

CONTENTS

7.1 - THE SHOWER OF BLISS - He brightens a mad artist's life and becomes a saint.....	210
7.2 - THE MORE THE MERRIER - He meets his true love, and life gets complicated.	219
7.3 - THE BOWLING BALL - He defies his horoscope and gets thrown into jail.	231
7.4 - NEW EDEN - He goes to heaven and then acts even crazier than normal.	243
7.5 – TRIPULATION - His true love's wife shows up, and then everything hits the fan.....	249

7.1 - THE SHOWER OF BLISS

The winter of 1963 was simply more than I could bear, and so on Christmas I tried to kill myself with sleeping pills. Tried was all I managed, because my carnivorous mother had to come in to say one last goodnight to her little Adrian (I'm over six feet tall!) and consequently I was discovered too soon. After my stomach was pumped, (during which thrilling experience I gather I raved about being the Emperor Hadrian), my dear parents, the illustrious Girouds of Lafayette, sent me all hush-hush to the Mandeville loony bin to fix me up.

At the very first session with the psychiatrist I explained that I've always felt so different from other guys, but I didn't tell him about the main difference. It was enough to tell him about realizing back in high school that I'm homosexual and hating having to lie so much about my one and only affair. I met Jerry when I was sixteen on a Saturday afternoon in the park when I was playing basketball with the guys. He was an older guy, not bad looking, probably mid-twenties, just standing there watching us play, and somehow or another we wound up talking after the game. Really attracted to him, and being cute myself, I managed to get invited to his apartment—managed without difficulty—and with absolutely no effort I got him to rape me.

In our regular Tuesday and Thursday afternoon secret sex sessions—Jerry worked in a bank, and I had those days off early for my after-school free moments—there wasn't much of what I'd call love or affection. He'd just say hi and get down to his business. There were no caresses other than when he greased up my butt and proceeded to plug me. I tried to enjoy it but was really frustrated by not getting off myself—which meant that Jerry never even noticed my deformity during the nearly two years he balled me. It ended because he left me to get married. I was ecstatic to be out of it, but even more frustrated without the sex, such as it was. Fortunately I left for college in Hammond soon after and forgot about Jerry completely.

Having to live secretly, there was no love life for me in college, and I got real used to solitary sex, hand-jobs. I grew very adept at vivid fantasies about hot guys around campus, and began to feel that my way was more fulfilling than the real thing could ever be. And there was no worry about someone seeing my weirdness. By the time I was a junior, I'd developed this whole philosophy of celibacy—not chastity!—and was fairly comfortable with it. I simply couldn't go so far as to pretend I was straight by going out with girls, and so was a dorky sort of fellow, I guess. But what was to be expected of a Art major? That proved a fine background for living the next two years after graduation back home in Lafayette chez Giroud like a freak painting mad pictures in the attic. I like to do huge flowers. During that virtuous time I elevated 'self-abuse' to an art as well. The situation was a prescription for madness.

So maybe suicide was a tad extreme, but it only led to spending two months in the Bug Bin while the official freaks in white coats tried to convince me I'm normal and should get married like my siblings. By April I convinced them—mostly through trickery, like crude

advances on female attendants—that I believed them, and thus I was released out into the wide world as cured. The whole ordeal I found more than passing curious and revolting.

After my incarceration in the Black Hole of Mandeville, neither I nor my older brothers and sisters, could deal with me coming back to Lafayette even as a supposedly reformed ‘queer,’ so Maman’s suggestion to get my own place in New Orleans was a perfect solution. In late March I found one on Ursulines right in the Vieux Carré. Not too far away for her to come see me about once a month. My bussing up there in turn is not very pleasant since I have to endure the silent hatred of my siblings. Maman tries to pretend that I’m just a regular bachelor. What else do you call an unmarried gentleman of 25? As far as she was concerned, my sojourn in the bughouse cured me. Instead, what it did was to teach me that if you generally act in a socially acceptable fashion, one can be as mad as a hatter and nobody gives a hoot. Or they find one’s little quirks and insanities very funny.

Of course Maman saw nothing on her visits to suggest otherwise because I haven’t been looking for a boyfriend these past months in the Quarter. My philosophy and right hand kept me consoled and my secret safe. Fairly soon I did manage to find a job with a company that makes Mardi Gras floats—a lot like art therapy with *papier mache* and such. At the float barn over on Tchopitoulas I work with comatose louts who put absolutely no stress on my principles.

My only society has been folks I know through family like cousins Henri and Madelaine (the Scarlet Woman) Dupree from my mother’s side. She usually identifies herself as ‘Mad Elaine.’ Henri is definitely somewhat madder than she or even I, styling himself Pope Henri I of the Holy Church of Charlie Brown. He has already appointed me to his Sacred College of Bluejays. I’ve yet to learn the tenets of the faith, but its rituals have a distinctly Fellini flavor.

Also these months, besides more painting, I’ve kept very busy redoing the apartment. The gate on Ursulines opens onto a long passage to a patio, then through another arched passage to another patio, and my place faces onto that, a small slave quarter with louvered doors. Inside are scads of elephant ears, high-backed white wicker chairs, my huge cane bird cage (empty but picturesque), and Turkish bed with huge pillows. Several of my floral paintings hang on the walls. I lie here reading by the lamplight and feel like a romantic Creole lady in her languorous and luxurious Caribbean retreat.

What with the painting and gardening, for all that time I didn’t see many guys to fantasize about in my tender moments. But life was pleasant in the languid heat of what was still spring—since there were still many months of summer to come (the seasons being abstract concepts in this blessed city). Naturally I watched people when I was out, since sometimes it’s impossible not to notice passing pulchritude, and the sightings came in handy at night. Like the interesting young blond fellow I saw any number of times walking on Royal or Chartres. He was always dressed in green corduroy jeans and those leather sandals with the toe loop. One day, like a lunatic, I waved at him across the street, but he didn’t see me.

One evening over drinks I described the sandal man to Henri, and he raved about how this Tommy, whom he had not officially met, "...is the patron of dancers, the dissolute, and deranged." Unbeknownst to the fellow, last Mardi Gras precisely at midnight, the Pope had ecumenically declared him Blessed when from a far corner of the Third Room in some place called La Marina, His Serene Holiness had devoutly watched the boy in ancient Greek costume dancing for hours in rapture. “A blond dervish with obscenely sensuous hips,” Pope Henri exclaimed. “We soon will canonize him San Tomás de la Marina!” I made sure to ascertain the location of this La Marina before His Grace left for another foreign film.

Of a morning in early June, loaded down with my bags of groceries, I was just leaving the A & P on Royal when the sandal-shod San Tomás came walking right past me. We looked at each other, and I said, "Peace be with you!" He said, "Hi." We went our separate ways. All the way home, I was shaking from that epiphany when the saint had acknowledged my existence. The rest of the afternoon was a waste as in spite of philosophy, I mooned around the patio tending my gardens and thinking about the fascinating boy on the street. *Un garçon de la rue.* My excitement was so sweet, something I hadn't felt since way Before the Bin—or BB in my personal historical terminology. I'm now living in the AB era.

A couple days later, on Wednesday I had Miss Madelaine to dinner. She's Maman's second cousin from home in Lafayette, also the black sheep of her family, though not in the same way as yours truly. Well, maybe it was in the same way. We both like men. While we ate our steaks and salads, as I expected, since she was wont to tipple not very fastidiously, Mad Elaine polished off most of a bottle of red wine. Since I get drunk on two glasses, we were fairly well oiled by eight o'clock. Quick and awkward cleanup in the kitchen, and we retired to the wicker thrones amongst my philodendrons and bananas, where I quickly fell asleep. I eventually woke to find Mad Elaine most of the way through another bottle of wine and enjoying the hell out of the Lysistrata illustrations in my new Aubrey Beardsley book. It was nearly eleven.

Fortunately with the nap, I was sobered up enough to walk her home to Burgundy and St. Ann. Now Mad Elaine is a not exactly svelte young maiden, and with her certain measure of extra mass, she can usually hold her booze. But tonight she was too loaded to know or care where she was going and was a chore to steer. Once the wench was safely delivered, I wandered the peaceful night streets of the Vieux Carré. I didn't go into the gay bars, of course, since I was still living in secret. Besides, I don't find feminine men at all attractive.

Feeling adventurous, I wandered farther down other streets until I was approaching the waterfront side of the Quarter down Toulouse. And there at the corner of Decatur in a perfectly ruinous building was a sinister place named La Casa de los Marinos, the dive Henri had told me about. A little sign with 'La Marina' and a throbbing rhythm that seemed to make the pavement shake. When I walked through the swinging door, the roar of Latin music almost knocked me over. In contrast to the quiet street, the bar was jam-packed with people, but it was too dark to see anyone very well. I wiggled my way through jostling people into other rooms. Mad Elaine really had to see this third room, fantastic with mad murals all around the walls.

And right there, at the other end of the bar, amidst the din and the dancers, perched cross-legged on a barstool, sat my Adonis in green pants, San Tomás de la... It made one almost consider believing in fate. I stopped in the crowd at the door to feast on this vision. The saint watched the dancers with a benign, angelic expression. When the song changed, the guy leapt down from his stool and with a girl from the crowd, began a sinuous Latin dance. His fluid movements mesmerized me. Continuing in another dance, a very lively number, his expression was one of such joy and abandon that I laughed with the beauty of it and of him.

When he was back on his stool, I watched him, arguing with myself about what to do. I almost turned around and left. Even if I was so inclined, someone as fabulous as this San Tomás was definitely out of my league. But I won the argument, or lost it, as the case may be, and crossed through the crowd to him. Shouting through the loud music, I introduced myself, hoping it all sounded perfectly straight.

"Hi, I'm Tommy." He shook my hand and shouted, "Have a nice party?" Confused by his question and fascinated, I stared. "You bought a lot of wine earlier this evening at the store on Dumaine," he laughed. I didn't know he'd seen me. "So who was your dinner guest?"

I couldn't talk in the loud music, and Tomás led me out into the second room of the bar where it was considerably quieter. There I gave a dramatic description of Mad Elaine, who actually in certain lights could look like one of Toulouse Lautrec's models, or in others a fearsome fishwife. Lest he get the wrong idea, but not to commit myself to anything, I made it clear that our relationship was purely familial. The whole while this lovely Tomás listened with an amused smile. What would he think if he knew he was going to be declared a saint?

We were quiet taking sips from our beers. "You know," Tomás remarked suddenly, "I'd love to see where you live." Again I could only stare, struck dumb by what was happening. He laughed. "I trailed you home this evening from the liquor store just to see. You're funny, you know, looking up and down the street and then sneaking in the gate—like you don't want anyone to know where you're going. Like a bunny sneaking into his burrow." This time I laughed. He had described much of the way I'd felt for months.

There was consequently very little way I could decline his charming company down Chartres where we talked more easily in the blessed quiet on the night streets. His whole name was Tommy Youngblood, a soon-to-graduate senior at Tulane. I told him about my work with the Mardi Gras floats and as little as possible about my 'background.'

We turned up Ursulines to my gate which I unlocked and self-consciously tried not to look around. Down the long passage, the both of us quiet, the first dark patio, quiet, the second passage, and into my patio. Here it wasn't so dark with the Japanese lantern by the fountain glimmering, and from the louvered window came the slatted glow of the lamp I'd left on by the bed. While I fumbled with the key in the door, worrying about where this was leading, Tommy put his arm around my waist and whispered. "I feel like I'm creeping into your inner sanctum."

I laughed nervously and opened the door. When I turned on the light, my bright flowers leapt forth like fireworks, and Tommy gasped. "I'm a mad artist," I explained, ushering him inside. The delight in his eyes was praise enough for me. Then he suddenly turned and basically threw himself into my arms. The force of his kiss pushed us straight back onto the bed, cushions flying every which-a-way under the elephant ears. For a moment I surrendered to his insistent mouth—until his hand started reaching... I froze up, freeing myself from his arms fairly easily since I was so much bigger. "No," I mumbled, "not yet..."

"Not yet?" Tommy groaned, lying a-sprawl the bed. "What do you have to do?"

I was taken by surprise. "Well, nothing really, but I don't..."

"Then come here!" He opened his arms to me.

I stood up, backing away, embarrassed. "I'm not ready..."

Tommy's eyes gleamed. "You mean you're a virgin?"

"Oh, no," fortunately I could protest truthfully. "I can't just jump into bed with you!"

"Why not?" he snapped. "Why'd you bring me home then?" He seemed insulted.

"I'm sorry," I whimpered, "I wanted to get to know you, you know..."

He laughed. "Just what I had in mind! Come here!" Again his arms were open wide.

It was a torment, but I was firm. "No, let's just talk and do things..."

"Let's do things and then talk!" Tommy countered with a wicked smile.

"I'll just make us some drinks," I headed for the kitchen corner. "Is vodka okay?"

"Don't bother," he sighed and got up from the bed. "I might as well go home." I reached out to him as he headed to the door. He avoided me and with a sad little "Be good!" closed the door behind himself. I stood there like a stick for the longest, wondering what had just happened. I mean, I couldn't have sex with him just like that and have him find out so soon. Oh, God, had I

driven him away already? Even after intense consolation therapy, I was emotionally ruined for the rest of the night, barely able to sleep in my luxurious boudoir.

Just as I was finishing my morning ablutions before work, there was a ring from the gate, and I buzzed whoever in, expecting at worst a hung over Mad Elaine. But it was the blessed face of San Tomás in the glass pane of my door. Rejoicing, I flung open the door to find him standing there with a bag. "Brought some Danish for a nice breakfast," he said very matter-of-factly, as though I should have expected it. "Is there coffee?"

"I made a whole pot..." I stammered and went for mugs. "Hey, thanks for..."

"Sure," he said. "Do you like cherry or pineapple?"

"Either. Cream? Sugar?"

"Both. You get pineapple. I have a thing for cherries."

We sat across from each other in white wicker thrones with our pastries. To revive the conversation, I asked, "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Well enough," he sighed around a mouthful, a trail of sugar on his upper lip, "for having been so cruelly rejected." He gave me a terribly hang-dog look.

"I'm sorry—I just need some time to..."

"To do what? Can I help you do whatever it is so we can get it over with?"

I couldn't help but laugh at his enthusiasm. "No, it's just that... I'm not sure I want..."

"You're not sure?!" The saint put his mug down on the side table, clearly exasperated. "You mean you're not sure if you're gay?"

"No, that's not it at all. What I mean is, for me to let myself go to bed with someone, I need to have a lot of trust in him."

"How many men have you had sex with?"

"Just one back in high school—till he got married."

"So you trusted him? Look where that got you."

"I know." I so much wanted to open up to him, but that old fear...

"Well, I'll tell you what," Tomás said, wiping his fingers on his paper napkin, "I've got to go to work. I'm a cashier in the University Center and work days now in the summer." He got up and patted my knee. "I'll come by around nine and take you to see my place, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed as he let himself out again.

For a long while I couldn't move from the chair. So I called in sick to work. Painting the waves on Comus #17 could wait till tomorrow. For hours I simply wandered the Quarter streets thinking about what to do about Tomás. Mad Elaine was no help either when we sat with juleps in the afternoon heat on her patio. She listened patiently while I told the tale of meeting San Tomás de la Marina. The description of the sailor bar's insane Third Room made her eyes light up. Of course I couldn't tell her the whole situation, so I was sure my hesitation sounded odd.

Later, still oppressed by fear and anxiety, I had no appetite whatsoever for dinner and made it through the evening by working on a painting of an enormous daisy. A day's eye. A golden sun in a pure white sky. Just after nine the bell rang, but not as loudly as my heart was pounding when I punched the buzzer. Tomás must have run down the passageways because he came tearing in the door very quickly and before I could resist, pulled me into an embrace.

His exuberance made me laugh as I pushed away. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I've been thinking all day at work about just one thing." He smiled, straightened his pants around an obvious hard on, and nodded toward my bed.

"Behave yourself!" I scolded, tantalized in spite of myself.

"Shit!" he snorted and gave up that tactic. "So let's head over to my place. I want you to meet some friends."

His place was on Governor Nicholls near Decatur and the rough areas around the markets. Here too one entered through a gate and dark passageway to a small patio with open steps and slave quarters in the rear. His apartment was on the third floor. On the sofa in the middle of the room sat a very angular young man in white ducks with his legs drawn up under him and his sandals partly off. Beside the empty fireplace sat a doll-like, curly haired girl swinging a bag purse and laughing at whatever the guy had said. A record player was providing "Silkie" by Joan Baez. "Hey, guys," Tomás interrupted, "I want you to meet Adrian. This is Raph and Beth." We shook hands around, and I made conversation about being an artist. "And guess what!" Tomás helped out, "He makes Mardi Gras floats." Both Raph and Beth got interested, and sitting down on the sofa, I leaked some top secret details of next year's Comus #17.

Meanwhile he sat beside me and shamelessly curled up against me. Since I'm so tall, he fitted perfectly up under my arm, and he tickled my ribs. I started to get embarrassed, but Beth didn't register any surprise. "Don't mind him," Raph chuckled, "The Tomahawk's got the manners of an alley cat." Beth laughed like tinkling bells.

"You are rather like a big tomcat," I volunteered.

"We don't call him that anymore," Raph cautioned. "She might hear!"

Tomás leapt up and opened the door to the right bedroom. Out came bobbing a tiny ball of golden fur that turned out to be a darling little Pekingese. "She's a sleeve dog," he explained as he picked her up and sat down on my lap, "the kind the Emperors kept in their sleeve, you see." He explained that the dog's name is She, after the heroine of a novel by H. Rider Haggard, and She was a present from his little sister who raised them.

"I think She looks like a goldfish," Raph chuckled.

Shortly Raph and Beth left to go somewhere called the Gin Mill. While Tomás made me a rum and coke at the counter in their kitchen, he explained, "In case you're wondering, they're not a couple. Beth is a sweet kid with a crush on Raph, but she won't get into his pants in a million years, that's for sure." Handing me the drink, he led me to the right bedroom whence previously came She, who was leaping about our feet. There was his big brass bed, which I stayed as far away from as possible to check the view off the balcony through the open French door. There was no floor! Three storeys down. "She knows not to go too close," he laughed and leaned up against me. Then, gentle pushes toward the bed.

But I resisted. "No..." When he looked mystified, I added, "I'm celibate."

"I've done that," Tomás said, looking irritated. "Boring... How long has it been?"

"About six years."

"Good grief!" he choked. "I only made it for four months! So why?"

I mumbled, "I've got this problem, you see..."

"So have I!" Tomás laughed and grabbed his crotch. But he let the subject drop.

The next stage of our evening was to stroll down the street taking She for a walk, a piece of fluff on the end of the leash. Approaching Jackson Square at St. Ann, Tomás pointed out two elegantly dressed beauties, one rather older and consequently the other much younger, a raven-haired hunk—obviously lovers walking their enormous wolfhound. "I really wonder what planet they're from," he laughed wistfully. I suggested it was the perilous planet Megabucks. She barked ferociously at the huge animal. But knowing our place, we peasant earthlings abjectly stood back to let the haughty Megabuckians pass in their oblivious splendor.

Up St. Ann we strolled with shaggy She, our own version of those two lovers, and then down Chartres with She perkily jiggling around ahead of us. We ambled along talking more about our lives. Tomás told me briefly about his unrequited love for a straight man, an East Indian, and about several other relationships. His life certainly seemed to be a bacchanal. Something prompted honesty, and I came clean about that ‘love affair’ in Lafayette, admitting that love was scarcely involved. Of course, I offered not a word about my attempted suicide to my saintly companion, who looked touched by my other remarks.

He took my hand as we turned the dog down Governor Nicholls and said, “Adrian, cher, you really need me bad!”

“Oh, do I?” I laughed, meanwhile knowing full well it was the truth. “Are you an angel of mercy come to shower me with bliss or something?”

“Exactly!” Tomás crowed and grabbed my buttock and squeezed.

“Hey!” I shouted, jumping away. Right here on the street? “Behave yourself!”

He didn’t look repentant at all. “I know an old Chinese trick I believe they call the Shower of Bliss. Just what the doctor ordered!”

“Will you cut it out?!” I protested as we turned into his doorway. And then in the dark tunnel Tomás leapt on me with a frantic, insistent kiss. My defenses were crashing around my ears—when behind his head I saw... Try screaming in the middle of a kiss! There on the dark wall right behind his back was an enormous lizard, phosphorescent and wet-looking, pale opal with big suckers on the ends of its toes. Tomás thought it was gorgeous but was afraid to catch it. Tiny She, no longer than the lizard, waited patiently on the end of her leash, unaware of anything unusual. Soon the ghostly lizard darted across the wall and up to the dark ceiling.

Inside the apartment kitchen he put out some food down for She and then invited me once again to his bed. I refused. He offered to go back with me to my bed. I refused. “Well,” he conceded, “in that case, I guess I’ll have to go out for a while and dance away my woes.”

Feeling absolutely miserable, I ventured to ask, “To La Marina?”

He shook his head as he opened the door. “No, tonight I need some Greek stuff. I think it’s time for the Gin Mill.”

Out on the steps again, after all my resistance, I didn’t have the courage to ask to come along to wherever that was. Down the steps in silence. In the tunnel I mumbled that I was sorry, and he laughed. “Don’t waste time feeling sorry. Just get over your problem and get ready for the Shower of Bliss!” Out on the street, he said, “See you tomorrow, cher. Get ready!” He turned right toward Decatur, and I turned left toward Chartres, in anguish.

Only as I was unlocking my front gate, intentionally not glancing around the street suspiciously, I realized that Tomás hadn’t said when tomorrow we’d see each other. Back in the womb of my wonderful apartment, I paced around among the plants, agonizing about ‘getting over my problem.’ It would mean letting him see the deformity, and I couldn’t do that. But I did so need San Tomás de la Marina and his Shower of Bliss! But what would he think?

I decided to have a glass of wine to calm me down. Damn! I always felt like such a freak! And there wasn’t much chance he wouldn’t notice. If I could just figure out how to talk to him about it first... Sitting in my big chair, I ran through the conundrum again and again, always coming to the same conclusion. But I’d never been able to talk to anyone about it. How now, brown cow, was I going to say it out loud to him? But I wanted to take him in my arms and... God! I did feel like I was going nuts! How was I going to last until I saw Tomás again? How could I wait until tomorrow evening after our workdays? I refilled my wineglass. Well, I’d try my best to ‘get ready.’ I’d work out just how to say... And then we could make love!

Back lounging in the chair, I soon drifted off to sleep—until the doorbell. And his face at the door pane again! As I let him in, Tomás giggled, “It’s tomorrow!” The clock did say twelve-fifteen. “I couldn’t wait any longer!” He threw his arm around my neck and gave me a kiss on the cheek with a faint fragrance of beer. His shirt felt damp with sweat.

“Can I get you a drink?” I asked, turning toward the kitchen.

“Oh, no, thanks,” he answered behind me with a curious inflection. When I turned back, there he was, taking off his shirt, and his pants dropping to the floor around his feet. The curly blond hair on his chest stopped my breath. Shuffling towards me, he whispered, “Get set!” He walked out of his pants, naked, toward my bed. I tried to beg off again, and he turned back to me with a cocky expression. “Well, cher, you’ve got two choices. Either you come here and make love to me—or you paint my picture. Which is it?”

“But I don’t paint people.”

“Then come here.”

“I’ve got to tell you something.”

“No, you don’t!” he said emphatically, pointing to my bed. When I shook my head, he said, “Then go get your painting stuff!” And he sprawled on the bed in a tremendously sensuous pose in the dim light from the lamp. Staring at the ceiling, he sighed, “Lord, I know you’re paying me back for how I tormented poor Tim!” I thought better of inquiring. Then he looked at me and announced proudly, “Last year I posed for another artist. He made me look very nice.”

“I doubt I can,” I whined. “You’ll end up looking like some kind of orchid probably.” Indeed the lines of his arms and legs suggested spidery petals against a background of shadowy leaves. I made no move to follow his orders and argued rather pitifully, “I’m just afraid that if I sleep with you, you’ll go away. You know, leave me.”

“Well, that’s pretty silly!” Tomás snorted and sat up.

“It is not.”

“Is too. If you don’t make love with me, I’ll be leaving a hell of a lot sooner! Like now!” I ignored the ultimatum. “See! You will go away!”

“Hey!” he laughed at me gently while running his hands slowly up and down his bare sides. “Eventually everyone goes away. We just love them while we can. Come on, cher!”

His arms were wide open for me. Faced with the ultimatum, I shyly went over to sit on the edge of the bed. “Tomás,” I began, with a nervous chew on the lip, “You need to know...”

“Out with it!” he ordered, reaching for my zipper and laughing.

I caught his hand and suddenly found myself saying so easily, as though it were simply some interesting fact, “I’ve only got one testicle.”

Although his brown eyes registered surprise, he responded immediately, “So what? Is that what your problem’s all about?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, ashamed. “It’s so awful being a freak.”

Tomás stroked my shoulder. Does everything else work all right though?”

“Yeah, I guess. But just one...”

He shushed me, and holding my embarrassed hand, proclaimed that one was all it took. So I hesitantly undressed in front of him and stood there, horribly self-conscious. “Wow!” he exclaimed, “You’re a perfect Cyclops!” Then he pulled me down to his mouth. We didn’t come up for air for at least an hour. Modesty forbids description of our activities, other than to say that my first experience of physical love went far beyond any of my manual imaginings. Tomás was correct. His Shower of Bliss was precisely what I needed.

Too early in the morning the phone rang. It was Mad Elaine, distraught. Last night she was dancing on the bar in La Marina and fell off! Her broken leg was now in a cast.

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7.2 - THE MORE THE MERRIER

Tommy was at home in the Memorial Shelter for the Hopelessly Debauched whiling away a sweltering late-July Friday afternoon off from work in the Snack Bar. He sat on the floor with a rugged tree-root three feet long in his lap, whittling on it with a small jack-knife. She the Pekingese scampered about nearby with a squeaky toy. Both the root and the huge wooden cable spool serving as coffee table had been discovered by Tommy and Adrian while exploring under the wharves along the riverfront. Great flotsam, but the jetsam was mostly pretty gross.

Raph and Beth lounged nearby on the sofa with drinks. They were planning the menu for a big dinner tomorrow evening, a farewell banquet for Gia's lover Max who was off on a tour of duty with the Coast Guard. Tommy's mind was elsewhere in his sculpting, oblivious to their chatter, until Beth said, "...wolfhound." He'd seen that glamorous pair of lovers again a couple days ago, and the young black-haired one just got prettier and prettier. Downright delectable.

"Yeah," Raph responded as he munched on a sheet of notepaper, "that's some guy named Drew something—lots of money, I hear. Don't know the other one's name."

Carving off a curling shaving, Tommy sighed, "I bet he costs a pretty penny!"

"Well, start saving up your pennies," Beth snickered. "Yesterday I heard the old guy kicked the pretty one out of his penthouse."

Silent, Tommy looked up from his sculpture. His current involvement with Adrian the mad artist notwithstanding, he'd had the black-haired Megabuckster on his mind for some time and was troubled by the thought of that beautiful gazelle cast out defenseless amongst the tigers of the French Quarter jungle such as himself. The fragrance of hot blood filled his nostrils.

"You know," Beth remarked with a sip of her drink, "that thing really is hideous!"

"I call it 'The Shriek of Arabi,'" Tommy announced proudly and stood the root on the floor, a twisted figure with a distorted open mouth, not unlike Munch's 'The Scream.' Only this had sharp-clawed fingers tearing the form apart from inside. "You really think it's ugly?"

"Let's put it this way, Hawk," Raph drawled, "I think that thing is the Ugly Stick!"

"And here I thought it was poignant—the anguish and joy of metamorphosis!"

Beth came over to look at it more closely. "I see what you mean—but it's still hideous!"

The sculptor stood it in the black, empty maw of the fireplace and growled, "Philistines!" He picked up She for a cuddle. "Just for that, I'm leaving! They're showing 'Les Enfants Terribles' again at the Royal Art."

Tommy strolled up Governor Nicholls, at loose ends because his sweet demented Adrian had gone off for several days to Lafayette for a brother's wedding. The poor guy really dreaded it. Since getting back from Ohio, Tommy had enjoyed a truly luxurious love affair with this painter of huge flowers, splendid afternoons lounging on the shady patio out of the heat, evenings of moderate carousing in the dives, and nights on a big Turkish bed amongst ferns.

A couple blocks down Royal at the theater, Tommy found it nearly a half-hour till show time. Alone in the dim lobby at the ticket counter sat his old acquaintance Monty, who was in a couple words hugely obese and therefore precariously balanced on his reinforced stool. "Hey, I haven't seen you in weeks, pretty boy! Who you been doing?"

"Cute artist name of Adrian over on Ursulines. He's out of town right now."

"Uh-oh!" Monty chuckled, his cheeks and chins jiggling, "while the cat's away..."

"Not much chance of that," Tommy laughed wistfully. "I'm being totally monogamous."

"How saintly! I assume that means you only fuck with one guy at a time."

"I never said that," Tommy objected. "As a matter of fact, the more the merrier!"

Monty's little eyes wrinkled with chagrin. "I wouldn't know about that, but I can well imagine." Then the enormous man leaned on the counter and launched into an account of a lurid soap opera being acted out in his ancient and degenerate Creole family. Tommy was well entertained. In mid-scandal Monty suddenly stopped and stared wide-eyed at the front door.

Behold! It was the beautiful young Megabuckster approaching from the bright doorway. He walked gracefully, like a gazelle. Tommy's eyeteeth tingled as he watched the splendid animal walk up to the ticket counter right beside him—with only a slight glance in his direction, and ask Monty for a ticket. The guy's eyes were blue! And the black hair... The killer combo! Monty sat mesmerized on his heavy-duty stool. The guy repeated, "Can I buy a ticket?"

"Just as soon," Tommy remarked snidely from the shadows, "as Monty gets back from the moon." The guy laughed musically. Tommy flexed his claws, the hunting instinct...

"I'm back!" Monty exclaimed with a shake of his jowls. "So sorry, I was momentarily distracted. One ticket, yes. That's two dollars."

The guy slipped him two singles with a laugh and thanks and finally looked to his left at Tommy leaning on the counter nearby. "Are you going to the movie too?"

"Yeah," Tommy replied and added, as though regretfully, "Looks like it might just be the two of us." He gestured at the empty lobby, imperceptibly moving closer and closer.

The guy put his wallet away and asked, "So what's this French flick all about?"

Monty assumed his official capacity commenting about Cocteau and French cinema and giving the false impression that he'd actually described a plot. "But you just have to see it," he concluded. With that he thrust forth his ham-like hand and said, "I'm Monty. Who are you?"

The guy shook his hand. "I'm Eric." Again Monty fixated, and there was silence.

"Just in case anyone's interested," Tommy casually remarked from quite near the guy's left shoulder, "I'm Tommy."

"Nobody's interested," Monty snapped.

"Hi," Eric smiled and grabbed Tommy's hand. "I've seen you around a lot on the street."

Monty lived for such openings. "Tommy walks the streets all the time." But his jibe elicited no response. The two stood just there looking at each other. He calmly counted to five and said, "Only ten minutes till show time, folks! Get your hot buttered popcorn! Soda pops!"

As though a spell had broken, Tommy and Eric turned and requested Dr. Peppers. Monty hauled his bulk off the stool and swayed around the corner to the drink machine. When he returned with their soda pops, the two were again simply staring at each other. "Oh boy," Monty sighed, "Looks like we've got a major problem here. Will one of you just say something?"

Eric said, "I've got to go to the restroom, please."

Monty pointed across the lobby, and Tommy gulped Dr. Pepper, watching the gazelle escape into the restroom. His eyes fixed on that door, Tommy explained, "We were waiting for each other to say something first." Monty twiddled his fat thumbs, dramatically looked around the empty premises, "Sounds like things might get a lot merrier pretty soon."

"Let's hope!" Tommy said. When the gazelle glided back into the lobby, the tiger asked, "So who are you?"

"I'm a model, you know, for men's clothes."

"That's great! How'd you get into that?"

"Well, I was working in this department store back in Pittsburgh, men's wear..."

"That's where you're from?"

“Yeah. Came down here a while ago looking for work and got a job at Maison Blanche in men’s wear and a couple gigs for some ads so far.” Eric’s voice took on a troubled tone. “I was staying with my cousin Drew Allen over on Dauphine, but I had to...”

“I heard,” Tommy jumped in to save him the embarrassment. “Is he really your cousin?”

“Wealthy side of the family. But it was just going to be till my wife gets here anyway.”

This cousin and now wife business caught Tommy off guard. He was mostly perturbed by the latter item, but decided to dig a bit deeper. “So where are you staying now?”

“The last couple nights I’ve been at a cheap hotel over on Rampart. It’s awful.”

“And how long until this... wife gets here?”

“Next month. Then we’ll find a place.” Eric fidgeted in the silence, not meeting Tommy’s eye. “Must be about time for the movie.” He moved toward the theater door.

Tommy caught his arm on the way in. “You’d have to sleep with me.”

“That would be okay.” Eric gave Tommy a big smile. “And I’d pay you something.”

Rent wasn’t exactly what Tommy had in mind. And time was a-wasting! “Do you really want to see this movie? I’ve seen it twice already.”

“Not really. I just didn’t have anything else to do this afternoon and thought...”

Back out in the lobby, Tommy advised Monty with emphatic innocence that they were leaving. “Oh, that’s great! My only two customers turn out to be refunds!” He chuckled lightly as he counted out their two dollars each. “Thinking about taking a nap, I bet. Well, sleep tight.”

Outside on Royal Street in the bright, sweltering afternoon, Tommy gave a fake yawn. “Actually a nap wouldn’t be half-bad right now.”

“Yeah, I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

Tommy’s heart bled for the poor guy staying in some fleabag hotel, but frankly he was more concerned about making a direct a beeline for his own bed at the Home for Wayward Wenches. Meanwhile he was still perturbed. “So what’s with this wife person?”

As they wended their way up Royal to Governor Nicholls in the tropical heat, Eric explained that he and his wife Melanie—married now for two years ago right out of high school, no kids yet—had separated a few months ago. She’d caught him playing around and kicked him out. But now she was willing to try again and was moving down here when she’d wrapped things up with her job in Pittsburgh. “Maybe we can work it out,” he said wistfully. Tommy inquired about the Drew situation, but Eric simply said, “I didn’t want to stay there anymore.”

Leading him into the dark, dank carriageway, Tommy resisted the urge to ask with whom Eric had been playing around. This whole thing was getting rather complicated. On the way up the back steps, he decided to keep his nose out of it and concentrated on his more immediate carnal urges. What a relief to find that Raph and Beth were gone, probably to the grocery store, which should take a good deal of time. While Eric scratched She’s ears, Tommy rummaged in the kitchen drawer for the extra key and chickened out on initiating the kiss when he gave it to the new tenant. He simply showed Eric around the sparsely furnished living room with its large flotsam coffee table and pointed out The Shriek of Arabi in the fireplace.

Now Tommy made for the bedroom where they’d sleep together. This was time for the kiss—when they were by the bed. But Eric walked away, straight over to the French door and looked down through the floorless balcony with a startled laugh reminiscent of a flute. When he turned around, Tommy was right there, but not close enough for a kiss, unfortunately. Brushing an invisible speck from Eric’s expensive shirt, he chortled innocently, “Naptime!”

“Not right now.” Eric walked back around the bed. “I better go get my stuff from the hotel. Be back in a little while.” And he glided, gazelle-like, out of the bedroom.

“I’ll be right here,” Tommy called, probably not loud enough for Eric to hear from across the living room. He sprawled on the bed, disconcerted, and with She snoozing in his armpit, was soon asleep in the hot breeze drifting in from the street. He woke to sounds of the kitchen door and voices of grocery shoppers. Groggily dismayed at the absence of Eric, he stumbled into the living room, only to find said absent one also waking up from a nap on the sofa. His elegant shirt was neatly folded on a suitcase nearby, and on his chest little black curls...

Beth and Raph were just then setting their grocery bags down and with big eyes noticed the stranger in the living room. “What? Who? How?” Beth stammered. Tommy introduced the newest resident of the Refuge, during which he discovered that Eric’s last name was Palmer. Beth scrutinized the two in the living room suspiciously. “Christ!” she whispered to Raph, “I mean it’s like speak of the devil. How does he do it?”

Dinner at the Sanctuary for the Terminally Perverted was courtesy of Eric, again muffaleta sandwiches from the store around the corner. Then it was time for leisurely street-walking for She. On the walk Tommy remarked about She being a real comedown from a wolfhound, and Eric said Basil was an absolute psycho. Some lazy hours lying around the living room, and around ten o’clock, there being no polite way to get Eric into his bed yet, Tommy gave in to primordial urges and paradoxically proposed, “*Vamos a la Casa!*”

Unsuspecting Eric was all for seeing a new “nightclub,” and they led him wide-eyed into the din and crowds, struggling to the Third Room, where like everyone, he gaped at the mural madness. Tommy was chagrined that instead of something normal like “*Mar Adentro*,” the mythic juke box was now playing a Beatles song. When they’d gotten their Dixies at the bar, it was back to loud Latin music, and Tommy danced deliriously with Beth. Raph wandered off into the crowd, and Eric stood at the bar watching the dancers with an amused smile.

Afterwards, expertly tutored by the elfin Beth, Eric learned your basic merengue and showed great rhythmical promise. Tommy lurked back under the careening motorcycle, admiring that promise. A few more dances with one or the other of them, including Raph who had reappeared, and Beth was ready to rest. Tommy snagged a stool for her over near the door and then leaned close to Eric. He took his hand down in the crowded dark by their hips, and Eric responded with little squeezes. Wonderful preludes to tonight’s eventual kiss. As the carouse progressed through a whirl of cumbias, Tommy took advantage of moments resting to surreptitiously stroke Eric’s side and revel in his lean, animal beauty.

Later—one could never be sure how late it was when the clock always said ten till three—Beth and Raph adjourned to the Gin Mill, but Tommy had to work tomorrow morning. Eric did too. They were in the kitchen when Tommy moved in for the first kiss, but Eric turned away to the sink to draw a glass of water. Before drinking, he said, “We should shower before bed.” Tommy ignited at the prospect. Eric drank and added, “You go first—I take a long time.”

This wasn’t quite the arrangement that Tommy had in mind, but he went ahead. Much refreshed by a quick shower and full of salacious expectation, he lay naked on the bed waiting impatiently for heaven to happen. But he definitely was running out of patience by the time immaculate Eric finally came into the dark bedroom, clad in bright white underpants. As the guy got into bed, Tommy rolled over with open arms, and the kiss began, deep and electric. His hands explored, itchy fingers finding their way to Eric’s buttocks.

Suddenly Eric tensed and pulled away. “I’m not a queer.”

Without letting him go, Tommy laughed. “So you’re bisexual? No problem.”

“No, I’m not,” he mumbled. “I just like women.”

“Then what’s with this hugging and kissing just now?” Tommy hugged him tighter.

“Well, you’re a nice guy, and...” After a strained silence, he added tentatively, “But if you really want to, you can suck me off.”

Tommy laughed bitterly. Talk about cutting to the chase. How jaded he’d become to have forgotten what some guys had to muddle through. “So you’re straight,” he said understandingly and released him from the embrace.

Eric rolled away and said, as though annoyed, “Now you’ve got me all excited.”

“The straight man’s burden,” Tommy purred, tapping on the white shape. “So you’re straight, but you just let guys suck your dick, huh?”

“No,” Eric answered apologetically. “Well, just once to get a job, and then because Drew wanted...” He put his arm over his face.

“That’s all?” Tommy asked hopefully and played with the black curls on Eric’s chest. How incredibly sweet to discover another virgin right here in his bed! This would require a different strategy. He turned playful, pulling a curl. “And so you kiss and hug me and will let me blow you just because you think I’m a nice guy?” Peeking out from under his arm, Eric gave a nod and a bashful smile. “But,” Tommy added emphatically, “I’m not queer either!”

“You’re not? But Drew said you’re a...”

“A what?” This was getting interesting. “Come on, tell me.”

Eric lowered his arm, swallowed hard, and said, “A lowlife whore in the sailor bars.”

“Glory be!” Tommy exclaimed, “At last I’ve been mentioned in high society! A rich old queen calls me a lowlife whore!” Eric joined in the laughter. “But I’ll have her highness know that I’m not lowlife—just dissipated.” Tommy returned to his earlier strategy, “No, I’m not queer.” Eric was confused, though still quite whitely erect, so he hurried to explain, “Queers just suck cock. But I’m gay—I make love to men.”

“How do you mean? If you don’t...”

“Like you make love to a woman, you silly man!”

“You mean up the...?” Eric’s whiteness jerked slightly.

“All the way!” Tommy cheered triumphantly, jabbing his fist up into the air. Eric laughed weakly, and once more tapping on the taut cloth, Tommy pushed his advantage. “Haven’t you ever wondered about that? What it would be like?”

“Yes,” exquisite Eric said quietly, “sometimes...” He reached over to touch Tommy’s shoulder. “Would you let me?”

“Now you’re talking!” Tommy chortled. “But first let’s do some more hugging and kissing, you know, like nice guys.” Down below on the street, as Raph was walking up to the carriageway, back from the Gin Mill, loud moans were issuing from the open door on the third floor, echoing up and down late-night Governor Nicholls.

In the morning rush to get ready for work, Tommy and Eric were in the bathroom together, more or less simultaneously shaving at the sink, watching each other in the mirror. After the night’s experience, Eric had become very affectionate, and his caresses often, as now, strayed down to Tommy’s bare buttocks as he bent to rinse his face. Tommy sputtered, “Just remember, darlin’, tonight’s my turn!” Last night, right at a moment when Eric had been in a nearly protoplasmic state and agreeable to anything, Tommy had cunningly extracted a treaty of reciprocity. Now, as though changing the subject, he remarked, “There’s an old friend of mine I want you to meet, a degenerate knight named Sir Roger Wrighte-Rowndleigh.”

“Sounds like a jolly old chap,” Eric joked in an attempt at British intonation.

“Quite,” Tommy responded with a pat on Eric’s buttock. “He’s rambunctious, though frightfully good at what he does.” Eric innocently asked what he did, and Tommy answered,

“Amateur proctologist—does a lot of volunteer work.” A moment of confused silence, and Eric burst into trilling laughter. This sort of humor, Tommy figured, might give him something to think about today at *Maison Blanche Men’s Wear*. Of course, Tommy would be thinking about the same from his own personal, obscene point of view.

Business in the Snack Bar on Saturdays like this in the summer was really just a trickle, and Tommy usually brought a book to pass time between customers. Today it was Genet’s “*Thief’s Journal*,” which did little to calm his libido. By late morning his hormones were at such an elevated level that he put the book aside, and for a distraction decided to write a letter to his pen pal Sally, which task took a few hours. Included in the letter that covered the sudden recent encounter with ethereal Eric was this typically amorphous musing:

“You know, Sally, how I’m always trying to find the meaning, the deeper significance for my life, in each new fellow I love—but I never can. And I’m beginning to think that maybe love affairs don’t really have a rationale or meaning. We’re all like particles swirling in a marvelous whirling dance—the Divine Debauch of Life!—randomly colliding with one another. We may stick together, but only as long as allowed by the laws of physics. When we ricochet away, the only trace of that evanescent encounter is the changed trajectories of the particles. So it isn’t a matter of who Eric is or what he signifies. It’s what he’ll do to my trajectory, and I to his. Meanwhile, this leads me to conclude that we must be the resultant vector of all our previous collisions. They are why we are who (where) we are. I think I should stop blathering and simply try to enjoy this exquisite collision. A major conjunction of heavenly bodies is due tonight.”

By the time Tommy got home, the Refuge for Unregenerate Reprobates was in a culinary uproar, Beth and Gia careening around the kitchen with utensils, bowls, and pans while Raph and Max set up the banquet table, huge planks up on sawhorses. Tommy considerately kept out of the way by taking She for a walk, and crossing Royal he met his delectable Eric on the way home. Obediently following the furry goldfish, they got back to the Haven for Hapless Harlots just as the other guests were also arriving. One couple was a wispy pair with reddish hair, named Carolyn and Ed, and the other was of course Raj and Felicia. Raj and Max had become friends in Cosimo’s listening to the cool jazz; Gia and Felicia knew each other from school; and Ed was Max’s friend—worked on a fishing boat. Tommy introduced Eric as his “buddy.”

Lounging around the living room with drinks and cheese and cracker hors d’oeuvres, the party chattered socially with faint Mozart playing on the stereo. When Felicia noticed the Shriek of Arabi in the fireplace, she gasped. “Oh, my God! What on earth is that thing?”

Tommy waited for other reactions. Ed and Carolyn, who stood closest to the fireplace, turned to look at the sculpture, and he said, “Hey, that’s really neat!” Carolyn said flatly, “It’s horrible!” The rest of them split evenly between neat and horrible. Tommy let Beth name and explain the piece, “It’s the ecstasy and agony of metamorphosis—whatever that means.” To Tommy’s relief, Raj came down on the neat side, concluding, “Very true!”

At dinner around the groaning literal boards, the group sat on the few chairs and large boxes. As host of the feast, Raph began with a white wine toast and touching speech about Max’s many virtues, including an inspiring one quite evident in his faded blue jeans. Amid the titters, he continued with the woeful news of Max now leaving them for three months to protect the boring coastline of our great country, how very much they all would miss his virtues, and how Gia would temporarily take the veil here amongst the cloistered Sisters of Reluctant Celibacy. They started with soup, clear cold cherry for this hot summer evening.

Beth then explained that the meal had been planned as a luxuriously slow series of courses. After the soup, there was an interlude for wine sipping and chat, and then Beth brought

out the fish course, a large cold platter of steamed shrimp, and of course, special large napkins. Conversation suffered during the concerted attack on the platter, replaced by much smacking, grunting, and napkin use. When they adjourned to the living room between courses, Tommy helped with quick dish-washing while Raph served dishes of orange sherbet to clear the palate.

After the dish-washing, Tommy joined the group, several of whom were sitting on cushions on the floor, and naturally noticed that Eric wasn't there. Nor was Max. Just as naturally, he drifted over to his bedroom door and found the two of them at the French door talking, ripe for him to intrude. "Hey, y'all," Tommy called, "what's going on in here?"

"Hi, guy!" Max smiled and threw an arm over Tommy's shoulders. "We're just talking about being bisexual."

"Oh?" Tommy drawled dubiously, cozying up to Max. Eric wore conspiratorial grin. "Well, I knew about you, cher, but I thought Eric here was straight. He said..."

"I've been thinking about it, you know..." Eric stroked Tommy's cheek.

"Me too!" Max laughed and pulled Tommy into an embrace. "And you know, you'll be gone far away by the time I get back, you little bunny. I need a nice big goodbye kiss." The kiss lasted so long that Eric finally cleared his throat impatiently. Max released Tommy and said, "And you too!" Whereupon he grabbed Eric, who offered no resistance.

Back out in the living room, Gia was playing a slow folk song on her guitar. When she was through, it was time to be herded back to table for the fowl course. Raph produced a platter heaped with roasted Cornish game hens, accompanied by julienne green beans, and a new kind of white wine. During this course, Max and Ed bantered about memories of high school pranks, but at one point Felicia, who was getting noticeably tipsy, held forth for quite a while on the genius of Picasso. Fortunately it was soon time to move back into the living room again.

This time they had a dish of lemon ice and listened to Joan Baez. Raj got going with Max and Ed on the politics of a bill pending in Congress on civil rights, his fingers flicking about in that strange Indian way to punctuate his points. Unconcernedly, Tommy snuggled with Eric and little golden She on the floor in a corner by the fireplace and gave him a kiss. Carolyn tittered at the sight. Tommy noticed her reaction and said, "I hope I didn't embarrass you."

"Oh, no," Carolyn giggled, "it was just so cute." Her smile was quite sincere. "But my aunt and uncle sure would call you sinners. They're real fundamentalists."

"That reminds me," Tommy remarked rather loudly so everyone would look his way. "Do you realize that 'fundamentalism' is a fancy word for 'ass-holiness'?" General laughter. "It's incredible how they don't know that! And you know what else is incredible? The way people use all the words having to do with sex as profanities! You know, making them into vile, negative things. Even the word for that miraculous act of coitus is used like a filthy club: fuck you!" Much surprised laughter. "It's full of disgust. You fucking whatever! So much negativity! When the actual act of fucking is perhaps the most wondrous thing humans have going!"

"Fucking A!" Max exclaimed with a slap on his thigh. More chuckles, though tentative.

"The exception only proves the point," Tommy replied snippily. "As I said, this same principle extends to sexually explicit terms. I'm not talking about 'scientific' words like intercourse, or penis, or vagina." Both Felicia and Carolyn made nervous noises.

Raph interjected, "I believe all of us here are presently experiencing inter-course!"

Even Tommy paused to laugh. "But observe: A prick is a mean, bad guy; and what do we call a really nasty woman?" His tact in mixed company was pointed. "Now it's a given that a penis is truly a thing of beauty, so why in the world doesn't prick mean a really nice, hunky,

sexually capable man? I can't comment on the beauty of a you-know-what, but why doesn't that four-letter word mean a sweet, sensuous mama? I just don't understand language."

"Good show, old cock!" Raj piped up in his best British.

"Ah!" Tommy leapt on it. "And there's 'tits.' Titties are always nice—always positive."

Over the hysterics, Gia boomed, "You're a boob!" Still more guffaws.

"But," Tommy broke in, "let's get back to 'ass-holiness.' That enchanting little sphincter, the anus..." More noises of discomfort. "...is twisted around to mean a terrible, wretched person. A particularly emphatic expression is 'gaping asshole.' Gasps around the room. "It's interesting that both a prick and a thingamajig can be an asshole. It's unisex." Widespread female fluster and male laughter did not deter him. "Now, sexually speaking, you've got your pricksters and country folk and ass-holistic types..."

"Please, Tommy," Raj interrupted gently, "do not say more of this."

"A person can't even make a point around here," Tommy sighed and leaned back against a giggling Eric. "Well, screw it!"

"We know you, Hawk," Raph called from the kitchen. "You were just going to say you're really a fundamentalist!" Much laughter.

Beth called the group to reassemble. A red wine for this meat course, tournedos of beef with béarnaise sauce, accompanied by delicate garlic mashed potatoes and *al dente* asparagus. Max very grandly toasted the heroic chefs, Gia, Beth and Raph, who had been slaving in the kitchen all day. The course caused serious disruption of conversation, and soon the only remarks were laments about getting full. Sitting in one of the few real chairs, Raj leaned back and said proudly, "Well, I will tell you that I am not yet so full. Perhaps because I have grown so very stout!" He stroked his bulging midriff contentedly, and Felicia looked drunkenly askance.

Gia served a salad dressed with a sharp vinaigrette, explaining that the plan afterwards was for an interlude at the Seven Seas for drinks—because Max wanted to play pool. Raph insisted that he'd stay home and take care of dishes. Far less altruistic, Tommy advised that he and Eric would also stay home. "It's been a long day at work, and we both desperately need a shower!" he explained with a small smile and nibbled the last of his salad.

When the rest of the party trooped down the stairs, Eric started gathering glasses off the table. "You go first," he told Tommy, "I'll just help with the dishes."

Tommy planted himself between the guy and the sink. "I said *a* shower!" Eric's blush simply glowed. Tommy let him deposit the glasses on the counter and then shooed him around the corner into the bathroom.

Raph placidly washed the dishes and watched over the roasting of the next course, a nice pork loin. In the background was the hum of water running in the shower. As he started drying the plates, other sounds could be heard through the intervening wall, moans and groans. He'd never realized the bathroom wall was so thin! Steadfastly Raph tried to ignore this inarticulate, if lyrical, language of love. But when there came a banging on the wall and a wavering cry of utter bliss, he could bear it no longer and in frustration pounded his fist on his side of the wall. It hurt. By the time the two staggered out in towels heading for Tommy's room, Raph was lounging on the sofa with one of his mystery novels, the frenetic Black Orpheus playing on the stereo. "Have trouble with the plumbing?" he asked pointedly. Tommy assured him that it worked perfectly.

Everyone was presentable again when the group returned from the Seas, and they sat right down to the table. The pork was dressed with sautéed apples and onions, served with a spinach soufflé and braised parsnips, and matched with a light rosé wine. The alcohol was noticeably affecting all of them in spite of the vast amount of food being consumed, and the

conversation became disjointed and blurry. There were many complaints of being full to bursting, but nevertheless, Gia brought on another salad of endive with a sprinkling of capers, served with hot French bread and butter. When they'd struggled through that, Tommy noted that it was already well past midnight and suggested that before dessert, some dancing would settle the meal. "*Vamos a la Casa!*" Gia and Felicia, also seriously inebriated, stayed to do dishes.

The Saturday night crowd in La Marina was stupendous, and the eight could scarcely stick together as they struggled to the Third Room. They created space by forcing a way through shoulders and dangerous lit cigarettes. Tommy and Beth started dancing a cumbia, and bystanders gave them a few inches so as not to be stepped on. When the people around noticed how good the dancers were, they allowed a few more inches for the performance.

Afterwards, Tommy leaned up against Eric moaning about feeling like a balloon. In spite of the group's feelings of abdominal inflation, most managed a beer and therapeutic dancing. Red-headed Carolyn, as petite as Beth, proved a dancer with grace and stamina, and since Ed was a total klutz, she danced a lot with Raph and Max. Raj leaned against the bar and watched. In the ringing silence after a particularly poignant merengue, Tommy heard a voice behind him, a familiar voice, remark, "There's dance in the old dame yet!" He turned to find the wide smile of Axel! Last summer's crazy tall Colombian—with longer hair!

Tommy grabbed him in an excited hug. Raj, Beth, and Raph remembered Axel well, and those who didn't were introduced. Through short shouts in his ear, Tommy learned that Axel was back in the US for real—working with his father's company—arrived on Thursday—staying at the Royal Orleans—came here last night too—hoped to find Tommy...

They'd left early last night, Tommy recalled, because of this Eric, who was standing at his left elbow, aglow with high spirits, very probably, Tommy surmised, the afterglow of having just lost his maidenhead in the shower. Axel gave Eric that once-over. Tommy shouted in his ear, "He's mine!" Good thing Eric couldn't hear over the music as Axel called Tommy a selfish pig. Carlos el Grande was very lonely. Tommy invited him home for dessert.

Staggering up the steps to the apartment, the enlarged group found Gia sitting on a box noodling on her guitar. On meeting Axel as a new mouth for dessert, she laughed, "Good thing Felicia's out cold in there on Raph's bed—I've got only ten portions!" But it was ten portions each of three different desserts, a chocolate cake, a nutty confection, and cherry pie to complete the culinary circle. Strong chicory coffee that did everyone good. This course went slowly as the diners attempted to lift forks to mouths. Groans and sighs. Both Max and Ed were now zombies. In the lingering over the coffee, Raj started in again on politics, something confusing, but critical of President Johnson and Southeast Asia, and to Tommy's total surprise, Eric got into a heated argument with the Indian, equally confusingly. What's more, Carolyn jumped in with a third point of view. Axel leaned over to say to Tommy, "I'm so glad to be back!"

"But I thought you had to go into the army!"

"I told *Herr Vater* I'm gay, and he was only too glad to get me out of the country."

"What did you say about a certain psychiatrist?"

"I told him Dr. Youngblood had helped me accept my homosexuality. He's really angry with the doctor now. I told him, and within two weeks here I am back in New Orleans!"

"The truth will set you free!" Tommy exclaimed, and stood up from his box. "Okay!" he interrupted the argument on the other end of the table, "Who's man enough to come with me for a little aperitif, some ouzo, at the Gin Mill? Come on now, it's only two-thirty. On a Saturday night! The Holy Carouse awaits!" There was no immediate response, but soon Eric, Axel, and Raph agreed to go along. Beth and Gia would do the last round of cleanup.

The several blocks down Decatur Street served to sober them up a bit, but not enough to walk a straight line. At the Mill, they commandeered a booth and sipped the clear licorice-flavored liquor. Tommy liked to put water in it so it turned all cloudy white. There was a fair crowd of sailors, some dancing to the lively Greek music, others casting significant glances at the four young men who, except for Axel, were fast approaching incoherence. Glorious Eric, the innocent uninitiated, looked around the dim and dingy bar with a bleary eye and laughed, "This sure enough is a lowlife dive!"

"Not lowlife!" Tommy corrected him, "Dissipated. Okay, and maybe a little dirty!"

Suddenly out of the crowd stepped a vision in tight pants and unbuttoned yellow shirt—the indescribable Israeli sailor A-aron from back last Mardi Gras!

He walked up to Raph with outstretched arms, "*Rafaelo, mein Freund! Mein Schiff ist zurück gekommen!*" Ignoring Tommy and the other guys, A-aron affectionately embraced a dumbstruck Raph and took him away to the bar.

"What's that all about?" Eric wondered, leaning in exhaustion on Tommy's shoulder.

"It seems Raph's ship has come in!" Tommy laughed, though he was secretly hurt that the demigod hadn't even acknowledged him—after all the fun they'd shared on the hood of that abandoned car. Fickle men! He nuzzled Eric's ear and groaned, "God, I don't think I can walk all the way home. Wake me up in the morning." He pretended to sleep. This was Axel's opportunity to invite them to his room with king-size bed in the Royal Orleans, only three blocks away.

Ensconced in the luxurious, air-conditioned room, Axel tried to instigate sexual activities, but neither Tommy nor Eric could stay awake. Thus it was when they roused in the late, bright Sunday morning that Carlos El Grande met Sir Roger again after almost a year. Eric was quickly and enthusiastically impressed into the jumble to do yeoman's service at the reunion.

When their morning needs had been met, the three made their way to the Coffee Pot on St. Peter for breakfast. Nibbling on his buttermilk biscuit, Tommy suddenly remembered Adrian, dear Adrian. He was so ashamed to think that in the whirlwind of the past couple days he'd so completely forgotten the sweet guy. And he was supposed to come home today! In the early afternoon! Clearly Tommy would have to face a number of logistical nightmares in the very near future. When he sought advice on the situation from his companions, they thought he should just say they were a new roommate and an old friend back in town.

The denizens of the Memorial Shelter weren't even stirring when the three returned from their night away. Beth was asleep in Tommy's bed, and Raph's door was emphatically closed. Soon awake, Beth joined them at the table for leftover coffee while Tommy made more. She said she'd almost fainted last night when Raph came home with that sailor. This prompted Axel to tell about the night of the French sailors, and Tommy ran to fetch his trophy hat with Jeanne D'Arc and the red pom-pom, which again looked incredibly sexy on his blond head. Then Axel reminisced about meeting Tommy and the paintings of him in Lafitte's, describing the pictures of Bacchus and Ganymede in detail.

"My God!" Eric exclaimed, "That's Tommy? Drew has the Bacchus over his bed! It's really hot! And the other one's in his guest room."

At this moment the door to Raph's room opened, and a totally nude A-aron emerged on his way to the bathroom. "*Guten Morgen,*" he said with a wave and continued blithely across the living room. Those at the table were transfixed. Raph came out in his burgundy silk dressing gown and joined them, acting as though there were no naked sailor in the bathroom. "Where did you guys run off to? I was so drunk," he moaned, "that A-aron had to carry me home!"

“A fate worse than death,” Beth laughed, not a little sarcastically. “It was impossible to sleep with all that noise. What were you two doing in there anyway? Bowling?”

“You don’t have the equipment to understand,” Raff sniffed and lit a Newport. “Ask the Tomahawk and Eric here about it? They’re pretty good in the noise department too.”

Just then A-aron appeared at the corner, still blindingly unclothed, but unabashed. “*Kann man Kafe trinken, bitte?*” He rubbed his bare hip on Raph’s silken shoulder, smiling, childlike. Beth stopped breathing. Tommy brought him a cup of coffee and made him sit on a box so his equipment wasn’t so distracting, and then the phone rang.

It was Adrian, back from the wedding. “You’re not going to believe this,” Tommy chortled, “We’re sitting around drinking coffee with a naked Israeli sailor!” Inadvertently he had prompted Adrian to run right over, and that logistical dilemma was upon him right away.

Beth scavenged leftover French bread and graciously shared the crumby pieces with Raph and A-aron. Nibbling her crust, she remarked, “He keeps giving me such amazing looks.” A-aron flashed his conquering smile around the table and paused attentively on Axel.

“I see what you mean,” Axel said, recovering from the hypnotic gaze. Avoiding using his native German with the sailor, he added, “I think what we have here is a perfect specimen of the bisexual human male in his natural, unadulterated state!”

Raph raised his cup to object. “Make that ‘adulterated’ state, and you’re right.”

“*Bitte, Thomas, mein Freund,*” the sailor said, “*Gibt es ein bischen mehr zum Essen?*”

Tommy found left-over cherry pie in the refrigerator. “You know,” he said, delivering it with a fork to A-aron, “this reminds me of Manet’s painting, *Dejeuner sur l’Herbe*.”

Adrian must have walked the blocks from Ursulines at a pretty good clip to arrive at the apartment so quickly, but he wasn’t even out of breath when he burst in the door. However, catching sight of the naked A-aron sprawled lasciviously up against Raph, his breath stopped. Tommy seized the moment to introduce Axel and Eric, who elicited only a raised eyebrow of recognition as the Megabuckster. Otherwise they were ignored as Adrian fixated on lean thighs and all the rest. “And this,” Tommy announced, “is Raph’s sailor A-aron. He only speaks Hebrew or German, but that doesn’t matter. Isn’t he absolutely phenomenal?”

Raph placed a hand on the sailor’s bare shoulder and smirked. Apparently having had all she could take, Beth suddenly stood up and announced, “I’m going home! I need sleep!” Putting her cup on the drain board, she turned and decided to complain after all. “I swear, these two made so much noise last night I couldn’t sleep a wink!” Again Raph smirked.

Adrian laughed his soft chuckle, and he and Tommy embraced with a kiss. Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy saw Axel and Eric sharing a similar kiss, like a parody. Now that was taking this a bit too far! But maybe it was actually very good camouflage. Beth gathered her bag from the living room and waved her way out the door. Sultrily Raph rose from his chair, helped A-aron up, and begged, “Forgive me for making off with the main attraction, but we have delicate matters to negotiate in the privacy of my boudoir! *Komm mit mir, mein Schatz.*” And his bedroom door slammed behind them.

So it was just the four of them hanging out together in the kitchen. Tommy couldn’t bear the sudden silence. “Let’s do something fun this afternoon! It’s summertime!”

“How about Pontchartrain Beach?” Eric suggested. “My car’s just down Chartres.”

“Even better!” Adrian burst out. “I’ve got a swimming pool!” He was watching over the place next door for his rich neighbors who were away, including their pool on the other side of his patio wall. They brought She along for her walk. Eric and Axel were enchanted with the overgrown passageways and patios at Adrian’s apartment. One climbed up the rocks in the back

corner of his patio by the fountain and swung down from the top of the wall on the branch of the neighbors' large tree. Leaving the Pekingese to fend for herself in Adrian's patio, they dropped nimbly to the ground in a spacious patio surrounding a gleaming blue kidney-shaped pool.

They quickly divested themselves of clothing. Since it was there, they tossed around a large green beach ball and horsed around in the cool water, squealing and laughing uproariously. Tommy momentarily wound up in a wet embrace with Eric. Before Adrian could react, Axel was upon him in a splash. Thus the subject was clumsily broached, with little dialogue needed to establish a quadrilateral conjunction. The abstract construction, half in and half out of the water, of arms, legs, heads, and miscellaneous body parts, eventually resolved itself into four discrete human bodies, limp with merriment.

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7.3 - THE BOWLING BALL

Actually, on Sunday when I left the guys at the apartment, I wasn't all that tired really. Raph and A-aron had made plenty of noise all right, but I'd slept well in between. No, I left more because I couldn't stay one more minute in the presence of that glorious naked man—and those looks!—enough to burn holes in asbestos underpants! Exactly what Michelle and Tommy used to moan about back at Mardi Gras. And now A-aron was doing it to me! Screwing around with Raph all night and then visually raping me over the kitchen table! And dear God, that nakedness! Better to get out of there before the little girl did something foolish.

The drive home out Elysian Fields helped me get my bearings again and prepare for Mother's usual snideness about staying out all night. Thank goodness, Dad doesn't worry much about it because I told him a long time ago that I'm hanging out with a bunch of gay guys, and his precious baby can easily remain unsullied. Of course, all this new stuff now about guys being bisexual... I mean, even that beautiful Eric gave me some unmistakable looks. And now A-aron! His ship's in port for five days, and I've got to wonder how Raph will manage all that sex.

Fortunately, I found that Mother was off visiting Aunt Martha, and Dad was taking it easy with the Sunday paper in the back yard hammock. He enjoyed hearing about the huge feast we had for Max's going away, but of course there was no mention of Israeli sailors, naked or otherwise. Later, I lay down to take a nap after all, and it was hard to shut that sailor and his splendid penis out of my mind. I seem to have dreamed about A-aron fondling my breast.

For a while I listened to the radio in my room and tried to work on a long-time art project, a painting of Latin dancers. I'm trying to capture the grace and joy of the cumbia, the way Tommy and I do it so well. (My years of college at Southeastern in Hammond were in art.) The painting wasn't going well, and I felt that largely due to having no space to work, the canvas propped up on boxes in the corner, and no way to get back for any perspective. And the light! Awful. It was so aggravating I decided to get serious about all my talk of renting a studio.

Out in the living room, I looked in the want ad section of the Sunday paper for places available in the Quarter. Dad already had said he'd help me with the rent if I really wanted to try to be an artist. And of course, I rather needed to start thinking about a job again. In the late spring (after those debauched months of Mardi Gras), I'd worked for a while in a grocery store, but really couldn't stand it. Even with part of the rent for a place, I'd have to be earning something soon. There weren't a lot of possibilities in the paper, but two sounded interesting, one a big place on Iberville and the other a slave quarter way down on Dauphine.

At dinner, I suffered the same old conversation with Mother. She means well, but she thinks I'll forget her warnings if she doesn't give them continuously. After these years of the exact same admonitions—in precisely the same language every time like an incantation—I don't think there's any way I could forget them for even a moment. Wish I had a silver dime for every time she said to watch out on the dark streets for seedy characters. It's always seedy characters—I guess her way of saying guys with lots of sperm, i.e., rapists. By now it had gotten to the point that I'd just smile and agree to beware of the danger *du jour*. Now, it was her fear about when I park my car in the Quarter and walk down the street alone to my new studio, or walk back to the car. I don't know where I find the patience sometimes.

I made it back down to the Quarter real early in the evening. After browsing the painters around Jackson Square, I sat on a bench watching people scurry around. I was surprised to see Michelle come walking into the Square through the St. Peter gate. After not seeing each other for some months, we greeted with a big hug. She told me about her new apartment on Dumaine, and of course, I had to tell her about A-aron's ship being in—and him screwing with Raph. Hearing

about the nude scene that morning, she groaned, "God! That marathon Mardi Gras was sheer madness!" Those 45 nights of ritual carousing definitely changed me.

Then Michelle started crying and blew me out of the water with the news that she's pregnant! Some jerk named Harold who immediately disappeared! Good example of Mother's "seedy character." She was terribly upset and worried, but I could only sincerely sympathize—and realize how incredibly lucky I actually am, I mean, hanging around with faggots who are perfectly content with molesting each other. When Michelle calmed down at last, I promised to come visit her tomorrow and took off for Raph's place.

When I came in the door of the apartment, Raph was at the sink rinsing out glasses, and A-aron was leaning by the sink, wearing pants, but that's all. The gleam in his dark eye made me feel naked. After greetings, I asked Raph, "So what's the plan for a Sunday night? Sin Mill?"

"Maybe, but right now we're going to dinner and movie." He patted A-aron's bare chest. "Deine Bluse, Liebchen! Wir müssen bald gehen!" A-aron went obediently to the bedroom.

"What are you going to see?" I asked, vaguely angling for an invitation along.

"Don't go getting ideas, Miss Thing!" Raph warned seriously, "He's only here for five days, and you better find something else to do!" I was so shocked I sat down at the kitchen table and stared. Raph's look softened, and he said. "Honey-chile! Why don't you go find a nice straight boyfriend?" At that moment, A-aron reappeared, fully dressed in his sexy way, blithely unaware of the dramatic scene we were having. Before I could formulate a response, Raph shepherded his beautiful sailor out the door with a casual, "See you later."

Numbly I stood up and walked into the living room. Only when I threw myself down on the couch did I start to cry. By trying to jump up on the couch with me, little She got me to pick her up and cuddle. Then came another numb calm as I stared at Tommy's anguished sculpture in the fireplace, the Shriek of Arabi, and its hideous, eloquent agony. Snorting, She licked the tears from my nose. When Tommy and Eric got home from their jobs, telling them got me crying again. They were sweet trying to comfort me. Eric went to get me a drink of water.

"After all, what did you expect?" Tommy asked gently, hugging my shoulders. "I mean, a gay guy needs a girl like a... a bird needs a bowling ball."

Still teary, I couldn't help but laugh at that image. On my left, Eric leaned closer and said confidentially, "But bisexual birds like to bowl!"

"Hey!" Tommy snapped, "What's that supposed to mean, big boy?" He reached behind me and slapped Eric's shoulder. Eric merely snickered.

"But you guys need me to dance with in La Marina!" I protested, still utterly miserable.

Tommy sighed. "Yeah, that's a problem all right." He sighed again. "You know I sure hope I live long enough to see it be legal for two men to dance together in public!"

"Good thing the police don't care about the Gin Mill!" I offered.

"Well," he sighed yet again and stood up, "we're meeting Axel and Adrian for Fong flied Lice, chop-chop! You come too? But no be boring bar!"

How could I refuse such an invitation? First, we had a quick trot around the block with the doglet, so She could stop and sniff several perfectly normal patches of sidewalk. Then we were off to Adrian's place. I'd only heard from Tommy about the great secret patio and Turkish bed. When Adrian showed me around the bright place and his big flower paintings, I truly was jealous. Axel was lounging in a big wicker chair, and Tommy plopped on his lap.

"Hi, guy," he said with a kiss on Axel's nose, "what's this? Moving in?" With his sandaled foot, he indicated suitcases almost hidden behind the fancy bed. Axel grinned broadly and nodded. Adrian hurried over, and the three awkwardly embraced with Tommy crumpled up

in the middle. Inspired by the emotions, Eric and I added to the confusion. How splendid being wrapped up in those strong male arms!

At Fong, conveniently right next door to La Marina, and equally dark and dingy, our dinner was heaping plates of cheap flied lice with rots of chopped spling onion. For dessert, we moved operations back up the street to the Café du Monde for coffee and beignets. In the glittery, bright café with all its mirrors and crowds of tourists, in spite of being a mousy little thing, I felt terribly glamorous and conspicuous in the company of my four striking young men.

Next was the ritual visit to La Marina. I swept into the Third Room with my gorgeous entourage and was soon busily dancing my little heart out with one or another of my men. In an intimate merengue moment with Eric, his hand slipped down to my butt and squeezed. I kept forgetting he was bisexual, wife and all. But Tommy would take good care of this 'seedy' character for me. They all needed to get home because of work tomorrow. How Tommy moaned about working full-time! So the two A-guys walked me back to my car up on Burgundy. On the drive home, I considered that the day had been rather fun, in spite of Raph's cruel rejection—and I'd totally forgotten to tell Tommy about Michelle!

On Monday morning the studio possibility on Iberville proved to be a huge dark room with a few small windows, probably a converted stable. I wouldn't rent that hole in a hundred years. I spent an hour in the Public Library reading magazines in the peaceful quiet and then dropped by Maison Blanche to see the famous Eric in his men's wear department, leaving with a nice shirt he bought for Tommy. He said he felt bad that Tommy's clothes all seemed so old. Often he does look rather shabby, but endearingly so.

I arrived all hopeful at Dauphine to see the slave quarter. There was a nice patio, but the apartment was upstairs, and while it was nicely done, it was still much too dark. And the rent would've been quite a stretch. Dejected, I walked over to Michelle's new place on Dumaine near Dauphine. Like Adrian's, it was a place with lots of windows, set back inside the block, and once again I felt pure jealousy. Michelle brought me a Coke and told me about her plans. She'd move up to her aunt's in Shreveport, have the baby there, and then give it up for adoption. She seemed calm and comfortable with that. Trying not to feel like too much of a vulture, I sheepishly wondered when she might move out.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you!" Michelle exclaimed. "The big apartment up front just came up for rent! Wait till you see it!" The guy there had just given their landlady notice. We raced across the patio up the steps to the second floor and knocked on the glass-paned door. A wild-haired, skinny guy named Larry said he'd be all moved out by Thursday night and graciously showed me around the place, a huge high-ceilinged room with an enormous planter-chandelier hanging in the middle, three tall, bright French windows onto a balcony, and a perfectly beatnik sleeping platform above a small kitchen and bathroom on the back wall. I absolutely loved it.

So Michelle took me down to see the landlady, a very old woman, Mrs. Durochet, who lives on the first floor front. I told her I definitely wanted to rent the apartment, and she was really happy not to have to advertise it. She even let me phone Dad with the good news, and he said he'd be down in a couple hours to make the deposit. It happened so quickly that my head was spinning as we stumbled back to Michelle's place. To celebrate, she mixed my Coke with a hefty shot of rum. I was at least one sheet to the wind by the time Dad arrived.

Needless to say, he brought Mother along. Larry was again gracious to show them the place, and old Mrs. Durochet happily took the check with praise for me as a lovely young lady. Assuring Mother that I'd be perfectly safe in her house, she tweaked my cheeks like a small child

and said she was certain I would become a famous painter. A certain distracted gleam in her eye made me wonder if my affectionate new landlady was playing with a full deck of cards.

But Mother was comforted, and Dad got so excited. He insisted we go shopping for apartment things right away, which was a sure way to get Mother involved. We spent the rest of the afternoon and part of Tuesday running around stores looking at linens and curtains and rugs and furniture and dishes. I stood back and let the two of them battle out choices, not really caring about anything more than having a mattress and various stuff for food. Mother fell in love with a small sofa that I simply had to have, and Dad discovered an amazing lamp on a great swooping arm that swings wherever... In short, I got all set up for studio life.

So as not to be a bowling ball, I'd kept out of the guys' way on Monday evening, but by Tuesday evening, after all that bourgeois shopping, I needed my dose of the Holy Carouse, as Tommy calls it, and drifted back down to the Governor Nicholls Den of Depraved Iniquity. The only inmate at home was fabulous Eric, sitting on the couch with She [*a miniature Pekingese*] and one of Raph's mystery novels. He was thrilled for me that I'd found a place. Turned out, it was a quiet night at the Shelter. Tommy was gone for the evening with Adrian to a conclave of Bluejays summoned by Pope Henri I—to be ceremonially canonized as San Tomás de la Marina. Raph's sister and husband were in town from Houston, and he was off with them for dinner. And Eric himself was going shortly to dinner and a movie with his cousin Drew. Something called "A Shot in the Dark" with Peter Sellers. Then he took my hand, stroked it, and said, "I hope it's not too lonely for you tonight."

"That's so sweet! But I'll be okay. I'll just lay around here and then go see Gia later."

"No," he said, leaning to me, his blue eyes gleaming, "you're the one who's sweet." And before I could blink, he kissed me—with tongue! I feebly tried to pull away. Eric immediately stopped and gave me a bashful grin. "You looked like you could use a smooch!"

"It was kind of nice," I laughed, "but Tommy would scalp me if he knew..."

"Not for one little smooch," Eric assured with another stroke on my hand. "Now it would be a different story if I were to uh..." He lowered his voice. "...you know, take your virginity!"

I yanked my hand away. "What makes you think I'm a virgin?" I demanded.

Eric beamed at me innocently. "What reason do I have to think you're not?" His question left me speechless, and he took advantage to give me a quick kiss again. Then he abruptly stood up and stretched sensuously. "Well, time to go pay a visit on Basil and Drew. See you later."

When he was gone, I took She for a short walk and then mixed myself a good strong gin and tonic. She kept me good company on the couch as I carefully paged through Tommy's big leather volume of "Don Quixote," full of really staggering engravings by some French artist named Gustave Doré. He said the book was about a hundred years old. There were so many pictures that I was well into my second drink before I finally finished. Then listening to some Beethoven piano music on the stereo and cuddling with furry She, I started to think about maybe finding some dinner somewhere. That was when I heard the door in the kitchen open.

"Rafaelo! Wo bist du?" It was A-aron's lilting voice – filling the air with electricity.

"Rafaelo?" He walked into the living room and saw me there with the dog.

I waved and said, "Hi. Rafaelo nine hear!" That was the extent of my German. His mere presence in the room felt like electrodes slapped onto my erogenous zones. Though A-aron's dark eyes gleamed, he seemed shy. Through my disconnected words and hand gestures I think he understood about the sister's visit and Raph eating dinner with her.

He came over and sat beside me on the couch. "I... wait... Rafaelo..."

With him that close, the voltage shot way up. "No, no," I protested, "Raph nine hear long time. Very late!" He apparently vaguely understood this, and for protection, I went into jabber mode. "So what if you can't understand a word I say, if I keep talking maybe you'll go away." He nodded at me enthusiastically. "This is really weird," I continued, "I can say anything I want. Like how you are absolutely the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. See! You have no idea what I'm saying! Good God, you're enough to make me wet my pants!" A-aron's smile was so suggestive that I couldn't restrain myself. "You know, if I wasn't such a good girl, I'd jump you right now!" The thought of it made me dizzy, or maybe it was the gin.

A-aron slouched and indicating his sleek body, asked innocently, "You like?"

For a paralyzing instant I thought maybe he'd understood my babble, but no, that was just where his mind was anyway. As though no great matter, I gave a little nod, and with great effort looked away. As I did, A-aron leaned close, and I turned back into an ambush kiss. This one I couldn't have stopped if I'd wanted to. His soft mouth and strong arms... Poor She got pushed off onto the floor as we squirmed on the couch. I knew what was happening but couldn't resist.

A-aron picked me up and carried me to the bed in Tommy's room where he took off my clothes with tender hands. My skin burned under his lips and fingertips, and I felt no fear, just a blazing joy at what was to come—at last! Holding this unbelievable sailor, this most beautiful man in the universe, surrendering to this gentle man whose hard, naked body covered me... When he broke through, I moaned, but not from pain, the new rhythm of his hips resonating out my arms and legs. And more moans with wave after wave of fulfillment, of unity, of peace...

Eventually the room around us reappeared, and here in the middle of it lay the miracle of our two bodies. I breathed the fragrance of A-aron's wavy black hair across my face and rejoiced in being a woman—with the most magnificent man in the world in my arms. But I didn't get silly romantic about it. I mean, A-aron was just a sailor who'd be gone again in a couple days, and besides, we couldn't even talk to each other. With a start I realized that Raph wasn't going to be happy about what I'd just done with his boyfriend. As best I could with clumsy gestures and disconnected words, I told A-aron not to say anything to Raph. The beauty of his smile washed over me as he spoke unintelligible, but apparently tender, words—in Hebrew?

When hunger got the best of us, we pulled on our clothes. Though there was no way to communicate, it was wonderful just being with A-aron, and I took him down the street to Fong again, where we silently grinned at each other over more fried rice. Afterwards, he walked with me holding my hand over to Gia's place on Barracks Street. When she came to the door, A-aron kissed me goodbye and with a sweet "Ciao!" headed back down the street.

Gia's eyes were big as saucers. "Who on earth was that?" she gulped as I came inside. I still felt so giddy I had to sit down to explain. Gia listened in amazement and congratulated me on my gorgeous seducer. I realized that I really did feel a different person now that I've known a man inside me. It was so wonderful to actually have dear Gia to talk to about such woman things. Can you imagine having to talk to Mother? And I certainly couldn't go back to the Refuge and chance seeing Raph. So I spent the rest of the evening with Gia, who was feeling so lonely since Max left three whole days ago. We sat in the dark patio of the Napoleon House with wine for the whole A-aron story and my news about the Dumaine apartment.

As planned, it was quite late when I got back home, a little tipsy from all the wine, and the folks were well asleep. But for a long while I lay awake on my once upon a time virgin's bed remembering the glory of making love and the perfect beauty of the sailor A-aron, the angel who deflowered me. I love that word... Finally I slept, like a log—until the creaky door woke me—Mother peeking in to see if I was awake in the late Wednesday morning. She made me a nice

brunch, and I avoided any indication of my transformation. While I ate, she told me all about her plans for safety locks on the door and windows in my apartment. Without letting on that the horse had already gotten out, I talked her out of closing the gate, so to speak, and as quickly as possible made my escape back into the real world.

First thing was to visit Michelle again with my further news of A-aron. I hoped she wouldn't be upset that I did it with him, and she even laughed. "He's sure got something for everybody!" she chuckled wryly, "You, Raph, Tommy... All except for me!"

"But you had all kinds of chances to lay A-aron back at Mardi Gras."

"I know... I was like Miss Prissy Virtuous. And now look at me—I'm the one who's pregnant!" Michelle suddenly grabbed my hand. "Are you okay, Beth? I mean, after..."

"Oh, yeah," I reassured her, "he used a rubber." I couldn't believe how casually I said that word. As much as I wanted to blabber about all the sensuous details again, I realized that Michelle didn't need to hear such things at this point and controlled myself. Since her mood clearly wasn't the best this afternoon, fairly soon I felt I should leave. How sweet standing in the patio looking up the steps to the door of what would be my apartment come Friday!

A lascivious little voice whispered to me that I should wander over to Governor Nicholls Asylum for the Sexually Insane and see if just by chance... But I told the little voice to shut the fuck up because I had absolutely no intention of ever screwing A-aron again.

Instead, I walked to Jackson Square and sat on a shady bench with a newspaper. High time to start looking for another job. Scanning the want ads was mind-numbing, the various titles and snatches of responsibilities flashing past like delirious bits of bad dreams. In the delirium I actually stumbled on a couple vaguely interesting items and circled them, salesperson in a Royal Street antique store, and information desk person at the Public Library. The latter was the most promising, but both would have to wait now till tomorrow to follow up on.

Late in the afternoon already, I couldn't hope to accomplish much of anything, so I wandered over to Ursulines to see if maybe Adrian was home. His schedule at the float barn was pretty erratic, and by chance he actually was there. Leading me back the progression of patios, he seemed really happy that I'd popped in for a surprise visit. And in the apartment I found out why. He was anxious to show off a new painting. "Axel insisted I let my flowers get more free-form," he said as preface to the unveiling. It was an orchid of pinkish golden blues like sky and clouds sometimes at sunset, the blossom's shape evoking incredibly the sensual curves of a body, one of the flower parts making it unmistakably male. Even the leaves and greenery of the background were a lacework of legs, shoulders, and other body parts in outline. And something about the gold in the apparent pubic area told me that this was the artist's vision of Tommy.

While Adrian went to the kitchen to mix me a drink, I sat in a wicker chair and told him about my new studio. My eye fell on the newspaper sticking out of my purse, folded showing the horoscope column. I idly pulled it out to take a look, naturally skipping right to Taurus. It started with comments about Jupiter and Saturn, which meant absolutely nothing to me, but then it got to the meat of the matter: "...not advisable to venture outside the safety of the home, especially in the evening hours; beware of running water; avoid Scorpio, Aquarius and Gemini. But most of all, stay home! This is no joke."

Those last two sentences were like a kick in the head. Horoscopes didn't say things like that! Something in me clenched up thinking that this could be a real threat. When Adrian brought me my gin and tonic, he read the horoscope and also thought it strange. He was a Scorpio and Axel was an Aquarius... And I remembered that Tommy was a Taurus like me. Without any conscious thought, I knew for certain what I had to do—warn him! Adrian would've come along,

but we were supposed to avoid him. I raced to my car parked over on St. Philip and took off uptown to Tulane, the whole while feeling an ominous something bearing down on us.

Tommy was perched behind his cash register in the Snack Bar looking at peace with the world. I thrust the column at him and watched him read it. "It's no joke!" I echoed the last words. "Who knows what awful thing could happen?"

He laughed nonchalantly. "That's how life is every day. But I'm not going to hide out just because Jupiter's getting it on with Saturn! Hmm... That's an interesting incest." He took money from a customer on the other side of the island and turned back to me. "And what's this nonsense about beware of running water?"

After I whined some more about being afraid, he agreed to let me wait around and give him a ride home after work at least. In the car I asked San Tomás de la Marina how it felt to be a saint, and he said, "Heavenly! Oh, and by the way, according to Pope Henri, you've got to address me as 'Your Slutliness'. I've been appointed the patron saint of sailors on shore leave."

To help with plans for lying low, we stopped at the grocery on Freret Street to get stuff for me to make a big lasagna for dinner. Back in the car, I finally decided I would tell him. "Last night," I began as calmly as I could, "Yesterday I let A-aron fuck me."

"Oh," Tommy replied, as though unimpressed. "I thought maybe so."

"What do you mean?" I exploded. "Why would you think so?"

"Well, there I was like Baby Bear coming home, and dear me, I do believe someone has been doing more than just lying in my bed. And my goodness, what is this I see? Why, it's a little spot of blood..." I was mortified, but His Slutliness gave me a winning smile. "Welcome to the ranks of fallen women! We are legion!"

"But please don't say anything to Raph, please!" I could just imagine how mad he'd be.

Tommy patted my arm. "My lips are sealed! How wonderful to have a secret with you! Who else have you told? A-aron?" Then he laughed uproariously at his joke. It was already deepest girl secrets with Gia and Michelle, so Tommy was for all intents and purposes simply a third. Then I announced the exciting news of renting the studio and remembered the bombshell about Michelle and her condition. Tommy gulped dramatically and muttered, "That was close! There but for JFK go I!" We chuckled recalling his outrageous vow of celibacy.

At the apartment no one else was home yet. I set right to the lasagna preparations while Tommy took bouncy little She out for a long walk. While the pasta was boiling, I browned the hamburger and then went out into the living room. Though I didn't feel romantic about A-aron personally—just somehow symbolically—I looked fondly on the big old sofa where he said, "You like?" And remembering floating in his arms across the room, I looked into the bedroom at that bed where he filled me with his beauty. A minute was enough. I put some Joan Baez on the record player and proceeded to layer the lasagna. When it was cooking in the oven, I snuggled down on the sofa in the soft cushions listening to Joan's perfect voice and staring at the bright square of sun that crept imperceptibly across the floor from the kitchen window. Feeling so happy and safe here in the Home for Depraved Dervishes, come what may of Jupiter's thing with Saturn. I could spend the night right here.

When Tommy returned with She, Eric was with them, still model-perfect after his day at work. His smiling blue eyes told me he knew. I'm sure I blushed horribly because Tommy jumped right in with, "He tortured me... I wasn't going to say a word, but the thumbscrews..."

Eric laughed. I could tell he was thinking now he had a reason... He diplomatically changed the subject. "We ran into Drew and Basil on the street. You should have seen it! She backed big bad Basil right up against the wall! Such a fierce little bitch!"

I couldn't miss on this one. "Takes after her mistress."

There was still a while left on the lasagna in the oven, and the two of them decided to take a shower before dinner. I started in on another of Raph's mystery novels—the things are like candy—and was occasionally titillated by laughter and odd thumps from the bathroom. It was an effort not to recall Eric's 'smooch' and think about... Before the guys were done with their water sports, Raph and A-aron showed up. I suddenly felt very tense as they walked in, but he simply sniffed the air and remarked, "Something good for dinner!"

A-aron gave me a casual wave and, "Ciao, Beth."

His dark eyes still seemed to devour me, and I weakly responded, "Ciao, A-aron."

Tommy and Eric saved my butt by appearing just then in the doorway in only their shower towels like lava-lavas, their beautiful hairy chests, dark and golden. I shooed them all out of the kitchen and began making the salad. Anything to distract me from all these male bodies. It didn't used to disturb me like this, but now that... By the time all was ready, I'd regained my equanimity, more or less, and called the guys to come serve themselves.

We ate on our laps out in the living room listening to records and chattering. Except that there were two chatter groups. One was all of us but A-aron talking in English, and the other was A-aron, Raph and Tommy talking in German. This would leave Eric and me to each other's company. Between A-aron's perfection over there on the sofa with Raph, and the smoocher grinning at me endearingly, I had a hard time relaxing. While I washed the dishes, Tommy and Eric ran over to the place on St. Philip and brought back chocolate ice cream for dessert.

When everyone was fed, we lay around with more music. I sat in a corner sketching the guys—getting my art muscles back up to speed for the new studio. Raph and Eric had their noses in books, and Tommy and A-aron were writing things. Tommy, of course, was writing another long letter to his pen pal, and Raph explained that A-aron was writing poetry—in Hebrew! "He called it 'The Song of A-aron.' His version of 'The Song of Solomon'." A-aron smiled at me shyly and looked back to his paper. Probably about Raph, but I hoped a few lines about me.

Then Tommy put his new Greek album on the record player and did some Greek solo dancing. Soon we were all up doing a line dance around the living room. Later, in spite of my renewed warnings about our 'horoscope,' Tommy voiced his call to battle: "*Vamos a la Casa!*" Laughing at my superstition, they left me lying on the sofa. Better safe than sorry.

Once again She was affectionate company, and the mystery held my attention until its unsatisfying ending. Then there was nothing to do but stare at the Shriek of Arabi, which was actually beginning to grow on me, and get bored. Everybody but me out having fun—and all because of a stupid horoscope! I rang up Gia to see if she'd come over to keep me company, but she wasn't home. Probably went to that new coffee-house place she found a couple blocks over on Esplanade. I tried napping but wasn't sleepy. What do normal people do all evening when they don't go out and carouse? All this idle time was unnatural. It could make you crazy.

Thank goodness, it wasn't terribly late when Tommy and Eric came home. It was obvious that they had certain plans involving a bed, and I felt awful interfering. Still, I wheedled at Tommy to just take a few minutes and walk me over to the Quorum Club so I could look for Gia. He teased me about tempting Fate but grudgingly agreed to walk with me the couple blocks. He gave Eric a quick kiss and "Be right back!" On our way up Chartres to Esplanade, he bubbled about how terribly much he was in love with Eric. "It's as magical as the first time I fell in love!"

"Did your first love have a wife too?" We needed a little realism here.

"That has no bearing on the present moment," Tommy pronounced seriously. "No sense planning too far into the future. After all, I'm leaving in a couple months..." He fell silent, and I did too, feeling his sudden distress.

The Quorum Club was on the east side of Esplanade, not strictly in the Quarter, a dark place with black and white people at tables. Gia had mentioned that the place was "integrated," which was a legal no-no, but no one paid that any attention. The old Negro man playing a guitar on the little stage had to be the famous Babe Stovall she talked about. We scanned the groups looking for Gia. No sign of her, but Tommy suddenly saw someone he did know and took me over to a table of two black guys and a white guy and girl. One of the Negroes was his close acquaintance, name of Adam, who used to go to Tulane.

Adam shook my hand and introduced us to the other black guy Ronald and the white couple Frank and Sue. Ronald remembered meeting Tommy a long time ago during the sit-ins at the Tulane Snack Bar. Adam explained that Tommy used to be his Russian teacher, and Frank jokingly asked if he was a Communist. Tommy said he was actually a monarchist. Lest we get into one of his boring diatribes, I reminded him that we hadn't found Gia and should get on home. "Your friend may be upstairs," Adam volunteered. "George is having a party."

Upstairs the party was also mixed, not terribly crowded, but enough that it took a few minutes to wander through seeking Gia. We made it all the way to the back balcony without success and suddenly heard a big commotion from up in the front room of the apartment. People started shouting, "Police!" Tommy and I looked at each other in horror. The guy beside him leapt over the balcony rail and escaped onto the roof next door. Already up on the railing to follow him, Tommy said, "Come on! We can do it!"

I was too scared to move. When he saw that I couldn't, Tommy sighed and down to stand there with his arm protectively around me. All of us on the balcony simply stood there in great fear until a big policeman in the doorway ordered us inside, looking at Tommy's long hair with blatant disgust. Following the others through the front room, I glimpsed George lying on the floor with blood on his face. That was when I really got scared. The cop directing us down the stairs looked at us with hate and snarled, "Nigger-lovers!"

They herded everybody together in the big room downstairs, and right there beside us was Gia! She was terrified and hugged me and Tommy. Then there was a scene that would have been comic if it hadn't been so frightening. Along the back wall on a bench sat an enormously fat white man—an acquaintance of Tommy's named Monty. The police were trying to make him get up, and he was quivering and moaning as cops pulled on his arms. "I've got a condition!" he bellowed. "When I experience stress, I lose all strength in my limbs! I can't move!"

"Like hell you can't, fat boy!" a cop snapped and jabbed a nightstick into Monty's stomach. It almost disappeared in the flesh.

Monty screamed piteously. "I'm having a seizure! You've ruptured my endocrine gland! Help!" With that he collapsed into an even larger quivering lump on the bench.

A cop threatened to whack him with a nightstick and shouted, "You're resisting arrest!"

"No! No!" Monty protested, trying to lift a protective arm. "Please arrest me! Please! I'm in your power! Take me away! I'm paralyzed by fear! Help!"

A cop in charge ordered the others to get the fat pig off that bench right now, and they proceeded to tip it over, rolling Monty like a very large sack of flour onto the floor. He wailed, "I'll never walk again! You've broken my clavicle!" Clearly the cops were stymied. The one in charge told them to forget that tub of lard and get the rest of us outside. From his comfy place on the floor, Monty waved sympathetically as we were trooped out the door.

Outside on the street they split up the men and women. I could only stand there fearfully clutching Gia and watching Tommy and Adam help Mr. Stovall into the paddy-wagon. Then we women were rudely crowded into another, dark and terrifying, as we rattled out Esplanade. I had no idea where they were taking us. Gia and I held on to each other and whimpered. Inside, I kept shouting at myself how stupid I was. I was warned. It was no joke. Gia probably thought I was crazy when I asked what her sign was. Gemini! Of course! What else? If I'd just stayed home—gone to sleep on the sofa... Tommy would really scalp me after this disaster! Finally the paddy-wagon stopped, and we were unloaded at a low brick building that looked exactly like a jail.

We were lined up inside where an officer methodically booked us, checking driver's licenses and ID cards and getting our fingerprints. By my turn I'd already heard several times that bail was fifteen dollars. Who had that kind of money? When all my information was written in the book, they ushered me through a barred door into a cell block with tiled walls and floors. The guards split everybody up by race and sex into four big barred cells, whites on one side of the aisle, blacks on the other. There were only about forty of us, split up fairly evenly, and I couldn't figure out where Mr. Stovall was. Gia didn't see some others she knew were at the party, and we figured they probably were locked up in another cellblock somewhere.

In Tommy's cage, along with the white guys were some previous prisoners, a drunken derelict huddled in the corner and a drug dealer on his way to Leavenworth. Gia and I stayed by the bars near Tommy, who was looking very pained. "This is all your fault!" he wailed. "Talk about bowling balls!" I couldn't argue. Across the aisle, Adam called to Tommy asking like a joke if he could borrow fifteen bucks.

When everybody was booked, they started letting us make our one phone call, one at a time! True to form, they let the white guys call first, and so Tommy got to go call Eric very quickly. When he came back, he reported that Eric would be right down with money to bail us out. It was a good half-hour before I got to call Dad and wake him up. He was naturally terribly upset and promised to be right there.

The groups in the four cells started getting restive (though Tommy, the drug dealer, the fellow Frank, and another white guy started playing bridge). First, the black women started singing spirituals, and then we white girls joined in. The cops yelled to shut up, but we ignored them. Then the black guys reached a breaking point. In a flash most of them had stripped butt-naked and were swinging from the bars like angelic apes, jeering at the jailers who stood stonily by the barred door, and hooting like chimpanzees. Everybody joined their hooting chorus. More orders to shut up were ignored. When the black women started "We Shall Overcome," we all joined in, and the cops got screaming mad. In the midst of our singing and shouting, they dragged in a fire hose and let loose a powerful stream of water that flung us up against the bars and washed clothing and playing cards out into the aisle. The song stopped abruptly.

I was blasted into a pile with the other girls, drenched and battered. Across the aisle, the cell was a writhing mass of gleaming naked black men. Dripping, Tommy pulled himself up on the bars and sighed, "It's a wet dream!" The black guys were trying to find their clothing, but much of it was wet lumps out in the aisle. The jailers wouldn't retrieve anything for anyone. Some, like Adam, made do with a shirt wrapped around the waist. Then Tommy frowned at me through the bars and said very quietly, once more, "You know, this is all your fault!"

Eric came very quickly, bringing enough money to bail out Tommy and me, and Gia and Adam as well. We were all ordered to be at the hearing tomorrow at two. Back out on the street, Eric had a good laugh at our waterlogged crew. Even though he was sopping wet, Eric hugged Tommy and chuckled, "I can't believe you actually hide your money in the bedpost!"

“Darn!” Tommy groaned, “Now I’ll have to start hiding it under the mattress!” If he could joke, I figured he wasn’t too angry at me.

Dad arrived soon after, looking pale with worry, but even he laughed at our sudden spectacle. After he paid Tommy back the fifteen dollars for my bail, they all piled into Eric’s neat convertible and waved to me. Dad drove me home, just glad I was okay. That was great because I was just about brain-dead after all the trauma of the prediction come true. I sat staring out at the night houses passing along the street and feeling like a total bowling ball.

I didn’t even try to explain about that god-damned horoscope until the next morning when a lawyer for Dad’s firm, Mr. LaFleur, came over to talk about the ‘case.’ They were both impressed by the accuracy of the prediction, right down to “beware of running water.” But Mr. LaFleur said we’d just have to see what happened at the magistrate hearing that afternoon.

He also brought a copy of the morning paper, and on the front page was the story. It began: “Last night the New Orleans Police raided a noted center of communist, homosexual, integration activity...” And it said we were arrested for “disturbing the peace.” It was so ridiculous I could barely keep from laughing. Mr. LaFleur was still rather serious about it, but I could tell Dad was a bit amused too.

I got right on the phone with Tommy to let him know this latest silliness, and that Dad’s lawyer would represent him too as my ‘boyfriend.’ We’d meet him at one-thirty before the hearing at the courthouse on St. Louis and Rampart. His continuing irritation showed in the way he said, “Who’s going to pay me for taking today off!” Not that I could blame him for feeling that way. It wasn’t at all what I’d planned for today either. And the rest of the morning was a waste for me, simply waiting around to face the next stage of the horrible experience. Dad kept assuring me that it would all turn out perfectly fine, but my nerves weren’t listening.

Naturally we were early, because Mr. LaFleur wanted to talk to somebody there first, and Tommy was late. Only five minutes though. He arrived in the company of a great number of guys. Of course Raj, Eric, Raph, A-aron, Axel, Adrian, and several guys I didn’t know, probably friends from school. If I’d thought my being paired with Tommy in this affair would keep them from thinking he was gay, his entourage was a dead giveaway.

Mr. LaFleur gathered Mother, Dad, me, and Tommy in a back corner of the courtroom to explain what he’d found out. “Here’s where it’s at. Jim Garrison’s not very happy with this case for some reason, so that could be good. We can just hope the magistrate throws it out.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead and sighed. Then he added, “Problem is they’re suspicious that Youngblood here might be the translator for the local communist cell!” Tommy hung his head and covered his face with his hands, apparently stifling a laugh, which I didn’t quite manage to do. My ha-ha rang out over the crowd’s murmur.

We had to go sit with the defendants, all neatly divided between white and black. Adam and Ronald gave nods of solidarity from their side. In a matter of nervous moments we all had to stand while a bald-headed, black-robed magistrate entered and slowly got settled behind the high bench. When he opened the hearing with a gavel rap, the lawyer from the DA’s office described the raid on the Quorum Club and the party upstairs, using serious words like in the newspaper. Then he named the formal charges against us as “being loud and boisterous,” and the room full of alleged culprits, friends and family burst into laughter and applause. The magistrate rapped his gavel and frowned at the crowd, bellowing, “Order in the court!” There was immediate quiet.

While various attorneys, including Mr. LaFleur, made remarks about lack of grounds for the charges against us, the magistrate sat with his head down, his bald pate gleaming. He lifted his head and pronounced, “This court finds reasonable cause to prefer said charges against the

defendants. Court date will be September 15!" A month and a half away! "Bond is set at \$100 each." He wrote on something, stood up, and in a swirl of black robes exited, leaving the room in stunned silence. Tommy glowered at me and said, "I won't say it again."

We met Dad and Mr. LaFleur at the back of the room. Writing a check for my and Tommy's bonds, Dad's face was so red, I'm sure he was angry. Mr. LaFleur looked so sad and apologetic. Tommy said, "But I've got to be in Seattle for graduate school on September 14!"

Mr. LaFleur patted him on the shoulder and calmed him down. "Don't worry. We can petition for an earlier court date." Then he looked at me too. "You two had better go straight home now and don't go out partying in the Quarter for a few weeks. The cops will be looking for any excuse to pick you up again."

When he caught his breath after that awful news, Tommy turned to me and said, "Vell, Natasha, doll-ink... Dere iss wan ting I haff to say..." I was so sure I knew what was coming next. "Kill moose and squirrel!"

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7.4 - NEW EDEN

(Epistle 8/3/64)

Dear Sally,

I hope you don't feel overwhelmed by this recent rapid succession of letters. The one I wrote last Thursday about the arrest and hearing you may be just getting right now as I write this new installment on Monday, once more at work in the Snack Bar. It's just that things are happening so fast that I dare not let more than a few days go by, or I won't be able to remember everything. And these last few days, must be recorded somehow. I can't allow them simply to evaporate into the forgotten vastness of the past. But everything in its own sweet time. Thanks to another lazy summer shift in the Snack Bar, there will be plenty of time unbothered by customers to write a great long one, as such is really going to be needed.

As it is, I can barely recall last Thursday evening. Seems we hung out in the Gin Mill where the cops never come. That's when Eric suggested going the next day, Friday, our days off, to the beach at Bay St. Louis in Mississippi. A good way to avoid surveillance. Heading home, as I turned the corner off Chartres, I saw a cop car parked across from our house down at the other end of the block. My pulse started pounding in my ears as I faded back around the corner. Circling the block and back up Decatur to the closer corner, I saw no one in the cop car. That meant they were inside somewhere, maybe waiting for me on the steps? I sat on a bench over by the French Market and waited, checking every couple minutes. On the third peek, I saw two cops come out of the carriageway of the derelict building across the street, get in the car, and drive away. Boy, was I relieved, but all the same I couldn't help wondering if maybe they were spying on me from the ruins. Someone could see right into my room from that ruined third floor.

The trip to Bay St. Louis was just what I needed, a vacation all alone with my sweet Eric. The long trip in his convertible was an experience in itself, and our hair was all blown back stiff by the time we got there. Eric explored down little roads and soon found a remote place along the shore with whitish sand where we could swim and sunbathe in the noodle. It was yet another day in paradise, lying with my perfect lover Eric on a summer beach under the sky, the gulf breeze and sun on our bodies, the gentle waves only a sweet whisper on the sand.

The rapture of being beautiful, healthy, young, free! Of dancing and laughing and loving in the delirious Divine Debauch. What in the world, I wondered, could I possibly have done to deserve to be so blest? To be amongst the chosen? Just stop and think, Sally: Billions of humans have lived on the earth for maybe a hundred thousand years, almost every one enduring constant survival hardship, just about that many suffering in slavery or oppressed by the powerful, all the while subject to virulent diseases, violence, ignorance, hopelessness, and backbreaking labor.

Out of the tormented billions, here am I, Tommy Youngblood, floating in bliss! A wave of the most profound compassion for those multitudes rolled over me. I swear it squashed me down into the sand. And think also: In this whole huge country of America full of millions of people blest with so much, I'm again amongst the chosen few—the dervish dancers of the Divine Debauch! The realization was tremendously humbling. I proceeded with my bare feet (and Eric's as well) to tramp out on the beach sand in letters 15 feet high "THANKS, GOD!"

With our big picnic lunch and cooler of drinks, Eric and I spent so long at the beach that both our little butts got pink. When we finally got back home to my bedroom, our sunburned bottoms were quickly soothed and assuaged by lotion, properly applied.

That evening Beth had us over to her brand-new place for a house-warming dinner. It really made me feel strange to go in that place where last year the Chinese painter Liu danced in my arms up there on top of the kitchen. But with Beth's stuff it now looks very different. I mean

curtains on the windows! She made a chicken dish with tasty vegetables and a chocolate cream pie, and looked so motherly in her apron. She was in an exuberant mood again, apparently believing me when I said I didn't really blame her for the horoscope debacle. I'd imagine her A-aron experience also had not a little to do with it, don't you? By the way she let me know that our trial is now rescheduled for Thursday, August 27. Plenty of time to print invitations.

Lounging around after dinner with coffee, I reminisced about how right over by the left window was where I'd posed for Liu's painting of Bacchus. Inspired, Beth asked Eric to pose for some sketches. Being a model anyway, he didn't hesitate to strip and stand there however she wanted. Let me tell you, Sally, he looked perfectly seraphic, and I swear, his buttocks were still pink enough to look like apples. I borrowed some charcoal and sketched too, but my untrained hand only produced distorted monsters. Beth's drawings were done quickly, full of his mystery and sensuality, especially how she delicately rendered the curly dark hair on his chest and other places. She let us each choose one, signed them, and gave them to us, mine, a side view in which he's glancing invitingly at the viewer, and his, a full-frontal in almost Egyptian formality.

When we took off for the night's carouse, Beth said she'd stay home. She really was trying to lay low, if only to placate her parents, but she warned that the cops would probably be all over the place this Friday night. Not about to let such mundane concerns stand in the way of the Holy Carouse, I was feeling hot for pachanga, and an hour or so in La Marina with named and nameless ladies of the night helped cool me off. By the way, Eric has become as popular as I with the terpsichorean trollops, having achieved a true understanding of the cumbia. And of course, there wasn't a cop to be seen the whole time. At the bar to finish our beers, Eric asked if we could go somewhere to talk, and where better than the dear old Napoleon House?

We sat by the French doors on to St. Louis, you know, Sally, where we sat for drinks when you visited last year. He'd gotten a letter the other day from his wife Melanie and now was ready to talk about it. I really didn't want to devote any thought to that personage. Eric is mine right now and that's all that matters. At any rate she wrote that it would be a couple weeks longer than planned before she'd come to New Orleans, near the end of August. Fine by me! Can she wait till September? But she also wrote that she hoped he wasn't 'fooling around with anybody' because she could never share his love, etc., etc. Pure high school schmaltz. What troubled Eric wasn't that she's coming later, but that (as I can bear witness) he certainly has been fooling around with somebody, and didn't know what to say to Melanie when he writes back. I advised that he simply ignore the topic, not a syllable about yea, nay, or maybe.

Then Eric started razzing me sweetly about being a virgin with women and saying how I should give it a try. I argued that I didn't feel the least inclination. He suggested with a wink that I could probably make it with Beth without any problem, now that hot A-aron has broken the ice, so to speak. I wasn't intrigued in the least. He intimated that he himself wouldn't mind a tumble in the hay with Beth. He enjoys screwing small women. Then he played my own trick on me, asking what I asked him on the first night: "Don't you wonder what it would be like?" Not fair! Of course, in perverse moments I've wondered, but only for an utterly appalling instant. That close call last year with Deborah had taught me a lesson I wouldn't forget soon.

And then I got to listen to him sing the praises of bisexuality as the best of all possible worlds. Nothing like the fervor of a new convert. And then in the next breath, he asked, "What are we going to do when Melanie gets here?" Even though it was really great to hear him refer to us as 'we' and all the rest the question implied, I suggested poison. Joking aside, I too am concerned by the impending arrival of this wife-person. Eric says he wants to patch things up with her, but he can't say where that would leave me. I assured him I can deal with being his

secret paramour. We have to be realistic that at that point I'll only have a bit more than a month left in town. Now there's a thought to send chills down my spine. I try not to think it.

After that contemplative interlude, we adjourned to the Gin Mill and spent a good while drinking and dancing with a new shipload of Greeks. Only a couple worth lusting over, but it was no matter since I have my own 'eromenos' or beloved. Eric's only 20, so that makes me at 22 the 'eraste' or lover. See, Sally, my study of Classical Greek actually has application. The sailors were very friendly, and Eric was amazed by their open acceptance of us as lovers. To demonstrate, right in front of them I told him, "S'agapo" and gave him a kiss. They applauded with shouts of "Opa! It's things like this that make carousing in the Quarter so magical.

Later on we set off up Decatur for a second dose of La Marina, and as we're passing the Fire Station, a cop car comes down the street slowing beside us. The two cops in it scowled darkly at us, freezing my blood, and then the car passed on by toward Canal. For evasive purposes, I pulled Eric to the left up Conti (pointing out the apartment where Colette's party raged for weeks last summer with Axel), and then right on Chartres. We were halfway to the Napoleon House again when I almost jumped out of my skin. This time from behind, a cop car materialized right beside us, sneaking along at the curb. It was the same cops glowering out the window at us. But they rolled on up the street. I figured the bastards saw us turn up Conti, and so they turned up Bienville and came around the block simply to hassle us.

The next evasive action was to take Eric down St. Louis back to Decatur. Only one more block to the protective womb of La Marina. When we got near the corner of Toulouse, what horror! The empty cop car was parked right by the Toulouse door of my shrine. They were inside! Oh, I've occasionally seen cops in La Marina, and they've never caused any problems. But those two were out for blood. Discretion being the better part of debauchery, Eric and I crept past the front door and on up Decatur. Even though it was still early, and both of us were off on Saturday, we retired to the Memorial Shelter for mutual nocturnal emissions.

Saturday afternoon, Eric took the bunch of us (with Axel, Adrian, Beth, and Gia—Raph was off with some new friends) to a party at his rich cousin Drew's incredibly fancy place on Orleans. It was that same harem place where I once went to a party! Drew was clearly furiously jealous, but very civil to me. We got to drink some very expensive and wonderful gin called Bombay, admire all kinds of antique furniture and things, and see the paintings of me as Bacchus and Ganymede again. As beautiful as I remembered, and Beth and Adrian with their painterly eyes thought them very good. Liu was a damned good artist.

In mingling with the party guests, we ran into acquaintances who knew of more parties, and the afternoon progressed through other fêtes, one in a slave quarter on St. Philip—never figured out whose party it was, but there was only cheap gin—another in an apartment on Burgundy with a balcony and band, and a third, or fourth as the case may be, on Chartres with fantastic finger food and lesbians who made Beth nervous. I figure, more power to 'em. Less competition. I joked to Eric that maybe we should get Melanie to try a woman. He wasn't amused. Nor did Beth appreciate my suggestion that she seduce the wife-person for us.

By five-ish we were not just a little intoxicated on the free booze, so the only antidote was "*á bailar merengue*." Always weird walking out of broad daylight into the midnight bowels of La Marina. We did the dervish thing for a while. Although a Sister of Reluctant Celibacy, Gia seems to know how to enjoy herself even in Max's absence. Axel danced a lot with a cute Latin girl, and soon Adrian got upset. Reminding him that Axel, like Eric, is one of those strange 'ambi-sexuals,' and that we simply have to put up with their perversions, I managed to convince Adrian not to go stomping off in a huff. So our party held together till hunger drove us next door

for Fong food. Axel's new friend named Concha joined us and flirted outrageously, if in broken English, with Adrian, saying again and again how much she liked tall men. Poor Adrian didn't know what to say and kept blushing and coughing.

After our sumptuous oriental dinner we split up. Concha was disappointed to be abandoned, but Axel chattered something in Spanish that left her smiling hugely. I suspect he made an appointment for Carlos El Grande. The A's walked Beth back to her place, and Eric and I accompanied Gia home to Barracks. After which it was time to take She for the obligatory Quarter circuit. On the ambling walk down Chartres, my delicious Eric agonized some more about Melanie and fooling around with me. I assured him that we were not fooling around, but engaging in a seriously adulterous relationship.

Then he got going again about how I should do it with Beth. He'd been watching her all day and insisted that she looked on me with lust. How ridiculous. In spite of my protests, he outlined a plan to get me into her bed. His brilliant idea was for us to visit her late tonight, and he'd remember something he had to do back at our apartment for a minute, leaving me there. Then in a little while he'd call and say the police were hanging around the building, so I should spend the night there. I thought it sounded pretty lame, and if Eric thought just spending the night at her place was going to convince me to screw Beth, he had another think coming. "Please try, Tommy!" he begged, "I know you'll like it." He took a little pack of rubbers out of his pocket and made me take it. "Be sure to use one of these," he said, as though it were all settled.

Rather than argue, I put the disgusting little pack in my pocket and walked on in silence behind the jiggling fluff-ball She. Comforted by knowing that Eric could lead the horse to water, but... Besides, it was totally absurd, having to put a balloon on your cock to screw. Why bother when I can hump a boy without worrying about anything but a little lube? As we strolled along, I went on the offensive and finally asked, by the bye, why Eric decided to move out of Drew's place. He answered, "He wanted to tie me up!" I was horrified. One hears about S & M types, but I've never before encountered one—nor do I care to.

Back at the Refuge we sat around with records, Raph still not back from wherever. I lay on the sofa with She reading an absolutely hysterical historical novel Max recommended, "Grenadine Etching" by Robert Ruark—involving an eight-foot voodoo witch named Maman Toddy and a pet gorilla named Brandy. I'm sure my continuous outbursts of roaring laughter distracted dear Eric who was in the kitchen working on a letter to the wife-person.

I'd never have imagined him laboring so furiously on something, but he'd write for a while, copy something from here to there, wad up a piece of paper, and write some more... It was going on eleven, somewhere in Grenadine's third very dramatic historical marriage, when Eric announced that he was done. I knew better than to ask anything about what he wrote. He made me shower, shave, and put on that green shirt he bought me the other day. Throughout the process I kept repeating to myself, "...but you can't make it drink."

We went by the liquor store for the white wine Beth likes. On the way to Dumaine, I asked why he wanted so much for me to make it with Beth. He said he just wanted me to know how great it can be with a woman, you know, to broaden my outlook and experience. I frankly suspected he wanted me to have some way to understand how he feels about his wife.

Beth was glad to see us. She greeted us with, "I don't care what you say, I'm not carousing with you guys tonight! Today was plenty!" She'd taken a long nap to sleep off the gin and now was in the mood to work. Sitting around with our wine, Eric casually suggested that she sketch me tonight. Beth got her pad and stuff, and while undressing, I wondered if she really

didn't see through Eric's shameless machinations. She had me drape my nudity over the pretty little sofa in various poses, all with the wine glass as a leit motif.

After a couple sketches, Eric announced, "Hey, guys, I need to run back to the apartment and call Melanie. Be back in a few." He was out the door in a trice.

Beth made a long, slow charcoal stroke on her paper and remarked, "Wonder why he needs to call her at this time of night?"

"Tomorrow's her birthday or something," I casually lied. And we went about the quiet business of art for several minutes. Finishing that sketch, she had me change positions to stand leaning against the window frame, slightly but not crucially draped by the curtain. As she began to draw again, I could stand it no longer and confessed, "Eric wants me to fuck you."

When Beth looked at me, I saw she was trying not to laugh. "Do you want to, Tommy?" she asked as calmly as if it were about having another helping of mashed potatoes.

Fair question. "I really don't know," I admitted, looking down at Sir Roger, who was not giving any hint of his knightly wishes. Timidly I asked, "Do you want me to?"

Beth gave his lazy lordship a challenging look and said, "If you think you can."

Against my better judgment, I said, "I'll try."

With an affectionate smile, Beth put down her charcoal and walked across the room toward me. I involuntarily drew the curtain around my nakedness. Standing on tiptoe, she gave me a kiss, and as her hand found its way behind the curtain, the phone rang. She let go and went to answer it. Eric, of course, and she handed the phone to me. According to script, he said "The police are hanging around—really truly!"

"That's okay," I said quickly. "The fat's already in the fire. I'll stay here tonight. See you in the morning, honey-chile. Bye-bye." Beth took the phone and ceremoniously hung it up.

I won't scandalize you, Sally, with much of what follows, other than to say that once we were on the mattress on top of the kitchen, and Beth started tickling and teasing him, Sir Roger got his noble dander up. She and I giggled a lot getting him into his tights, and he complained mightily about the bloody thing cutting off his circulation, but in spite of that, when push came to shove, Sir Roger danced a stately, if somewhat stiff, rendition of the In-und-Aus Polka, which segued into a sailor's hornpipe called Poppin' the Jolly Old Cork. Beth felt he did well for his debut as a dancer. However, I'm sure it was a far cry from A-aron's performance. Truthfully, I found the softness and looseness foreign, alien. No offense intended, Sally, but I could see how some poor guy who doesn't know anything better might find it a big deal. Holding each other close to go to sleep, our bodies seemed to fit very well together.

In the bright Sunday morning, as usual I had to run for the bathroom, scrambling down the familiar ladder from the sleeping loft. Afterwards, I wound up making coffee and toast and bringing Beth her breakfast in bed. It seemed like the chivalrous thing to do. As soon as reasonable, I got dressed and headed home, feeling slightly stunned and unfocused.

At home I woke Eric up and gave him my honest assessment of heterosexual copulation as passable, but I wouldn't care to make a habit of it. He insisted that the cops really were there last night. They stopped him right out front as he was getting home and said we should put a fence across the French door "so the poor little doggie doesn't fall out into the street!" Then they asked if he'd observed any suspicious activity, like "protest meetings or Commie propaganda lying around." Can you believe the idiocy of it all? But I did rig up something of a fence out of coat hangers to protect She from the abyss.

To celebrate my long-overdue loss of innocence, Eric announced that we would all go for lunch at the Court of the Two Sisters. Seems he and Axel had had a bet, and Axel lost, so lunch

would be on *Herr Vater*. Beth was of course not to know this background detail. We got a great shady table on the patio and ate and drank mint juleps most of the hot afternoon. I was pleased that Beth didn't seem to assume anything after the last night's coupling and gave no indication. Nor did I. She really seemed to enjoy holding court with the four of us.

It was already tea-time when we finally staggered out onto Royal Street, and Adrian led us raucously to his cousin Mad Elaine's place on St. Peter near Burgundy. Since she still had the cast on her broken leg, she was entertaining at-home. A nice slave quarter with patio and an assortment of booze you don't see in most bars. The Mad Dame was enthroned in a wicker chair like Adrian's, cast prominently propped up for folks to sign. Most everyone there I had never even seen before, and we were probably the only gays. That's when it's the most fun to be naughty. Just to make a statement, I dragged Eric over by a banana tree briefly for kisses and let the party chew on that for a while.

Before long we bid goodbye to Her Madness and split up for home, dropping Beth off at Dumaine. She invited us to come by later, like maybe nine, for supper. I was so happy that our acrobatics of the night before had made no change in how we got along as plain old friends. And of course, with Eric by my side, I wouldn't have to worry about her getting me into bed again. Back at our place, we leashed the ferocious goldfish-dog and took her on a wonderful walk.

Can you believe it? We actually left the Quarter—out Esplanade Avenue under its big trees through the long, sultry summer evening. Sally, there is something surreal about New Orleans, the almost blossom-like fragrance of moments like these in the golden sunlight, the air thick and warm like honey. Now it was I walking with ethereal Eric and dog, and the planet we're from isn't Megabucks but New Eden. Walking with Eric and talking with him, I felt the rapture that love is. For that incredible gift and the magic of the Esplanade evening, I wished I could write "Thanks, God!" in the clouds this time.

Several blocks out the Avenue, we came upon that big house where Emanuel once rented his apartment, and Eric got shown the rooftop terrace where I danced Greeky that night, naked in the moonlight, giddy in love with the little *chula* guy. How different love felt now—but I must admit that I'm still giddy after all these years. By the time we got home, it was almost dark, and poor She was exhausted.

With only time for a perfunctory, but nonetheless titillating, shower to freshen up, Eric and I hustled over to Beth's studio armed with a bit of an appetite again. She greeted us both with the kiss of an affectionate hostess and sat us right down to a cold pasta salad with the rest of the wine from last night. After our supper, Beth asked to sketch the two us embracing, which gave me pause, but Eric was up for it.

When we were chastely naked on the sofa, Beth said now she wanted to watch us "do it." Eric grinned wickedly at me and said, "In for a penny, in for a pound..." By then Sir Roger had emphatically put his penny down, and to satisfy the purely aesthetic interest of our esteemed hostess, we struck several intensely intimate poses demonstrating the mechanics of gay love. When we'd "done it," Beth sighed, "That was even more beautiful than I imagined!"

Today as I sit here at my register, I'm slightly embarrassed at our shameless fornication, but ecstatic that in a half-hour I'll be on the Freret Jet on my way home to my beloved. This evening maybe we'll take a walk with She along Elysian Fields, an appropriately named street on this idyllic planet of New Eden.

Always, Tommy

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7.5 - TRIPULATION

In spite of the pain and regret I felt about Melanie and me separating, it gave me a real rush of freedom. If she wanted our marriage to be over, I figured I'd try and make the best of it. In spite the stress and distress, it was exhilarating, and small wonder, since I'd never been on my own before. Mel and I started going steady in tenth grade, and by our senior year we were famous for sticking together so long. Since she's a knock-out brunette with delicate nose and lips, and I'm not half bad, we were in the 1962 yearbook, Eric Palmer and Melanie Hinton, as Most Beautiful Couple. That preparation led us straight into marriage as soon as we graduated. A seamless transition into adult life and jobs. And everything rolled along peacefully and happily. Except that no matter how we tried, Mel never could get pregnant, and that really was a torment. And in the middle of that, or maybe because of it, I started playing around.

You see, modeling with ad agencies lets you run into nice-looking women, and after all this time not knowing anyone but Melanie... Well, on general principles I never had any of them more than once, and I didn't cheat all that frequently over the course of a year or so. Still, and how she did it I'll never know, last April Melanie found out about one gal named Tina from a few months before and totally blew her top. I swore that it was only that one time. Anyway, we fought like cats and fucked like dogs for a week, and Mel kept getting madder and madder, until she finally kicked me out and did the separation stuff.

Feeling at first cut off at the knees, I rented a room and kept trying to talk to Melanie, but all she'd do was scream at me. No more than a week of that, and I got mad enough myself to make it a clean break. When I arranged with Cousin Drew to move to New Orleans and stay with him, Mel got even angrier. She accused me of running away from our problems, and since she was my problem, she was right. Driving south was a delicious journey into the bright unknown, the whole world opening up to me with its wonders.

Everything in New Orleans was different and beautiful. My rich older cousin's fabulous penthouse apartment on Orleans Street was in a house said to have been for the harem of some Sultan. There was the exotic atmosphere of the French Quarter, and of course, I easily found a great job at Maison Blanche Men's Wear. Drew made some great modeling contacts for me. Since I was conscientiously avoiding any 'cheating' on Melanie for the time being, and since it was small price to pay for a luxurious living arrangement, I occasionally let Drew relieve my horniness with a blowjob. I'd only had that experience once before to land a modelling gig and found it sort of silly but still satisfying. Besides, Drew was generally fun company.

Things rolled pleasantly along that way for several weeks with letters to and from Melanie. Hers swung back and forth between calling me a no-good son of a bitch and wondering why she loves me so much. I kept assuring her she's the only woman I've ever loved and that the 'other one' was just once. In early July two big things happened. One, Melanie wrote that she was willing to give it another try and would come to New Orleans when she wrapped up her job. And two, while "relaxing" with Drew, he tried to slip handcuffs on me—why, I didn't want to think about. I smacked him a good one and thought it best to leave the harem.

It was easy enough, though disgusting, to take a shabby room in a hotel on Rampart for a few days until I was lucky enough to meet a handsome guy named Tommy who invited me to stay at his apartment, which they called the Memorial Shelter for the Incurably Debauched. It was indeed that. Tommy, his roommate, and friends were definitely dissolute. They hung out in degenerate sailor dives along the waterfront, which I too found wonderful.

This time the rent arrangement included doing something I never expected to like so much. Tommy showed me how men can make love, and it was so stupendous that next thing you

know, I was hooked on his tricks—and his funny, affectionate nature. Even though he and I spent every free moment together and fucked each other whenever possible, just like lovers would, I figured it didn't count for cheating on Melanie, strictly speaking. So I came to understand that I'm a bisexual. Melanie possessed only the one half of my being, and Tommy now had the other. Of course, this split caused me a lot of concern about when Melanie would get to town, and how I'd handle them both. But that wouldn't be a problem until later.

In the midst of what had become an idyllic affair with Tommy, around the end of July, a complication arose. I got it into my head that my virgin friend needed to make it with a woman. Though he was real scared, I basically set it up for him with his friend, a cute girl named Beth. She was something of a temptation for me as well, but for Melanie's sake, I was good. And he really went through with it! How proud I felt of him.

In the weeks that followed we caroused as joyously as before on Decatur Street in La Marina, a degenerate Latin sailor bar, and the Gin Mill, a depraved Greek place. Beth's friend Gia, whose beautiful boyfriend Max was off with the Coast Guard, often came out with us for company, which meant I always had someone to dance with. I definitely caught the dancing bug from Tommy, and I think the rhythms of the cumbia are the most wonderful of all. Down at the Mill I did okay in the line dance stuff, but I couldn't get into the solo thing Tommy does so well.

The biggest complication for our life was when Tommy and Beth got themselves arrested at an integrated coffee-house. Seems the cops turned a fire hose on them and, boy, did they look bedraggled when I got there to bail them out of jail! That led to a hearing the next day, where they were charged with 'being loud and boisterous!' It was ludicrous. And then weeks of Tommy being watched by the cops, who thought because he studied Russian, he might be a member of the local Communist cell. We had lots of laughs about it, and he and Beth often talked to each other like Boris and Natasha of the 'Rocky and Bullwinkle' cartoon show.

There was a really nice consequence of the arrest experience for Beth. Tommy's black friend Adam, who was in jail with them, invited us all to a big celebration party at the Quorum Club for Congress passing the Civil Rights Act that made segregation illegal! Everybody we knew went, and the integrated crowd spilled out the door all over the sidewalk. At the great party, Beth met up with a guy named Frank, also arrested with them. By the time Tommy and I headed for La Marina (taking black Adam and his girlfriend Janeen along with us), it was pretty obvious Beth and Frank had something going.

Then came the trial itself. Tommy and Beth got their court date moved up to Monday, August 24, and so the two of them were the 'test case.' Their lawyer, Mr. LaFleur, made Tommy get his long hair cut pretty short and dress up in a tie. That was a strange sight, since otherwise he lives in green corduroys and leather sandals. (If only he'd wear nice clothes, he could do real well as a model too.) And Beth had to have her hair done up fancy. All the Quorum culprits came with friends and families, and this time the courtroom was mixed up with blacks and whites. As a close friend of the accused, I sat with Adam and Frank up in the front row.

When the charges of "being loud and boisterous" were read, the crowd laughed, causing this judge to rap his gavel for silence. Then Mr. LaFleur called a police officer to the stand and pointing at Tommy and Beth, asked if he could identify these young people as having been among those arrested at the Quorum Club that night. The cop blinked and said, "No, sir." The judge said simply, "Case dismissed." And the crowd cheered.

In the happy uproar afterwards, Mr. LaFleur laughingly told us that since the Civil Rights Act, the District Attorney, Jim Garrison, wanted this ridiculous case thrown out, and so it was really easy lawyering. Tommy and Beth accepted the congratulations and thanks of dozens of the

culprits. Then they raced back home with me and Frank, respectively, for other celebrations of a carnal nature, as Tommy would say. That night La Marina witnessed our frenzied dancing and gaiety. I enjoyed the fun and my friends with a vengeance and refused to think about Melanie arriving soon—or that Tommy was leaving in less than three weeks for grad school in Seattle.

It was the next breathlessly hot evening of Tuesday, August 25 after work and our walk with Tommy's little dog She, when Melanie's call came. I'd been on pins and needles all day, and the phone ringing in the kitchen almost made me jump out of my skin. Saying hi, her voice sounded so soft. She'd just driven in from Birmingham and checked into a motel on Tulane Avenue. I arranged to come over so we could get dinner together. She said she couldn't wait to see me. My sad-eyed Tommy kissed me desperately, and I steeled myself for what was to come.

Melanie opened the door of her motel room with a beautiful smile that changed to surprise when she saw my much longer hair, but I guess she was used to the Beatles by now. Though her dark hair was done different, she was still so beautiful. We hesitated about what to do, then hugged. It was strained, of course, but we smiled afterwards and gathered her stuff up to go to dinner. I took her to a fancy place Drew once took me, called Galatoire's, for a fabulous and expensive meal. Strangely, the whole evening our conversation never touched on the point of the matter. We chatted comfortably about what had happened to us both since I left Pittsburgh, the same stuff we'd written to each other in our letters. During dessert when I started telling her how much I loved New Orleans and wanted to keep on living here, I saw those familiar signs that Melanie was getting her back up. Too much like talking about the future, I guess, and I told her about the places I wanted to show her.

Since she was really tired from her long drive, after our dinner I took her back to the motel, and we actually kissed goodnight, very lightly. On the drive back into the Quarter and the long search for yet another parking place, I thought about my situation. Maybe Melanie was serious about giving it another try, and something in me really wanted to. But I didn't have a clue how to keep Tommy in the picture for these last weeks he'd be here. When I got back to the Refuge, he was waiting all nervous and immediately dragged me into bed. To be truthful, I also did some dragging. And then another night of holy carousing.

I took Wednesday off and had a full day with Melanie. I took her driving all over town, showing her the Garden District, the Lake Front, City Park, going across the river bridge, and riding the ferry back and forth to Gretna. By mid-afternoon we were strolling the streets of the Quarter to the cathedral and Jackson Square, a totally tourist day, and she took lots of pictures. Throughout, we talked and laughed as though on a wonderful vacation trip together. When I left her at the motel to freshen up before dinner—in this climate, freshen up means shower and the works—Mel kissed me a bit more seriously.

My own shower back at Governor Nicholls had the not unwelcome companionship of an enthusiastic water sprite, which calmed my nerves considerably. Then Tommy asked how it was going with working things out, and I said I didn't know where things stood yet. Drying off my shoulders, he remarked that I had to stay clear about what I want. But he didn't volunteer any other advice or opinion, for which I was grateful.

I took Mel to eat wienerschnitzl at a big noisy German place on St. Charles Avenue. Over this dinner she not so subtly interrogated me about my faithfulness to her over these past months. No matter how much I insisted that I hadn't screwed a woman since we split, she wouldn't listen and soon started in like a broken record about the "other one." By dessert, she calmed down and even gave me affectionate smiles. So back at the motel while kissing her goodnight, I made a subtle move, but she wasn't ready yet and pushed me out the door.

At the Memorial Shelter, the person who pulled me in the door was very ready—to go dancing. We caroused through La Marina and the Gin Mill in great spirits. Something about the dinner made me feel optimistic, the way she'd said not yet. The fact was, I did very much want to fix things up with Mel. I never did want to leave her—just got curious about other girls, you know. Like now, I'd gotten curious about a guy. When we finished our cumbias with the girls, Tommy asked when I was going to tell "the wife-person" about him. I had no answer.

When he'd come in me and collapsed on my back, Tommy kissed my ear and said he'd reconsidered and asked me not to tell Mel about us. We should keep it our big secret, and she'd never have to know I was bisexual. He figured if I told her about him, there wasn't a ghost of a chance she'd take me back. We'd just have to steal whatever moments we could together in the two weeks until he'd go to Seattle. We both started crying.

Thursday with me back at work, Melanie was on her own during the day. When I picked her up in the evening to go out to the lake for seafood, she said she'd stayed all day in the air conditioned room resting and reading, probably best since it must have been a hundred degrees outside. But there were some cooler breezes off the lake in the evening, and our dinner was comfortable with shrimp and crabs in amazing quantities. In the middle of it, I came right out and asked Mel when she thought we could make love again, but she didn't know yet. I knew better than to continue. So we went back to the Quarter to the Napoleon House for a civilized drink. She was enchanted by the place and its history. Afterwards, by promising her something surprising, I convinced her to come with me to La Marina.

The whole degenerate bunch was there frolicking in the Third Room. Melanie was blown away by the music and crowds and murals. In the thunderous music and crush, introducing Adrian, Gia, Tommy, Raph, Frank, Axel, Beth, Raj, Felicia, Adam and Janeen was no mean feat. Beth was excited about having gotten a part-time job in a jewelry store.

Melanie was hugely impressed by my beautiful friends. She shouted in my ear that Tommy was a gorgeous man. Right away I taught her the basics of the merengue and let the rhythms work their magic. Soon she was caught up in the energy of our carouse and was laughing and chattering with folks like old friends. Once Tommy danced with her, and they moved beautifully together. I was struck how he looked so much different now with his shorter hair, just as hot, but more normal, so to speak.

Fairly early Mel was ready to go back to the motel, and this time our goodnight kiss led to her bed. There was something different now about making love to her. I mean, after so long and now being so used to Tommy's strong, hard body. To me we seemed closer than ever before, and even she remarked that I seemed different, but it was a wonderful difference. In the morning while we were getting dressed, she told me not to think that this meant everything was fine now. We still had a lot of talking to do. It wasn't clear what else still needed talking about, but I didn't plan on talking about the gorgeous man who'd spent the past night without me.

When Mel and I arrived at the Coffee Pot Friday morning for breakfast, there in the midst of pancakes and bacon was that very same young man with friends Axel and Adrian. We joined them at their patio table under the shady umbrella, and Tommy's secret wink spoke volumes. Everybody seemed in great moods. Mel fell right in with the chatty conversation. Her familiar meaningful glance at me said she'd figured out that the A's were a couple and found it amusing. We always were rather good at non-verbal communication. We started on our eggs benedict while the others were finishing and relaxing with their coffee.

Always incorrigible, Tommy chose that moment to ask Melanie off-handedly if the fact I didn't come home last night meant she and I had worked things out. Mel's blush was adorable.

She mumbled that we were making progress. He described how I'd frequently expressed to him my sincere repentance for messing around with that trollop Tina and swore I'd never looked at another woman again. Adrian and Axel pitched in, claiming that in all the time they'd known me, I was as pure as the driven snow. (Adrian was a consummate liar.) Axel added, "regretfully." This made her laugh, and I saw she was starting to believe. Axel said I'd been a terrible bore always moaning about missing my Melanie. The guys were geniuses. The finishing touch was Tommy wondering when he might get his couch back.

Leaving the guys there on St. Peter Street, she and I strolled the Quarter again, first window shopping in the antique stores on Royal and then over to check out the artists around Jackson Square. Walking along in the sweltering noontime heat, we talked about everything besides important matters, but it was fun and light, the way we'd always related before, especially in our shared reactions to the artwork on the iron fences. For some escape from the heat, we rested on the shady grass under the big trees, and that was where we got down to business. It was somehow easier, right there in the midst of all the strangers walking by, to talk it through, no hysterics or raised voices. Mel accepted that I was really sorry about Tina and finally forgave me. I really truly meant it when I said I didn't need any woman but her. And then she said if we were going to live in New Orleans, we'd better start looking for an apartment. In spite of the people all around, we started crying and hugged and kissed like old times.

More strolling up Pirate's Alley beside the Cathedral and along Orleans brought us to the spectacular building where Drew lives, and we paid him a visit. He's known Mel since we were going together in high school and even came to our wedding with a big gift. So on hearing our good news, Drew brought out a bottle of champagne for toasts to our happiness. Then he insisted we move into his guest room immediately until we got our own place. I was overwhelmed by his generosity (not to the point of handcuffs, of course), and Melanie cried. When he let Basil the wolfhound out, she fell in love with the insane beast, and she adored the elegant guest room with its frills and fancy Victorian bed. Thank goodness, she didn't seem to notice the painting of gorgeous Tommy as Ganymede hanging over it.

After gratefully arranging to move in the next day, Mel and I went to the Memorial Shelter bearing our great news. I was worried Tommy would be upset, but he seemed genuinely happy for us. Showing Mel into the living room, he moved a stack of my neatly folded shirts off the makeshift coffee table over to my suitcase and boxes in the corner. He'd made it look like I really was living on their sofa. Again Mel fell in love with the dog. Little She must have smelled Basil and went into a sniffing frenzy. Leaving them with Raph to make drinks in the kitchen, I whispered thanks to Tommy for being so cool. He said he'd be looking down on that bed every night, so I wouldn't forget his ambrosia. His romanticism is sometimes downright weird.

Over our drinks we agreed to get together in the evening, have dinner, and go see 'Night of the Iguana' with Richard Burton and Ava Gardner. Raph said it was his treat as a celebration for the happy couple. Then Tommy took Mel and me over to Adrian's so we could tell them the news and Melanie could see another great French Quarter apartment. This led to sitting around chatting away the rest of the afternoon in our lounge chairs on his fantastic shady patio with big glasses of iced tea or gin and tonic.

We left them there getting rather tipsy and drove back to the motel for another freshen-up. Mel and I took a shower together and for the first time made love standing up! We spent so much time in the cool water that we were almost late meeting the guys for dinner. Tommy had invited Gia to come with us, and the five of us trooped down Decatur to a place called Tujaque's, which was really fantastic. Raph laid a couple hundred-dollar bills on the check, and we hopped

into my convertible to drive to the movie theater out Elysian Fields. I don't remember much about the movie because I was busy holding Mel's hand like we always do, and at the same time trying not to pay attention to the pressure of Tommy's knee against mine on the other side. After the show, Tommy took off with Gia and Raph to La Marina for a carouse, and we spent our last night in that motel room sleeping all wound up together like newlyweds. I felt so happy and contented Mel back in my arms, totally sincere about needing no other woman.

I took Saturday off from Maison Blanche to be with Melanie and move into Drew's guest room. He joked how great it would be having more Basil-walkers in the house. Melanie was thrilled on our first walk with the huge hound around the Square because everyone stared at us, and she felt so glamorous. I always felt the same way. She was even more thrilled when we got back to the harem and Drew asked what we'd like his chef to make for dinner, a luxury of my rich cousin's hospitality that I'd forgotten to mention. After the great meal, when we were alone on the roof terrace, Mel said it was so lavish that we couldn't stay there very long. We had to find a place to live soon, or she'd get spoiled.

Later on in the evening I talked her into coming out for a while to La Marina for a dance or two with the gang. Tommy gave me a sad smile when we left him there in the Third Room, our third night in a row apart. We hadn't yet talked about how or when to get together again, and the inviting way he looked down at me from that painting over the bed made me want it to be real soon. After our love-making, Mel snuggled up in my armpit and purred contentedly. Just as I was about to go to sleep, she said there was something else we needed to talk about. I tensed up thinking she was finally going to ask about the painting.

But instead, she said, very quietly, that she was pregnant—from back in April! I basically lost my mind with excitement, laughing and bouncing around on the big bed. Then came the tears of joy. Even Ganymede smiled down on us happily. I put my hand on her tummy and marveled that in there was my child! After that news, there was no way I could sleep. Throwing on some shorts, I went and woke Drew with the news that I'm going to be a father, and he broke out another bottle of champagne. Several glasses finally put me to sleep.

That was the dramatic way I started married life again, coping with the job and finding a place for us to live, plus the excitement of future fatherhood. We saw Tommy and the gang that evening for what he called 'post-prandial exercise' in the Third Room. They were all tremendously pleased by Melanie's news and toasted us with their beers, suggesting all kinds of names for boy and girl babies. That night Tommy and I also got Melanie to come see the Gin Mill, but she didn't like it, too dingy and foreign, but the music and dancing were interesting.

Anyway, it was that night Tommy took me off alone and begged me to find some way for us to see each other. He was going crazy wanting me so much. Assuring him I felt the same way, I promised to think of something. He said to think of lots of somethings because he wanted to make love to me at least three times a week for the short time we had left. Mel could have me the rest of the time. Wasn't that fair? Even being so happy having Mel back, I still wanted to make love to Tommy so much my arms ached.

On Sunday morning I convinced Mel simply to relax in the cool apartment, you know, to take care of her condition, and I'd run all over the place in the heat looking at the list of possible apartments we'd made from the want ads. That's how I managed to race straight to the Refuge and into Tommy's bed, where we more than made up for our lost nights, which is saying a mouthful. He insisted on coming with me afterwards to work through the list of places, and we quickly ticked each of them off as unsuitable for a baby, too expensive, or just plain ugly.

Discouraged, we dropped in on Beth, who was in the middle of another painting in her “Bailar” series, swirly semi-abstract things that look like La Marina dancers. Then of all the lucky things, she told us her neighbor Michelle had given notice to move out of the apartment in on Tuesday! Beth took us to see the girl’s place, and I loved it, spacious with large windows off the patio. I left Tommy to visit with his old friend Michelle and went to see the ancient landlady, Mrs. Durochet. She was overjoyed that I was married and an expectant father and knocked twenty dollars a month off the rent, which was already very reasonable.

Saying bye to Tommy till tonight, I raced over and got Mel to come see the place. She and Michelle quickly found out they were both pregnant, and even due around the same time early next January. When Michelle told us her situation, both of them started crying. I looked out the window into the patio until they were calm again. The moment we came into her apartment up front, Mrs. Durochet made Melanie sit down and insisted we have iced tea. While I signed the rent agreement and wrote out a check, they visited like women do. Afterwards, we went upstairs to see Beth again, and these two women, who had only seen each other before in the madness of La Marina, also hit it off well. Something I never knew, Mel said she’d always wanted to learn to paint, and Beth offered for her to work up there in the studio too.

I invited Beth to come and celebrate with us over lunch, but she said she wanted to keep on painting. So Mel and I walked over to the Bourbon House, had poor boy sandwiches, and headed back to the harem to spend the heat of the afternoon in Drew’s air conditioned museum. He was off on some business affair or other, so we browsed his huge record collection for some good Sinatra and were lazy, cuddled up on the bed. Being back with Mel, with the baby coming, the new place, and all the possibilities, I was feeling pretty darned happy.

That was when, out of the blue, Mel asked why I hadn’t told her the guy in the painting was Tommy. His hair was so much different now that she hadn’t recognized him at first. I think my heart stopped, but my mind raced, and I managed to say because I didn’t want my little wife getting any naughty ideas about my good friend. Drew had told her this morning it was Tommy and showed her the even bigger one of him as Dionysus in his bedroom. She thought he had a really beautiful butt, and I told her that’s exactly why I hadn’t told her.

The two days until we could move into the new place, life was pretty relaxed. On our evening strolls with Basil the Terrible after my work, we often fell in with Tommy walking fierce She. After an initial scene, the two dogs became very playful, Basil prancing around like dancing, and the goldfish scurrying around nipping at his heels. We drew a lot of attention as an incongruous combination. Mel and Tommy talked a lot on our walks, clearly liking each other.

Despite Drew’s great chef, we went to dinners with folks of the gang. Our future neighbors Beth and Frank were a lot of fun on Sunday over a bushel of boiled crabs out at the lake. On Monday Michelle took us for fried oysters in a place near the docks and told us about her mad, frustrating Mardi Gras with Tommy. And on Tuesday Raph and Tommy took us to a strange hole-in-the-wall Cajun place out Canal Boulevard for fantastic gumbo. On Sunday Mel came out to the dives for a dance or two with me or Tommy, but she wanted to take it easy and let me go out alone with the bunch for the exercise. It amused her that I liked to dance so much. That’s how I met Tommy’s request on Monday and Tuesday evenings. When we got through loving each other, there was no need nor time for dancing.

That Wednesday, with the help of our friends, we moved into the new apartment. There wasn’t a lot of furniture beyond table, sofa and bed to start with, but Adrian showed up rolling another big wooden cable spool to use as a coffee-table. Axel brought a strange-looking chair he’d bought at a second-hand store on Rampart. Raph brought an old-fashioned floor lamp,

Tommy gave us groceries for the empty refrigerator, Gia presented us with a large round cheese, and Beth supplied plates and mixed silverware. So there was a start on the household. The most amazing thing, though, was that Drew insisted we have the painting of Ganymede. Mel was thrilled, and I was enormously touched, knowing why he did it. Tommy felt it should hang on the side wall of the living room where the light from the window wouldn't glare. I noticed that was where it could best be seen from the bed.

With our own place now and friends to socialize with, Mel and I settled down peacefully. We took occasional walks with Basil or She, which made us think about maybe a dog of our own. When I was at work, she spent time up front with Beth when she was off from her new job and got taught stuff about painting. Long ago Beth had promised never ever to tell my wife about Tommy and me, so I had no worry about the girls getting to be friends. I enjoyed getting to know Frank, who works in a bank and loves to fish. Mel and I, meanwhile, continued to faithfully perform the Holy Carouse. She went out only a couple times a week, and I the strategic three times on my own, via Tommy's bedroom. To each of our precious times, he assigned its number in an ominous countdown, and each time it got even more intense with the painful knowledge that... We cried a lot about our doomed love.

On a Thursday night with the gang in the Third Room, I saw Tommy was real depressed, not even dancing. Then while Mel and I were doing a cumbia, he drifted out the door, and we exchanged looks. I took off after him and saw him go out onto Decatur. Tommy ambled up toward the Square, and though I wanted to grab him, I snuck across the street to the Jax Brewery and watched. At the corner of St. Peter, he also crossed Decatur to below the levee into the big bushes with yellow flowers near the corner of the brewery. I felt strange spying on him. Tommy suddenly sank to the ground behind the bushes and broke into heaving sobs. I stood in the shadows, paralyzed by his lament. When he grew quiet, I walked over, and he looked up at me with frightened eyes. I knelt down to hold him, and he sobbed about leaving me, his love, and this heaven of New Orleans, and how he was really terrified of what was outside the universe, in the Real World, on the distant planet of Seattle. When he calmed down, we walked back to La Marina, and Beth soon got him into a therapeutic merengue.

Back home in our wonderful apartment, Mel and I were sleepy but lay there awake for a while talking. She had something on her mind, I could tell, and she finally got around to it. She'd been thinking about how she'd never been with anyone but me, and it was natural she'd get curious about other men. I protested, but couldn't argue effectively. Mel said Beth told her she'd once slept with Tommy, and now she wondered what it would like to make it with him. After all, why wouldn't she find him attractive? Look at how gorgeous he was in that painting out there in the living room. She argued that since he was my good friend... and since Tommy was going away so soon... and since she was already pregnant... and since Tommy seemed interested...

Mel said she deserved to have a fling too, and then we'd both have something to forgive each other for. What's good for the gander... I asked why she thought Tommy was interested, and she couldn't believe I hadn't noticed how he made eyes at her. I carefully remarked that I could probably arrange something with my buddy, if Mel really truly wanted. To show I was getting into the spirit, I said I'd read about somewhere in the world where sharing wives was part of hospitality. She asked shyly if I really would do that for her. Pretending to be resigned to this fate, I answered that yes, I would, but only because it was Tommy.

Friday was a night for me to go out with the gang alone, and Melanie insisted I talk to Tommy. As though I could forget. This was night number four in our tortured countdown, and the splashing activity in our shower was frenzied. While drying each other off, I told Tommy

about Melanie's curiosity. He squealed in delight that this was just what he'd been waiting for! But he insisted it had to be the three of us. He admitted flirting with Melanie with exactly this in mind. The more I thought about it, the more exciting the prospect became. We raced out to La Marina for at least one dance to legitimize the evening.

Back home I teased Mel pretending I'd forgotten, but then I said Tommy was willing—but he'd only go to bed with both of us. I innocently figured he must have been wanting to get me into bed all along. Though she may have been shocked, Mel snuggled me, asking if going to bed with a guy was too much for me to consider. It was a really hard act, but I pretended to be very, very reluctantly agreeable, depending on... Part of my act was rationalizing that after all Tommy was my good friend, and I was an open-minded person. We'd have him over to dinner Saturday evening and let things happen.

Tommy showed up with a bottle of red wine since Mel had made a roast, and all of us just looked at each other in the doorway with stupid expressions. Then he gave Melanie a big hug, calling her Little Mama, and me one too, calling me Big Daddy. It cleared the air. Tommy announced that today had been his last day working in the Snack Bar, and he felt terribly sad about that ending. While we ate, the conversation jumped from one thing to another, and in the midst of it all, I kept wondering how we were going to broach... But with the three of us intent on the same thing, I really shouldn't have wasted my time worrying.

Over dessert of chocolate ice cream, we talked about Tommy's plans for his departure on what he called the Saturday of Doom, September 12—just one week away! The flight to Seattle would leave in the later morning. Sadly he talked about all the stuff he'd like to do and places to go before that, but no time... Next thing you know, he started crying, and Mel comforted him with a hug. Then she and I started crying, which turned into a common hug, and then the kissing started. This led to three hours of the most intensely sensual lovemaking imaginable. All the while I watched how Mel was coping with the wild things we were doing with each other and never noticed any sign of concern even when, as once threatened, Tommy stuck me in the middle. Lying in the quivering pile of our bodies afterwards, he giggled that we really should have done this a long time ago. Then he gently rubbed Mel's still nearly flat tummy and said hi to our little kiddo. She looked so happy with the two of us cuddled up on each side.

As a result, Tommy's first countdown was cancelled, and the clock started anew at six more days. Into those days we crammed as much sightseeing, eating, drinking, walking of dogs large and small, dancing with the gang, and ravenous lovemaking as possible. I took off as many days as I could, and we drove to the Gulf beach again and out the River Road to the plantations. Once, rolling down the road in the convertible along a lovely bayou, Tommy shouted to the sky and God that he must be in heaven. It was an outrageous joy at being in this beautiful ménage, or as Tommy called us, 'the Happy Triple.' In our precious nights we engaged in every possible combination of 'tripulation.' Mel glowed with happiness and pregnancy and grew splendidly aggressive and sensual. We all blossomed with passion, spending our days in a continuous post-coital glow. Evenings in the Third Room, Mel and Tommy danced so sensuously that I think maybe Beth got a little jealous.

Then came his last night, Friday night, when we went for a special Last Supper to Antoine's and got all sentimental. I was so emotional I couldn't even eat much of my fabulous veal dish. Then, as secretly arranged, Mel and I got Tommy to La Marina right around ten. He was holding up well under the tension—until we walked into the Third Room.

Stretched out over the bar was a banner painted with "Vaya con Dios, Tom!" And the room was full of just about everyone left in town who knew Tommy, all cheering him. A tearful

wreck, he managed to dance with almost all the girls and hug all the guys. His Indian friend Raj embraced him with tears. The barmaid Angie turned off the juke box creating a surreal silence in which Adrian's mad cousin, Pope Henri I, bestowed a papal blessing on San Tomás de la Marina and grandly offered up a bon voyage prayer. Tommy told the crowd how much he'd miss everybody, but how he was at least comforted to know that, even without him, the Divine Debauch would go on here in La Casa de los Marinos. Then he shouted, "Á bailar!" and Angie plugged the juke box back in. A bone-rattling merengue shook the room.

Later, also as arranged, we lured Tommy to the Gin Mill and another surprise party. Here there was a banner in Greek, which he translated for us as "We Love You, Tommy!" Enormous Jackie the barmaid shouted something else in Greek to the crowd of dark sailors in the back area, and the two toothless whores Alice and Janie led us to a special table on the dance floor. They poured us shots of ouzo, and sailors danced around us with shouts and fancy footwork. Tommy cried softly watching these farewell ceremonies. Soon the ouzo had its effect, and as a new song started with a heart-rending bouzouki, he rose from his chair to step slowly into that majestic Greek dance, arms and face raised, eyes closed, and soared like a bird over a valley. Alice sobbed, and sailors shouted, "Opa!"

By the time we left the Mill, we were all three emotional ruins. We stopped by the Napoleon House to share a beer—which Tommy claimed would counteract the ouzo—and for him to bid farewell to that favorite place. He took both our hands and made us solemnly promise that he'd be the only person ever to "come between" us. Then we walked arm in arm back to Dumaine for our last night in heaven. Tommy was happy that Mel and I would be staying here in heaven, while he would be cast out and fall to earth. In the long dark hours of our last night together, Mel and I shared our lover's beauty like sweet communion.

After virtually no sleep we were up early for breakfast at Beth's apartment. Yet another surprise to find more than a dozen of Tommy's dearest friends there, waiting to toast him with a champagne drink called a Mimosa. Raph gave the main toast, thanking him for having been a guiding light for us all through the jungles of depravity and degeneracy, and pledging personally to continue the Holy Carouse in remembrance of Tommy Youngblood, the Tomahawk, who was in truth Dionysus, the Divine Debauch. We drank and cheered. Raph added that Tommy wasn't getting away, however, until properly disposing of a certain item, which he brought out from behind the curtain—that disturbing sculpture, the Shriek of Arabi. Black Adam immediately called dibs on it, and no one objected.

Then his old lover Rob gave him a neat leather vest with beads and fringes. With Tommy's long blond hair, eternal green cords and leather sandals, the fancy vest gave him a very Bohemian look. Butch asked Tim's lover Lloyd to take a picture of us all together, and then he had to do it for Adrian, Rose, Gia, and finally Mel and me. Finally we got down to eating the scrambled eggs and bacon Beth had prepared, and Frank poured coffee at last. I was in sore need of it. With so many people milling around, the conversation over breakfast became disjointed as we each felt the pain of losing this friend and lover in our own way.

It was a real cavalcade that rolled out to the airport. My big Chevy convertible was in the lead, the Happy Triple of us in the front seat with She, Raj, Butch, and Gia in the back, followed by Ben and Rose on his motor scooter, Raph's blue Corvette with Axel and tall Adrian all scrunched up together, and Beth's little green Falcon with Frank, Adam and Janeen. Bringing up the rear was Rob's ritzy old Mercedes with little Leon, Tim and Lloyd. A veritable parade.

Our crowd trooped into the terminal at the Moissant airport and watched Tommy do the stuff for his ticket, giving up his suitcases and poor She whimpering in her travel cage to the

baggage people. From there our mob swept down the concourse. Tommy walked between Mel and me staring straight ahead and biting his lip. Mel and I held his hands to give him courage. The others followed behind us in a solemn procession.

At the gate area we had only a few minutes to wait for boarding. Tommy pulled himself together and took charge. Dry-eyed, he lined us up and starting with Raj, proceeded to embrace each of us for a long tender moment and give each a lingering kiss. Meanwhile we were all getting real emotional, and the other people in the boarding area stared. After five or six of these ceremonies, the airline guy asked me if this was some kind of religious thing, and I told him maybe it was. Call it the departure of Dionysus. Hugging Mel, Tommy suddenly gave a sob, and their kiss went beyond ceremony.

He came to me last where I stood by the door to the jet way. In his embrace I whispered that special Greek word he'd taught me, *s'agapo*. We kissed for an endless moment, and I tousled his blond hair. With tears in his big brown eyes, Tommy whispered *agape mou* and backed away from me. Then he turned and ran down the jet way.

Mel and I fell into each other's arms weeping, and there wasn't a one of the gang who wasn't doing the same, Adrian almost wailing. We all crowded to the windows to watch the big white airplane with its long row of little round windows roll back and waved sporadically, just in case Tommy might be able to see us. As the plane taxied out onto the runway, it felt as though a piece were being ripped out of my heart. When he was gone and we were straggling back up the concourse, once more, in that incredible way she has, Mel blew me right out of the water. She asked what I'd think about adopting Michelle's baby—we could have twins! When I stared, she said, after all it would almost be Tommy's child.

END#