as loud.

Afterwards, in the stillness, record over, party quiet, my Tom-Tom breathing heavy by my ear, through the balcony door from down on the street there came a faint quacking.

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6.4 - THE BULLET

(Epistle 5/16/64)

Dear Sally,

I am positively mortified that it's been more than a month since last I wrote. Surely it was before the... but all in good time. There is no real excuse for my neglect since the whole time I have been drifting about like a stunned... oh, what the hell, aardvark... now that my last term at Tulane is ending. I never dreamt it would really happen, and now the classes are honest-to-god ending! Just this morning was the last Ancient Greek. Alas! How can this be happening?

And in about a week I'll be putting on that black robe and marching. Can you believe? What are you planning to do, Sally, when you leave Jackson? Surely you don't want to go back to Tulsa! Anyway, as I curl up here on my huge sofa in front of an empty fireplace, I can't believe it will happen, but it will. The days keep clicking off. Suddenly I can hear them clearly like an obnoxious clock. The sense of doom has been growing for a couple months now. You may recall remarks in the last letter about where did spring go? Now graduation seems rather like expulsion—from the womb! Out into the real world of graduate school! But of course, I'm being silly. God forbid I be expelled into the Real World. They'd tear me to bloody shreds.

At any rate, all the stress and distress of the past month pretty much made me into an insomniac. Generally I haven't slept any more than four or five hours a night for the past few years, and then by later April—after my 22nd birthday—I found I often couldn't get to sleep at all. And when I did, it was for shorter and shorter periods of time. Not as though I felt tired much—until around the end of the month when there came a three-night stint. All the more time to dance at La Marina and carouse. But it was soon boring when everyone else went off to sleep, and I'd be sitting right here with a book wishing I felt even like a nap. But I'm getting ahead of myself. If I don't put things in some kind of reasonable sequence, they'll be all twisted up.

Starting at the beginning means starting at the end. When my sugar pie Timmy finally left me. I believe I last wrote that he was handling the two affairs, i.e., me and the jerk, fairly well for a novice. Well, thanks to my sterling instruction, Tim converted the jerk to a more profound method of intercourse. I'm told he has an innate talent. I was only a little jealous about sharing Tim's amorous aptitudes, because they were—I blush to admit—almost, and I stress almost, too much for me to keep up with. Lloyd helped a lot, providing breathing spells.

Right around the middle of April, however, things were clearly the other way around with Lloyd becoming a greedy pig. Wait! I need to tell you about a funny thing.

Once in early April Tim and I strolled along Royal Street near Brennan's restaurant. This middle-aged couple, who look like straight out of Iowa, comes out the door, and on seeing me approaching, the woman points and says, "Look! It's a beetle!" Now I'd been called a lot of things, but I don't feel I bear any resemblance to a bug—or to a Volkswagen. With as much dignity as I could muster, I begged her pardon, and she explained that my long hair reminded her of some new English rock group called the Beatles. So I took no offense. Later Timbo found a radio station where I could hear one of their songs, rather inane, called "I Want to Hold Your Hand." But a nice beat. Oh, I get the name! Sometimes I'm so slow.

Anyhow it got to the point that Timbo would only come to see me a couple times a week. On one of those ecstatic occasions, after we'd managed to rip a pillow apart by kneeling (and performing similar balancing acts) on it, we lay back laughing in the feathers, some of which stuck to things that were unavoidably sticky. His eyes were full of that same puppy-dog love as before, but at the same time I could see some tension wrinkling up his brow. Tim was painfully torn between us, I was certain, and understandably so. Between me, the intoxicating, amazingly

erotic older man, and Pretty Boy Lloyd, who has only his 18 year-old stomach muscles to recommend him. Okay, I'll stop being catty.

In perhaps one of the few heroic moments of my life, I carefully helped my sweet sugar babe come around to say he needed to stop seeing me. And in a performance worthy of the great Sarah B, I was understanding and accepting—my first concern for his own happiness with the other man—and we agreed that we could go on loving each other without ‘being in love.’

In such fashion, by the middle of April, I was once again a free agent. Along with the graduation syndrome, that was indubitably a major contributing factor to my stress and insomnia. Another is that there are always so many people hanging around the apartment. Everyone Raph and I know seems to wind up staying over at one time or another at the Gov. Nicholls Memorial Shelter for the Incurably Debauched. Probably the worst example, though still exemplary, was the night we had Loony Leah (back for good from California) sleeping on the couch, and straight Steve was in bed with Raph. (He didn’t trust me enough to share my bed.) Steve’s ugly little brother Charlie (only 14!) had arrived that day and was sacked out on the floor by the fireplace.

I was the last one in the bathroom, and right after my shower, I heard a knock at the door. Before I could get across the kitchen, a fist smashed through one of the panes and reached through to open it. Leah screamed. Charlie cowered up against the mantle, white as his sheet. I hollered, but the guy came in—big Carl, too drunk to know what he was doing! He slobbered and lurched into the living room where he collapsed on the floor, sound asleep, a little blood running off his hand onto the wood floor. Leah wrapped it in a towel, cussing the whole time about drunk faggots. They all went right back to sleep—but not me.

Another unsettling thing was coping with the general strangeness of living in the Quarter. Like one evening some of the gang were hanging out, lying around with drinks, playing records, reading, all the usual. There was also a young Cajun girl named Emilie upon whom Steve had carnal designs, and our friends Gia and her cute sailor Max. Along with Gia’s guitar we sang stuff, including a version of “Jabberwocky” sung to a medieval tune that fits perfectly.

When all of a sudden we hear this banging from upstairs. Everybody ran out to look up the steps, and the door at the top of the steps is bumping around just about to pop off its hinges. It goes crash! And then a strange rumbling sound afterwards. Carl nearly had himself right there because he’d just eaten a whole pack of morning glory seeds, thinking they were hallucinogenic. It sounded like some kind of a monster up there, or a murder going on, and nobody was brave enough to go find out what it was. So we all just went back inside, and every time it went crash, we’d all jump and make the sign of the cross. Later it just stopped. In the morning it turned out to be the new upstairs neighbor’s Great Dane who didn’t like being left alone.

A couple weeks ago we all decided to pull it together and have a real party. Late the night before a bunch of us made a run down Royal to the big city building and made off with a whole lot of magnolia branches from the trees there. We trooped back up Decatur looking like a bunch of bushes moving along the sidewalk, I’m sure, and I guess we were lucky not to get arrested. Passing the Jax Brewery, I saw Raj waving from the window. Then we tacked the greenery up all over the apartment like a forest—and put up barriers across the doors to the floorless balcony.

A huge crowd of folks came, many of whom I’ve never seen before in my life, and danced and carried on till all hours. It was an amazing experience for me being host to a collection of my old lovers, Joel (with a knockout redhead named Maryanne), Mark (with a girl named Janet), Rob, Leon, and Tim (with Lloyd, who was really quite charming after all!), Gia with her sailor Max, Butch (with his new boyfriend, a cute guy named Davey), and of course Raj (with the usual Felicia). Even Wulf came for a while, and dear Ben and Rose spent a good while.

And last but by no means least by any means—I called him with a special invitation—Pete came! I don't know where I found the courage to call, but he accepted! Lord, going on three years since our one night of closeness! In the back of my mind I still hoped for a rapprochement, but right away his glorious blue eyes told me that my first beloved was forever beyond my reach. Pete was very friendly, shaking my hand and complimenting the apartment. As I mixed him a drink, he told me he was leaving school to enlist in the Army. He'd to finish his architecture degree afterwards. I took him into the living room to meet everybody. Then I raced to the kitchen for a stiff shot of vodka.

Rather late in the festivities, at least four-thirty when there wasn't a sober eye in the place, Mark left Janet momentarily and cornered me in the kitchen. He made known his desire for an encore by Sir Roger, indecently proposing we go down to the patio and do it behind the banana trees. My better judgment arranged a tryst for the next evening (which turned out to be a truly virtuoso piece of chamber music!) It was just as well that we didn't try the banana trees because the two lovers who live in the slave quarter by the patio, Ken and Gary, came stomping up the steps stark naked and ordered everyone out. Party over! Go home! Afterwards, alone with my bittersweet emotions of seeing Peter again—probably for the last time, I didn't sleep.

The crisis in my insomnia came about a week ago. Again after the requisite carousing at La Marina or the dive of their choice, a bunch came back to the Memorial Shelter to lie about. Beth said she'd love some coffee, but we had no way to make it. Steve said he could fix that and rigged up a column of plastic glasses and (clean) socks suspended from the ceiling over the sink. Steve's super coffee-cooker. And it actually worked, a thick chicory coffee dripping out of the bottom sock into the cups. We had it mixed half and half with rum, and in short shrift everyone else in the place was asleep, like the queer's curse on Sleeping Beauty's castle. Not me. I had more, and in my desperation for something to do, I pulled out my typewriter to write a story, an allegory using farm animals for god and devil and people. When I finished the four pages, I walked to my bedroom and fell like a log onto the bed. I woke up in the afternoon feeling perfectly renewed and ready for Mark. My sleep pattern has been normal ever since.

At least that's been normal—not a lot else has been. Ever since last Saturday evening when I decided for a change to go hang out in Dixie's. Maybe it was being alone again. (Mark was definitely only an encore for old times' sake because he's serious about this Janet.) Right away I ran into that older man Val I met with Alex at the Lost River party, pudgy with curly gray hair and not very attractive at all. He invited me to sit with him and ordered me a drink.

As you know, I haven't had a lot to do with 1) old guys; 2) fat guys; or 3) homely guys, but I tried to be polite and conversational. It turns out Val's a French teacher and was leaving for Europe in two days. In spite of his triple handicap, there was something strangely appealing about his manner and tone. He wasn't smarmy like old guys so often are around us young things. When our drinks came, he toasted me, "Here's to a fascinating young man!" He explained that Alex had described me as the most depraved person in the French Quarter. I hadn't been aware that my reputation had gotten so out of hand and was flattered. So we talked.

And we talked. About everything from family to sexual history to literature to music. He's actually in his late forties, a widower, and father of a girl in college. He decided to 'come out,' at least in certain circles, only a couple years ago. I was impressed. But he sighed. "How I wish," he sighed again, "I could have been like you—young and beautiful and gay!" It wasn't pitiful at all. Just poignant. It made me feel suddenly how I too will someday get old, and I gave sincere thanks for my present youth and beauty and gaiety.

Sometimes I sleep with people for the strangest reasons. Maybe for novelty. So I took Val home with me to the Memorial Shelter. Raph and Beth were lying about listening to records, and I could see the disbelief in their eyes as I introduced Val. While I mixed us a drink, he struck up a conversation with them about, of all things, racing dogs. But I wasn't in the mood for gab-fests and quickly dragged him off to my room. I still don't quite know what hit me. It was utterly unlike making it with a hot young guy. The feel of Val's large soft body, the mature smell of him that reminded me of my father. He was slow and intense, and to my true wonder and amazement, taught me things I'd never imagined the male member capable of feeling. And in the dark I wasn't the least troubled by his gray hair or less than handsome face. Eventually I curled up in his arms and slept like a child.

All day Sunday we traipsed around the Quarter, very late breakfast in the Coffee Pot—make that lunch—check out the artists around the Square, and then take the Magazine Street bus down to see the zoo, always one of my favorites. The whole while we jabbered about everything at such a rate that I never gave his age or looks a thought. His story of, as he called it, 'being in the closet' for so many years was very touching. But something I could in no way relate to. As was for him, I'm sure, my sordid tale of so many loves lost and assorted debaucheries. By a cage of the most gorgeous colored birds, Val told me I'm a blessed being. "As though some pagan nature spirit!" he rhapsodized, and the recognition and adoration warmed my inner Dionysus. Val clearly understood, so I only gave a cursory version of the doctrine of the Divine Debauch.

Since I had a shift in the Snack Bar at five, Val took off on his own somewhere and then came back to see me home late in the evening. He brought me a little flower he'd found and showed me a poem he'd just written on the bus. In it I was a little boy with a basket of apples, and it was all very tender and complimentary. The romanticism was nearly overwhelming. Val then remarked that I was so perfect he almost didn't want to go on his trip. I made him get real, for goodness sake. A summer in Europe!

On the way back home on the Jet, we talked about my plans for graduate school in Seattle. He was a great help in calming my nervousness about it all, stressing all the wonderful opportunities ahead of me. And he gave me an amusing piece of advice. "When you get famous, just remember," he said, "when somebody's kissing your ass, you can bet it's because he wants to fuck you." I'll definitely keep that in mind.

Val was eager to accompany me to La Marina for a couple hours of crowds, uproar, and dancing in the Third Room. Maria, a fairly new dancing partner, taught Val the merengue, and he was pretty good even with the extra weight. Sharing my world with him made me feel great. When we finally burst out the door onto Decatur, Val found a bullet lying on the sidewalk, shiny new. I put it in my pocket for a souvenir of him and how he was passing through my life like one. Our second-night last night in the brass bed was even more astounding than the first one for discovering closeness with another human being. I sit here now with my chewed pen and scribbled pad and wonder if I'll ever find anything like that again.

In the morning when he had to take a cab back to his host's house for his luggage and head off thence for the airport, we shared tears in the dark entranceway. Before the taxi got to the end of the block, it already felt like a dream, but for the bullet in my pocket.

A quick jaunt down to Canal and Maison Blanche for a fitting on my graduation suit helped calm my sense of loss. Actually it was replaced with a renewed nervousness about said event, but now I had a more optimistic feeling about it, thanks to Val. On the way home, I felt oddly peaceful, and that's why I'm couched out here writing to you, my oldest friend!

You know, when you come right down to it, I'm not as upset about the thought of school ending as I am at the prospect of leaving New Orleans in the fall. I realize now as I walk along the dear familiar streets of the Quarter or wander under the oaks of Audubon Park how much beauty and happiness I'll be leaving behind. Will I be able to find more in a place like Seattle? Something in me weeps when I sit beneath my little palm in Jackson Square and look up at the lovely spires of St. Louis. I keep saying I'll keep an open mind about that distant city—and I do have nearly four more months here. I expect this summer to be the most splendid ever!

I'll try to write again soon after the Day of Great Trauma this weekend. Pray for me.
Always, Tommy

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