

Chapter One

Have you ever tasted a young boy's skin?

When you were a young boy *yourself*, I mean.

In the roughhousing of youth, did your lips ever brush against, say, the nape of a neck—a deeply tanned, salty strip of boyskin? Slightly greasy at the hairline, maybe, but wasn't that part of the *earthiness* that made you feel you'd stumbled upon the essence of the planet?

Did you ever, when throwing a boy to the ground or getting thrown yourself, let your tongue briefly glide across a forearm, or maybe (oh maybe, just once, by the swimming hole) a bare chest?

Wrestling, did you ever get a thrill from being trapped in an armpit? Locked in a leglock, never wanting release?

It's the stuff of my dreams, in this ancient house where the wallpaper's bumps and bruises look like varicose veins and the smells are just as homely: must and camphor, lemon cough drops, the onion-and-boiled-milk of chowder. The staircase leading from the front hall to the second floor sags just slightly, and tepid air exhales from the floor vents like an invalid's last gasp.

Outside, in the town of Two Piers, the Ferris wheel and Tilt-a-Whirl sit empty at the edge of the beach, their cars covered in canvas, their bright spokes pitted with salt. A sign reading *ICI ON PARLE FRANÇAIS* blows along the boardwalk. The sea lies alone, unvisited, a smudge on the horizon. The one remaining pier, its mate having washed out to sea ages ago, sits uneasily in heavy winter surf, its pilings groaning and creaking in the cold.

These things are as lonely and as far removed as my former life, which seems to have given up on me, I can't hear it calling anymore.

After a long night I wake up wrapped in my sheets. I reach for the blanket, but it's slithered away. I'm a mess, leftover dream images crimping my consciousness like things too hot to touch. And here's Brian at the foot of my bed—there are no locked doors here—pulling back the curtains.

"It's Sunday, Paul," he says. "Pancakes today."

After a couple of tries I manage to clear the cobwebs from my throat. "Pancakes? With blueberries?"

His shoulder-length red hair, which he usually wears tied back with a rubber band, is hanging loose, framing his sweet smile. "Blueberries, Paul? In the middle of winter? I don't think so!"

I laugh. "I don't know why, I just thought of blueberries, for some reason." I laugh again, a good feeling. Maybe the part of me that's *so serious*, that always has an answer for everything, is on its way out.

Once Brian has left I put my slippers on, throw a robe over my pajamas, and make a stop at the second floor bathroom, remembering to knock first. I face the man in the mirror, a middle-aged dad from a soporific TV sitcom, the kind of guy who looks best on a small, black-and-white screen. That he stares so impassively as I pee, or that he moves when I do, ducking his head as I spit out toothpaste, is only slightly disconcerting. It's with a curious sense of control that I head for the back stairs, down to the kitchen.

Brian's already pouring pancake batter onto the skillet. I take the half-gallon orange juice jug from the fridge and fill the six small glasses on the table. "Why six?" I ask.

"We'll have a guest this morning," Brian says. "Someone who may be joining us."

Sometimes I blush when Brian looks at me, and sure enough I can feel it in my cheeks right now. So much for control. I look down at my outfit: the standard-issue pajamas, chalk-blue hospital scrubs, and a white robe as threadbare as an old washcloth. "I should have showered and dressed before breakfast."

"Nah, don't worry." Brian is still smiling. "That's 'past life' thinking, Paul. You look fine."

I feel better, at least until David and Aaron and Todd appear. David and Aaron have showered and dressed, wearing the loose clothing that's preferred here, oversized sweatshirts and sweatpants. Todd's still in his pajamas, like me, but they're nice ones, cream-colored with a subtle red-and-black print. They even look like they've been ironed, for Christ's sake. And his slippers aren't the mangy-looking things I'm sporting but stylish and gleaming, made of the kind of imitation leather that makes you wonder why they bother with real leather. Not a scrap of skin shows between their uppers and the hem of his pajamas, while I am grateful, after we've said our good mornings, to take a seat and hide my hairy white ankles from view.

"We were going to have a guest this morning," Brian says, carrying a platter of pancakes to the table. "But he's late. You know what that means, he might not show. So I'm not holding up breakfast."

Mixed reactions around the table. Aaron and Todd look slightly disappointed, while David, who is blond, skinny and nervous, looks relieved. I'm pouring syrup on my pancakes and

still brooding, for some reason, about blueberries—big ones clumped together in thick syrup, like pie filling. It doesn't matter, it's not important. I shake my head, clear away the image.

"Anybody have a dream?" Brian asks, as he does almost every morning.

"I did," David says. There's something touching about the way he raises his hand, as if we're in class. "I had a dream about Sean."

Ah. Sean, the ex-lover. Swiveling our heads in unison, we smile politely.

"We were in a room. A totally white room, like in an art gallery or something. We were, uh, naked. And he was holding a cat in his arms. A black cat."

"And what were you doing?" Brian asked, knowing from experience that David, always so quick to volunteer, usually needs prompting, as if just raising his hand took all of his energy.

"I was—leaning in, I think." I get his quandary—it's tough, the way perspective shifts in a dream, hard to describe unless you're a cinematographer. "I was about to kiss him, and then the strangest thing happened."

Okay, David, tell us about your latest strangest thing. As if we couldn't guess.

"Suddenly it was like this guy comes into the room, and it's me. Another me. And this me takes the cat from Sean's arms and throws it out a window."

Brian beams approval, and in a way that's touching too, because he knows—he *must* know—that David's full of shit. He's only regurgitating yesterday's lesson: that if you can master certain powers of concentration, you can change your dreams. To my surprise this was meant quite literally: if you're asleep and having a dream that's ominous or discomfiting or just plain scary, you can—because you are master of your mind—enter that dream *without waking up and change the outcome*. It's all a matter of concentration, and with practice anyone can do it. I stare at my silverware, wondering how I managed to reach middle age without ever learning this.

I'd wasted a lot of time on nightmares full of stark raving pain or troubling, incoherent, erotic urges that twist and turn like the sheets I wake up in.

David has more to say, no doubt, about his naked ex and the black cat, and the meaning of his symbolic act, tossing the cat out the window; but my silverware-staring has yielded strange fruit, and I can't help crying out. "Wait," I say. "Wait, wait, wait." I tug on David's sleeve.

"What is it?" he asks.

The small hairs on the back of my neck are rising. "Does my fork match my spoon match my knife?"

"What?"

"My fork match my spoon match my—"

"Take it easy, Paul."

Take it easy—how many more times am I going to hear that? Doesn't anybody understand why I'm upset? My *knife*, my *fork*, my *spoon*—in a house where no two plates or glasses match, where every blessed cup and saucer has come from a different garage sale, it's *impossible* that two pieces of silverware would have the same pattern, let alone a spoon *and* a fork *and* a knife....

"I see what he means," Brian says. "It's true, they all have the same pattern. What are the odds?"

Now they're all peering at my silverware. "Huh," Aaron says. "I've never seen two alike before, let alone three."

They not only match, they bear the initial "C" in Old English. Now what does that mean? How sad that someone who went to the trouble to get monogrammed silverware is now forgotten, only his initial left behind.

Brian laughed. "Well, don't worry, Paul. Just because your tableware matches doesn't mean you're a fag."

Har har har.

"Yeah," Todd says, "it doesn't mean you don't like pussy."

This kind of talk is allowed, to an extent. Not that we're intended to be sexist pigs in training, lacking appropriate respect for the opposite sex; it's just that ... well, we're just *guys*, that's all, and that's what guys are like. Todd ought to know—Todd of the tall slender frame and sarcastic voice, Todd whose skin holds a deep boyish tan even in the dead of winter. *It's precisely the nape of his neck that I love to suck and lick and nibble at. It gives me that little-boy feeling again, there's nothing better in the world—unless it's the smooth salty edge of his shoulder blade or the funky shallows of his navel. Surprisingly strong, he slings me up against the headboard, excited to see my shoulders thump wood. If I look scared so much the better, for it's all about power, just like those boyhood games. "Go ahead," I tell him, raising my knees toward my bruised shoulders. "Fuck me, hurt me, leave a mark that'll never go away." First he lowers his face toward mine, having something to prove with his tongue, turning my mouth inside out, marking his territory from bicuspid to tonsil. When I can't stand waiting any longer I beg shamelessly. "Fuck me, you know you want to, your balls are gonna burst, give it to me...!"*

When he's good and ready, he does.

"Hey, Paul?" Aaron asks, barely concealing his mirth. "Do your sheets match, too?"

You ought to know, I nearly tell him.

Aaron drives a stick. Always has. Here he is, telling his shameful story again in group. Very casually, just as he begins, I haul a throw pillow onto my lap.

“It was summer camp,” he says. “The summer before I entered high school. My folks sent me to a different camp that year, one I’d never been to. I was put in a cabin with these guys who were a year or two older than me, they were already in high school. And I was...nervous. I didn’t know what to expect. I wanted to be cool, you know, and so at the first I kept to myself, just watching. They all knew each other from summers past, so it wasn’t hard for me to keep a little distant.

“Then they started hinting that, since I was the new guy, there was going to be an initiation. I figured they were going to, you know, give me a swirlie or something. Lock me outside without my clothes. Kid stuff. And sure enough, that first Sunday night at camp, after I was in my bunk, I heard them stirring. Uh-oh, here they come. They stripped my blanket and sheet off from over me. Worse comes to worst, I thought, they’ll strip me and lock me out. And they started to. I mean, they pulled my jockey shorts down. Not all the way off, though. Their hands were all over me, holding me down, and I got...hard. I couldn’t help it! Lying there like that, all exposed. It was so...humiliating. And the worse I felt, the more ashamed, lying there exposed, the...the harder I got.”

I hope no one notices that I’m leaning over and surreptitiously biting a corner of the throw pillow.

“They were giggling and making cracks, acting like real *assholes*. I started getting really mad, struggling to get loose, and they held me even tighter. I could hardly see anything, there was nothing but the moonlight coming in the window to see by, but I could...feel. I felt something...cool. Smooth. Going over my...my dick. Rubbing all over it. Like lotion, my mother’s hand lotion that I used...sometimes. They rubbed it all over my cock, my balls. And it felt...”

Yes. Silently gnawing my pillow. Yes, Aaron, how it felt.

“I couldn't believe this was happening. No one else had ever touched me there before. It felt so good I couldn't hardly stand it. They...one of them, then another....” Aaron sat slumped, one hand on his forehead, the other rising slowly, as if against its will, curling into a loose fist, making the international sign for jerking off.

It didn't take much, he said. No, it wouldn't, not the first time, even if he secretly tried to drag it out, prolong the pleasure. Before very long he was gushing like a fountain. Squirting as he'd never squirted before. Causing much jollity among his cabin-mates, who then dropped their own shorts and proceeded to pull themselves off, basting him in their juices...

It was so erotic, so boyishly, immaturely erotic...and to think that this was only the beginning of the summer's midnight adventures....

It's my own first experience that Aaron's reminds me of. My freshman year in college, in the notorious men's room at the Student Union, a much joked about place that was no joke to me, it positively haunted me; and the first few times I stepped into it, getting no farther than the sinks, my heart beat so fast I thought I was having an attack, no doubt thanks to the burgers and fries, *also* from the Student Union, that I consumed unceasingly. Cholesterol or lust: one or the other would kill me before my time.

Lust won out, of course, leading me one night to that notorious place, past the sinks to the stalls with their tall wooden doors that nearly reached the floor. Pushing one open, scared to death there might be someone in there. And seeing that, no matter how designed for privacy those stalls may have been on the outside, the marble partitions between them were almost embarrassingly short. Sitting down, with my jeans and undershorts around my ankles, I see the base of the toilet bowl rise from the floor next door, and realize how true all the stories must be,

there were many, many things that could be accomplished in that open space. Nearly swooning, I almost cry out loud when the door to that stall creaks open, and two splendidly dirty sneakers appear, as torn as if they'd been chewed by rats in the sewer, and ragged hem of bluejeans above them.... No, I don't cry out loud, but I do groan, alerting the stranger before he even sits down that yes, there is someone next door.... How still are those sneakers, turned toward me at an uncertain angle, as if they might as easily flee as approach. If my heart was battering my chest before, it's now stock-still, I can't draw a breath, can't even twitch—I love those dirty sneakers, I must have them. When they do move, toward the bowl, I nearly fall to the floor then and there, ready to crawl toward them with my tongue hanging out. But wait! Not for nothing have I listened to the stories...the contemptuous straight guys talking about how the campus cops raid these rest rooms...somewhere I've heard the word *entrapment*, and it clamps down like a bear trap on whatever impulse might have me heedlessly heading toward this stranger. He's going to have to make the first move, that's all there is to it, if only I can survive long enough to take advantage of it.

Do I make a sign? I'm scrunched up into a compact ball on the toilet seat, and I seem to have given up breathing for minutes on end: how is he even supposed to know I'm here? It's time for a declaration of some kind, but nothing in me is willing to move, not lungs nor larynx nor lips. Only with great effort do I manage to make a sound, a heaving grunt that seems to have more to do with my bowels than with its true place of origin, my sore, tender balls. Then my breathing stops again—really, how long can a person go without oxygen before brain damage sets in? Or is it already too late?

When the hand appears, I'm as shocked as can be. Thrust beneath the partition like a curious dog's snout, it hangs there, several inches above the floor, palm upward, fingers curled

just enough to suggest.... With a groan (all sounds are involuntary now), I get down on my knees and thrust my hips so that my cock, which is so hard it hurts, is close enough to touch it (but I'll die if he touches it, I'll *die*...).

His grasp is unexpectedly tender, as if he knows this is my first time, my first homo time. Yes, those are a *man's* fingers sliding gently along my rod: having never felt a male touch, I'd still know it anywhere. Those fingers carry an electric charge, and my slick, dripping cock is the perfect conductor for it.

Dizzy, excited, on the verge of passing out, though not from asphyxiation now, I'm hyperventilating, and apparently no longer too frightened to make noise, for as my right hand steadies me by grasping the toilet paper holder, my left is slapping the marble partition, spanking out an ever-faster tattoo that seems to have something to do with the way my thighs are—not just shaking, but *jackhammering* away...and of course it's over before he's given me, probably, a dozen strokes, though it seems it's been much longer than that. Whatever's just happened was too monumental not to be marked by a respectable length of time, a proper ceremony takes more than a few seconds. Because of the necessarily downward tugs he'd given me, I've come all over the floor, on just his side of the partition, and though his hand withdraws rather abruptly—Christ, my cock is still so hard it may never go down—it comes back in a few seconds, with a wad of toilet paper that he uses to scrub, again very gently and tenderly, the cum from the floor. What a hand this is! What a hardworking, conscientious worker, cleaning up after the job with the same tender solicitation that it applied to the job itself. A credit to its kind, this hand, which I also notice now is white and hairy, topped by an inch or so of equally hairy wrist, and then a shirt cuff, a shiny pink one, no less, with a kind of psychedelic, faux-tie-dye pattern to it. When it withdraws again, its cleaning done, my body, which by now is truly stiff all over, jumpstarts into

action, I'm down on all fours in a wink, thrusting my own hand under the partition without a thought as to what I might encounter. And...yes...now there is a cock in my hand, and so I know for the first time what that feels like, to have another man's cock slicking up my palm and fingers—I didn't know it could feel so *big*, and so willing to *move*, delightfully springy...why, there's no end to the things you could do with it....

In retrospect, how fitting that my first gay experience ended in puzzlement. For though even before I'd explored the full length of my pink-cuffed partner's prick he had begun to gently pry at my fingers, undoing their grip, then pushing my hand away as if it were a curious pet. I stayed where I was for a minute or so, not knowing what to do. Still buzzed from my orgasm, and suffering from residual shaking in my thighs, I wasn't sure I could stand up, much less walk. It was only a sound—so brief and low, and yet so heartfelt, these sounds of the tearoom—that came from just outside my stall, a barely audible clearing of the throat that was nevertheless meant to carry to my ears. Oh, of course—someone else was awaiting his turn.

So it was a sense of protocol and etiquette that finally got me to my feet. I put myself together, smoothed back my hair—with a hand, I realized too late, that had just caressed wet cock—and opened the stall door. So great was my urge to follow the unwritten book of rules that I didn't even glance at the man who nearly brushed against me on his way to take my place.

Over the next hours and days I tried not to think too much about what had happened. And of course I thought about nothing else. Every detail of that brief interlude had been exciting—even, in retrospect, the physical discomfort of kneeling on the cold floor, trying to remain upright on my knees despite my quaking thighs, my near-asphyxiation from forgetting to breathe. And I wanted more of it, all of it.

So here's how I got Aaron, through a campaign that was—ha!—made by hand. Whenever we were in the same room I would try, as much as possible, to keep my hand in his line of sight, my fingers lively. Wiggling, stretching, curling, cupping handfuls of air like scrotums, playing with pencils or pens, proclaiming that the sexiest part of the male body is that old opposable thumb and forefinger.... Aaron's such an easy read, he blushes even more easily than I do; and when he glimpses my suggesting digits he cannot look away.

One evening at supper, while Brian is holding forth on some topic or other, I catch Aaron's eye in a way that's become so easy, leading it down to table level, where my hand oh-so-subtly caresses the salt shaker. Now, of course, I'm looking away, my hand is acting entirely on its own, fingers gliding just the teeniest distance up and down the smooth glass cylinder. You wouldn't even notice it, if you didn't have lust for what fingers can do. As Brian talks on, as I nod very seriously, the speed of my hand picks up, my fingers are almost grasping the shaker now—the kind of shaker that has, conveniently, a metal top that bulges out over the narrow glass neck, so that it's easy to tease its edges, stroke its apex...I can almost feel it engorging, getting ready to spurt a fountain of white stuff.... One more squeeze, nearly but not quite lifting the shaker free from the oilcloth, and there's a gasp from Aaron's end of the table. I shift my eyes just in time to see his guilty glance shift also, and I know I've got him.

A few hours later I'm in his room, breezing through the door as if I own the place. He's under the covers, pretending to read, a book propped up on his belly; but it's suspicious, the way his knees are raised—he's hiding something, all right.

“Don't you ever knock?” he asks, but he's not fooling me—he seems more relieved than anything when I close the door behind me. And he doesn't put up a fight when I tenderly pinch his blanket and sheet and pull them down. His birth-giving position is appropriate, after all, for

his spanking-new hardon is crowning, lifting its eye to the wonders of life. Reaching for it, I watch the magic lantern show in Aaron's eyes, an endless loop of fear-disbelief-shame-resignation-desire. "Easy," I tell him, reassuringly, my tender grip on his shaft the very definition of easy, oh how easy it is....

"I was just...." He says.

"Yes, I see what you were just. Where is it?"

"You mean you can't see...?"

"The bottle, I mean."

Under his pillow, that's where it was—hand lotion, not the best product for the job, but it'll do...and be so reminiscent of that night under the moon, years ago, those first exciting touches.... He's never lost the excitement of that first time, the greedy male hands holding him down, stripping off his shorts. Which is why I kneel above him, taking control, forbidding him to use his hands. I'm making his cock a monument to the sticking-place where fantasy and flesh meet, and he will never forget it. Never forget me. It. Me. It.

"Don't," he says, writhing whorishly, thrusting against my hand.

"Oh, you were made to be held, hard guy, made for it...." I am reassurance, threat, cool voice of wisdom; more than half whore as well, a slut with itchy palms who'll do anything to please, to keep the greased-up miracle going. "Ooh, Aaron, I love your shaft, so hard, so long, and look at that fat slick dickhead, I just want to work it...." He groans, and it's the involuntary groan I know so well: he loves this kind of talk. "Slick, and so hard...just begging for it...."

"Please make me come," he pants.

"You really get wet, don't you, Aar? I put out a lot of precum myself...."

How long can I keep him on edge, begging me to bring him off? Oh, for days. Months. Years. A cock, after all, is made to last a lifetime.

Okay, there are a lot of things that still confuse me, including the exact circumstances that brought me here. Brian tells me it's normal, nothing to worry about. Many guys "blank out" their first encounter with East Oak House; it's traumatic, after all, to commit to changing your whole life. The blanking out is a voluntary act of the mind as it prepares to abandon one way of thinking for another.

The question is, how long before I start changing? I look at my fellow journeymen, exclaiming now over Brian's pancakes as they do every Sunday, while he shrugs and smiles his sweet smile. Todd, who is closest to my age, though much taller and thinner, has a manner of speaking that makes everything he says sound sarcastic; he seems aware of this, and often repeats or overexplains things to emphasize his sincerity. Aaron is younger than me, and blond, but similar in body type, the one that is kindly described as stocky. He doesn't have David's nervous habits, though like me he is easily flustered. He uses his fingers for almost all food, including his pancakes, which he rolls up and eats dry without butter or syrup. These are basically decent guys, and I know things about them that they've never told anyone outside of our group. I've seen each of them cry, and they've seen me—well, they've seen me as I am at this moment, so addled I could slip under the table and slither away, like the blanket I lost during the night.

Then there's Brian. Ducking and weaving, shifting in and out of focus. Someone I long to be, or never got the chance to be, or can't stand the thought of being. A shape-shifter,

inscrutable, hard to pin down. Suddenly the doorbell rings, and he rises to answer it, each movement graceful and assured. When he's been gone a few seconds I realize I'm holding my breath. I force myself to relax a little and smile across the table at Aaron, who's brushing crumbs from the front of his sweatshirt.

Oh, Aaron!

How quickly our twosome develops other tastes in addition to lush juicy handjobs. We're in my bed now, and here he comes, stocky and bristly, musky in his hairy crevices, lumbering on his hands and knees across the twisted bedclothes like an animal that's too big to be cute, especially with that monster cock swinging halfway down his thigh. Is this part of the appeal of being gay—the scary-funhouse side of it, when some naked brute rolls toward you with a boner that could cleave you in two? “Please don't hurt me, please.” Yet it's a cinch to roll Aaron over on his back—heavier men can be light on their knees—and snap goes the wide strip of leather around his scrotum, stretching his balls; snap goes the cock ring, preparing his tool for worship. Erect and glistening, it shivers against the tip of my tongue, which can tease hard cock like nothing else on earth. I bring him to the brink, then switch to his heavy balls, juggling their weight, bouncing my tongue one to the other. Then back to his dick, then his balls, dick, balls, dick, and I haven't even started on his asshole yet. By the time I do he's grinding his buttocks against my face and whimpering like a cub, submersed in a helpless eroticized state. But I must pay a heavy price for all this licking and teasing. When he can't take any more he grabs me by the hair, caveman style, and pulls me toward the head of the bed (we've rolled perilously close to the bottom, one quick move and we'd thump to the floor, alarming the whole house). His cock looms up like one of those alien spaceships that fill half the movie screen. He'll use my mouth like a cunt, Aaron will, and then flip me over and ream my asshole till I'm almost dead.

Whatever's left of me can be used to scrub our juices from the sheets. I'll become an old cum rag, crumpled and crusty, abandoned at the side of the bed.

In a moment—has it only been a moment?—Brian returns with our guest in tow, a slim young man in his twenties with a mustache and dark, heavy eyebrows that give him a skeptical look. He seems nervous, like me, and I'm glad his seat is down at the end of the table.

"Everybody, this is Kent," Brian says. "Kent, meet David, Aaron, Todd, and Paul."

Kent nods, just once, a lock of dark brown hair falling across his forehead. He smoothes it back, using only the first two fingers of his left hand. A delicate gesture—tellingly so. I glance at the others, who are smiling calmly. Kent sits down and, with some effort, moves his heavy captain's chair closer to the table.

"This is a typical Sunday morning," Brian says, returning to the griddle to pour out more batter. "Up at nine, something special for breakfast—and these pancakes *are* special, if I do say so myself. Uh, we don't have religious services here, I think I told you that."

"Yeah, I don't care about that," Kent says. His hands grip the armrests of his chair, his eyes keep shifting toward the corners of the room. The judgmental side of me observes that he'd be more at home sipping a bloody Mary or mimosa. When he glances at me I look down, as if I've dropped something—hardly the proper thing to do. My face turns red again. When I look up there's Kent staring in dismay at the two golden pancakes Brian is sliding onto his plate. "I forgot to tell you," Kent says, "I already ate breakfast."

Brian laughs. "It's all right, Kent, we don't put anything in the food. Have some coffee, anyway." He fills Kent's cup from the carafe and takes his seat at the head of the table. "And think about this." He leans forward, steepling his fingertips as he makes eye contact with Kent.

“Everything that worries you about your life...all the complications, the pain, the guilt...all of it gone. Does that sound like a better world?” He pauses for a beat. “You bet it does.”

Brian's a force to be reckoned with, all right, his blue eyes so startling in their intensity that they help make up for the rest of his face, the blunt nose and the weak chin that always has a few scrapes on it, as if he shaves with a razor made for larger, more challenging chins. No wonder Kent is squinting at him in deep concentration. Or maybe his contact lenses are bothering him.

“Now,” Brian says, “I'm not telling you it's easy to change, but in the right environment it can be done. And we have that right here at East Oak House.”

Somebody sighs—Aaron? Todd? David? They're all so still, it's as if the house itself sighed. Or maybe *I* sighed. I look down, at a drop of maple syrup on the thigh of my pajama pants. I am *not doing very well*. I'm not *making us look good*. But maybe it doesn't matter: Kent's eyes, breaking loose from Brian's gaze and glancing here and there across the tabletop—at a fork, a red-and-white-checked napkin, a tub of low-fat margarine—seems not so much to be staring at things but looking within, their restlessness a symptom of the urge to change. It's almost too private a thing to be witnessed, and I look down into my lap again.

Brian sees it's time for some light conversation. “Well, let's talk about some of the things we do for fun.”

“I've been reading Chaucer,” someone pipes up. Oh, it's me. “*The Pardoner's Tale*.”

Like everything else I say, this has to be explained by Brian. “We make our own entertainment here,” he says to Kent, “and we're getting ready for an evening of reader's theater. Paul's doing some Chaucer, and—“

“I'm doing Robert Frost,” David says. ““Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.””

There he goes, being cute. I want to put him in a headlock and rub my knuckles on his scalp. Hey Davy, that's a poem we all learned in the second grade, can't you do something a little more ambitious?

Todd, by contrast, announces that he's doing some Shakespeare. "From *Julius Caesar*."

"And I'm doing some *Leaves of Grass*," Aaron says.

All of our heads turn toward him. Really, Aaron? Walt Whitman?

"What?" he says, the corners of his mouth betraying his fear that he's said something wrong.

For me there's not necessarily any "what"—it may be a stretch to put Aaron together with *Leaves of Grass*, but I wouldn't mind a bit of Walt at all. So what if he was a card-carrying queer, long before that concept even existed. For now, though, I can only think of Chaucer's Pardoner. At one time it was an honest profession, folks were even commissioned by the Church to roam hither and yon, selling pardons for sins; but by Chaucer's time the profession had become corrupt. So the Pardoner, my Pardoner, is a phony, a liar, a cheat. And worse.

Since our literary discussion seems to have ground to a halt, Brian takes the opportunity to ask Kent if he wants to take a tour of the place. As Kent gets up I get a good look at him again. His button-down shirt is open at the neck, revealing a nice serving of chest hair, and his jeans define the trunk of his body a bit too well. A ring of keys hangs from his right-side belt loop. In the old days that would have meant he liked to get fucked—do key codes still apply? And what kind of language is that—*he liked to get fucked, he liked to give head, he liked j/o, water sports, fisting?* It's not so much that it sounds obscene, it's just—dated somehow. Old and quaint-sounding, like Chaucer's English.

“Be right back,” Brian says, and they disappear up the back stairs, around the corner from the kitchen. I’m ready to take my coffee into the den, the only room where smoking’s allowed, but for the moment it feels good to sit and bask in my relief that our initial encounter with Kent is over.

Todd gives a nervous cough. “He seems nice enough,” he says, his voice unintentionally dripping with sarcasm.

“He didn’t seem as nervous as I was,” David says. Like you *are*, I’m thinking, watching his orange juice tremble as he raises it to his lips. *Clothed, David’s slight frame promises little; but what a torso he’s got—not bulky but chiseled, his pale, pale abs like dinner rolls waiting to be browned. They’re as sensitive to touch as they are beautiful to look at, and more than once I’ve pinned him down and dug my fingers in, tickling him till he wet the bed.*

One gray winter afternoon, I come to in the lumpy wing chair where I’ve been dozing—unobtrusively, I hope, since there’s a group session going on. A sound, unvarying as the sound of a jet high overhead—a droning, numbing sound—seems to originate someplace close, here, in this room. I cuff my ear like a dog with a sudden itch, but the sound remains.

Focus, Lavarney. Get with the program, as Brian would say, *before it’s too late.*

The sound is what could charitably be called a human voice, after all: David’s, recounting, for the tenth or perhaps the hundredth time, the source of his shame. Logy as I am, I recognize where he is in the story immediately: as far as the stories of my housemates are concerned, I’ve become like those Bible-toting Christians who, unfathomably, can quote scripture and verse at the slightest cue. Right now we are coming up to, *He touched me.*

“He touched me,” David says, choking back a sob.

He being the evil uncle, *me* being David at the tender age of thirteen. And now we are at the part where Brian says, *Yes, David, go on.*

“Yes, David, go on,” Brian says.

“He *touched* me,” David says, “and...oh, God...it felt so *exciting*....”

Go on, Davy, don't stop now.

“And I felt...so *empty* afterwards....”

The rest of us nod, involuntarily. It is so familiar by now. And now comes Shame.

“I was so ashamed,” David chokes out, in full sobbing mode.

But wait! Fortunately, Shame is good.

“Shame is good,” Brian says. “It shows that you know right from wrong, Davy. You've known all along.”

Does anyone call David *Davy* except during these moments? I don't. No one does. But as he sits there, rocking with sobs, hugging his own thin shoulders, he is definitely Davy.

Unfortunately, this is the beginning of his story, not the end. The abuse lasts through Davy's junior year in high school, ending with the uncle's mysterious disappearance. By then the damage has been done. Davy's giving blow jobs behind the school stadium every afternoon between 3:00 and 4:00. He explains his late arrival home from school every day by saying he's joined Glee Club. The jocks who use his mouth know when they've got a good thing, they're not about to squeal.

“And how did it feel, Davy,” Brian asks, “when they had all gone, and you were left alone there, behind the stadium?”

Wiping your chin. No, Paul, stop it.

Davy's beyond speaking now, he's barking out harsh, dry sobs.

So, not too many days after Davy's most emotional telling of his story, I find him sitting in the green wing chair in the living room, writing in his journal. It's one of those notebooks with the black-and-white marbled cover, a design that predates dirt: we each have one. The winter light, on this particular afternoon, has even more of a dishwater quality than usual, as if a dimmer switch has been wired to the sky.

"Dark by four o'clock," I say, taking a seat on the end of a sofa nearest him. "The dead of winter, wouldn't you say?"

He hikes himself up in his chair, doing his best, with his ankles crossed and his knees on the armrests, to hold his own against the slippery green fabric. He never lifts his eyes from the page, but his shift in position is a way of acknowledging me, answering me. It tells me to stay away, and to stay put.

"You know, Davy," I croon, "we're all very proud of you."

He wipes his nose on the back of his thin pale wrist. His eyes stay put, but his hand is not moving; or it if is, its movement has diminished from writing to miniscule doodling. Encouraged by this break in concentration, I lean closer over the arm of the sofa, holding out a thick white mug.

"Want some of my hot chocolate?"

That was a shoo-in. Like me, he can't resist chocolate in any form. "Careful," I tell him, "it's very hot." The mug is the thick white kind whose glazed surface gives no clue to the temperature within. He wraps his pianist's fingers nearly all the way around it, raises it carefully to his lips. His upper lip extends toward the steaming surface, then recoils, its movement very like a cat's. Behind his glasses, his pale blue eyes shift. Another trial sip, and this time some of the hot drink makes it in and down.

“So proud of you,” I say. “You work hard, you always contribute in group...you’re going through a lot, yet you’re always there for the rest of us, too.”

For the first time he looks up at me. Todd, Aaron, Dwight—none of them ever speak to him like this. Only Brian is this encouraging, and Brian...well, he never sits quite this close. “I don’t do any more,” he says, “than the rest of you guys do.”

“See? You’re modest, too.” I don’t want to push this line too far, he might start blushing, which would pull him away. “What are you writing about?”

“Oh.” He wipes his nose, on the back of his hand this time. It’s no cold that’s got him sniffing, but emotion, that’s for sure. “I was trying to write about this time...my uncle took me to the lake, to go fishing. Just the two of us. We had a cabin there....” He raised the mug, his upper lip flirted with the surface again, then took a bigger sip.

“You liked being close with your uncle, didn’t you?”

He raises his knees from the armrests, flapping them gently, like butterfly wings. “I...I guess I did.”

“Now, on this fishing trip”—I lowered my voice, not only in volume but in pitch, low, soothing and firm—“he didn’t mistreat you at all, did he?”

“Well, at the time...I think I was so fucked up by then by what he was doing to me that I didn’t...wasn’t able to recollect anything at the time.”

“But now you can.”

He shakes his head, defiantly. Still, it’s the kind of shake that says yes.

“It’s okay.” Very, very gently, I stretch my right hand toward him, to rest ever so lightly on his knee. “You can remember. It won’t hurt you.”

“He...we didn’t....”

“Shhh.” Proving, once again, that full-figured guys can be light on their feet, I swing my legs around and take two silent steps to the side of his chair. “It’s all right.” Hiking my fanny onto the edge of his armrest as carefully as a chef sliding a soufflé from the oven. He doesn’t even know I’m this close.

“I guess...oh God.” He waves a hand across the journal page. Not dismissing what he’s written, just admitting there’s not much there.

“You can talk about it, Davy,” I said. “Sometimes talking about it is easier than writing it down. Just let it out.”

“Well.” He hiccups, nearly jolting me off the arm of the chair. It’s not an attack, though, just one solitary hiccup, followed by mouth breathing: his nose is clogged again. “My uncle...” That gesture, wiping his nose on the back of his hand—does he even know how boyish that is? “He...this was a weekend, and it was on the Saturday night...he had a few friends over, guys he knew at the lake. They played cards. And I thought...I grew up thinking, for the longest time, that all they did that night was play cards.” Agitated, he lets the journal fall closed, not bothering to mark the place. “But now I know.”

“Easy. Take a drink.”

He sips from the mug, nearly half empty now.

I move just a little bit farther onto the arm of the chair, ease my right arm across its back. “You can tell me, Davy.” Almost whispering now. “Tell me what you know.”

Another hiccup. Or sob. He sets the mug down, on the little end table to his right.

“He...they...fucked me.”

“Oh, Davy...!”

“My uncle...went first.” A grim little chuckle. “Of course.”

"Where did it happen?"

"In the big room, the same room where they were playing cards. On the braided rug. They...it was hot, the middle of summer, and they were just wearing shorts. Me too."

"Did your uncle knock you out first?"

"He...he put his arms around my shoulders, the way he did, and held the bottle under my nose...just enough...."

"So you weren't really sure what was happening...."

"It didn't seem real."

"How many were there?"

"Three. Three others, I mean, plus my uncle. I remember now, how he slid down my shorts, my underwear, showing me to them...."

"Sssh. Go slow, go slow, Davy, no need to rush." I'm whispering now into his fine blond hair.

"Then he had me on the floor, he raised my legs."

"Did it hurt?"

"It always hurt a little."

"And he was excited, wasn't he, doing it in front of his friends?"

He turns toward me, he's known all along that I'm right here, practically sitting on top of him. With both hands on my thigh he draws me closer. It's easy, now, to bring my right arm down, encircling his shoulders.

"I remember...looking around, and they were there, with their...their dicks in their hands...."

"Sssh, Davy, it's okay...."

Not content with a sniffle now, he snorts like a bull. "And I remember the big guy...he could have been a football player...how he said to my uncle...and I'll never forget the look on his face...he said, 'Hey, Bud, I think he likes it. He might turn out to be a regular fairy someday.' And they all laughed...."

Pulling on my other arm, wrapping that around him, he buries his face in me and cries. And I'm stroking his hair, I'm crooning in that low, deep tone...just like...a trusted older relative: "It's all right, Davy, it's all right. Nobody's going to hurt you ever again." There's not really room for both of us in the wing chair, and yet there is. It's hard for him to reach around me, but I can enfold him so easily, my little Davy. "No one's going to do anything you don't want them to do." Desperate with belief, clawing, clinging to me so that I'm practically lifting him up now, holding him in my arms. He's as trusting of my hands as I am, he knows there's nothing to fear when I caress his butt. Let my fingers slide even under his butt, between his legs....

"Now, Davy," I tell him, my voice even lower now, so low that it might be real or it might not.... "Davy, I want you to see me as your Uncle Paul, only I'm the Uncle Paul who won't hurt you. Okay?"

His face is buried in my side. I feel his hot breath as he nods.

"I can only make you feel good, Davy. Good things. Okay?"

Again the nod. His nose moistens my flannel shirt.

"There's all kinds of things I can do to make you feel good."

He stays still in my arms the way a cat stays still, completely trusting. I kiss the crown of his head, the straw-colored hair that smells of the house, its faint dry heat, its boiled-milk-and-onions. We are both still, I'm not aware of how stiff my limbs have become till I start to move them. It's the hem of his long-sleeved t-shirt I'm reaching for. Ever so gently I begin pulling it

up. "Sssh, Davy, it's okay...." He gives no resistance, raises his arms so I can pull the shirt over his head, exactly as if he's a child and I really am his uncle, getting him ready for bed. Even in the gloom of this room his slim-but-ripped torso can take my breath away. "It's okay, Davy." Slipping my hands under his butt, tugging at the waist of his sweatpants. He's nearly in a swoon as I pull them down. His sweet cock is curled between his legs, I'll get it stirring soon enough. "This is the way, Davy. This is the way a man can make you feel good."

He comes to a moment, enough to be aware of his surroundings. "But we can't! Not here...."

"Sssh. Dwight's in with Brian, Aaron and Todd are upstairs.... It'll be so easy, Davy. Easy and...nice."

And just as I promised, it's easy to get him down on the floor. In my uncle-role I am above him, always, controlling him, turning him this way and that. That's Davy all over: he wants to be mastered, raising a Phoenix of aggression from the ashes of my passivity. Touching him anywhere makes him breathless, and he's my toy as I lube his orifices with pre-cum. "Go ahead, squirm," I tell him, shooting a middle finger up his ass. When I take his cock in my mouth he moans like the wind rubbing up against the old roof, and when he's been sucked and fingered into an altered state of consciousness I mount him like the animal I am, slamming into his butt so hard his thighs shake.

Afterwards he tells me again and again how it feels to have my hot load inside him, till I'm ready to give him another one. He sighs as I loom over him again, my presence as inevitable, as inescapable as a perfect uncle-lover's must be.

Sometimes I shake the way David does, after too much coffee. The sugar I've had doesn't help, my thoughts are racing in a familiar way. The sugar high is something I've used all

my life as a coping mechanism, but what a foolish trick. More often, these days, sugar only leaves me confused and tired. Which doesn't stop me from helping myself to another cup of coffee with two heaping teaspoons.

"Seems like Dwight's been gone a long time," Aaron says.

"I miss Dwight," Todd says. "I mean, as a friend."

I miss Dwight too. He came here not long before I did, and already he's gone. Well, recovery is different for everyone, as Brian would say. In group Dwight had a nice self-deprecating sense of humor, kind of like mine but without the pathos. He was so fair his hair was almost white. *His chest hair too, thick and lickable. His nipples were so sensitive that breathing on them made him sigh. When his dick was hard it was the darkest part of him. He had a funny dickhead, like a knob of putty stuck off-center. I liked to ride it while he bucked like a bronco. "Fuck me, stud. Fuck me till dawn and I'll slap your tits, just the way you like it."*

I got Dwight with one daring move. I don't know where I got the balls for it. It was one morning when I was passing him in the hall. Unlike me he was showering after breakfast, traipsing toward the downstairs bathroom with a towel around his waist. I had never seen a man like him before: so pale, yet so hairy. Nearly white fur covered him from his shoulders on down. Something in Dwight was begging for me; and though I'd seen him half naked before, it was on that morning, that I got it: his nipples. They poked out of his pecs like deeper, darker treats peeking through cotton-candy nests. Oh, they ached to be touched, and my fingertips ached for them.

It might not have happened if I hadn't dreamed about him the night before. He was as warm as a bear, and we were hibernating together, spoonwise, my dick planted firmly between his thighs. I woke up curled against my pillow, wondering why I'd intuited that Dwight was so

warm. Was it one of those dream-puns that Freud was so fond of—a “hot” man serving the role of bed-warmer? It took effort to pull my dick from its crevice between pillow and mattress, where it had done its best to glue itself in place. It was washing my bed linens, for the third time that week, that brought me to that first floor hallway at the same time that Dwight was heading back from the shower. I knew he was returning from the shower, not heading to it, because while the rest of him was dry, the hair on his head was not; it was slicked back into a ducktail, which gave him a sexy, fifties-style look. And those nipples....

Who's to say, really, what a friendly gesture is between men? I'd seen enough grabassing in “straight” locker rooms to know what a fuzzy line there could be between improper and acceptable touch.... And so I talked myself, during that few seconds' walk down the hallway, into reaching out with my right hand and tweaking Dwight's left nipple as he passed by. Without stopping he reached to slap my hand, missing it, letting loose a good-natured chuckle. I hadn't stopped, either, but looked back over my shoulder to see him glancing at me. As I kept looking he swung around on his large bare feet and walked backward a few steps, facing me full-on as his towel suddenly slipped from where his left hand had been grasping it—slipped all the way to the floor. How embarrassing! Yet there was a pause—a significant pause—before Dwight stooped to grab the towel. In that split second I saw him naked for the first time. Saw the fur that continued down his belly to his groin, saw the pink tip of his irresistible dick, which swung in the lazy kind of arc peculiar to dicks in the process of lengthening, thickening.... So much happened during that split-second that, as Dwight tucked his towel in place again, I had to catch his eye to see what he had taken in. Yes, there was recognition there, in the half curve of his smile—an acknowledgement that something had begun, and it would be brought to a conclusion, hopefully sooner than later.

My prescient feeling about Dwight's nipples soon made me wish I could predict other things with as much accuracy. He taught me so much about tits: working them with slickened fingertips, I could control his entire body. The right kind of tweaking could cause different parts of him to twitch uncontrollably—his buttocks, his feet. And he never failed to look at me with gratitude that I had so quickly found his weakness, his obsession, his reason for living.

But what was his reason for leaving? Of course there's only one reason to leave: he had recovered. On the morning he told us he made a speech about life and change, presenting his case with sincerity and skill. But why he chose that exact time to go...wracking my brain gave me no answers, and if I were really honest I wouldn't need one. Instead I would admit the truth: he left because he didn't need us anymore.

"Been a while since we had anybody new," David says. Does he know that he's tapping his fork with his fingernail, making it *ting-ting-ting* against his plate? "Not since Paul."

Oh great, everyone looks at me. I try to smile and feel it misfire. No doubt my mouth looks as insincere as Todd's voice sounds. They know that, when all is said and done, I'm different from them. I keep to myself too much. Yes, this is a place for healing, you're supposed to be self-absorbed; but it's also a place for—oh, that word—*sharing*. Sharing and caring. Insane little ditties run through my head all day: *Oh, we share and care in our underwear*.

I glance at Aaron, who's smiling at me, just slightly. Like Dwight he's almost painfully blond, especially in the fluorescent light of the kitchen—his eyebrows like frost, his lashes like attenuated snowflakes. Almost an albino. There's another dimension to Aaron, too, for if you took his wintry paleness away, painted his eyebrows and lashes brown, his blue eyes hazel, you'd have Eric, my ex-husband.

He's there, Eric, in my dreams, the ones I never talk about. He hovers over me, his features as clear as the media player of memory can make them, and his Spanish accent keeps on ticking when I turn the volume up. His words and actions are limited, though, as if I've run short on disk space. Often he's naked, I see the freckles on his belly, the dick I know as well as my own, the dime-sized birthmark on his hip. He peers at me, as if at his own reflection in a mirror, and asks something like, "Paul, what are you doing?"

"What the fuck do you think I'm doing," I ask gently.

His lower lip trembles. "Come back to me."

"Come back to *you*?" I sweep my hand in dismissal, forcing him to step back. "*You're* the one who left *me*, in case you've forgotten. You cheated on *me*. Then you left me."

He raises the back of his hand to his mouth just as a sob tears it open. "No! That's not true, Paul!" The vehemence of his words—he's practically screaming—wakes me up. I lie in the dark, trying in vain to think about what's true and what's not. Wondering where my husband is now. What's become of the king-size bed we shared. What's become of our cat, whom I would never throw out a window, not even in a dream.

David gets seconds on orange juice. I warm up my coffee from the carafe. By the time we've sat down again Brian and Kent return, single file, Kent ducking into the kitchen as Brian, behind him, asks, "Well, what do you think?"

"It's pretty nice," Kent says.

So young. He looks young enough to be in high school, and he speaks—shades of Todd!—like a kid talking to a teacher, saying the right words but really thinking *You're full of shit*. Oh, he likes to get fucked, all right: it comes through as clearly as his bright smile and untrimmed mustache. How about that mustache? He's neat enough in other ways, why doesn't

he keep it straight-edged? He must think that ragged fringe curling against his lip looks sexy, and damned if it doesn't. One unkempt detail can go a long way. I know you, Kent: you're a little sex machine, working your sphincter around a lubricated shaft like you were born to it; in mouth or ass you can take two cocks at once, sucking them up like a Dirt Devil. I see you, I recognize you even from my humble vantage point—middle age, chalk-blue pajamas, white hairy ankles and all.

I wonder what Brian has seen. Does he feel that Kent is a good candidate? Hard to tell from his expression. "Well," he says, sticking to the script, "I'm going to leave you all for a bit, so you guys can, you know, talk amongst yourselves." He takes his coat from the rack and edges through the kitchen door—making a show of leaving the house so that Kent won't think he's hiding somewhere, listening.

Taking his seat at the table again, Kent looks at each of us in turn, seeking eye contact. Soon I'm trapped in his steady blue gaze; if my head were snatched away my eyeballs would stay in place, hanging in midair. Yet I return his gaze very calmly. Let him accuse me of hypocrisy, it wouldn't be the first time. He should have been here when our last guest came through—a little shit with a shaved head, his salt-and-pepper mustache giving away his age. Rodney, his name was. As soon as the five of us were alone, Brian having slipped out the kitchen door, Rodney let us have it. "Fucking hypocrites!" he screamed. "You'll never change, you know you won't, you CAN'T. But once you're completely brainwashed you'll be just like your creepy 'leader,' telling guys they can get rid of their gayness, a GOD-GIVEN gayness, by the way. So don't talk about God, you pathetic bastards. Just FUCK OFF, okay? Fuck yourselves, if you're not secretly fucking each other!"

Looking back, I'd say we did very well. Not a lip trembled, not an eyelash fluttered as we sat and watched Rodney, who was shaking so hard he nearly fell off his chair. We didn't argue, didn't cry—okay, one tear appeared on my cheek, but it dried up quickly—and didn't correct his notion that we talked about God. As he'd already been told, God didn't enter into our affairs. Poor guy—he must have suspected that the minute his back was turned we'd be beating him with Bibles. Sitting, staring calmly, our advantage was almost unfair. No wonder he finally bolted to his feet and ran, leaving the kitchen door open, his footsteps crunching through fresh-fallen snow, his car roaring furiously as it overtook the stop sign at the top of the hill.

For another minute, we just continued to stare. Finally Dwight, who was still with us, said, “Jesus fucking Christ.” It was enough to release the tension, we laughed as if it was the funniest thing we'd ever heard.

Now Kent is giving us the hairy eyeball. I plant my feet flat on the floor and take a big gulp of coffee. Another outburst is unlikely; Rodney was an anomaly, guys are too thoroughly screened to fake their way in here—though how or when I was screened I cannot say. Sure enough, Kent's voice is soft as he asks, “So you guys aren't...?”

We sit perfectly still, as if we've put our heads together and decided to let composure speak for itself. Even David manages not to fidget.

“Nobody likes to suck dick? You don't even like to look at pictures of naked guys?”

Continued composure. Unruffled feathers.

“Jesus,” Kent says, “don't you guys even *beat off*?”

My composure breaks, in the form of a short, sharp laugh that sounds and feels more like a sneeze. No one else's breaks, though. David speaks up clearly and calmly. “You might not

believe it now," he says, "but it's possible to lead a life where you're not obsessed with sex all the time. It's possible."

Kent sticks his tongue in his cheek, rolls it around as if tasting something new.

"We're not, like, monks or anything," Todd says. "It's not like we're giving up sex forever, or anything like that." To my surprise Todd has found a new way to overcome his habitual sarcastic tone: by growing louder. His next statement fairly booms. "It's just that some of us would like to get married, have kids."

Kent sits for a moment, considering. He looks down at the floor. The table leg squeaks, he must be rubbing his boot against it. "I haven't been doing much with my life lately," he says. "Not really."

"You can do something here," Aaron says. "We can help you. We support each other. We're doing it."

If there's a double meaning to *We're doing it*, it doesn't show on Aaron's perfectly sober face. Now an increasingly awkward silence seems to point out that I'm the only one who hasn't added to the pep talk. Isn't there *something* I can say? I don't have to search my thoughts too far before I come up against a wall. It's a high, blank wall, but at least I know what's on the other side: grief, a whole shitstorm of grief and loss and despair. When I speak it's to that wall, as if I might break through it, then level off the sea of muck so that I could, for the first time in what seems like years, glimpse the horizon.

"Do it, Kent," I tell him. "Do it now, while you're still young enough that you haven't ruined your life yet, or anyone else's. Do it before so much time has passed that you don't know if you can. Do it so you don't have to learn how scary that is, or what it feels like to live with all that regret."

More silence, but of a different kind. Kent seems about to speak, his lips trembling; instead he just looks at me while I blush for the third time this morning, feeling it like a warm dry cloth laid over my face. I've done what had to be done, what could only be done by me—the oldest man at the table, the one with more gray hair than anyone else.

Brian would be proud.

Sunday breakfast is always followed by free time—a reminder that we are “free” from the burdens of churchgoing and other religious rot. I head for the den, where I can stare at the book-lined walls and smoke one cigarette after another. The only other smoker in the house is Brian, who keeps trying to quit. He'll duck into the room, light up and start pacing, biting drags off his fag, crushing it out when it's half gone. I said to him once, “If you're going to smoke, you might as well enjoy it,” then wished I hadn't, for he looked even more ashamed. Maybe he feels that, as an expert on quitting queer life, he should set an example in quitting smoking as well. If you can forsake blow jobs, doesn't it follow that you can stop sucking on Marlboros? Yet I'm glad—secretly glad—that I'm not the only smoker in the house.

I don't see Brian during this Sunday morning smoke because he's left for the supermarket, to get supplies; Kent has already decided he'll be moving in tonight. So I sit and smoke and listen to the vague winter complaints of the house and David's noodling on the piano in the living room. Todd and Aaron are probably upstairs, reading or perhaps writing letters with the standard apologies: *Sorry you can't visit me here, sorry we can't even talk on the phone, sorry I can't even give you the address. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Those are the rules....* Rules, that is, meant to protect our privacy, and our safety in this little Maine town where the locals would torch the place if they thought it contained homosexuals, recovering or not.

The slamming of the kitchen door wakes me. Christ, have I been dozing with a lit cigarette in my hand? I check my hand, my lap, the chair, the floor, the ashtray. Nothing burning. The kitchen noise means that Brian is back from his shopping; I couldn't have slept very long. Long enough, though, for a thousand tiny dreams, and I close my eyes to try to recapture some. It was also a dream that was troubling me when I woke up earlier this morning, I'm sure of it. This certainty itself is reassuring, since dreams are nothing to worry about. Still, I'd like to know *exactly* what it was I'd seen in my sleep, and whether or not it has just revisited me....

Something brushes my cheek, startling me again. Another nap has come and gone, an extremely brief one, and though I didn't feel the familiar *oops-I-left-a-cigarette-burning* panic, there was panic in me just the same: *what* could have touched me? I look around for the winter housefly (rare) that might have settled on my face; I wave my hands, seeking out the draft (not so rare) that might have caressed me. Nothing doing. But now I *know*: something touched me during the night, too. Brushed my cheek, and more—left me twisted in my sheets, too. It was no delusion.

As I sit and smoke my fourth cigarette of the day, I pick my way through the minefield of what I like to call my consciousness. Some crap is always on the edge of exploding, and if it should all blow at once—all the events, say, of the last six months or so—it would leave a Paul-sized crater where I used to be. Should I confide more in Brian? He already knows what a mess I am, but he doesn't know...everything. *I don't know everything. Does anybody?*

Not that he doesn't *think* he knows everything. *How smug he sounds, calling me into his office on the first floor, just beyond the living room. "Come on in, Paul."*

His naked chest is coated with curly red hair, and I know that under the desk he's naked as well. Out of sight, maybe, but I can smell his hard dick. It sets me to salivating.

"How old are you, Paul?"

Again? "Uh...forty-five. I think."

"You realize your life may be two-thirds over? Two-thirds! Think of it!"

"I guess I'd rather think of it as half over ... assuming I'll live to be 90, which, I admit, isn't too likely, given my family..." I'm mumbling. I hate when I mumble in front of Brian, it makes me feel like a bratty kid who's been brought before the principal.

"Whether it's half or two-thirds, Paul, the key word is 'over.' What are you going to do with what you've got left?"

His blue eyes are so bright; they are (a) his most prominent feature, followed by (b) his curly ginger mustache and (c) his Adam's apple, like a tonsure among the bristles his razor didn't quite reach. From there my eyes slip easily down his chest. His nipples are hard, and why wouldn't they be, it must be twenty below outside and this is far from being the warmest room in the house. If I pressed my palm against the windowpane near his right shoulder it would probably stick, fast-frozen. Just the thought of it makes my hand cold, I slide it under my thigh as I stare at that perky right nipple and wonder, for the hundredth time, if it has a telltale hole from an old piercing.

"Look, Paul," he says when I am obviously at a loss for words. "Look. Is this what you want?" With a push against the floor he sends his chair rolling back, and I have to stand up now to see that he is indeed sitting there naked. He spreads his knees, lifts his pelvis slightly. His hard cock strains against his flat, hairy belly; his balls are tight and wrinkled, his scrotum reacting to the chill in the air. His hands with their long, sensitive fingers appear on either side of his bush, framing the goods. "Is this what you want?"

Drooling, I watch a delicate finger trace the length of his cock. His other hand appears beneath his balls, and they respond, descending in the warmth of his palm. Making a circle of his thumb and forefinger, he slides it over his shaft, moving up and down like a magician seeking to prove that the audience volunteer has no strings holding him up. He is not quite jerking himself off, just keeping enough contact to ensure that his cock stays its hardest. "Look, Paul. Take a good look." His fingers move across his balls, poking and tickling them while his other hand takes a firmer grip on his shaft. "Is this what you want?"

"I...I don't know what to say." Unfortunately my dick is speaking for me, I can't hide the erection that's pitching a tent in my sweatpants.

"Or how about this?" He lifts his knees, raising them nearly to his shoulders—if his chair was the kind that tilted he'd be flat on his back by now—and while I can't quite see his asshole, that's clearly where the tip of his middle finger is headed, inserting itself as his tongue barely protrudes from his mouth, as if the two are connected. "How about it, Paul? This is all there is, isn't it? The be-all and end-all. You'd give up your whole life for it. In fact, you already have."

When my tongue comes unglued it's only to whine. "Don't be unfair."

"Unfair?" Slowly he unfurls himself from his curled-up position. His dick is hard as ever, but he ignores it completely as he rolls his chair back under the desk. "I'll tell you what's unfair: you've given up your life for this, and what you've got now is nothing."

Okay, it's true: nothing to hold, nothing to keep. And nothing to say, apparently.

"It's not too late, Paul. No matter what you think, it's not too late."

I could go back to my seat, but even that small decision is too much at the moment. I stand, swaying, prepared to fall either way.

“Remember free will? Remember choosing? Think, Paul! Use that magnificent brain of yours!”

“Uh...I must have missed something. Just a minute ago you were playing with yourself, if I'm not....”

He leans forward as if I've discovered something that needs a closer look. “The key word, Paul, is ‘playing.’ It's just playing, after all. It's not real, it's not life itself.”

The argument feels familiar, I've heard it a hundred times, but there's something accompanying it, something intense in his blue eyes that can't be denied. I'm asking silently, Is it really that simple? And he's saying, without speaking, Of course, of course.

Now I ask again, as I light cigarette number five: Does anyone know everything?

As if in answer the doorknob rattles. When the door swings open a half-second later I expect to see Brian, hunchbacked with guilt, fitting a cigarette to his lips. Instead I see a cigarette, but the man it's attached to is Kent. He's startled to see me, his eyebrows go up—or rather eyebrow, for it's more like a single straight line hooding both eyes. Ordinarily I like the feral look of excess hair in a few well-chosen places, but right now it only makes me nervous.

“Sorry,” he says.

It takes me a moment to respond. “That's all right” is what finally comes out, though the pause before it makes it sound like a lie. “I just came in,” I explain, “to look for a book.” Yet it must be obvious, from the pack of cigs beside me and the butts in the ashtray, that I came here to smoke and smoke and smoke.

Kent doesn't seem fazed by my awkwardness. He nods, lips his cigarette and lights it, and I'm lost, watching him. No sultry jazz musician ever handled his mouthpiece the way Kent handles a cigarette. He takes a drag, rolls the taste around with his tongue and lets it go, his lips

puckering the smoke into a thin line like steam escaping through a fissure. He nods, as if in silent agreement with his coffin nail, and takes another drag, grasping the filter with two fingers as he bites off smoke, tilts his head back and, blinking rapidly, exhales through his nose. Finally he looks at me again, takes a step in my direction. Then another. My back stiffens against the chair—*What am I afraid of?*—and I think I might actually cry out till I see he's only heading for the ashtray by my right elbow.

“Sorry to interrupt you,” he says, mixing his ash with mine.

“Oh, no, not at all. I was just....” What? Haven't I already told him I was looking for a book? I stare at my lap, but my eyes refuse to focus. Do I even know how to read?

“I'm moving in tonight,” he says. “Just thought I'd look around a bit more.”

I smile, or try to, as his bright blue eyes zero in on mine. “Sure. Fine. Welcome.” Did that sound friendly? And why is he *still* looking into my eyes, even as he takes another drag? Finally I have to look away, my face flushing again for no reason. We're just a couple of guys having a conversation, no big deal. It happens all the time around here.

Except that it doesn't. Not like this. Even when I first met Todd and David and Aaron and Dwight, there was nothing like what I'm feeling now—as if I've not only *thought* of doing wrong, but have already done it. And Kent knows.

That's it! Kent *knows*. He knows that something brushed my cheek in the night, and then....

And then there were two bodies, and a lot of grappling under the sheets, as if we were trying to catch a mouse, not each other. Hands that hadn't touched another male body in ages stumbled upon dimly remembered erogenous zones. The clumsiness, the desperation, the accidental roughness was part of a thrill that did not, could not last long once hands found hard

cocks, hot and slippery, achingly touchy. The explosion that followed was potent and copious, I thought the sheets would melt, the air ignite.

Then there was my door closing gently, and bare feet crossing the hall, scurrying off to ... where?

Kent can see all of this in my eyes, I know it. So I ask him, silently, *Where? Who? Which door closed softly in the night?* But he only smokes, and stares, and reads me like the books I'm feigning interest in. It's time for another effort to make all this seem natural, but as seconds tick by the chance to redeem the moment moves at warp speed, out of sight. He crushes out his cigarette and says, "Okay, see you later...Paul? Is that right?"

I nod. "Paul." The name that sounds like a funeral bell. "See you, Kent."

The door is about to close behind him when he pauses again. "Say, can I ask you something?"

To pose that question is *already* asking something, a pet peeve of mine. But I try to put on a bright smile. "Of course."

"That guy who left recently? Dwight?"

I don't know why, but his question disappoints me. I guess I expected something more personal. "*Six inches, Kent. Versatile, yes, extremely so. I swallow, too. Always have. In for a penny, in for a pound.*" "What about Dwight?"

"Did you know him? I mean, did you get to know him before he left?"

Sucking Dwight's chest hair while he moans, polishing his off-center knob till he begs me to bring him off. "A little, I suppose." Enough to know that Dwight had a problem. Not that half the world isn't disturbed—no, three-quarters of the world, at least. With Dwight it was anger.

“We’re all angry,” I told him once, knowing that the anger that had once motivated me was gone, leaving me hollow.

I rock him in my arms as he cries. “I can’t do this anymore,” he says. “I can’t, I can’t.”

“Baby, hush.” I hold his scrotum, warm his balls in the palm of my hand. A final pearl of cum leaks from his slit. “You can do anything you want, I don’t mind.”

He nearly chokes on tears. “That’s not what I mean!” Heaving himself up, he turns toward the door as if he might step like this, naked and still semi-erect, into the hallway. Instead he raises his pale fist and slams his knuckles into the wall. “Shit!”

“Baby, baby.” Arms encircling him from behind, my fingertips soothing his tits. “Let me sell you a pardon. I’m the only one who can, you know....”

His fist slams the wall again. The ancient plaster crumbles, but that’s not what I’m worried about. “Honey, don’t,” I tell him. “That’s your jackoff hand, you don’t want to....”

Kent voice intrudes. He’s still questioning me, but it’s hard to follow. It’s too much like having a real conversation, I’m not used to it. “Excuse me?” I ask.

“I asked you if you saw him leave the house. Dwight.”

“I don’t see....”

“On the day he left. Did you actually see him go?”

“Well, no, I don’t think I did.” Actually I know I didn’t. No one did, we didn’t even know he was gone till Brian announced it at breakfast. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason.”

As if such a question could fail to have a reason. I’d sneer at him if he wasn’t so cute, standing there with his little package pointed at me. “Mind if I ask you a question, Kent?” “Why,

not at all. Eight inches. Get your trick towel ready, I blow a wad like you've never seen. But you have to fuck me for a good hour first." He seems about to shut the door, then pauses again.

"Have you ever seen *anybody* leave the house?" he asks.

Well, I've seen Brian leave the house, and come back, too. You can smell the cold air clinging to his parka. And Riley, our gopher and handyman—he comes and goes, too. But it's too late to give an answer like that; darned if I haven't let a pause slip in, a long enough one to reveal that I know what Kent's really asking. Which leads me, somehow, to Chaucer.

"Do you know what *The Pardoner's Tale* is about?" I ask him. "These three guys, these 'rioters,' are in a tavern, getting drunk as usual, when they learn that a friend has been killed by a thief named Death. They go off in search of Death, to give him what for, and an old man directs them to a tree, telling them they'll find Death underneath it. But instead they find piles of gold under the tree. They decide to carry it off, but not until it gets dark. One of them goes back into town for some food and drink. While he's gone the other two start plotting: when their friend gets back with the provisions they'll kill him, so they can split the gold two ways. And when the guy gets back, they do. Kill him. But then they drink the wine, and what do you know, the guy had poisoned it so he'd have all the gold to himself. So they all end up dead. It's just like they were told, there's death under the tree."

Which is my way of saying that I know what he's asking. He's asking if I've ever seen anybody—any of us pilgrims—leave the house *alive*. Well, no. Not really. But then Dwight's the only one who's left since I've been here.

"Okay," he says, sounding as if he's humoring me. "Okay, Paul. See you later."

Wait, I want to call after him. I didn't tell you everything after all. Somebody keeps coming into my room last night. It's not a dream or a fantasy, it's real. But Kent has closed the door behind him.

Now Brian comes in, his cheeks still flushed from being outside. Agitated, he bounces on his heels a few times, *and just when I think he's going to take out a cigarette he takes out his dick instead. This is made easier by the fact that he never wears underwear, though I feel like asking him, Gosh Brian, doesn't that ever cause a problem, I mean what do you do about those embarrassing pecker tracks on your jeans? But as usual he starts talking first. "You want this, Paul? You want it? Tell me how bad you want it." His fist moves so fast he's going to tear that big dick right off, I've never seen him so horny, never seen his prick so hard. He's going to jizz any second*, which doesn't stop me from getting out of my chair and walking right through him.

It's almost midnight. In the room next to mine Kent is pumping seed for all he's worth, masturbating so furiously that he can't sit or lie or stand still. He's reeling about the room, crashing into walls and furniture, panting and cussing as his shoulder contacts a wall or he stubs his toe on the rug, throwing himself to the floor and thrusting his hips in the air. Of course I can't see this but I can hear it and picture it. We've all been through the same thing. He's draining himself of spooze, he'll find it hanging from the ceiling in the morning, obscuring the corners like cobwebs. It's a strange ritual, because you can't really drain the body of anything: given the minimum daily requirements of nourishment and oxygen and warmth, it will just keep on making more. But it's the symbolism of the act that counts, and I understand symbols very well.

I have one in front of me now, the edition of *The Canterbury Tales* that I took from the den, illustrated with faded woodcuts of the pilgrims, including the dour, elongated Pardoner. In

his famous essay George Lyman Kittredge called him “the one lost soul among the pilgrims.” Irredeemable, because he’s not only a cheat and a liar but also, it turns out, a homosexual—at least most scholars think so. There’s the telling detail that he travels with a male companion, and also he’s referred to as a “mare”—slang for you-know-what. Plus he looks like a fairy, a little too light in his medieval loafers.

So I feel for the Pardoner, who pardons others falsely and slavishly while clutching his own sin tight to his chest. He keeps me company as I make this effort to remember, to create a record for myself alone, an understanding of what’s been happening to me over the last several months.

This afternoon I woke from a long but unfulfilling nap to a winter twilight that was just a few shades lighter than midnight. I sat up, and in the minute or two that it took to orient myself I sensed not only the house but the whole little town settling around me. I heard creaking footsteps in the kitchen and also, some distance away, the wind whistling through a crack in a funhouse window. Even the sea made its presence felt, the low tide dragging like slush across the sand. Heightened senses for sure, thanks to a dream that wasn’t the usual obscure teaser but vivid as life itself—a life I’ve known elsewhere. I listened, I crept to the window, looked out at the back yard with its few bare oaks. I closed my eyes and another scene appeared, as clear as Eric’s face and voice had been as he’d called, *That’s not the truth, Paul!* It was the sea I was looking at—not a winter sea but an autumn one, viewed from the window of ... a diner. I sat alone in a booth, eating pancakes. They were real diner pancakes, hot from the griddle, topped with blueberries in a deliriously thick syrup, like pie filling—hell, it probably *was* pie filling. The sugar high mingled with a caffeine rush as I refilled my mug from the thermal pot at my elbow.

That was it. No action, and no meaning, really, just a snapshot from my mostly unremembered recent life. But it gave me hope that I might be able to piece my story together, after all. Throughout the evening, a dull Sunday evening of dinner and playing cards, pieces of the past kept floating past my eyes, adding to my conviction.

It's a story full of reeling that I have to tell, like the jackoff scene next door, with more than its share of stubbed toes and bruises. And other things, things I can only trick out vaguely from here and now. A car will drown, and there is someone or something else, a restless shadow in my memory—something emptied of life that nevertheless keeps moving, senselessly, rhythmically, in the darkness.



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