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## EDITOR'S WELCOME

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“Travel can be so broadening”—that’s the ironic refrain of a short story I read centuries ago whose protagonist carries with her all of her own provincial prejudices regardless of how widely she journeys to different places. Travel can be broadening, but first it is often disorienting and delirious, provided that the traveler does not insulate himself with a coach bus, McBurgers and Coke, Guide Michelin, or a Cook’s Tour. For gay men of the States, travel can be an opportunity to learn that “gay” and “homosexual” do not mean the same thing in other cultures as they do in the hegemonic U.S. Instead, sexuality, erotic pleasure, affection, love, and relationships are complex, finely calibrated, and socially structured negotiations of power and sensation. In other words, queer.

The gay travel “industry” leverages many white, middle-class men’s mobility and disposable incomes with a promise of the exotic, erotic Other. One result is a pernicious sexual colonialism, which usually sets up shop in developing countries (Thailand, Sri Lanka, nowadays even the Czech Republic and Russia, for example), its outposts promising forbidden delights to the erotic tourist and a chance to blow off steam at an advantageous exchange rate. Its sex workers are usually young and often not definitively what Westerners would call “homosexual,” but simply opportunistic (much like those Mormon patriarchs, the Marriotts, whose religion forbids alcohol and caffeine but whose hotels serve plenty of both). Conversely, some people from outside North America are drawn to the explicit and clearly defined “sexual orienta-

tion" role that has been mapped out by the gay-rights movement. The mythic "land of opportunity," which drew Michel Foucault in his later years, can offer (provided that one has the erotic or economic capital) the utopian site for a "proliferation of specific pleasures and the multiplication of disparate sexualities."

Sometimes, moreover, the traveler discovers that his concepts of "natural" or "normal" are simply matters of habit. As Montaigne famously declared, "we seem to have no other standard of truth and reason than the opinions and customs of our own country. There at home is always the perfect religion, the perfect legal system—the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything." Two men walking hand-in-hand down a sidewalk means one thing in New York's Greenwich Village, another thing in an African, Arabic, or Mediterranean village. The traveler can learn a new discourse of the body and a new syntax of affection.

The pieces gathered for this issue delight in the difference of the alien. In each, Western subjects are required to recalibrate themselves to slightly (or vastly) different frequencies. Two lengthy short stories (almost novellas), H. E. Francis's "To Timimoun" and Marian Michener's "Meanwhile in Torino," frame our collection. In Francis's febrile tale, an artist flees Paris, with its emotional and social entanglements, and travels to the Algerian oasis town Timimoun (also the setting for another novel featuring a homosexual character, North African novelist Rachid Boudjedra's *Timimoun*) where he must face the desert within himself. Robert Welker has written of Francis's fiction that his characters come "to a moment of 'spontaneous revelation' wherein they shed for a brief moment their grotesque[ness], or hopelessly reconfirm it, or pitifully find their moment has come too late to find a time and form to communicate it in. So, like the shades of unquiet spirits, they choose H. E. Francis to finish their lives and communicate their momentary revelations." In Michener's story, a male couple from the States meets two Italian men who may or may not be lovers . . . and who may or may not be gay.

Tom Armbrecht's witty memoir and critical essay ("The Cucumber Seller") examines desire, social class, and the eratotype, reminding us that the semiotics of lust are as culturally shaped as language. In "The

Long Yang Club Party," Oliver J. Haas provides two parallel short stories, in Rashomon fashion, the same encounter told by an older white professional and by a younger Asian man studying in the United States. The stories turn on its head the stereotype of the sexually predatory American and the emotionally vulnerable Asian.

Finally, though not literally following the theme of this issue, the artist whose work provides our cover, Jack Whitlow, offers his own creed and a narrative of the journey of the soul that led him to it. Jack's work in pencil or pastel is well known to gay men around the U.S.

Thomas L. Long

# To Timimoun

H. E. Francis

## i. The Party in Nice

He saw insects coming from Pierre's mouth again. He blinked, but the motion went on. "Pierre—" He reached past Dubonne, Remi, Louise. Hesitant, he stared at Pierre's mouth, then kissed it. He expected mandibles, cusps, needles, but felt only the tongue—lizard quick but soft, slinky—drive over his.

"God, Reed, why so twitchy? You in need of rest, or—"

"Not, certainly, a lover." He laughed, futile, for his sound drowned in the voices, the entire studio and apartment end-to-end flesh—and he was not quite over Gerard. Yet at each shadow on the stair, he sought that other shadow in the burnoose. Would he come?

"Reed!"

Past myriad heads, he saw Genevieve flagging him—eternally. He would have moved toward her—to soothe her—but arms held him back. "Reed! How you avoid me!" "Angelique!" Close, she bit his ear. "You deserve—what you don't deserve!" she said. "And will I get it?" "If you insist on staring at my mouth that way. Are you going to eat it with your beautiful green eyes? I'd let you if we could get out of all this." "But it's my party!" "After?" "After, simply stay." "With your watchdog?" "O, dear old Genevieve, we settle later—"

"We do, do we!" She had squeezed through, a spill of breasts and gin.

"Ah, Genevieve—" But Angelique sailed.

"Not now, Genevieve—" God, no end to scenes—shrieking Genevieve, crying, whimpering, pleading, loving, groveling Genevieve, who made guilt and fury and hatred and who made the most experienced and tortuous love and who painted like a devil-angel with the same complexity of technique with which she made love. "You're all technique, love," he'd whisper, "so much for one so small and soft and round." But with Genevieve nothing did not start an argument: "Yes, and nothing else, you imply, no soul, not like your own love and work, you genius of the soul." Now she tossed the thick black hair he loved. "I know how you penetrate your subjects, but must you penetrate their bodies first? Mine, my body's not enough, will never be enough for you? Well, I'll show

you how Genevieve will be there when all the others are sick of you, tired, exhausted, dead, vanished, impotent—yes, then I'll have my baby to myself. O God, Reed, how did I live before you came to France, eh? And you—don't you see it was destiny? We were drawn together by some force; the moment was here waiting for us."

"Fulfilling, that moment?—and male or female?" The starkly raised brows intruded.

"Edouard!"

Usually humor saved Edouard from Genevieve, but this time she struck Edouard, if not violently. Her nail clawed. Edouard's palm touched his cheek—the faintest flick of blood—and he slunk, shrinking, between bodies.

"Don't start, Genevieve. Why can't you behave like last night?" On the Rue Paradis she had comported herself like an angel, offering up her protégé. All the art world of the coast had shown up at Marseille—délucieux her boy, a triumph—and then, champagne-soaked, steeped, stripped of jacket and bow tie and vest, free, outside the Centre Méditerranéen D'Art Contemporain—but impelled by that invisible silent shadow Genevieve could not see, no one could see—he had danced, liquid, twirled, alone, down walks, into the street, across the green, while Genevieve held a surprising distance until "my satyr" she'd whispered, until in the taxi her hand inside his shirt had gripped hair, and the mouth—

Now mouth he did not want, but shadow—its absence made the missing guest loom. He saw the Arab where he was not.

And a rather monomaniacal laughter pitched to break crystal rose over the din, saving him. Triggered by the insane peal, everyone broke into laughter.

"Werner!" He probed the German's circle. Last night he hadn't thought the critic—so overwhelmed, he'd do a spread for the Frankfurter Allgemeine—would succumb to his really flirtatious invitation. Now, at the edge of the chair, aquiver, Warner was all eyes and ears at the flagrant ambiguity of the soirée.

"Werner," he said, kneeling. "Monica!"—he had to shout—"fill Herr von Zahn's glass tout de suite."

Others passed on the shout: "Monica, Herr von Zahn's glass!" A mad roaring followed.

"Werner—" He touched the German's knees, sliding his hands along his thighs. "You mentioned last night my intuitive collusion with the work of Bosch."

"Bosch, yes, but also with a bevy of Renaissance painters. No, not painters—techniques, Renaissance techniques: the eye pressed so close to flesh you see its composition, the finest web of its composition, but you do it with lines and not, as they do, with paint, and you also do it without the ponderousness of the accumulated lines of a Dürer." But Werner was uttering desperately, mechanically, in hard metallic spurts of phrase, for his eyes fixed, nearly ogling, on the hands on his legs, the legs so taut. Werner would crack with rigidity. He laughed at Werner's sheen, a profuse sweat; in an instant he would turn liquid, disappear in a puddle.

"But, Werner—thanks, Monica—relax, it's a party. You must lose yourself." And he ran his finger over Werner's lips, which brought another peal, nervous, a cry between terror and desire. He glimpsed the brown roots of Werner's teeth. Poor man. His hand sleeked over the faded blond hair. "I might add you to my collection." Werner's head quivered.

"To such a collection of bitches?" It was Ma Mére brushing his lips, with her collection, Antoine and Theddy Burlington, and the poor little American—blond, inept, out of place. "Compatriote!" He kissed the boy, who blushed.

"And who hauled you up past the old harridan who lives under me?"

"Oof! We harridans manage one another."

"So I see. To shut her up, I invited the old thing downstairs to the party, but she shouted she'd have the police, Sodome, how insulted! and slammed her door. Tomorrow she'll be a little different, if not soft, because of the invitation, though I'm sure it sent her straight to her prayer book. But what goes on up here's given the old woman's life new zest. She's eternally at windows and doors, watching."

Ma Mére's fingertips lightly touched under his eyes.

"You're too tired, Reed my beauty. Don't wear that face. You mustn't steal from time its task of desecrating you. Your eyes are too dark,

you don't see how nerves quiver them, too quick, haunted. Are you listening to me? Protect your hands for your work, but don't worry so much about them."

"It's not my hands—" Dark rose. A shadow. A succession of shadows? Last night the man had reminded him of—what face? Something familiar in the broad forehead, the deep eyes—mysterious because of the hood, or because he was so dark and still—and the voice, its resonance compelled, and the beard, dark, not long, well-trimmed, forced you to the mouth, eyes, framed.

"I know I know I know," Ma Mère said, "not your hands then, but each added worry—and, ach, that Genevieve—enough! Or I shall leave before I arrive. But heed me, yes?"

He kissed her. "My true mother."

She galed. "And without ever a father, you're my one true miracle." She, too, bared teeth, too perfect in that heap of flesh. "Or must the only wisdom be silent? Get up, Dubonne, and give me that armchair."

As Ma Mère sat, he almost cried out at the crush of insects—wings whirred, his hand rose to protect his face.

"Reed?" she said, but his eyes found the insects motionless in his paintings. He turned, the room a glitter of glass in hands everywhere, laughing wet teeth, crystal eyes—Genevieve's fixed to follow, and Angelique's, Claire's, Charlotte's.

"Roxane." He clutched her shoulder to steady himself. His lips found her neck.

"I was half afraid," she said, "you'd ignore me. I know almost no one." She actually trembled in long ochre, which barely hung from her breasts.

He held her glass to his mouth.

"Tomorrow you'll work with me, won't you, Reed?"

"All the technique I know, all from Genevieve, Dalí, Tabares, Seraphim. We'll work on and on, I promise."

"You've promised before, but will you remember tomorrow when that woman comes or when Gerard, your famous count, comes. I didn't think such things as counts still existed—"

Gerard, count lanced. She must have seen his pain—he felt jabs in the perfect center between his eyes, brief quick excruciations that left rheum.

“Reed? Reed!”

But he moved from her. By touching his hand to a shoulder, a chin, an empty glass—“Monica!”—he kept the reeling walls from falling; between bodies, held, he stood upright. My hands. My bridge to them all. For a moment, the pure pleasure of that passage through them gave him vertigo. Genevieve surely had been right: “You call Gerard love because you don’t know true love, my darling.” She had clutched, clutched. “And you do?” “Yes! To give all, wait, sacrifice—forever.” “That’s not love, that’s madness. To love really—” But he couldn’t say—she would think madness. But to love—he said, “After it’s over, I still love—each, all of them, no matter where they are, I’m part of them, they’re part of me. If tomorrow I meet them, it’s yesterday—always.” “That’s grotesque and they are, then.” He’d clutched her skin, flesh, pudged between his fingers: “Underneath this, Genevieve—this, there are no grotesques!” It was such moments as that which drove him back to his subjects—made him sit them, stare into them, travel into wet eyes to pierce deeps, to penetrate bone to marrow; made him try to gaze from their heads at all this outside them, till he felt the rhythm of blood flow through their doll bodies, broken puppets’ bodies, and human parts, human heads. Blood fed lilies rooted in their hearts, pansies bloomed from flesh, from groins, stalks, roses; butterflies hovered; night moths clung to armpits; all their bodies crawled with praying mantises, locusts, crabs. Wings, claws, mandibles dwarfed man—a domination of brown. And men and insects stood against islands, mountains of stone, and stone stood against space—white, infinite nothing.

He glanced up now: all around the room, against emptiness, hung faces, and others crowded into the studio—all of whom I have traveled through, who have traveled through me. He closed his eyes over where that other face, almost faceless in its cowl, suddenly stood, a shadow. Why did he not materialize? Last night, “You don’t deceive,” the man had said. “In your clinging to people and insects, you reveal that it is space you’re interested in. Is it nothing? Is it space you fear, condemn, struggle against? And something in them is fighting time.” “But they’re

in me, I'm in them. We're the same thing, as permanent as bone and dust and air?" "Then what is all that white space against which your figures stand . . . ?" "I'd know what that is if I knew what all this is under my feet and in my bones. I leave it blank because I can't look out there until I know this. Why do men look up when the salvation they're looking for may be so close?" "But you do look up—by leaving it white you make it loom. You make it as solid as earth. And you want to know earth. Do you?" "Earth?" "Stone. You say bone, dust, air. But not stone—mountains, rock, sand even? What happens in the desert?" "Happens?" "You don't know Africa, the Sahara?" "No, nothing." "But it's"—The man turned—he seemed to disappear in the burnoose as his arm gestured toward the far shore, across the Mediterranean—"the coast, within sight." His arm summoned—mystery: an immense dark shadow endless in conception, fold after fold of mountain darkness flowing into luminous folds of golden sand. But he couldn't imagine its immediacy. It was too far to grasp despite a crossing of waters to a coast he could see on clear days. "I've a friend, Charles—he's here—who's always urging me to visit him in Biskra." "Biskra! Yes. And Ghardaïa. To Timimoun. Beyond." The man's arm made an arc, a bridge—like his paintings it became a visible link to what was absent. His own rose—

"Reed? Reed!" Through shadow, a face imposed.

"Gilberte! But all the way from Arles?" He rose to that Amazonian height to kiss her, for an instant staring at the mouth. But nothing.

"You think we'd miss one single Reed exhibit? You don't know our esteem, then."

"And Jules?"

"Happily, I've lost him. You find him."

"And Claude?" He sought the boy, a memory of desire.

"Claude, my boy, has found a lover. Knowing his nature, we've encouraged it, crushed, of course, that it wasn't you. I can tell you now I'd have preferred you to anyone, we sent him to you knowing his desires, we thought it would happen naturally, but it didn't happen at all." No wonder Claude had hovered so! And how he had resisted the boy! Out of the sanctity of Gilberte and Jules' old friendship, he had attempted to preserve sexual anonymity, become friend, mother, father—the word lanced.

“Your exhibition was such a success! But the sales—everything sold—broke my heart!” Gilberte said.

“And mine.” But it consoled that these and others which had covered his studio walls were in houses and museums all over the world—Les Rochers, Pygmalion, Immaculate Conception, Madonna of the Witches, The Eight Immortals and Lady Wang, Metamorphoses, Crucifixion, La Petite Morte, The Fifth Trumpet, Piqué par la bête de passion, Apocalypse—alive with whom he had known, all he had to give.

“I almost died when I found your Pietà was sold. After I’d seen it here, when I came for Claude, the Pietà haunted—I awoke at night to those sad eyes. Would you believe it?”

“Of course. I woke to those sad eyes. What impulse do you think made me paint it?”

“You dare me to answer? Anyway, I’d deliberated too long. I’ll always lament it.” Her glove touched his cheek. “You’re worn, my boy. Shouldn’t you give up this life, part of it?”

“But, darling, which part? Can you give up a part?” He laughed. And she.

“I could suggest.”

“But do, yourself?”

“You realists! You’re the best bargainers in the long run, though it costs.”

“Then not the best—and I don’t want to find that out.”

“Finding out’s in the offing, Reed. The greatest gifts cost most. Genius gives up more than the rest of us.”

“You know that?”

“Well, acquiring great money is genius—it costs; and money—freedom—is its own prison, n’est-ce pas?”

“How would I know? Money’s part of my drive—but to have only enough to paint, something between me and the canvas, or starvation—unlike your case, where money is, say, the canvas itself.” He added, with a little vengeance, “Hein?”

“Très heureux,” she said, but with her usual refusal to compromise what even money was, “et très triste, eh?”

“No, because this is everything.” His hand—could it—would draw to him all those who filled the walls and all those not painted yet.

His eye caught a rush of arrivals—the Aubiers, Don and Carlotta, Emery and his Marine captain, and Bev's little American friend, inept and gawking, so out of place, so business, doing the town with dissection, a cheap thrill to take home sterile to the States.

“Angelique, see that the little American isn't bored, will you?”

He himself helped Monica serve—martini glasses, mad shivers of gin. Werner's pitch thrust up clear words: “. . . divorce from the influence of Dalí . . . classical coldness in treatment, but a romantic quest, not the rarest of combinations in Greek times, but rare now—” Yes, how to congeal with cold precision the flow of all blood burning. He set the pitcher down by Angelique. He whispered, “Angelique, I need you—to hold me down all night, not let me get out of your arms.” But she was already vociferating with Méndez and his little snip of Elena, who could—too actively—hate. An instant, his eyes closed. Almost, he could not open. Ah, if he need not! If there were arms, a voice—a father's—to sustain. Why did the voice always remain in shadow? And why didn't he come now when he needed him? Last night the man had seen, had known that he must hear. The man was about to tell. “I see you've just begun to know stone.” “Yes, recently in Alabama, where I was born, I turned to the mountains. I'm into painting rocks now.” “And what have you heard?” “Heard?” But he knew—a halt came in his blood, a motion stopped, or so it seemed, and the stillness sounded. The man was staring at the stone in his painting “L'Entrée.” “Yes, what is in stone,” the mouth said. “In?” He watched that mouth. But he knew bone moved—he had heard—and fossils spoke. The deep eyes, too deep and dark under the cowl, turned to him. “A singing, a sound so eternal”—But a cry, “Reed!”, interrupted. It was Genevieve. “But, darling, they're all beginning to wonder where you are, and the cameras are ready. The gentleman will—you will, won't you?—forgive. . . .” He nodded. She had nearly circled him free of the Arab, but not before the man took out a card: “If you ever wish to explore—” “And you”—he had but to reach for the man's program and scrawl his address—“you'll come, won't you, tomorrow night, to my studio—in Nice—to a party—” “But I must be in Nice tomorrow.” The Arab's reply left him giddy. Stone was ringing—blood, released, rushed. “You'll be there?” The man had—hadn't he?—nodded. “Couldn't this have waited, Genevieve?” But she would not be rattled this night—it was

so much her night; her energy drove, guided. "But everybody's here!" she cried. And they were, but when he turned—to see what painting the man stood before now—there was in the mélange not a trace of that hood high over the other heads. Gone! He could not find—did he imagine?—no, he held the card in his hand: that was real, yes. Ahmed Khelal, 7, rue de Tout, Biskra. Real. And tomorrow night—

"What a party, Reed! Your German's divine, and he simply adores your work."

Startled momentarily at the sudden face, he said, "Michelle," and kissed. Over her shoulder was old Bordereau. How she dragged him with. Bored he was, always, but vigilant over young Michelle, too much glitter, gold and diamonds; her glitter splayed his vision, though he loved her gawdy riches, Cleopatra without dignity, a girl wallowing in baubles, with a Caesar gone effete.

"Bouquets and baskets, anybody?"

"Leo! You came." A rose hung from Leo's old head, a flower he could touch—he reached—real, yes.

"With a full basket—all my grapes tonight!"

"And the cloven hooves?"

"Oh, I never leave them at home."

And poked, he turned: "Gould here, and Wendy." He felt Wendy's lips, fleeting.

The gin was getting to him. Elevated he felt. The whirl came—he could sweep through, faces his now, bodies all amove his now, a joyous crush and babble. He had to shout to ride gales of laughter, shrieks, bellows, mouths farting words, bursts and bits of arguments he couldn't untangle: "Oh, straighten it out in the hall, no—in the street, oh for gods sake the bedroom—who cares? just"—till finally the bodies thinned out and gray glimmers, green of morning, wrought dark edges, loomed dark buildings, and the light in a slow sea began to return Nice. Down the stairs went the last to go. Others had sofas, beds, chairs, all long in limbo. But he had Angelique—and Genevieve, who struck, struck with words.

"Ogodjesus, not now oh not now, Genevieve, must you? I'llbewith youinamminute, Angelique."

"Not! With nobody, you!" Genevieve cried. "With me, your Genevieve, you can't, can't ever do without, you know it. That girl—you, Angelique—getheroutofhere. What good—tellymethat—whatgoodcanshedoI can't?"

"You're behaving—and you look—like a hag, hag, yes."

"Yes, hag, but because of you, but love you, yes—you can't do without—and true, you'll never find a truer love who'll see you through anything and stay motherloverfatherfriendall, yes—"

"Stop it—now, Genevieve. Go—back—to—your—studio. Jesus, one night's peace, just one—"

He shut the bedroom door, felt Angelique's arms around his waist press against him pressed against the door, his head hard at the wood where the grain streaked dark as blood. O listen! He could see, but not hear—only the voice from the dark cowl, which reminded—but of what reminded?—whose words roused, whose face he would look full upon. If he could only know that face, it would give joy, peace. Under closed lids, he anticipated, saw revelation like morning silent rise, saw it silent crash against earth, city, trumpet each object; could hear its seething flow—If he could fling open the door, stare into sun, ask What? to whatever was calling his blood, summoning him—where? His whisper broke into Angelique's whispers. "It's exhaustion after too many months of uninterrupted work, last night's exhibition, this party—" Sweet, she wouldn't utter a word against Genevieve, who loved, Ojesusgodyesshedidlove, but didn't know how soul loved, how he wanted that, not now Gerard—

"You bastard!" Genevieve cried. "I know what you're doing in there. You think I don't hear you?" She pounded on the door till below Madame pounded on the ceiling again, and Genevieve cried, he heard her sink down, her nails scratched the door—she was capable of that too, bleeding, hurting her body, his: O, to murder and then grieve for a lifetime for love, that one-minded, possessive, possessed woman. But was he not one-minded, possessive, possessed?

"Ah, Angelique—" He turned, his head sank into her neck, his hands kissed her breasts.

"Reed! Reed!" screamed, screamed Genevieve.

Angelique's dress sank to the floor. He sank to the floor, kissed her belly, her dark hair, "my dark crown," he murmured, sinking his face

into her dark crown . . . and though he had hardly a memory after, a night of fragments, bits of time, “Such a party,” he murmured, he stood, coming out of some limbo without sleep but unremembered, and opened the door: Genevieve—he couldn’t believe—gone! no slumped body on the floor, falling into the room. And there: Emery and, yes, the Marine; Monica, a fragile tumble frozen against Wally (how stoned to have slept through Genevieve’s shrieking); and, ay, yes, Werner, whose eye, stone now, stared, orienting.

Startled, Werner rose, but staggered, half-smiling in apology.

“Ach, too much. I am not accustomed.”

“Sit. I’ll give you some breakfast.”

“Impossible. I will be sick.”

But he did sit an instant. Gin fragmented his porcelain blue pupils. Forlorn, from fallen pride, lost stability perhaps, Werner raised his eyes and held still.

“You had a most marvelous time, it appeared.” His hand—the German watched it—touched his shoulder, touched his cheek. “I appreciated your coming. My guests loved you and your wonderful conversations about art.” And he drew the chin up. “I’ll always remember your visit. Think of that when you’re back in your Frankfurt.” He brushed back the blond hair. He took the petrified head between his hands. Poor Werner, who would be, always, this—apart, wriggling in a shell which would not break. Werner’s eyes fixed on him, silent discomfort, but he hoped Werner would treasure this moment, shore it against whatever life he felt he must lead, and happily. Werner stood.

“I’ll cook—”

“No, no. Mornings I walk, it’s a beautiful morning, mornings—” All the morning spread now in his red-webbed eyes. “I walk.” His hand gripped to breaking. Thanks, real, he gave, then went, a faltering clump down the stairs.

Now amid the mess, chaos, he sat. Morning smeared glass, glared between streaks over the floor, made stark the frayed threads, edges of furniture, bottles of still fire, fine irregular little landscapes of paled food on plates, fragile mountains of crushed napkins—all the studio explored, made naked, by light; every object—hard, sharp, alone—subject to sun; all the room disassembled. On the sill, three geraniums looked like

bloody eyes. Bones of animals—skull, tibia, femur—littered his bench. And shells. Giant moths. Horseshoe crabs. Locusts, spiders, grasshoppers. Brushes and paints, tins. Hats, gowns. The two broken dolls staring endlessly. This: my bedlam. Always these objects were waiting. He needed them. With them he bound love after love in an endless chain. But why not all love in one? There was always a shadow behind, which he could not reach. Or was that shadow in each, luring, but standing ever farther off. It rose now, out of Nice's morning shadows, stood in its burnoose, its face shadowed. But real, that shadow. He was. He had the card. Only at the peak of creation—when the luminous moment came and the invisible blood he heard flow through arms, legs, organs of the men women dolls insects made itself visible in an up-pouring into the eyes which stared back at the world with its own suffering and apotheosis—did shadow and flesh fuse for an instant. Then he fell back with a sensation as physical as orgasm and as spiritual as renewal. But that renewal lured to a greater satisfaction ever denied him, a fusion he knew must be unbearable because it would deny the pleasure of all his previous loves. Must he deny them? Did love end all loves? He was doomed to paint failure in each fallen love, all those sad faces. Was it a doom to follow the rhythm of the blood on its endless stream, which led—where?

Where did it lead? Back always to those paintings?

In the paintings the insects were still. The giant beetle settled over Nabokov's eye did not move. Poised on heads clothes bodies, dwarfing them, gigantic over rocks, enormous against sky, roaches, beetles, praying mantises, bees—all were still now. An instant's stir of imagination could move them. He dared not close his eyes. Under lids they moved. A moment of vision would come—he would behold the instant—when all his creations, men insects dolls, pulsing in the stillness, would move, the frames of the paintings fall away, and they would rise, they would move over the earth, into sea and sky.

But now he saw, almost with a cry, how the dark shadow fled. All the shadows moved. And despite exhaustion, gin, he too wanted to flee. And he would flee, yes, leave Genevieve, the studio, all—he would take his coming for a sign. He would go—rest, recuperate, search—there. Tomorrow. He closed his eyes, closed out Nice and Genevieve, his mélange, madness. He would accept Charles' standing invitation to

Biskra, a way station to—whatever. He would go, he would cross the Mediterranean, he would go down through mountains to sand. To Timimoun. In the very word stone sang. Timimoun. Tomorrow.

A voice broke—in the hallway.

He opened his eyes. Gold blazed over Nice, blinding.

“Reed! Reed!”

O, Christ. Genevieve!

ii. Tizi-Ouzou

Something was drawing him back. He pressed his head against stone, it was coming, the singing—but whole mountains slipped through his arms, song ceased, he moaned and opened his eyes. He gripped the sides of the mattress. Raymond was mouthing him to madness. He gasped in frenzied release and sank—back to a dark float of clouds outside, and dark drenched mountains.

“Delicious. Come kiss me.”

Raymond mounted and smiled down into his eyes, and kissed.

He tasted himself, wet on Raymond’s mouth. “You’re bound now,” he whispered—and laughed. How lust urged him to more and more life. It fed—and fed on. After three days of feeding his eye on forts, villages, ruins, caves, the labyrinth of road through forests and stone, even his hand lusted—to work.

“I knew this would happen if I saw you get on the boat at Marseille,” Raymond said.

“Thank God for Customs or you’d still be traveling alone. Poor Charles! I shouldn’t have left him in the car alone, but we’d spent four hours in line, with hours to go; he knows how impatient I get, and you were eight cars ahead.” And he was feeling guilty for leaving no word for Genevieve or Monica about where he’d be.

“Won’t you change your mind, go the whole way, Reed, and spend my two weeks’ vacation with me?”

“But painting’s my only support—I’ve got to work, all my things are in Charles’ car. I need good light to work by, I seize it while I can, and Charles has always raved about the sun in Biskra. This place is like be-

ing at the bottom of the ocean. We should have stayed in the sun at Dellys. But you'll drive me to Biskra?"

"To Charles, you mean."

"To his place." But beyond was shadow. "I'm going on from there in a few days."

"He won't be angry—about me?"

"Charles? He understands my every move. We're old friends—he knew my wife, before she was my wife, at the university. And my painting time's sacred to him—he'd sacrifice anything to art—so he wouldn't interrupt."

"Reed, these days with you have been wonderful. I've loved watching you blot up everything you look at."

Blot? Eat. Suck. Swallow. How could you stop?

In the mirror he saw his eyes were dark, deep, and nervous—too anxious to behold. What—he could not imagine.

"But I wish you'd stay with me. Can't you?"

"You can imagine how much work I'd get done! No, when I get back, you must come to Nice."

"Shall we leave, then?"

The bright yellow and red ribs in the black rugs of the foyer made the dark outside seem darker. The Peugeot gleamed with wet; air was heavy, and breath; flesh and clothes turned immediately damp.

"Charles promised all light and dryness in Biskra. God, in three days you almost forget how dry dry can be, don't you?"

Over the low pass, peaks loomed, clouds lay a sea of soiled smoke. The road wound quickly up into thin cedar forests blackened with damp.

"So you think you'll escape in Biskra?"

"Escape?"

"Genevieve, you said."

"Not for long. She's a miracle of ingenuity. She may be in the car behind us."

"You! But is she that tenacious?"

"As an insect. She'll never let go." But he regretted his unfairness. Poor Genevieve. He closed his eyes. For three days he had not thought insect. Now a cloud dark with them descended.

"You could come with me, Reed—"

A different voice, but still Genevieve—and he was to blame: he had led Raymond on as he had Genevieve. Three days and already he yearned for free passage, to keep moving, not be held—We’ve gone through each other, Raymond and I, and spilled. Why couldn’t he stop that flow? He always regretted leaving anyone behind, but he comforted himself—he could always go back, Raymond would be there. And there was memory.

“Yesterday,” he said, “was the first time I’d been in a cave since I was a boy in Alabama.” At Grant his father had been behind him. “They’d put out the lights to show how quickly you’d become disoriented—and eventually go blind—in the dark.” He had waited for his father’s hand. He’d reached. You? Nothing. He bit, not to cry out. Ever after, he would not depend, and he would always seek the light. “Down there all the crickets were white.”

“So you run from Genevieve—not to be enclosed, to see light—as you’re running from me?”

He saw Genevieve’s womb, stone, crawling with white crickets.

“I never think running from, just to.”

On a crest, a village of pink roofs about a white mosque made a clean, blank eye. Quickly he caught it in photos, then, beyond, the snowy summit of the djebel.

“And he paints too?”

“He?”

“Your father.”

“My—” The summit burned white in his father’s eyes. He laughed. “If you knew!” His father had started out as a painter, talented too, but afraid and without faith, and failed. “He fell in love with the long green. He filled his eyes with the graven images of Hamilton, Jackson, and Lincoln. He came to own, if you can imagine, a bank—sold now. He lives on his cash in the green of Alabama, transformed no doubt by his new faith, gin.” He laughed again. But his father’s eyes rose, silver.

“So you can travel and paint at ease if you want to.”

“I told you—this kid vowed to support himself completely, on art. And does. I did my stint for the ghost—became a football player, frat boy, social gadabout. He bloomed on it. Never missed, as you can guess, a game or a party. Absolutely delirious he was when I married

Rhonda May. We were the beautiful young things, Bama's proud pair, Scott and Zelda all over again. After Tuscaloosa I even worked a year in his bank, my straightjacket, every day my blood screaming for art. She finally gave in and said sure she'd try a year abroad, so in defiance of Daddy-O we sold everything and went to Italy and France and lived like paupers, but the roaming was too much for Rhonda May—she wouldn't sacrifice her life to art, me, or poverty. And I was gone most of the time—to teachers, studios, galleries. Then I met Genevieve. I'd spend days, a night, sometimes night after night with Genevieve. Rhonda May couldn't fathom the older woman bit, so she left, but left friendly—in fact, left me, though I didn't know how completely, to love—or lust.”

The pines covering the mountain slopes turned live dark phalluses.

“Since, my father's faith in gin has doubled. It feeds—oh, how do I know what it feeds! He hates my success, it's killing him, it's what he might have had or, in a queer way, does have in me, but he won't accept mine. What about yours?”

“My success? But I've failed with you!”

“You've had your moments of success, I'd say.”

“Or my father? He does make this life possible. We're in business together. I'll follow him in it. Dolls.”

“Dolls!” His own two—broken, tattered, guts spilling—were resurrected, with human heads, in his paintings.

“Yes. I'm a collector.” His hand verified.

“You'll have to pull off the road in a minute.”

“At the next oasis?” He laughed, but hand and knee came alive.

“I've never seen an oasis, and I'll be awfully busy then.”

“Seriously, you couldn't leave Nice—for me?” Raymond said.

“And leave Genevieve?”

“But you said she's a nightmare!”

“Did I say I didn't want the nightmare?” Inside Raymond's shirt, his hand fingered hair. “Genevieve taught me—she's given me—too much. I need her now.”

“You said you wanted peace.”

“Who doesn't want peace! But you never know who can release what you are. She can release, that woman, the best of me. She recognized my passion. She knew, the way only a woman—maybe a mother, yes,

mother-knows, that a man must find his form. That's Genevieve's art—as a woman and an artist—she can hold me because she knows the shape of vision is everything to me. She lured me with technique, knowing that when I mastered her technique I wouldn't be able to separate it from her, and with both I could go—where couldn't I go? She'll be wondering right now, poor woman, where I've really gone. I should feel guilty—I do and I don't—because I know she'll be there, she must, through all my meanderings. I can't think she won't be. I need her violence, anguish, the fury and making up and coming together. She can be softer than all women when that happens and the cruelest of critics. She's a kind of miracle, but she knows—she's so wise—I must have life, life breeds life, breeds in my work, I must have it, I'll run—and, worse, I'll go where she can't follow, but she'll wait till I find—”

Down, dark glittered—

“Look—water—and—how beautiful!” The oued fed a stretch of orchards and a sea of floating green, waves of palms, tamarisks—

“But find what?” Raymond said, rather perplexed.

“Where it leads.” He stared along the ravine, toward the far green.

“Isn't that rather foolish? Whatever it is, it's in you.”

“But what? And how do you know it?”

Lucky Raymond, for whom hand and mouth seemed enough, who was not doomed to endless hunger.

Mud-brick houses marred a crest, but he saw no one. Ahead, sky broke. Blue burned over.

Abruptly Raymond turned into a side road, following stelae—up a crest, over—onto a high plain surrounded by mountains.

“Holyjesus!”

Below lay the great stone skeleton of a city—thousands of columns, great colonnades, an architrave, all the same faded-blood color of the earth they rose from.

“Timgad,” Raymond said. “Mighty, phallic Rome—broken. The Berbers knew their own ground. They finally drove the Romans out.”

He saw the hooded hordes descend against armored legions to kill and plunder. Apocalypse? He would rather scatter bones, shields, armor, weapons over this great corpse, but he felt the fervent desire of life against all that death.

"I've never seen such emptiness." Not even a wind moved.

But Raymond cut off his words, gripped him against a column, kissed, mouthed. And he wanted Raymond's maddening touch, wanted him to mouth the sacred grapes. When he drew wine, he cried out with the sound rushing through him, gripped Raymond's head—it moved, moaned. And he saw—why couldn't he stop seeing?—Raymond with his doll body among bones, a fine web of red in his eyes, claws gripping his skull. "Ah, Raymond."

After, they walked through temple and forum. . . . The city was a devastation of silence.

"Shall we go down?"

Through the heart of the Aurès, they were silent. He closed his eyes over that forest of Roman stone. He listened. A whirring of wings came over the crest. Quickly the car was reduced to rust, bone lay heaped in the front seat, something was staring into his skull—

"What do you suppose the Romans wanted there—power, the passion to spread the imperial eagle, the physical feat of mastering mountains, a demonstration of Spartan discipline, zeal for the best—" Raymond said.

"Perhaps they did it despite any reason they could give."

"History always has a reason."

"So the historians say. They track down one history, but a history beyond written history's being lived out all the time."

"Which history?"

"A thing must be working itself out, the irrational one that makes men do things for its sake—we don't know how to contend with that. We find reasons because we can't explain the unreasonable, because we're animals and we eat one another, we can't get enough, and there's no end to ending—we can't explain that to ourselves so we give it names. We're like the other living things; we want to eat the motion, we want to keep it inside us, but it doesn't want us, it wants to get out of us. I wonder if it will ever want us—or anything else."

"Now you're beyond me."

"I'm beyond myself. That's one reason Rhonda May divorced me. I couldn't settle down. We had the best going. But it was the moving—not just from place to place, but a moving I couldn't pin down. I see now it must've been hell for her. She wouldn't have any of it. She wanted a

place—in the U.S.—with me always there. ‘I should’ve known what I was headed for when we were in Tuscaloosa,’ she said, ‘because of Héctor—he did something to you.’ It’s true—nothing ever penetrated me like the first sight of Héctor’s paintings. He’d been exiled from Cuba, Héctor Aguirre. He made me realize for the first time how motion—time, sound—is always visible, palpable, though even he couldn’t have known that—he triggered me. And—before you ask—through sex too. I’d just begun really feeling my way into art then, and he released me, I spilled. I never told my father he was paying for an art, not a business, major; I just changed it. And night and day I worked, and from that instant followed what I began to see—it never stops. Rhonda May said I’d never stopped travelling from the moment I met Héctor, even when I was still. She couldn’t hold onto me, she said. She still writes me. The sad thing is she hasn’t married again. I spoiled something in her—I regret that. She shouldn’t—nobody should—be alone for long.”

“You hitchhiker you! You know people’re always alone.”

“Always and never.”

“You will speak in enigmas.”

“What’s not an enigma?”

Boys swarmed about the Peugeot, babbling, begging, their arms vying.

“They want to be guides.”

Guides? Dark all their eyes. Beyond, passed men in burnouses. To Timimoun. Raymond was making it clear to the boys—“Biskra! Biskra!”—though it did not fully discourage, while he was lured to a handwoven mosque rug. “You like?” He wanted it—he did not haggle. In the car he draped the weave over him. “A passionate mummy?” Raymond said. “Now hold still,” and hooked a hand-done chain about his neck. “This grigri will charm you against bad luck.” “Think I need it?” “Who doesn’t?” “Maybe bad luck’s not chance.” “You’d think so!”

Down, they entered deep gorges of chalk white fire. The white summoned—Dalí.

“You know Dalí’s work?”

“Who doesn’t!”

“I studied with him Thursday and Sunday afternoons at the Hotel Maurice. ‘Work from nature,’ he said. He made me see a flow within objects, fluid shapes. But I wanted more.”

"I've asked you before—what more?"

"If I could say!" But a flow that broke bounds. It flowed into the eyes he painted. Blood was a sound. He would paint the motion of that sound.

He watched where the oued, deep, flowed through the gorge, a thin wisp that glittered, looking still. He wanted where it burst from the stillness, the moment of its eruption. Dalí lacked that. And Genevieve. But they had led him—

The cliffs gave way to green hills. Fig trees stood about a ruined house; green gripped the forms of ruin. And a great lake of blue stillness spread the sky below, then all passed into rock, mile after mile of red rock—

"Eerie," Raymond said.

"Yes." Like endless dried blood. He rested his head against Raymond's shoulder. He thought, To what part of the world will you take what you have of me, Raymond? He closed his eyes. But the earth bled.

"Tired?"

On the canvas the oued burst through sand—but from where?

"Not really."

"Painting again?"

He smiled. "You're too canny."

"It's my last chance to be. It's not too many kilometers to Biskra."

The high red walls fell away to low cliffs. Unending green burgeoned. In the late sun Biskra's walls burned on the plain, stark white, ocher, brown, dark mud-brick, and high on the hill the minaret sent its claws into sky. But it was the space which held his gaze, blue endless distance over a dry, broken, fragile land floating on ageless baked sand-rock forms.

Was he near the edge at last? Beyond Biskra lay the world of the erg and its hidden oases and golden dunes. He could not contain the imagined space. He could hardly bear the wait—he wanted to go into, farther. He was grateful to Raymond, but now he wanted him to leave. He wanted no one, not Charles either. He wanted to know what was in it all. But he had to contend with Charles. And after? He had the card. To Timimoun. It had sounded like a promise.

"Let's find Charles," he said.

## iii. Biskra

In the studio Charles had set up for him, he worked on Raymond's portrait: fallen limp, Raymond's doll body lay in a battlefield, an incipient column burgeoning from his breast; over bones crawled gigantic flies; from off the canvas a hand reached for the lily in his groin. He must let Raymond go—yet bind him to the others with the finest fibers of blood in his sad eyes—before he could let in the Berber faces whose dignity would halt him in the street. Life would not be long enough. Why was it given if you could not know it all? His eyes like his body lusted, he was convinced, to love.

“Come on,” Charles said. “Lust is lust.” Life—for Charles—was serene.

“Because you're too rational, Charles.”

“Actually you have the built-in logic or you wouldn't be so quick to possess and abandon—and even be happy doing it, though the reverse doesn't seem to please you.”

Surely he had Gerard in mind? “Bitch!”

“Leaving people never bothers you.”

“Because I never leave them.”

“That too is rationalizing. You're cold, pitiless, with no mercy.”

“But you—cold, pitiless, with no mercy—love me?” He laughed.

Yet if he ever failed to translate lust into art, what then? He would be truly alone? The shadow of that devastation was never far off. How else guard against that moment but by putting himself in enough paintings, though always in the image of a devil desiring his angels.

Despite the promised sun, when he went outside to work, fine dust defeated. He resorted to photos to work from, indoors. But he was waiting for the moment, warding it off, heightening his anxiety, but fearful—to find that address. He would not tell Charles, who prepared meals, introduced him to friends, had people in for drinks, slept close to him, knowing when to touch—

By the morning of the third day his curiosity was unbounded. He went out alone to find the street he had located on his city map—narrow, an alley really. In a mud-brick wall an ancient wooden door opened onto a dirty courtyard with a surrounding veranda, bare of all but many doors. Standing in a doorway was a boy. He flagged him. The boy

stared, then without a shift of eye called to someone. Instantly an older boy sprang up by him.

He crossed the courtyard and extended the card—

The older boy stared at it, turned to call back inside, and moved part way into the room. In semi-darkness four other boys, a glitter of eyes, were sitting on the dirt floor. Again the older boy spoke. They laughed.

The older boy shook no.

The others watched, waiting. One of them tittered. It resounded, hollow. And he could not believe the hollowness of the empty rooms, the courtyard—ruined walls and timber and dust. Was it the place? His arm swept in the courtyard, again he pointed to the card, and said, “C’est le numéro? Ici? Cette maison?”

The boy shrugged. The shrug, he was certain, revealed—somehow he was being burlesqued, purposely misled? “Timimoun?” he said. Recognition—was it?—flicked in the eyes. Behind, the heads moved. “Timimoun?” he said again. Now they all smiled. An arm rose—that direction. But the boy was peering at him. Had he been struck by that word? Again, he insisted with the card: “You know this man—*connaissez-vous ce nom?*” The boy mouthed “Vooshhhnom.” The others burst into laughter. “Ssshvooshnom,” another repeated. Plainly, they would go no further with it. He said, “Thank you,” though he didn’t move. The older boy mocked his words with half sounds, “. . . nnnnkyouuu.” Now he was not sure they did not know French or English.

But if there was nothing here—no man, office, agency, house—what was he doing here? Why had he come to Africa? He turned to gaze at the courtyard. For this. Dust, decay, emptiness. Suddenly it mirrored the utter irrationality of a decision made in a fit of ennui—to leave Nice, to follow an obsession at a moment when, yes, he did need one . . . “Genevieve,” he murmured. Even her instability suddenly seemed stable. “. . . veeeeev,” someone said. With a quick last look of distrust, disbelief, at the boy—who didn’t seem so much the boy now, who had the detachment of experience—he nodded to the boys and crossed the yard.

What made you think someone would have led you so easily to what you yearned for?

Instead of going back to Charles', he followed the alley, surprised at how suddenly he reached the edge of the city: He came upon the sight of dunes, wire grass, thornbush, a vast rolling, irregular plain of sand and far hills. A shepherd moving his flock darkened the air quickly. He made some photos he could work from in Nice, then turned back.

It was the day of the souq. The marketplace was filled with men with their sheep, goats, charcoal, hides, herbs, bags of produce. He sat under an arch in the arcade, his board on his knees, but watched the bargaining, face after face, bearded, men with amorphous robes, alike all. How did he ever expect to tell that face. . . ? All was babel, but he found himself listening to the voices, at first recognizing a French phrase, a sound that rose, emphatic, or a familiar Arabic word he'd learned; but as he listened the voices rose and fell, fusing, flowing into a single current, humming and vibrating, which overrode, and for a long time he was carried in that anonymous rhythm. Then he walked among them, stopping to stare at a man speaking frenziedly, aware of the flick and brush of robes, the pungency of flesh, a mouth; stopping to stare too at the still eyes of sheep or a goat. When he left the marketplace—through the arches, along the narrow, labyrinthine streets, back to the apartment—he was trembling.

"Look at you." Charles brushed him. "You're all dust."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Hadn't!" He frowned. Suspicion? "You getting acclimated that soon? What did you find?"

"Find?" It unnerved. He saw the dusty courtyard, six boys.

"Any good subjects?"

"I caught a shepherd—on a camel—with his flock, crossing the plain. But I was fascinated with the market. I spent a couple of hours watching them haggle."

Sun, when he opened the blinds, turned the walls a lavender flame and the shutters green fire. He laid down his board, paint kit, camera, and leaned out the window.

"I've found you three models, the sons of some Arab friends."

"Models." But he was watching below.

"Yes."

In the alley was a boy.

"Reed, what's wrong with you?"

The boy was staring up the stairwell.

“Not a thing.”

He was certain it was the older boy from the courtyard.

“The models will be here first thing in the morning. You can choose the one you want.”

That night, in his dream, he knew exactly where to go: he walked into the courtyard—to that room. But in an instant the six boys descended on him, sticks raised, and beat at him, tore at his clothes. He fled the courtyard, but at the end of the alley he was halted by the shadow of a tall man in a burnoose. Help me! he cried, running toward him; though the shadow did not move, it remained at a constant distance. As the boys were about to strike him, he woke—into the courtyard, he crossed to the room, the six boys descended, he ran, he was halted by the shadow, he could not escape, the boys descended—

He woke—someone was moving.

“Time, gentlemen, please!” Charles said, and sat on the bed.

He took Charles' kiss, a cigarette, coffee.

“Your models will be here at nine.”

What a relief and pleasure to speak—and hear—English in a gathering, though the three boys, smiling modestly with each sentence they spoke, went mute if he did not go at questions—Did they use the railway? know the old fort? go to the spas with their parents? belong to a club?—to keep their eyes on him. Each had the same intense, impervious gaze—perhaps thousands of years of nomadic discipline had produced that stillness that concealed an alert inner motion. That motion lured. He sketched the three, but kept the middle-sized boy, who had an almost saintly gaze. And when he dismissed him, he couldn't dismiss the painting, for he saw the boy's head on a limp doll's body half-emerged from the dark of a stone womb, escaping the reach of many bones. In the cave bulbous eyes glittered, hairy legs and antennae fumbled over the edge. As he worked by the open window, a fine slow dust annoyed, irritated. “God, for clean air!” Yet when he finished, if work exhausted, vision exhilarated. It was always so.

“You won't believe what clear air and sky are till you see Ghardaia. There's no end to distance. But don't fret if the sand blows. April's the time.”

“I’ll look into buses to Ghardaïa tomorrow.”

But he was tempted back—it could not be for nothing he’d come!—he followed exactly his first visit, the dream: down the street to that wooden portal, into the courtyard. Now there were scattered men and women, children, a mass of goats. The room was empty. He approached a man and, pointing to it, holding out his card, he asked, “Where are the boys?” and then, “Le connaissez-vous?” The man shook no. He tried several others—useless. Then he went to the children. “Do you know him?” he repeated. They grinned shyly and backed off. All the people in the courtyard were watching.

He wandered for the rest of the day, hoarding sights—doors, faces, cairns, gardens, carpets—also carefully photographed. The marketplace was thinly populated, and the streets, for at the mosque the faithful clutched their rugs and he could hear their voices inside, blending into an insistent rhythm. He carried it down, the sound. He was moved even by the frail sound wind made along the walls. Leaving the steps of the mosque, he thought he saw the boy, the older boy. But—fool!—it could be any boy. Descending the hill, to avoid repeating the sights, he wound a devious way back, meandering, momentarily lost, consulting the map now and then. At the end of Charles’ street, just before the cluster of apartments, he halted to wait. After a brief interval, a boy did appear—he stooped beside a door.

He went on, but just before Charles’ entrance stopped to look back. The boy hadn’t moved. At the turn beyond him, five others appeared. They too halted, watching.

Charles was not in.

When he opened the blinds and looked out, the boys were passing in the alley. They did not look up.

And he did not look into leaving for Ghardaïa. Early the next morning he began to explore the city systematically, down every street he did not know, encompassing it alley by alley, street by street, doorway by doorway, searching faces—What are you doing to yourself?—and invariably, if he did not find the man, the boy was there somewhere behind, a boy, for he could no longer tell which boy. He had not lost the face, but each face became the older boy’s, just as the dark eyes, the face, of each tall man with burnoose and hood became that other face—and that con-

formity alerted him, for now he was sure that when he did really see that face there would be an instant's mutual recognition, the eyes would speak, apocalyptic. The least sound, sometimes the wind, vague as a rush of wings, made him turn, expectant; sometimes sudden shadows falling alongside him made him swerve—no matter, for when he looked, always the boys were behind in their short robes. He moved relentlessly, all day, through the noon meal, through the afternoon hours of prayer, as if now time itself were a presence pursuing him—if he turned, it too would disappear and he with it. And when he returned to the apartment, exhausted, though he had not rushed, why was he breathless? He would stand, peering over the rooftops, toward where, luminous under moon, beyond wiry shrub, dunes, hills, the erg lay. He felt—could almost hear—it call. To Timimoun. Yet tomorrow he might find the right street, the door—

Charles touched his shoulder—he gasped. Charles laughed, but comforted. “Heat and sand do that.”

“They do?”

What do I do to myself?

“Yes.”

“I’m wasting my days—I’m not painting.”

“Then go, if you need Ghardaïa.”

He leaned his head against the pane, hearing the finest dust whisk.

“In the morning. I’ll take the bus.”

“What’ll I do without you?”

“What you always did. But I’ll be back in a few days.”

“I can’t hold you. I’ve tried that before.”

“A part of me’s always with you. The painting proves that. Isn’t that what life’s all about?”

“You say so. Will anyone ever be able to keep you?”

“Genevieve.”

“Why, of all people, Genevieve?”

“Because everyone else indulges my selfishness. She defies it. She may even cure it.”

“I don’t believe she will—or can. Being loyal to it, despite defying it, isn’t the cure. But the right person still might.”

Already, the idea of moving on instigated. He felt drawn. For an instant hadn't he stood beside him at Marseille? And he had said Timimoun. In his pocket he fingered the card.

"I must keep looking then."

iv. Ghardaïa

Soon the bus stank. He was, through his own fault—with his paints, board, bag, chest—jammed till his legs felt needled. The old man beside him poked and prodded, and spoke with an accent he had to strain to catch in all the trundle and babble: "A Ghardaïa? Ah, Vendredi allez au cimetière et faites vous réciter par le tolba une sourate du livre des morts, oui, et visitez toutes les villes du M'Zab. Vous riquerez peut-être jusqu'au Hammada?" Despite a cry in his intestines and a slight headache, perhaps from the heat, jam, anticipation, he kept turning away with a quickening joy to the landscape—nothing could deface the horrific beauty of unearthly brown, gray, ocher, violet running into endless plains and hills. There came sudden interruptions of hidden oases, a long range of palms flicking in comic protest at the sky.

The man, Abd-el-something—everybody was Abd-el-something here—spread an oil-stained cloth, set out bits of cold meat, a dwarf ball of lettuce, baguettes, white cheese, and with genuine grace, a kind smile, urged, "Prenez donc un morceau-dejeuner?—essay le fromage—du thè?" He was foolish to have thought he wouldn't need to carry food. The man ate slowly, with ritual, nodding, explaining how the woman made the goat cheese, laughing fondly, perhaps at the thought of that woman. The man then put away his knife, food, cloth, settled in, closed his eyes—a digestive nap no doubt—and freed him.

He surveyed faces glimpsed in the rearview mirror, conscious again of how still but all-seeing their eyes seemed. He could never keep his own from darting everywhere. Perhaps their survival depending on it as in Nice—back in his own . . . "civilization," he was thinking, but which civilization?—his own depended on his hand. Watching the dunes, he could feel the life growing in his hand. A minaret on a cliff, quickly gone, the glimpse of a stretch of plain, then cliffs the color of faded blood, an unexpected cluster of drear mud-brick houses seemed to

sprout from the earth under the palms and tamarisks. He found if he sat stark still, he could bear the flies that settled on hair and head and arms; he made himself ignore the monotonous buzzes; and, half-asleep, he succumbed to the droning and vibrating till the bus bumped and veered over potholes and brought him to. What he heard then were his intestines gurgling like sewage. He laughed, if in discomfort, then self-consciously glanced up to the mirror. Eyes, alerted, hardly moved. Beside him, the old man stirred.

After twelve hours on the bus, he could hardly stand. In the dark he could see only the lights of Ghardaïa. His companion hurled his arm up. "Profitez bien du—Au revoir—" In a streak a boy gripped his bag—"Atlantide?"—and would haul it off, so he half ran to keep up. The hotel was a tiny affair, the room drab—metal bed, washbowl, mirror, hanging fatis in weaves of black, gray, yellow. He went down the corridor to the toilet and squatted; on the way back he asked for tea, and, shortly, went to bed.

In the morning he was up with first light. But he was not prepared for the hard blue sky. How real it was! And he had never felt so near. The tips of the minarets seemed to reach four blunt fingers toward it. And the air was so clear! Sun struck hard and made every white and ocher and brown wall and earthen street a clear fire.

For the morning he resisted the city. Despite nursing incipient diarrhea, he was at his board and began work—he would try to capture a motion of time in those still dunes. . . .

Only while resting his eyes after hours of the infinitude of spider-thin lines was he conscious that he could not blink away the still figure off to the left. A boy was sitting there, cross-legged and too still. How long had he been there? Going back to work, he ignored the boy. Later, glancing across, the boy seemed—did he imagine it?—closer. He drew the window to, latched it, and went out to wander. But he stopped—the face from Biskra?—and gazed too obviously. The boy did not move.

All afternoon he reveled in bright sun, clear sky, warm air—perfect—yet he knew the shadow of the boy, a thin darkness, behind him. He refused to look back. What was he pursuing? Was he? Yet the very idea of pursuit stimulated.

Outside the city he was staggered by stone. Along slopes, as far as he could see, sharp flinty stones, thousands of stones, and monuments shaped like balls and triangles and minarets, painted that eternal bluish-white, marked the dead. Stone spread like molten waves in tumult congealed instantaneously and forever. Women, buried under haik, as white as monuments, picked their way among the graves.

Hours he spent wandering that dead sea, taking photos of the mysterious forms at every angle. He had cramps, he felt feverish, he relieved himself in a squat among stones, feeling watched and ashamed, exhausted, but he wouldn't leave—each moment he discovered a novel shape, he had to go on. Lying on his side to capture crests, he could hear the least fall of sand, the crawl of a lizard, insect, a footstep far off. When he was holding the camera up and focused, he saw a figure, thin and dark—the boy?—standing ahead in the stones. Rapidly he lowered the camera—there was no one. Yet when he brought it to his eye, the dark form stood there. The lens was clean, his finger was not in the way—yet when he looked, it was clear. Fleeting, she crossed his mind. Genevieve? Ridiculous! Lowering the camera, he tripped, his arm flew out, he fell—a rock grazed his side sharply, his hands struck stone and he cried out. He closed his eyes in pain. There was a flutter and scrape over stone—

But it was feet running—that boy!—and he rose.

When the boy saw he could stand, he halted.

Had he come to help—or for what reason?

He had no recourse but to speak.

“I live too much in my paintings. I sometimes imagine them out there.”

He was burning and sweating. Why would he say such a thing—and to a stranger, and a boy? But he had to speak.

“You understand?”

The boy stared. He looked tired. The stranger sharpened shadows and fine hard lines at his eyes.

He said it all again: “Je vis beaucoup dans mes peintures. Quelque fois je les imagine eux là-bas—Vous comprenez?”

There was not the slightest glimmer of comprehension.

What did he want then?

“Que voulez-vous alors?”

No doubt the boy wouldn't move till he himself left.

His side was a smear of blood, but drying, and already a mat of flies. He flexed his hands to regain some ease. Laboriously picking his steps, he made his way across the field of stone. He did not look back. What would come would come.

At the Atlantide disbelief halted him. I'm crazy! Sitting there, as if he had never moved—had he?—was the boy.

“Have you been sitting there all the time?” he cried. “Have you?”

Motionless, the boy stared back at him.

In the corridor he took off his shirt and flapped it to free himself of flies before entering his room. He washed the abrasion, a long streak, but only for a few seconds could he keep it free of flies. Lying down, he lay a handkerchief over it to discourage them, but it damped through instantly, and instantly they clustered, new golden green bodies, clear wings.

A cool breeze woke him. The room was darkening. A long shadow stood over him—but moving. He recoiled, but as quickly rose on his elbows: the boy was fanning him—fanning!

“You!”

“Shhh.” This time, pointing to the window, the boy said something. His voice was soft. At the insinuating softness, he almost blenched, but from pleasure. The window was open. He would go back out the window. He would not be seen inside the hotel.

Lithely the boy slipped out.

Weak but hungry, he got up and put on a clean shirt. Once outside, he beckoned to the boy. Some distance from the hotel, the boy joined him, but lingered always a bit behind. When he stopped at a restaurant, he invited the boy along, but he shook his head vehemently and sat against the wall, on the ground, to wait.

Though hungry, with headache and cramps, he was careful to eat light. The fall had made his muscles sore, and now the boy aroused his curiosity and doubled his anxiety. What did he want? Was it coincidence, or had he followed him from Biskra? And if so, for personal reasons? For some ulterior motive connected—was it possible?—with that man in Marseille? At the thought he felt a quick excitement, imaging

the man, the image he realized now which had come to him and vanished at the cemetery, whom, but for the card, he could be sure he had imagined, for that image had spoken with his own desires. But the man had handed it to him, yes, just before Genevieve had drawn him away to the television interview. Had it been a trick by one experienced in such affairs, to lure to a false agency, address, to follow and exploit, once they'd arrived, its "clients"?

Enough of that. He was here, wasn't he?

He went up to the mosque. From the hill, he watched the moon blend Ghardaïa into the silver earth, shrink it to a frail web of glitter among shadowed walls in a night so vast it stirred his desire to make himself known to it, like those lights the brighter for being so frail, silent cries more defiant than his own silence.

It was the boy descending ahead of him whose white motion he followed back to the hotel. He read a while and rolled over and slept.

He stirred from deep sleep when the bed moved. Dimly, fearful but half-expectant, he saw the dark presence. He knew the head. In the moon the eyes glittered like coins. You? Then he woke fully. The boy was sitting looking down at him. "You!" He sank back, his blood surging and straining. "You'll drive me to madness sneaking around this way." But he wasn't angry. His flesh was in torment. He would touch—

But the boy touched him. His fingers gently traced the wound, soothing his side. He lay still, unable to still the rush of his blood. The hand moved up over his chest, then down. He nearly cried out when it withdrew, but it was only long enough for the boy to slip out of his clothes and come down full over him—

In the morning, groping at stillness, his hand met nothing. He bolted—thief? syndicate? Timimoun. His wallet, clothes, painting, chest, bag—yes, all were there. But the curtain—it was drawn! He flung it aside—there was the boy in his usual spot. Not, then, to be caught inside. He smiled—memory was sweet.

He could paint him now—he must. And in such light! He set to. What he'd enfolded, kissed, he must link to the world and make part of what forever he envisioned. Against endless white nothing, now out of the finest lines, flesh he created, shadows and deeps, life—the Berber Boy grew. Eyes—whose?—glittered, wet and deep as the oued. The insistent

motion of passion erupted into fine red webs in the eyes, the burning lids. As he worked, wind sounded, wings, and claws scraped stone; crowding to enter the drawing. Off the edges insects were breeding. And he listened for stone—

For two days the boy was constantly with him, with a joy but a silence as he led him through the M'Zab towns, to the dam, under the endless palms; at a distance one afternoon they listened to the prayers outside Beni Isguen, sharing food as they walked. Nights, his lust raged with the boy's. Mornings, he channeled it in disciplined lines to breed life.

The boy tended his side; slightly infected, it irritated. He would ignore it, but the boy wouldn't let him. In their meanderings sometimes he would stop and pour fresh water from the guerba and soothe it. He came with an oil to coat it, careful to cover it against the madness of flies. He was amazed at how still the boy could sit—hair, face and limbs littered with flies—as indifferent as the flies were insistent. Such control made him laugh at his own futile flagging. The boy was experienced for one so young, and in his dark skin were fine lines in his forehead and in his lips.

Perhaps it was when he glanced at the drawing board, at the dark eyes, the glitter of life against dryness and darkness that he was capturing in the Berber face, that the face of the other in shadow and a cowl goaded him. Timimoun. He must leave the boy. His presence, desire it as he did, he knew was an obstacle. He would not have another Gerard—the memory still grieved. And he saw in the face he drew Gerard's and all the others'. And he yearned. Then, exhausted with passion, half in dreams, he was moving toward that face in the shadows. All my life I've been looking for you, he said. But despite his motion, the figure remained at a fixed distance. Please take off your hood. He saw coins in the eyes. I've never really known you, he said, I never saw your eyes. Show me your face. I want to see your eyes. But in the slow green light of morning, he met only the eyes of the boy on his drawing board.

Yes, he was there, outside.

The drawing finished, this time in daylight he called the boy in—to see it, perhaps to tell him implicitly it was finished, over, though he couldn't say because you are there with the others now, mine but not mine.

But how startled the boy was! He hardly moved, his face turned hard, his jaws clenched, lips taut, and his eyes narrowed—he looked older. Perhaps he had given him too great an innocence. Or was he superstitious, like those who shunned cameras? Did he fear his trapped soul would be imprisoned, maimed, cursed? As usual, he did not speak.

When he explained he was leaving—bus, Timimoun, south, go—the boy murmured after him, “Bus . . . Timimoun . . . south . . . go,” not to question, he saw, but to understand. He nodded then and bowed, but waited while he settled his bill, then helped him lug his bag and equipment to the public transport. He would accept no money.

Now where would the boy go? Where did he live? How? What would he do nights? Surely he didn’t sit outside every night as he had that first night at the Atlantide—in a cold that descended so rapidly after sunset. Had he gone and returned at the chosen hour?

He went through the long wait for a ticket, settled in, hemmed in again. He felt a qualm at losing what had become familiar, apprehension about the void ahead, nervous a little, and doubly annoyed at the smell. The cramps in his intestines were back.

#### v. Timimoun

It was afternoon.

He forced himself up, though he felt his body would break. He had lain too long, begging sleep. His body resisted, and his mind. But he was grateful—after six hundred kilometers (despite claims for a good piste) of potholes, bumps, ridges, feeling filthy with sweat and stench and flies—for such stillness and air and clean smells. And despite erratic cramps and rushes for relief all night and morning, he felt a current excitation—he was really at the edge.

Beyond, was the erg.

He stood, aching, woozy—Nice, the morning after!—and closed his eyes to avoid an instant’s vertigo, but there came a rush of faces, a voice, Genevieve’s, will be there when all the others are sick of you. Ah, where now, Genevieve? But he would not give way. He dressed and washed. Up now, he must keep moving. In Nice he would long since

have jogged his stint through darks and fogs along the cliffs of Rabau Capeau before going to the drawing board.

The board lay with his cylinder of drawings in the heap he'd chucked down in deathly ennui last night.

Along the floor ran a scorpion. He stomped, but it streaked under the hall door.

When he stepped outside, there was a flood of red earth. He thought, It's coming again, but he was not imagining, for the earth was deep red as if blood had seeped up and stained and wind and sun dried it. Fleeting he saw the red oued, deep in the earth, nurturing this. And he was exultant, for the deep green palms shimmered and made the ground seem to move. He followed the walls of the ksar, past ramparts in ruins, passing a herd of grazing goats tended by a young girl. But soon he was following the seguia, caught by the glitter of water. He stopped to watch a man dip his balance-pole into a well and fill his guerba, and the man offered "De l'eau, de l'eau." But he waved, smiling, with thanks. And if he followed till he reached the well? But he wanted to see the source, the place, hear down. Fool! This was one oasis, they were infinite. But in the drawing there would be the one, and it red and unending—

Pain was sudden—it weakened. He would stop and stealthily relieve himself behind a wall, suddenly reborn for a spell. But he kept on till he reached the wide belt of palm groves—he went through it, and at the edge halted where sun burned over a vast basin of faded pink beyond which were dunes, mountainous sands golden, orange, spread in great curves and rounds as smooth as the flesh of enormous bodies lying in still and indifferent sensuality.

For a long time he sat watching the subtlest drift of late afternoon shadows and the sands tarnishing to old gold and deeper orange.

On the way back he would prop against a wall, close his eyes to rest a moment, then go on. An old woman with a clutch of skimpy twigs was digging a dry branch out with her hands. Poor creature! And a man was cleaning out a channel of water. The camels were ugly, plunging their piss noisily, made screeching complaints, and farted. He was relieved to reach the center. At the fountain two old men were selling sand-roses and petrified wood. He stopped. He stared at their faces, not realizing

how long until the nearest jerked his pants leg. “Vous n’en trouverez pas de meilleur marché. Et leur forme! Regardez! Quelle perfection!”

“Yes.” He chose two perfect roses and a thick finger of wood.

By now shadows were deep, his stomach was noisy, he had to dare tea or collapse.

After, the cramps and nausea did not desist; his body drove him back to his room.

When he saw the dark form outside, he said, “No! It’s because I’m sick, I haven’t slept—he’s in Ghardaïa, he’s at the Atlantide, I’m in Timimoun—”

The image persisted—he sat cross-legged, facing his window.

“You!” He locked the window. “It’s not possible.” He lashed the curtains to and slumped against the wall, his head bowed, but seeing it, seeing—he would not yield to his imagination—wouldn’t. Because you want it. You want it to happen. Why do you? He flung himself on the bed, exhausted, with his clothes on and in no time was asleep.

His rest was fitful. He had no control, he was furious with his body, and each time he had to bolt out of bed, he was tempted to the window, but he resisted—

In the morning, yes, he was there by the tamarisks.

The boy rose, smiling, taking the lead now. He was struggling to tell him: you must come—far—ride—with me, “Ali.” His name! “Ali?” He nodded.

“I can’t travel. I’m sick. You understand? Sick.”

He nodded but beckoned, tapped a parked car, and gestured—out past the violet cliffs that rose behind the ksar. He gave way, nodding, and let himself be led.

Soon, in a rented car, they were moving past the cliffs, outside the oasis, past a cluster of palm-leaf huts. Where the dirt road ended, they left the car to wait and walked—a long distance it seemed, because he was weak and already tired, though still within sight of the car—till down a slope they came upon an earthen house by two young palms. The boy went in. From the door—a tattered rag hung over it—come he motioned.

The thick walls and dim interior gave cool comfort, escape from sun and sand. The boy was murmuring constantly now, softly persuasive, and drew him outside again, flung his arms at first toward Timimoun,

then back to the house, then indicated draw, drawing–bed–eat–here–and quick sun, all space, to draw in.

Live here?

Yes.

And food?

He, he would bring food.

And to sleep on?

That too.

He laughed at the other's laughter, the glitter of sun in the dark brown eyes, over the laughing wet teeth, though sun bared stains and dark rot.

At last the boy conveyed his awareness of his sick body, the expulsions.

You want to take care of me–here?

Yes–yes.

“You'd do this for me?”

At his voice the boy smiled, warm, intimate. Yes. Two–you, me.

He watched the boy's mouth, hands, with the memory of that body.

And suddenly he wanted–he could hardly believe–wanted to give himself over, be bared, reduced, to find in this place of sand–

Everywhere he saw sudden bones. His hands quickened.

What were a few days more or less? If Charles got upset, it would pass.

He threw up fingers–how many dinars?–till he hit the right sum.

“I put myself in your hands,” he said. Yes.

The boy clamped his palms flat together and fingertips lightly to his lips as in prayer.

He kept the auto to cart his belongings and checked out of the Oasis Rouge immediately.

And he proved a wonder, that boy. He fashioned a deep bed of leaves and lay the rug over it, he came with clay pots and gourds and made fire for tea, he went off and returned with cheese, hard bread, chunks of charred meat–mutton?–and fruit. Now he massaged him with miraculously light hands, now laughed and urged him not to hide with shame his looseness and with water and leaves eased and comforted and cleansed him, now made an herb concoction–bitter, green, with bits of bark in it–which he insisted he drink, now in dark slipped down against him, playing, rousing, wearing him to sleep.

For two mornings and—sporadically—afternoons, kneeling in the sand, he sketched, driving between seizures, with an intensity and a happiness he had rarely known. From far came only the inimical, mean pierces of the camels. He wandered—he found pomegranates dried a blood-wood red, a new symbol for his work, and rusted oil and milk cans half buried in sand, and bleached skulls. When he lay half-feverish, about him the boy never ceased moving, talking at last—he was so delighted at this show of confidence—to him, to himself, rapidly, mutilated English and French words in an outpouring he did not understand except to indicate this—a thing, desire, intention.

At moments, apart, the boy would go through observances—last, at dusk, facing east to bring on the darkness. But for himself Allah was this sun and air, water, the boy's hands.

“Sickness in paradise,” he murmured.

Inside, the boy became eyes, a shadow. Where had he come from? And he could not avoid the thought—to Timimoun. Now that he himself was here, he could not fathom how he had come. That man had become as invisible and mysterious as the source of the oued. He saw that glitter and shadow only in the boy.

“You came,” he said to boy, “for my body,” and would kiss, “and for my art,” but the boy always turned away from the drawings. He was all nature, art did not interest him, though unknowingly he fed it.

Before bed the boy insisted on the herb drink, not bitter this time, and after Ali slept, he lay listening to the vague stir of rags over the openings, the faint flicks of palms against the walls—the sound became a scrape and crawling, and quickly he sought oblivion against the warm body. . . .

An agony woke him. It tore through his body. He stank. The air was stifling thick with the smell. The stillness was too still. Ali? Where was he? “Ali?” He turned his head, moved—all his muscles wrenched in pain. “Ali!” In the dimness his eyes created a chaos of white spots and streaks. What was askew? He tried to blink them away, but they did not move. Then his eyes cleared. His drawings! Torn to pieces. He bolted—cried out, fell back. But must—Slowly he pushed up onto his elbow: nothing! His camera, bag, equipment, board, even the rug—gone. Passport! Every pocket emptied. So the time, care, tenderness—lies!

“No, Ali,” he cried in an anguish of fury, lament, shame, thinking again syndicate? setup? coincidence?

To Timimoun.

He rolled onto his stomach, his mouth grunting into dirt. He pressed up onto his knees, but instantly vomited—

He must find the way—

With what mercy had Ali left his clothes? He had all he could do to inch into his jeans, and would lie for a while, but—no, he must move with light, go back, find the ksar, find the road . . . and sit till what came along?

Shrubs were hazy, far dunes vague. Why were they? His eyes? Green and bark. . . . So the boy did that? But the sun was dim. The air—smudgy—was heavy. Far to the right was Timimoun, a dark ridge against the sun. Was the sun moving too fast? A spread of green and cliffs smeared violet and ocher and red brought quick joy. He would touch—he pressed himself up, every muscle cried out, but he stood, thinking I must propel—propel!—and laughed, and an echo—you must—but a woman’s, was so clear he turned to it. He said You’re a fool, Genevieve—not now, not here, but sent his hands out to touch her. Air. I’m—I am—imagining. The fragrance of desert spices she wore verified she must be close, as always. Too always. He laughed. Leave me, Genevieve, I’ll get there. But suddenly he was on all fours, grunting dry heaves.

I can’t sit up, can’t—somehow he did. Air—he thrust his head up for it, arms out, let air touch every sweated inch of him. He would lean now—on Genevieve, but she was far down the road—she was moving, if slowly, back. She swayed. To Timimoun. Genevieve, not you. You didn’t? His knees buckled. You must hurry, Genevieve. He held out his arms. Almost, it was prayer the way sun touched—but dark—the figure which did come to him, and halt:

At the miracle his eyes filled.

He could thank—and stood.

The boy smiled.

But real?

An Arab boy on his donkey was holding in his arms a tiny lamb. Smiling, he offered a glimpse of the creature and pressed close to him the softest wool, warm, and the clean smell.

But his own head fell forward against the donkey, who saved him.  
 “Venez, montez derrière moi!”

He, with all his effort, mounted and leaned heavily against the boy’s back, blessing, perhaps profusely, for his eyes blurred; he couldn’t explain the waverings, and his arms went around the boy’s waist, hands found their way under the robe to his skin, under the warm lamb. And the boy talked with such happy innocence, “Je viens juste d’avoir quatorze ans, mon agneau a quinze jours.” But he was listening to the serenity in his voice. Where did such tenderness come from? “Je l’amène chez moi dans ma famille au village.” And Timimoun was maybe ten kilometers south, yes, on the piste. And Ghardaïa, and Charles . . . ? But he was sinking into boyflesh and lamb, all warm, carrying down with him the dark face—beautiful his eyes!—and dark in the cowl, the mouth dark, and hands pressed in love against the warm wool.

The tugs of the boy woke him, and tugs again—

He was pointing down a dirt road, narrow, to vague green, where his village was.

Leave me?

Yes.

He slid quickly down onto his knees and as quickly said, “I have nothing to give.” The boy gave him a full sweet smile, and he thanked the boy with what may have been, brushing the hand, a kiss, “Thanksbeaucoupmercigarçon,” and heard “La piste passe par ici—par là-bas, elle mène loin dans les montagnes, au Nord . . .”

And remained on his knees—how long after? at times so long, asleep surely?—and woke: alone, he saw, with endless road.

Charles?

He saw no ramparts, only a vast, eroded and scoured of vegetation, running into a far dark edge jagged as stones, and heard—sometimes he could—close buzzing.

He bowed his head to wait until a higher sun darkly veiled.

What else, Genevieve?

Hitchhike, then—twelve hundred kilometers to Biskra?

Air was gray. He heard the gray waves below. The cool air rushed against him as he jogged along the edge of Rabau Capeau. He must

hurry back to draw. Against endless white the Berber Boy was ready for the life he must give. Hot sweat stung. He opened his eyes—not Nice. Burning, he said, I must keep moving. Hands gripped his intestines and would not stop clenching. A dry gulch heaved inside him and ached. He would choke on his dry throat.

Sit. Wait.

Listen.

Someone was whispering so close, lovesoft. Who? He laughed. But man? woman? He couldn't, straining, be sure—EdouardDmitriHelenBill AngeliqueTedRhondaMayAlphonseManuelSimMonica. His laugh belched and a quick hot spurt from his loins seared his thigh, darkened through. Quick flies blackened it and made him move. Once up, he feared stopping. She egged him on: I'm waiting. He said, I must give the Boy life. Genevieve said, You're a regular breeder, Reed. She hummed a hum never hers before, and he harked—but slipped, and his head struck ground. Listen—but convulsions wrenched stomach lungs throat mouth.

He lay till, stilled, he could hear wind, sand flicks, soft footfalls—were they coming? He raised his head to meet them, startled at how now they were coming, a horde all long in robes and dark against flat silver sun. Shrieks drew his eyes quickly to a dark moving herd of camels. But where? Down the road they were coming, all—resurrected from nothing, returning for him, to lift him up, returning in a thunder of harrowing.

Earth thundered.

He raised his arms to them.

It halted beside him, thundering, a small truck full of goats.

“Biskra!” Did they hear? “I must—to Biskra. Will you take me to Biskra? Biskra!” To Charles, who will pay, yes.

They were smiling. One broke into laughter. There was a babel of speech between them during which clutching the door kept him from toppling. They nodded. He could ride behind, with the goats.

He summoned all his strength to grip the wood guardrail and drag himself on. When the truck jerked, he slumped beside goats indifferent and, he soon found, stinking but warm, and blessed the goats, the men, this moment, though cursing the bumpy hard rock and jostle. You see, my darling, Genevieve said, not in rocks or wood or stars, but in me,

love—this touch, and warm. He wanted to slap her. You want me to fail, he said. How can I paint without that still sound? I came for that. And I have seen—What have you seen?—the oued. In stone he must hear it flow, and see. I want—in stone, in water, down under—to hear once and for all. You wouldn't deny me that, Genevieve? Reed, you deny yourself, you must decide, it's always at your fingertips. Again she held up—as how many times in Paris, Marseille, Nice—her key. I've moved, I leave the key in the usual place, she said. Moved—but where, Genevieve? Since you prefer your Angeliques, your lovers, and must search so, I'll leave the finding to you, the pattern's always the same—isn't it?—another door, and when you find the key, you'll know the door, my darling. Yes, he said, but with a shrill cry—which recalled cold thin-blue eyes, I grieve for you, Werner—but felt his cry tear through him in awful pleasure-pain, for the truck was still, his jeans had been ripped down, one of the Arabs was astride him, thrusting, and when he twisted his head he caught, in struggle, that laughter which turned fierce and raucous, he saw the agony in the Arab's eyes and teeth and felt a convulsing and quick withdrawal. He heard the two speak, words became laughter, harsh throaty sounds. And then he was turned over—the other jammed down on him till he was mouthing, breathless, gripping up under the robes those buttocks and would not let go when the Arab cried out till the man struck his head an angry blow and hauled him up and heaved him off the truck—

In the air he gripped where the sun was turning gray—

You see, Werner?

And thumped.

He could hear their footsteps in heavy palpitations against the earth. Werner kept walking with the others. They had all turned from his now, they were crossing—he could not see what they were crossing.

Wait!

The earth groaned and he opened his eyes. Grit smat them shut. Why can't I move? And with effort he mounted a hand over his eyes and squinted—thick gray, and still day—but saw nothing, no line, no trace but solid gray that moved—and whacked him down; ground thundered and heaved under him; wind shrieked till the sound would split flesh, battered, faded away, returned with redoubled howling, smiting head arms

clothes with sand, driving in a hiss broken by abrupt roaring and cascades of thunder. He could not cover. He remembered now the truck, the two Arabs, lust.

How long have I lain here?

Where was the road?

Their feet were moving the ground, robes whisked and brushed him, he pushed up against them—they smat, smothered.

He couldn't explain the low dark sun.

Ahead he glimpsed, yes, the dark form, hood, and two silver discs. Those eyes. The man beckoned—surely to guide? I came for this, all my life waited. Don't go so fast, please! he cried, but sand swatted his mouth. Why wasn't he moving toward them? I will—wrenching, he raised himself, and winds buffeting so strongly lifted him, held him leaning into it, his arms raised. The instant he opened his eyes sand bit, burned, blinded, but in that split he saw—all low—rock and rock and rock that moved and moved, then he was hurled down onto sharp points, gashed, shrieking, shrieking, deaf to his own sound, and couldn't move—and lay so deafened by a chaos of battering, roaring, thundering that he heard nothing now but the stillness. You won't speak? He raised his head to seek the silver eyes in that dark where they were waiting. He even lifted his chest partly off the stone, but an excruciating pierce drew his right hand down his side—it came back wet—he smeared the wet on the stone where his head lay hard against the humming.

Listen!

But the face kept moving, moving, leading them all. And he heard her voice: Reed will bring it back to us. The party will go on till Reed gets back. Tomorrow. In the morning, perhaps. He tried to raise his head from the stone—he could not see morning. But must not lose sight of him. He said to him, I must take it back to them or what is it for? He must make them know the sound moving through stone and blood, into the eyes of the Berber Boy, into all their eyes, yes, all—you see, Genevieve?

At that, the face turned to him, silver fell from the eyes, and the man gazed with a full warm smile. You. He knew the man. But he quickened, for his eyes—O Christ, I have looked into those eyes!—his eyes were the

boy's. And again he felt the soft serene voice and heard the warm flow pass into his flesh from the boy and the lamb and the donkey. You. He gripped stones. He did not fear pain, hurt, agony. He thrust up—kneeled, he would follow, he rose—but he saw nothing ahead. My eyes! His fingers caught at his eyes, and met sand. Then his arms reached—

For less than a breath he stood—how long must I wait?—before wind cast him down.

**The Cucumber Seller:  
Homosexuality and Social Class in Turkey**

Thomas J. D. Ambrecht

I didn't move to Istanbul for the men, but I must confess that I thought they would be sort of a 'perk' that came with the country. I have a fetish for facial hair; moustaches and beards really turn me on. Turks, as everybody knows, generally have moustaches, and they're hairy and dark on top of that. I moved to Istanbul because, as a heartbroken unemployed man of letters, what other choice did I have but to move to the Orient to become mysterious? (How I got that way is another story.)

It was the end of my first week in the city, and I was in a gay bar. Yes, to my surprise as well, they do exist. We were in an unmarked place called Neo, identifiable only by the crowd of men standing in front. I had been taken here by a Turkish lesbian friend of mine and by a guy I'd met through the Internet (yet another story). The doorman asked us as we entered if we knew what kind of bar this was. I have to admit that I'm not used to being asked such questions in the United States. It's so obvious that I'm queer that I would more likely be asked this question before going into a straight bar.

Once we had confirmed our sexualities and paid the entrance fee, we were let through a sliding door to a raging party. Although I'd never been to a gay bar in Istanbul before, somehow, I recognized these people. Woozy-in-the-corner was the party-boy who had a problem with drugs; alone-at-the-bar was the guy who hadn't been out for months, but was looking for some tonight. Of course, I didn't really know these men, but something common to gay culture made me think I did. Although I would like to believe in the international brotherhood of gay men, I am not naïve enough to think that we are all the same. How could someone who grew up in Eastern Anatolia in a town of five hundred people have anything in common with someone raised in Southern California in a city with five hundred different places to buy frozen yogurt? Maybe we all speak some common language of forbidden desire, but could this explain the seemingly international code that seems to determine the body language and physical presentation of all gay men?

Some of the men whom I met consciously modeled themselves on their Southern California counterparts. These were the men who were educated, had perhaps traveled abroad, and, most obviously, were

young. These were also the men whom I “recognized” most easily: they had boyfriends to spurn them; they were wearing designer labels; they understood and performed the difference between gay and straight culture through the way they looked, moved, and acted. Where had they learned this behavior—through the movies or the media? From foreign guests? Come to think of it, where had I learned this behavior? I, who grew up in a town of six hundred in rural Maine. I, who before the age of fifteen, when my family moved to a larger town, didn't think I had ever known or even seen anyone gay. Was my story really so different from the boy of Eastern Anatolia, and if not, where and when had we both received the same gay education?

The term “gay education” is, as I am beginning to discover, more accurate than I might have at first suspected. If what I was recognizing in my Turkish counterparts was not some innate similarity, but rather some common knowledge, shouldn't there be men and women who engage in homosex, but who are ignorant of the social structures and codes in play that night at Neo? Testing my theory by simply looking around the bar, I noticed that none of these men had facial hair. Wasn't this Turkey, land of the moustache? As I knew from reading articles in the Wall Street Journal, more and more western-oriented Turks were doffing their moustaches. Hair on the upper lip is seen as traditional, and as synonymous with the East. If gay culture, which is not to say same-sex sexuality, is a product of the West, then being clean-shaven is the obvious look for gay Turks. Having a moustache would be a contradiction; how could one live a Western lifestyle but have an Eastern look?

Being the facial hair fetishist that I am, I was disappointed by the fact that even in this developing country, the men who might be attracted to me were trying to look like me, even though I was in search of people who were “different.” What exactly was this difference that I was in search of? I have never been attracted to the proverbial “straight-acting, straight-looking type,” but wasn't I now searching for the Turkish equivalent of this? By being so focused on the moustache, a signifier of heterosexuality, wasn't I also attracted to straight culture? What did this mean for me—gay theorist and activist? Moreover, what did this mean

about the kind of identity that my culture and I were exporting? Was there truly no “indigenous” gay culture in Turkey?

After I had been in the bar for sometime, I noticed a man whom I had missed during my first scan of the room. At last, someone who corresponded to my fantasies: bearded and swarthy, with a rugged, lean look. He may have come in after I did, or I may simply have not seen him because, unlike the other men in the bar, he was skulking in the corner, keeping to himself. He seemed almost a bit out of place. Now, I have been around enough to know that just because someone is in a gay bar doesn't mean they're gay. Although I didn't fear meeting Jeffrey Dahmer, I had also been sufficiently warned by my Turkish friends to know that occasionally there would be people in bars with less noble intentions than a blow job. I had heard about men who had been lured into the night with visions of adventure, only to be ambushed by the object-of-affection's pals, and relieved of their wallets. I decided to ask the friends with whom I came what they thought of this man. He didn't look like trouble, but he did look different—which was probably the reason that I found him more attractive than the other people in the bar.

My friends' reactions were as negative as they were uniform. This man was definitely not like the others—and unlike my friends, as well. Ugur, the Internet connection, had noticed me cruising him already and was thinking of warning me. To Ugur, the man looked like a pick-pocket, though he said he probably wasn't; the doorman, who had scrutinized us upon entering, must have let this man through, which meant that he must have been there before with “acceptable” friends. Zeynep, my female friend, also thought he was strange. She wasn't sure why, but she told me that he looked “like someone who could be selling cucumbers on the street.” On the one hand, this was an exaggeration. He was clean, handsome, and obviously not someone who lived on the street. On the other hand, I vaguely sensed what she meant: he did look a little poorer than the others, and certainly less sophisticated.

I wanted to know how my friends had identified this man as different. Of course, I had as well, but this was mostly because of his facial hair and body language. My friends had noticed these things, too, but there was more: he was wearing a gold chain, apparently something no westernized Turk would do. According to them, he wasn't dressed quite

right either. I had noticed that he wasn't wearing any designer clothes, as were many of the other men in the bar, but I thought he looked quite handsome in a team shirt (emblazoned with the name of a team I'm not quite sure exists, although I can't claim to be a sports expert), and khakis (apparently, jeans are *de rigueur* gay bar wear).

An ironic note here: I myself was dressed quite inappropriately. The weather had been so hot, and I had been wearing a jacket and tie all day for job interviews. When I had to get dressed for the evening, I couldn't bear the thought of putting on long pants, so I did something I would never do in a bar in the United States (except perhaps a lesbian bar): I wore shorts and sandals. Even though I knew that this wouldn't be exactly fashionable bar-wear in Istanbul, I decided that I didn't care. The fact that I was obviously American would probably be the only calling card I needed to gain admittance to bars and discos. I was right; I had no problem making it through any doors. So, here I was in a gay bar dressed for a picnic, attracted to a man who also looked a little different. Yet, despite our similarities, there was a barrier between us that I was fast discovering to be the true divider in Turkey: socioeconomic class.

I'm not rich, having always been a student, but I am quite privileged. Not only do I come from a family whose values essentially exceed their actual wealth (all of us kids went to expensive, private schools, for example), but I am also resourceful enough to have earned my doctorate in French Studies from an Ivy League university—a degree of the leisure class, if there ever was one. I have traveled a lot and have managed to make my life by writing and teaching only six months of the year. (I should also mention that, like my Turkish counterparts, I am also a brand-name queen.) Basically, I am trying to say that my pocketbook has not necessarily determined my lifestyle.

When I write of “socioeconomic class” and how it was separating me from the cucumber seller, I am aware of what a vague term this is. I myself am not exactly sure what this popular phrase means, nor how a person would go about placing himself in such a hierarchy. This said, there was still an obvious gulf between this young Turk and myself (how ironic that in terms of attitude, it is I who is more like a “Young Turk”). Even though we both may have made our way to the city from small towns, my “upbringing”—i.e., my schooling, parental encouragement,

money, and all the things that this word comprises—better enabled me to understand and emulate gay social code. Of course, there are plenty of Americans who are not adept at this code either. In fact, one of them was with us at the bar that night—a lawyer from Washington, DC, who, while not lacking money, was dressed “all wrong” and devoid of a certain *savoir faire* common to most of the other bar patrons.

I was more acutely aware of the difference between me and my young Turk, however, because I desired him as he did me. We remained unavailable to each other because of our “social differences.” I was too new in the city to trust my own instincts and to go against the advice of my friends and pursue him anyway. What if he did turn out to be a pick-pocket or one of those decoys for a mugging? Moreover, I didn’t really want to risk making a bad impression on my hosts, who had brought me to this bar. I wanted us to become good friends, so that they would in turn introduce me to other people. I didn’t want to risk alienating myself so early on by revealing my penchant for inappropriate men. These Turks were sophisticated, too, and definitely aware of their own social codes. Shorts and sandals might not prevent me entrance into a gay bar, but screwing outside the circle probably would.

How was I to communicate all of this to the cucumber seller? I wanted him to know that I was interested, but that it was my first week in Istanbul, that I was here with friends, and that I just didn’t know what to think. How would I have communicated such a collection of reasons and emotions to anyone? Although I knew I shouldn’t pursue him, I couldn’t stop myself from looking. Now that he seemed disadvantaged compared to most of the people in the bar, I wanted him to know that I found him more attractive than the others. Money and class weren’t necessarily important to me, I nobly told myself. What was then, a moustache and a cute ass? Although my American instincts toward egalitarianism might seem noble, given my motive, was it really more “fair” to want to fuck someone regardless of his social situation?

Fairness aside, I didn’t see why I couldn’t at least make contact with him. Perhaps I would discover that my friends were wrong; maybe my cucumber seller was actually a lawyer simply having a bad hair day. How could we have read so much into the life of a person whom none of us had ever met, or to whom we had never even said a simple hello? I

decided that it would be truly unfair to pass a condemning judgment without at least making contact. So, again using my American geniality as an excuse (Americans—even the unfriendly ones—become very genial when in a foreign country), I sided up to him and said, “Hello. My name is Tom.” He said something in Turkish, which I understood to be the equivalent of, “Sorry, I don’t speak English.” So I said, “Tom” and pointed to myself. He smiled and said, “Mustafa” and gesticulated similarly. Conversation stopped there. Not only could neither of us say anything, but also I don’t think we had anything to say. English is another indication of social class. Although everyone in Turkey takes it at school, only people who go to good schools are given opportunity to practice enough to develop real language skills. This isn’t so unlike the fate of most foreign languages in America, except that we don’t think we actually need to learn a foreign language. (Doesn’t “the rest of the world” speak English anyway?) In Turkey, however, even cucumber sellers are convinced of the utility of English. Not knowing any is a disadvantage any way you slice it.

While reflecting on such things during the few moments of silence after my attempt at conversation, I completely forgot about the international gay language that I mentioned before: body language. My companion, however, did not, and he grabbed my hand and squeezed it. Although surprised, I didn’t want to reject his attempt at communication, so I slipped my arm around his waist. Now we were talking; our mutual attraction was confirmed as clearly as if we had spoken to each other. He put his arm around me in acknowledgment. All of a sudden, I realized that I was starting to manifest the ultimate in body semaphore: the erection. I wasn’t so sure that I wanted my message to be this clear, however—and what about my original intent? Although I found him attractive, I wasn’t prepared to follow up my desire. How was I to say this: a kiss good-bye with a sad look in the eyes?

Essentially yes. I let my arm fall from around his waist, and moved a step away, as if to talk to my nearby friends. I then said something quasi-derogatory to Ugur, like “Boy, he’s coming on strong,” to make clear that I wasn’t really interested. I could feel Mustafa’s hand, however, reluctant to let go of mine. In truth, I didn’t really want to let go of his either. He was so handsome, and he was also attracted to me. I knew

that my task was clear, however. I needed to put my budding social life before my momentary sexual satisfaction. Otherwise, I could see the outcome: I might have fun that night, but I wouldn't even have a reason to exchange phone numbers in the morning. After all, we couldn't even tell each other our names without gesticulating wildly. I let his hand fall a second time, but turned to face him with the aforementioned sad look in my eyes. I then gave him a small hug and went back to my friends.

As I see it, there are two possible ways of ending this article. I am tempted to make up the ending and write that when I went to buy a drink a few seconds later, I discovered that both my wallet and the cucumber seller were gone. This would make a good story and would also confirm my friends' and my decision to observe the barriers of class. In fact, when Mustafa put his arm around my waist, it did seem as if his hand was awfully close to my back pocket. By the end of the night, however, my wallet was still there—and so was Mustafa. He stayed close by for much of the evening, still hoping to catch my eye. As the evening wore on, it seemed to me as though he looked more dejected than he had before, and even more “different” than he had when I had first noticed him. Maybe I was projecting my feelings of guilt, but wouldn't I have felt dejected if the object of my desire had refused me?

In point of fact, I was feeling a bit dejected, and not just because of my guilt. I was beginning to realize an essential flaw in my unconscious plan when I moved to Turkey. I might be living in “moustache-land,” where the men were exotic and attractive, but I was not living above the law of the land. Many of the same pressures that I feel so acutely within the United States exist here as well. The only difference is that I am less able to understand them, being new to the country. Even if I do manage to learn Turkish, which is my plan, it is unlikely that I'll be able to learn the unspoken language of societal structure so well that I will confidently traverse class lines. This means that, consequently, if I do manage to find a Turkish boyfriend, he probably won't have a moustache, but he probably will have a pair of Calvin Klein jeans. Will I be disappointed? Yes, but then again, maybe it's my own fault for worrying too much about holding on to my wallet.

# The Long Yang Club Party

Oliver J. Haas

## PART I: THE MEMBERS' STORY

We met at the Long Yang Club party at Ron's house. There was a good-sized crowd, as we usually get for a potluck, with a nice mix of Asian and non-Asian men. I noticed him right away because, what can I say, he was my type: thin and young looking, seemingly a little innocent and a little bewildered at all the people he didn't know. So I made it a point to introduce myself and also a few other members, trying to make him feel more comfortable at the gathering.

His eyes sparkled and he gave me a wide grin as he told me his name. He was new here in Boston at an English-language school, a student who had just arrived from his home in Asia. He said he didn't know anything about the gay world, but was determined to exercise his new freedom from the relentless parental supervision he suffered back home. He saw our ad in Bay Windows and decided to attend. He hoped to make some friends in his new hometown.

Well, I could feel myself falling for this guy. Maybe I'm too much of a romantic, thinking that at some party just like this, in what seems a casual encounter, I will meet the Asian guy who takes my heart away. And this seemed to be him. I was gregarious and trying to say witty things with a smile, and probably ended up sounding dumb in the attempt, while he was much more silent and self-possessed. But he kept smiling and his eyes sparkled, or so it seemed to me, and so what else could I do? He was a dream boat. My Mr. Right.

He agreed to meet for lunch the following day, and he showed up on time just as we had arranged. When we got into the small deli, he glanced around without comment at the classic American greasy spoon interior, but when we came to order, it seemed he didn't have any special food in mind. The real problem, he confessed, was that he couldn't understand the American menu. I suggested a ham sandwich, a sort of all-American standby that I liked, with a taste I thought would not offend, and asked him if he would like to try one. He seemed pleased with the choice and gave me a happy "Okay!"

At the end of the meal I suggested we go to my place for coffee, where we could talk without other people around. I wanted to have some time alone with him, to be in a place where I could just stare at his face and see him smile only for me. I wasn't really sure what he was feeling, so I kept up my witty remarks and made my suggestion sound as casual as I could. His response was a moment of thought, then another "Okay." Fate had smiled on me!

Once at my small apartment, I put on some quiet music, and began brewing coffee, and we easily fell into a relaxed conversation about life in Asia. I had traveled to Asia a number of times and had even been to his country, though I really didn't know much about its history or culture. All I could think of as we chatted, to be honest about it, was this fabulous guy sitting on the couch next to me.

It wasn't long before the electricity between us, as least from my point of view, was crackling all about. It was hard to pretend we were having a casual conversation while his movements and glances, though they may have appeared quite ordinary to a disinterested observer, had me totally enthralled. To have him there in my apartment was like a dream coming true. Would it be possible we could spend a lifetime together, sharing our lives as if in a garden of delights? My imagination of the two of us living together as partners was running wild.

I didn't know how to break the physical inertia of just sitting there, and I desperately wanted to touch him, but I feared he wasn't fully relaxed with me yet. I really couldn't tell. After all, we had just met the previous day. So I asked if I could give him a hug. He cast his eyes down for a second, bit his lower lip, smiled, and whispered "Okay." Next was to ask for a kiss, then to unbutton his shirt. Each request from me was met with his one word of permission, "Okay."

It all began to happen too fast, and the pace was made easier because he seemed totally cooperative. He gave no sign of pushing me away, while my growing feelings of love, mixed with erotic desire, propelled me forward, faster than even I thought was a good idea. We found ourselves on the floor in front of the couch, more out of our clothes than in them. He was smooth without any body hair, thin but sinewy. His hair fell in his eyes as he looked not so much at my face or into my eyes, though he did now and then, but more at my midsection and the jutting

erection. He, too, was completely hard and erect, though his size gave him the advantage of seeming to be more discreet about it.

He was hesitant with his lips, but on his own initiative he grabbed my hips and placed his parted lips on my shaft. The downward thrust he applied was distinct, with a regular rhythm, and I was quickly beyond control. I exploded, unable to staunch the erotic tide that engulfed me.

Then it was my turn to express my feelings toward him. My hands and lips on him, centering on the one part of his smooth flesh where there was an outgrowth of bristly hair, made his hardness only harder. It took no time at all until, with rapid breathing and a deep moan, he too burst, releasing a power, as his body writhed, that I might not have expected from someone who seemed, almost delicate.

Both breathing rapidly, drained of energy yet still fully alert to physical sensations, we lay on the floor in each other's arms. I was hooked. This was my Mr. Right. This was a fantasy come true. I was in love, that's for sure.

I could feel a slight chill from the film of sweat on our bodies. I felt I must have seemed to him to be quite unpracticed, having fallen so quickly into passion and, without enough time to savor the eroticism of the moment, orgasmed. I felt the need to apologize and mumbled, "I, I'm sorry. It happened too fast. I didn't intend to . . ."

He looked up at me with his eyes slightly moist, brimming as if with tears. He seemed vulnerable as I held him, even while his lack of any clear facial expression made him appear very serene. With an affirming nod he softly answered back, "It's okay." Then, a smile played about his lips. Once again I was blessed with his wide grin, as he added, "It was great!"

I was ready to begin the rest of our lives together.

## PART II: THE VISITOR'S STORY

It my lucky that I find out Long Yang Club potluck party. I see their ad in the Boston gay newspaper, give them call, and I invited to attend. I away from my home country first time and try to learn everything about United States. If I say honestly, I also try to know the gay world in

America, where men have freedom to express all of their sexual side. I hope, just a small hope, that I could find some American man and have some sex with him. Some good fun. The problem is that I am no confidence in how to do that. It was only my secret dream, that I dream even when still at home in Asia. Now is my chance to see if my deep hidden dream can come true.

Everyone was very friendly at party. There were other Asians there, but none from my country, which is good because I might be embarrassed if I meet someone who know me from back home. Well, it could happen. I know I am in America, but I still feel connected to my home in Asia. Now that I am here in States, even though I want to enjoy some American-style sexual freedom, I still keep feel that all other Asians always looking at me.

I so happy to be at a real, American, gay, party. Just a few weeks ago I only dream of such chance. Actually, a few weeks ago I still act dutiful son for my parents, especially for my mother. She is very sweet, but she treats me like a ten-years-old boy. She cannot realize how grown up I am.

One of guys at the party, a white American older than me, seem especially friendly and he suggest we have lunch next day. I can hardly find my way around Boston, didn't know any restaurants at all, and so I say okay. I am glad he so much older than me because it give me kind of safe feeling when I talking with him. He not movie star type, probably not best-looking man at the party, but he seem interest in me, and I don't want to wait another nineteen years for my first "date." No guy ever ask me before. I quickly accepting his offer of meet for lunch and, I secretly hope, something more after the lunch. Maybe he is my ticket to sex in America.

When we get the eating place on following day, I see it a real small, plain restaurant he say is called deli. Not anything like the fancy hotel restaurants in my country, and not at all like elegant restaurants where our traditional cuisine is served back home. But I decide to accept this as new experience, except then I remember I don't know about American menus. So he suggest sandwich—it was like a hamburger but different—and the portions pretty big and I am hungry anyway.

Just as I had been hope, he ask me to his place for coffee and I feel my stomach churning inside. Now that I am in this situation, the one I had want, he probably ask for sex. It would be like another dream come true for me to finally have sex with American guy. A real adventure! And I just got here to the States! But wait, what exactly should I do? My high school friend back home once show me American gay video with sex scenes, but those a little too rough for me. So in my new American friend's apartment I am confused and just keep fairly quiet and keep my eyes down a lot, which in my country is very polite behavior when younger person speaks with older person. Probably he doesn't know that I feeling a mix of shyness with a lot eagerness that I don't know how to express.

Then it started. He ask if he can hug me. His question sort of catch me off guard, but I think a moment and tell him it is okay. Next he ask for a kiss. That's really sweet. He's not seem at all like those rough American guys in my friend's video. After kissing a while, he ask to unbutton my shirt. Wow! Now I know it will really happen. I maybe look very passive and quiet to him, but, boy, I want sex!

Between hug and kiss and touch, he manage to get my shirt off, my jeans and briefs down around my ankles and, then, there I see live before my eyes. He also take off his clothes. His body is so pale, almost milk white, with more muscle in his chest and thighs than we Asian men. It wasn't perfect western body like I see in the gay video (I think he will look better if he less a few pounds), but it was a different body type from mine, and that exciting. There was light sprinkling of hair on his chest and legs. His hardon, that just like in video but better because there in front of me. I couldn't believe it. I only do this a few times before, secretly, with my high school friend back home. Now I think I'm gonna do the real thing. I couldn't wait longer, I had to put my lips there, just as I before did so many times in private fantasies. And when I did, he really likes it. When he came, it probably the most sexy thing I ever experience. I can feel the force of ejaculation as it coursed through his hard penis. I see him close his eyes and open his lips as he come. He swooning and I wonder if he maybe fall over backwards. But I no time to think about it because he bend his head on my stomach, and kiss

lower and lower, then he put his lips on me. This I think too much for me. I then come, and that was absolute most sexy feeling I ever have.

I collapse next to him. Exhaust. Excite. Confuse. So happy. I want to laugh and holler and tell my mother how wonderful it is. I get teary eyed and think how happy my mother would be to know how happy I am. That's crazy thought, huh? But a happy thought for me. He hold me tightly and, because he such a kind and understand person, he began to apologize me. In my country apologize is considered very sincere thing to do.

So I thank his apology using same word I had say over and over that afternoon, "Okay." After all, my English is not so good and it's one real American word I know how to use well. Then I think another phrase I just learn at my language school. We all practice it one after other while sitting in circle in the classroom; the teacher tell us proper intonation. It's perfect phrase for this situation. I smile when it comes into my head. I look up at him and say, "It was great!"

As we both lay smiling content and silent, I wonder when Long Yang Club have their next party and what sort of new guys I can meet there. If it happen so easily this time, really I only follow this American guy what he ask, then I bet it always be easy to meet new guys in States, one after other. My time in America going to be very exciting than I dreamed.

# Meanwhile in Torino

Marian Michener

Sam Bowman touched the hands twined on his chest and traced one arm to the familiar shoulder of his lover Jeffrey. He identified the single bed in the Hotel Piemontese by the smell of the starched sheets and the muffled sound of a train pulling into the Porta Nuova station. Behind his eyes, he could see his own ribs made only of dense blue air hanging nearby in space. For his floating skeleton, it was evening in Seattle. For his landed muscles, it was 3 a.m. in Torino, and he and Jeffrey were the only people for thousands of miles yearning for dinner.

And dinner wasn't all they yearned for. Sam stroked Jeffrey's long thigh slowly. He closed his eyes. His blood heated and each heartbeat brought the scattered pieces of his body closer together.

Sam asked, "How many people do you think are in this bed, Bombshell?"

"What?"

"I feel like I have two bodies."

Jeffrey buried his mouth in Sam's neck, tickling it with his beard. "Two of you, huh?"

Jeffrey caressed him, for a long time, and every cell of Sam's body wanted to get in on the action. As Jeffrey held him and moved into him, Sam recognized the old urgency from their early days together. They made love like a sweaty scramble up a mountainside and a dive off the high cliff. Then Sam floated for a long time in Jeffrey's arms.

The softness of Jeffrey's chest under Sam's face made him want to cry. It felt like the transatlantic flight had wrung the armor from both of their bodies. He thought, I guess if I let that low, flirty voice thrill me back home, I'd never get anything done. But, then, he thought, it's not just me. He hasn't used that voice in years.

He realized Jeffrey was asking him, "Now, what day is it?"

"Who cares." Sam laughed, sad at the overdue delight.

Then he sighed and said, "Jeffrey, let's not ever work that hard again. We've been machines with each other these last few months."

Jeffrey murmured, "We'll try not to."

Sam's heart broke a little, thinking, count on a pair of workaholics to try to relax. With one hot tear in the corner of his eye, he let himself slip

into a five-hour drift. When he reached Italian morning at last, he kissed the gray patch in Jeffrey's red beard, and realized his own Seattle body was still lingering in the night behind him.

Sam's first success with his dining-room Italian won him a cup of espresso and a slow wink from one of Jeffrey's wide blue eyes. And Jeffrey's blond head leaned confidentially close to him to say, "If you can do this well with breakfast, you'll have the mystery of Franco and Beppe cracked by suppertime."

Sam flipped through his Italian-English dictionary. "Why don't I just ask?"

"Please don't." Jeffrey closed the book by putting his big hands around Sam's small, square ones. He smiled, persuasively. "If they aren't, then they really aren't. You know what I mean? They're either completely blatant, or completely innocent that anyone would ever interpret them that way."

"Sometimes you're too careful, sweetie." Sam said. "Remember Bobby's aunt?"

"Sometimes you're not careful enough. Remember Montreal? It just doesn't feel safe. Franco and Beppe have been so affectionate toward me, I wouldn't want them to freak out and dump us in the middle of a strange land."

"How affectionate, exactly, have they been?"

"You know. They took me under their wing, in Tunisia, and looked after me a lot. Half the time, I thought they were straight, and assuming I was likewise. But, half the time, I thought not. And I thought they thought I was not, too."

"Bringing me with you is a big hint."

Jeffrey smiled hungrily and nodded. "Only if they're looking for one. They may even be having the same conversation about us we are about them. But, here they are."

Two men approached their table in a great bustle of excitement, repeating Jeffrey's name, embracing him and kissing him on each cheek. Beppe, the shorter man, about Sam's height, appeared to be in his early thirties. He wore an Armani jacket, and a close beard and moustache and black curly hair styled with the great care that would mark a fellow

traveler back home. Beppe shook Sam's hand with a take-charge manner and a strong whiff of spicy cologne. His dark, dark eyes smiled as he said, "Benvenuto. Che piacere di conoscerla."

"Mi fa piacere conoscerla anche," Sam said and sighed, loving the birdsong sound of the language. This moment of understanding each other made his two years of grinding through Italian lessons finally worthwhile.

Franco was tall, with rowdy waves of chestnut hair, and looked five years older than Beppe, but still younger than Sam and Jeffrey. Sam couldn't stop the pump of recognition he felt at the olive-green cashmere pullover and the artful draping of Franco's trousers over his rugby player hips. He reminded himself that Italian men pay much more attention to their appearance than Americans. It doesn't necessarily signify anything.

Franco, the engineer, had been studying English, and he approached his first sentences as if he were building a structure across the gap between them. He took a deep breath and began in formal-sounding British tones, "We are very happy to welcome you to Torino. It has been so long since we have seen you, Jeffrey."

He reached out to clasp Sam's hand with long, warm fingers and a scent of citrus. "I am very pleased to meet you, Sam."

The "a" in Sam's name came out rhyming more with "Tom" than with "am." But, Sam was impressed.

"What beautiful English," he said.

Franco said, "We practice these phrases: 'Let me introduce my friend, John. I am very pleased to meet you, John,' many times. Repetition drills."

Sam nodded. "It works, doesn't it."

Franco looked puzzled. Sam said, "E' molto utile per imparare la lingua."

Franco smiled broadly, "Sì, sì, veramente. Anche lei parla Italiano molto bene."

"Grazie."

Jeffrey raised his red-blond eyebrows toward Sam. Sam forgot that Jeffrey couldn't understand until Jeffrey nudged him and asked, "What did he say?"

"He complimented my Italian."

"Ah-h-h," Jeffrey rocked on his heels and beamed.

The four men sat down, and Franco engaged Jeffrey in a textbook discussion of the trip and the weather in slow, careful English. Beppe touched Sam's arm and said, in equally enunciated Italian, "So, you are the translator of Jeffrey's letters. You do very well."

And Sam replied, feeling delicious danger at wandering from his practiced phrases, "I wanted to learn the language better to read your letters."

Beppe looped his hand through Sam's elbow and stayed so close Sam thought the spice cologne was starting to rub off on him. "I have been wondering what Jeffrey's translator would be like."

Am I imagining this, Sam wondered, or is he using translator as a euphemism for a person in Jeffrey's life? Beppe smiled knowingly. Sam returned the smile, and asked, or hoped he was asking, "Am I what you imagined?"

And Beppe said, "Very much so. I knew you would be intelligent and likable."

Sam thought he detected a bit of jealous irony in this, but he could not be sure across the barrier of culture and language. So he said, "You are very kind," with perhaps a bit of irony on his own part.

"I will have to explain our plan for the next three days to you," Beppe said. "Since Jeffrey doesn't speak Italian, and I don't speak English. Do you mind explaining it to him?"

Sam shook his head.

Beppe said he and Franco wanted to show the Americans some nearby sights today, and then go to his parents' house in the Canavese. From there, tomorrow they would go to the wedding of Paolo, another of Jeffrey's friends from his Tunisia trip, the stated occasion for the current visit. Sam wondered for the thirtieth time how Paolo had managed to schedule his wedding so that they would be there too late for the grape harvest and too early for the opera.

He tuned back in to Beppe's explanation, when he realized the other man was saying, "At my parents' house, we have only a double bed in our guest room. Do you mind sharing it with Jeffrey? Because, if you do, we can arrange something else."

“Oh, no,” Sam smiled as widely as he dared. “No problema.”

Beppe smiled just as widely. They both laughed. Sam decided Beppe definitely suspected, and was fishing for confirmation. He hoped he was giving it. The word for double bed is ‘matrimonio.’ The same as the word for marriage. Sam repeated it. “Most comfortable.”

Did he dare say, that is how we usually sleep? Maybe not. He thought that was the information he was giving in the international code of furnishings. On the other hand, Beppe had booked their room at the Piemontese. If everything was okay with him, why hadn’t he arranged a double for them there?

Maybe he wasn’t sure. Or, maybe it wasn’t safe. Sam and Jeffrey were usually less closeted when they were a long way from home, like this. But, as Jeffrey would remind him, they had friends who had gotten bloody noses for being too out in the wrong places.

Furthermore, Beppe and Franco would continue to live here after Sam and Jeffrey were gone. Sam knew Beppe had arranged the hotel through the software company he worked for. So, it would make sense for him to be careful. That is, if he had anything to hide. Maybe he was just straight and never thought a thing about it.

While Sam was arguing with himself, Beppe and Franco exchanged quick and heated words over the map Franco had picked up for the day trip. They spoke too fast for Sam to understand, but he could see that Beppe was angry because Franco had bought the wrong map, and they would have to return to the bookstore for another one. Beppe opened the map and shook it in front of Franco, who threw his hands up in frustration. They both huffed and turned their backs on each other.

Facing Sam, Franco changed his expression to smile engagingly, raise his shaggy eyebrows and say, “E’ come un matrimonio.”

Jeffrey said, “What was that?”

“Una discussione,” Franco replied.

Jeffrey said, “Quite a discussion.”

Sam allowed himself a slight smile. “Franco says, it’s like a marriage.”

Jeffrey raised his own eyebrows, “Oh?”

Then he pointed to himself and Sam and said, “Us, too.”

All four smiled, but Sam was uncertain whether they all meant the same thing.

\* \* \*

That afternoon, Sam and Jeffrey walked down the Stairs of the Dead cut into the high rock foundation of the medieval Sacra San Michele. "It's an abbey," Sam explained to Jeffrey. "Dedicated to St. Michael. Beppe says a young woman ran up here to escape an encroaching army. I'm not sure when this was, but it was a long time ago. The soldiers cornered her in the abbey. So she went to one of these high windows over the lake and jumped out. St. Michael and the other angels caught her and carried her to safety. She couldn't see how she had been saved. And she was curious to know how it worked. So, later, when the danger was over, she went to the same window and threw herself out again. But, I guess you can't use miracles like that capriciously. The angels let her drown for her pride. So, don't press your luck around here. One miracle is enough."

Jeffrey leaned close, as if he were helping, while Sam searched for a word in his Italian dictionary.

"One is enough?" he said, quietly.

Sam smiled into his book, and let his hip rest next to Jeffrey's. "That's what the angels say."

They walked the rest of the way down the Stairs of the Dead, bumping lightly against each other. Franco and Beppe were still inside, so Sam and Jeffrey looked over the low 11th-century wall at the Dora Riparia Valley in the foggy distance. "So," Sam said. "Franco says it's like a marriage. That seems pretty clear. And I get the feeling Beppe may be breaking custom to put us in his parents' guest bed together. Come on, Bombshell, let's just ask."

Jeffrey shushed him as Beppe and Franco approached. Beppe explained, in Italian, that they could see the Alps from here if it weren't so cloudy. "It's like the museum I wanted you to see in Rivoli. Closed."

Franco asked, "How do you say 'chiuso' in English?"

"Closed," Sam said.

"And do you also say, 'close the light'?"

"No, we say, 'turn off the light.'"

"Turn off?"

"Yes."

“And the opposite?”

“Turn on.”

“Turn on?”

“Perfect.”

Jeffrey smiled with seeming innocence and said, slowly, “There can also be a sexual meaning to the term ‘turn on.’”

Franco took a minute to understand this, then he smiled wolfishly, as if Jeffrey were sharing a technique for seduction. Sam felt trapped and a little hot.

Jeffrey said, “It means someone makes you feel sexual.”

Franco asked, “How would I use that with a woman I like? Does one say, ‘do you want to turn on me?’”

Sam was floored to be suddenly talking about women. He exchanged a look of disappointment with Jeffrey, who then returned to Franco’s question. “You would say, ‘you turn me on.’”

Franco said, “Do you want to turn me on?”

Jeffrey said, “No, it’s more with a feeling that already exists: ‘you turn me on.’”

Franco said, “You turn me on.”

Jeffrey said “Exactly,” and shot a “told you so” glance at Sam.

Sam felt like he was losing all the ground he had gained that day.

Beppe asked, in Italian, “What was that about?”

Sam explained about the phrase and its connotations and Franco’s question. And it seemed to Sam that even Beppe gave Franco a sad look.

Still, the fall day in the foothills was coolly beautiful. And Beppe found an inn that smelled of stewing meat and vegetables. He ordered and poured an oak-aged Barolo wine that spoke warmth back toward the gray day outside. The crunch of Torinese breadsticks filled some of Sam’s empty feeling. Next came a veal tonnato that made him stop speculating and start eating.

He looked at Jeffrey, who was chewing with a big grin. Jeffrey pursed his lips to figure out the sauce. “What is in this mayonnaise? I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

Sam asked Beppe, and Beppe said, “Tonno.”

“Tonno?”

“Sì. Tonno. E' tonnato.”

Sam made a fish face to be sure he had understood. Beppe and Franco laughed in agreement. To Jeffrey, Sam explained, “Tuna.”

Jeffrey laughed. “Tuna?”

Sam nodded.

Jeffrey frowned. “In the mayonnaise?”

He made a mortar and pestle motion with his hands with the question on his face.

Beppe smiled, and repeated the motion. “Sì. Sì.”

Jeffrey tasted again. He agreed with a smile, as if he had discovered it for himself. “It is. It's brilliant. Who would dream of this? Can I have the recipe?”

Sam translated.

Beppe looked pleased, and said his mother, who was a very fine cook, would love to give him hers.

Sam sighed. “And that's just the appetizer.”

Jeffrey tasted again, and said, “I think we've reached the outskirts of heaven.”

Sam consulted his dictionary and translated to the other two. Beppe shook his head and said, “Now you are beginning to understand. Americans eat too fast. For you, it is only fuel. You eat to live. We live to eat. This is no joke. For us, food is a sacrament.”

Sam translated to Jeffrey, who said, “I'm a convert.”

As deliberately as a priest, Beppe tasted and approved the Barbera d'Alba he had ordered to go with the lamb and cabbage stuffed agnolotti. Jeffrey groaned ecstatically at the combination, while Beppe looked stranglely satisfied, and Franco laughed. Sam blushed, delighting in the pasta and wine, but feeling strangely exposed.

When Beppe insisted they taste the stufato bergamese with a glass of ruby-colored Roero, Sam tried vainly to explain they had already eaten more than two American dinners and drunk more wine than they would drink in a week back home.

Beppe advised, as if he were teaching children how to eat, “Slow down, and try at least a little. It is a product of our region.”

Sam tasted and agreed the stew was beyond anything he had ever tasted before. Jeffrey emptied his bowl, then let his head drop on his chest in exhaustion. Sam played with his coffee cup and smiled. He liked how Jeffrey approached life as if it were a banquet laid out for his pleasure. And it seemed to work that way for him. For Sam, more than a few minutes of happiness made him want to run. Because wanting anything had always made it too easy to be hurt.

Back in Beppe's Fiat, Sam looked at the backs of Beppe's and Franco's heads. Were they lovers? He didn't know. His mind wandered among the clouds winding in and out of the bare branches of the trees on the hillsides.

They stopped at a church Franco explained was notable for its collection of memorie, drawings posted on the church wall in thanks for prayers answered. At the door, Franco reminded Sam that whenever he enters a church he has never been in before, he can make a wish. He called it a desiderio. Sam took a deep breath and was surprised to find, as he stepped into the dark frescoed church, that his wish was to keep doing exactly what he was doing, stepping into new churches and making wishes.

Then he followed Franco's gesture to look at the wall covered with drawings of people rising from their sickbeds, surviving accidents, finding lost children, each with the initials PGR, which Franco explained stood for 'Per Grazia Ricevuto,' 'for grace received.'

And Sam felt that, in this moment, his own life could be one of those drawings on the wall. He felt lucky to be alive, to have Jeffrey's love, even if their relationship was a little emotionally overdrawn. And these new friends showing them the local miracles. He believed in God, though he didn't know anything about Him, and most of the time he felt like he had moved around too much for God to have his address. But, here he stood feeling grace running like a river through his life. He couldn't explain it.

He had been to so many funerals these last few years. He thought of their friend and business partner, Bobby, dying that slow, suffocating, smelly death. And he knew there was also grace in the lives of those who don't get up off their sickbeds. He didn't know how to draw that. But he stood in the candlelight and pieced it out. They say God sees the

sparrow fall. If He doesn't stop her from falling, His love must comfort her as she falls. And isn't that something like grace?

Beppe was asking Sam if he was Catholic. "No," he said. "But I am a believer, in my own way."

Just at that moment, Jeffrey came up behind Sam and said, "I lit a candle for Mick."

Mick was Bobby's lover. Sick, now, too. Sam wasn't sure how lighting a candle worked, but it sounded like the right thing to do.

He put his arm around Jeffrey's waist. Jeffrey's particular musk and warmth made Sam sigh. He felt sad for all the people he knew who thought they had to choose between God and their sexuality. For him it was all part of the same mystery. He might feel overlooked by God, but, at least, he didn't feel judged. He looked at a stained-glass portrait of Mary looking like he felt, brokenhearted for the fracturing of people separated from God.

Beppe's dark, dark eyes looked just as sad. Sam took a deep breath and continued the conversation. "Jeffrey is Catholic, though."

Beppe smiled knowingly.

Sam asked, "And you?"

Beppe said, "Yes. And I also have to have my own beliefs."

Sam translated for Jeffrey, who shared a conspiratorial glance with Beppe.

Driving through the rocky, woodsy region of the Canavese that afternoon, Franco said in English, "Tomorrow, the wedding of Paolo and Bunny." Franco and Jeffrey laughed, then Franco repeated what he had said, in Italian, to Beppe. When Beppe laughed, it made Franco and Jeffrey laugh again.

Sam had heard the comment in two languages now, and still didn't understand it. He nudged Jeffrey. "What?"

Jeffrey explained, "When we were in Tunisia, Paolo used to call his girlfriend Bunny, because of her rabbit teeth. She wasn't there, mind you. And Franco used to talk about a girl back home whom he called Bird, and Beppe had one called Mouse."

Sam wasn't sure he liked this attitude toward women. But Jeffrey, who always liked to get along, didn't seem bothered by it. In fact, Jeffrey was asking Franco, "And how is Bird?"

Franco laughed sadly, "Things are not going well with Bird. She flew away to another man."

"Oh, too bad," Jeffrey said, without much conviction. "And Mouse?"

Franco translated to Beppe, who sounded a little relieved to explain, in Italian, "Mouse and I have decided just to be good friends."

Sam translated to Jeffrey, and then nodded, thinking he was recognizing one of those changes people make in their relationships to be true to themselves. He said, in Italian, "Friends are very important."

Sam must have dozed, then, because he woke up when Beppe pulled the Fiat into the cobbled streets of Franco's hometown, Ivrea. Beppe proposed a walk along the Dora River, which reflected the four towers of the local 14th-century castle. Beppe took Sam by the arm and guided him along the river path. Sam looked back at Franco and Jeffrey, also walking with their heads together, but more slowly. He thought, we'll find out the limits of my Italian and Franco's English with this pairing.

Beppe explained, in patient Italian, that, though he and Franco shared an apartment in Torino, they each spent the weekends in their parents' houses in the country. That was what they considered home.

"How long have you lived together?" Sam asked.

"Seven years."

Sam whistled. "That's a long time."

Beppe nodded.

Sam asked, "Are you happy together?"

Beppe said, "Yes. Very. And, how long have you two been together?"

"Three years."

"Soon after Tunisia?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy together?"

"Very much so."

"Jeffrey is so outgoing, and you are so practical. You must work together well."

Sam sighed. "We do work together well. Almost too well. Neither of us knows how to slow down and enjoy ourselves."

Beppe nodded, seriously. "This seems to be a very American problem."

Sam said, "Maybe Italy will help."

Beppe said, "I hope so."

The level of Sam's Italian forced them both to put things in the simplest possible terms, but Sam felt Beppe understood more than he was saying. Maybe even more than he himself understood. That work had gotten out of proportion for both of them in a way that was spiritually dangerous. Like Beppe said, it was almost a religion with the Italians to take time, with their food. And with each other. Strolling along the Dora, with Beppe's arm looped around his, he saw how much he needed exactly this. He smiled at Beppe.

Beppe smiled back and said, "Your Italian is really very nice. I am not saying this to be polite. Did you learn it for your work?"

"No," Sam laughed, thinking, you don't sell much real estate in Seattle in Italian. "I learned it so I could talk to you."

Beppe said, "That was quite a task."

Sam said, "It was worth it. I'm not saying this to be polite, either."

Sam thought of the young college students in his Italian classes, how they all seemed to fantasize coming to Italy and finding beautiful lovers. But what was his fantasy? Finding something with Jeffrey that was missing at home?

Beppe squeezed his arm and said, "So, we are all in love with each other?"

Sam smiled, and nodded. He was ready to say, "We're gay. I assume you are." But Jeffrey's caution at breakfast held him back. He looked behind them at Jeffrey and Franco walking arm in arm and laughing together in the evening air. Surely it was time to talk openly. But, you don't out your boyfriend when he's already said he's uneasy. Sam decided he had been open enough, for the time being. Maybe a specific disclosure wasn't called for. Maybe this was one of those cultures where you could do it, but not say it.

Beppe said, "I would like to come to the United States. To visit you two. And to see such a different country. I have always wanted to see San Francisco."

“San Francisco is beautiful. I lived there for five years.”

“Oh? One of my computer programming trainers at work made a joke about San Francisco, once. He was talking about data manipulations that only work if you have a large enough number of subgroups. He said, ‘For example, if you divide the population of Torino by gender, you have too few groups. But, if you divide the population of San Francisco by gender you would have enough.’”

Sam laughed. “That’s one of the things I liked about San Francisco.”

Beppe looked at him with serious dark eyes and said, “I think I would like that, too.”

Just then, Franco and Jeffrey caught up to them. Franco and Beppe exchanged a few words about the time, and agreed they should turn around. Sam and Jeffrey walked ahead a little, together, as the river walk darkened into night. Sam still felt at odds with the local time cues. He walked close to Jeffrey and told him about his conversation with Beppe.

“So,” he said, “it sounds to me like they definitely are.”

Jeffrey shook his head. “I would think so, too, if Franco hadn’t just spent the last hour telling me how devastated he was over the flight of his Bird.”

Sam groaned quietly. “I don’t get it.”

Beppe drove to Franco’s parents’ house, a flat in the old part of the city. On the way, Franco taught Jeffrey to say, “Pleased to meet you” to his parents. Franco’s parents, who kept a shop in town, greeted the Americans with an uproar of laughter and warm handshakes. They introduced them to the butcher in the shop next door, and Franco’s aunt and cousin, with Jeffrey consulting his palm, where he had written, “Kay Pea-Uh-Chair-Ay Dee Coh-Noh-Share-Vee.”

They left Franco there and returned to the car, Beppe saying, “Foreigners are a big event here.” Jeffrey was eating it up, waving from the window at all of Franco’s family and neighbors. Sam was becoming weary from trying to follow the unfamiliar language and the puzzling emotional landscape.

Beppe’s mother and father greeted the Americans with more laughter, and another leisurely meal of bagna cauda with the artichoke-like

thistle cardi, minestrone and roast rabbit, along with a hearty red and a sweet golden wine from their own vineyard. Something about drinking such good wine out of bottles without labels seemed otherworldly to Sam. But, then, he thought, with another sip, we are in another world.

Beppe's mother complained that the rabbit was not her best. It could have been better if she had had more time to prepare. Sam said he didn't think he could bear it if it were any better.

Jeffrey entreated Beppe's mother to explain how to make the *bagna cauda*, a hot dip of butter, olive oil, garlic, anchovies, and cream. Sam stumbled through the translation until they reached the white truffle, for which Beppe had to mime truffle dogs to the endless laughter of his family. It was Jeffrey who, without the benefit of a dictionary, finally guessed the mystery ingredient.

All night, in the *matrimonio* in the guest room, Jeffrey and Sam wrapped their legs around each other, and felt North American time slip further away.

"This is nice," Sam said, as they fell asleep.

"Yes-s-s," said Jeffrey. "But I haven't had sex in one of those singles since college. It kind of took me back."

"You're still a schoolboy, Bombshell," Sam said, and fell into a dream of angels carrying him to safety.

In the morning, Sam was the first to work his way out into the hall. There he found Beppe, hair wet and combed, carrying a tray with two tiny cups of thick, black espresso, a little sugar bowl and spoon. Beppe gave him a kiss on one cheek, and Sam returned the gesture, smiling at the boyish softness of Beppe's beard. Thanking him for the coffee, he felt, again, the wrap of conspiracy around them.

He took the tray into the room, where Jeffrey was patting the bed and locating himself. Sam said, "Beppe just kissed me."

"It must be the local custom."

"I just don't get it. He treats us as a couple. They've lived together for seven years. They take all their vacations together. And Franco says it's like a marriage. Then Franco comes up with this thing about chasing women. Do you think they're so used to using protective coloring, they're still not sure of us? Bird and Mouse didn't sound like core affec-

tions to me, even if Franco does claim his heart is broken. I think I used that old broken heart cover in high school when people wanted to know why I wasn't dating girls. Maybe it's a universal lie."

Jeffrey said, "I noticed in Tunisia, they never asked me about women. But maybe they are very close straight friends who are the main relationships in each other's lives, and they assume we're the same. You were supposed to help me figure this out."

"First I think I've got it, then I think I haven't," Sam said.

Jeffrey said, "That's exactly how I felt in Tunisia."

Then he grabbed Sam and pulled him onto the bed for a long kiss. "And what is this?" he asked.

Sam said, "This is two men who are lovers and have been for a long time, and are very happy knowing each other so well."

"How well?" Jeffrey asked, holding Sam close and nibbling his ear.

"Well enough that I know it turns you on to tease when you know there isn't time." Sam kissed him and pushed him away.

"Do you mean like turn on the light?" Jeffrey grabbed him and kissed him again. "Are you sure?"

"Sure it turns you on? Yes."

"I mean, sure we don't have time?"

"That, too," Sam said, and rolled out of Jeffrey's grasp and onto his feet.

The four had been invited to the bride's house to see her in her dress before the wedding, but when they arrived at Franco's parents' house, Franco wasn't ready. The patient intimacy with which Beppe fastened Franco's cufflinks didn't escape Sam and Jeffrey.

Franco, in his turn, straightened Beppe's tie and reviewed the total effect of his friend's formal clothes with detailed approval. Franco slapped Beppe's cheek. Jeffrey and Sam exchanged a glance of mutual mystification. Sam took in how good Beppe and Franco looked together, and reminded himself that the image of two men in Gucci shoes just didn't mean the same thing here as it did in Seattle. By then, it was time to rush to the church.

The Chapel of San Martino was nestled in a valley covered with rows of trimmed back grape vines, north of Ivrea. Sam let Jeffrey enter before

him, so he could follow the rituals. He remembered his *desiderio*, just as he crossed the threshold and looked at the wooden altar, carved in a fine detailed baroque piedmontese style, which made him wish he could be as aware of the art surrounding his life, back home, as he was of what people here apparently took for granted.

They were the last of the fifty guests to arrive. Sam followed the other three into a dark walnut pew burnished by decades of use. He breathed the smell of hot wax and incense into his chest and found there an old, unspoken prayer for love and peace. He leaned into Jeffrey's shoulder discreetly, and let something flow from his heart into his lover's body. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the slight, but definite, smile on Jeffrey's downturned face.

Then he sank into a pot of heating anger. Why don't we do this more? Why do we live the way we do? We spend so much time together, and make so little contact. I want to come home together, like this. All the time. I want to carry it back with us. Keep it burning. Because what else is life for, really?

A tear slipped onto his lower lash and stopped there, brimming at the edge.

Jeffrey touched his hand and leaned over to whisper, "I love you."

Sam nodded. The tear fell to his cheek. He sighed.

Paolo was at the front of the church now, with his witnesses. He was in his early thirties, but looked younger with his thin black hair brushed to shine, and a tuxedo a bit oversized. Sam balanced this observation against his generalization about how well straight Italian men dress. But it didn't matter. Paolo was beaming and beautiful.

Margherita, which was Bunny's real name, entered, looking classically nervous, with her black hair piled high on her head. Two little cousins carried the train of the wedding gown, which, Beppe had explained had been Margherita's mother's before. Her mother and her grandmother escorted her, because her father had died the year before.

Sam found a tear on his other cheek. What a nelly, he sniffed to himself. Oh, so what if he cared about this couple he didn't really know. It's lucky to celebrate new love. Well, it wasn't really new love. Paolo and Margherita had been engaged longer than he and Jeffrey had been to-

gether. He smiled. New commitment, then. And he wondered why his throat tightened at that.

What do I want? Stained glass and candles and a best friend singing a solo in the choir of a country church. For us? The rich tenor voice of the man who was singing for Paolo and Margherita reminded him of Bobby's voice. He thought, Bobby did sing to us, before he died. At our anniversary, last year. He sang, "That's What Friends Are For." I was too embarrassed to really hear it. I wish I could hear it again.

Oh dear, everyone is kneeling. I must be praying. God, whoever You are, do You think You've broken my heart enough for today? What's the point? Is there something to break through to?

Sam sighed, closed his eyes, and sat quietly. Maybe it's to know You are everywhere. That the Men's Chorus back home is our church choir. That I can hear Bobby's voice there, in the voices of his friends. That our life can be a ritual. That we have to remember to take the time to affirm our relationships and place them in Your hands.

That's where the peace and love is. Even when that little sparrow with the beautiful tenor voice falls. This is no time to pray for these things and then close up and run off before they can touch me. This is the time to stay.

He looked up and saw another stained glass panel of Mary, smiling this time. It reminded him of how his father always said he thought God must be a brown-eyed woman. There she is, Dad, Sam thought, not sure why his mouth tasted bitter. Except about the way his father worshipped the body of women. Always wanting the physical compassion of a new woman to staunch his wounds. Instead of what? Instead of coming home. Instead of staying.

Sam shook his head and sent his own flexed calves a message: forget it, we're staying. He turned his attention to the priest and his sermon, though he could only decipher a few phrases. Something about how God makes a place for us in heaven, and the new couple should imitate that in making a place on earth for each other and their family and friends.

He recognized the cadence of the priest calling the vows and Paolo and Margherita responding. He looked sideways at Jeffrey and it

seemed all his study of the language wasn't giving him any advantage here at all. Jeffrey was absorbed and understanding.

As the two exchanged rings, Sam thought, every day, then, can be a ritual. Every day, we can remember to give our hearts to each other. What could be more important? Just because it's terrifying is no reason not to do it. He bowed his head and closed his eyes and sent his heart's messenger to meet Jeffrey's, where their sleeves touched, like old neighbors always talking across a fence. And they sent their love to cradle the new couple. Margherita and Paolo were still strangers to Sam, but they had made a public statement of their commitment and invited him to share, and he did.

Paolo and Margherita knelt while the priest prepared the wine and host. He fed them, lovingly, and then invited the congregation to take communion. Jeffrey stood and brushed Sam's knee as he joined the line. Sam felt a little lonely, watching Jeffrey go. He wondered if Jeffrey was going to heaven without him. Or just to the front of the room.

Closing his eyes, he felt his own connection with the source. He knew heaven was within, as they say. And he was glad Jeffrey was finding his own way there. Jeffrey's relationship with the church was troubled, but never completely broken. Sam felt like he was watching a friend make his peace with a big and difficult parent. The church could be so wrong. But Jeffrey's love for God could never be.

Opening his eyes, Sam noticed Franco and Beppe had not joined the communion line. Sam never knew what all the rules were, and they were probably different here anyway. But he assumed it meant there was something unconfessed. Or unreconciled. From his peripheral view, Sam thought he saw a touch of sullenness in Beppe's cheeks, in the shadow of his affection for Paolo and Margherita. Beppe, he guessed, was the unreconciled.

Franco's face was more complicated, formally festive with its roman nose, aware of its own handsome power, but hiding something. Sam thought Franco was unconfessed, in more ways than one. And he wondered if Beppe and Franco were conversing through their adjoining shoulders as he and Jeffrey had. And he wondered if they could be doing it and not even know it. And he wondered if he and Jeffrey made the

opposite error, taking their communication for granted because they thought they knew what it meant.

What is a couple? How do we know we are one? How do they know they aren't? Why are we so anxious to put them in a category we think we understand? Each relationship is unique, isn't it? Even the two people who are in it have different experiences of it. Even after years. Sam stretched his flexed calves and thought, maybe trying to define them is a way of running from the mystery of our own. Maybe that's also why we work so hard.

Sam smiled wryly and decided he didn't care whether Beppe and Franco were lovers, whatever that meant; whether they had sex, whatever that is. He could see they loved each other. What more did he really need to know?

And he wanted to give that not-knowing to Paolo and Margherita as a wedding gift. It's the gift that comes with being gay, he thought, of not assuming we know who does what to whom, or what we'll be to each other. The hot delight of figuring it out. And may we not forget that, either, he thought.

Jeffrey stood in the aisle and smiled at Sam. Sam moved his knees to let him brush past again. Then, Sam turned to smile what was gathering in his heart. But when he did, he saw Beppe, also looking at Jeffrey, his dark eyebrows raised. Sam could see that Beppe had a pressing question that he could not speak. And he lost all his resolution not to wonder how Beppe and Franco's sexual identity fit into this question.

Oh well, he thought. Thank You, God, whoever You are, for these brief moments of peace. And I suppose I have You to thank for this inescapable curiosity, too.

Outside the church, a light layer of snow had fallen on the foothills and the vineyards. Sam turned his collar up and wondered, again, why the couple had chosen such a cool date.

Paolo and Margherita's friends had hung balloons filled with rice on a wire over the door. They also passed handfuls of rice and seeds to the excited crowd. When the couple came out the door, one man with a stick with a nail in it burst the balloons, and everyone shouted and washed the couple in waves of grain.

Then everyone had the chance to hug and kiss the bride and groom, and the parents and the grandmother, and each other in the confusion. Beppe, who had been a schoolmate of Paolo's, wiped tears from both eyes, then herded Franco and Sam and Jeffrey into the car.

"We're supposed to follow them."

Paolo unwrapped the ribbons that had appeared around his car, and opened the door for Margherita. Then he got in, kissed her, honked and waved, and started the procession toward the reception in the dining hall of the monastery where Paolo and Beppe had gone to school.

Beppe drove slowly behind them. He was confused by the route, and then explained, "They must be stopping at their house first."

Indeed, the wedding party stopped in front of a new stucco house beside a cold trickle of a creek. Beppe explained that one of the reasons Paolo and Margherita had been engaged so long was because it took years for the new house to rise through tangles of bureaucracy, financing, and construction.

Sam thought about how, back home, he and Jeffrey were always putting off their time together until the current deal or project or problem was over.

He joined in the bravos of family and friends, as Paolo lifted Margherita over the threshold. Then the newlyweds returned outside to lead the party onward.

Again the route puzzled Beppe. Then he said, "Ah, they'll stop at the graveyard."

The entourage stopped outside a high-walled cemetery. Beppe explained, "Margherita's father died a year ago, which also postponed the wedding. She wants to put her bouquet on her father's grave."

Sam translated. They all looked at their hands while they waited. Sam wondered what he would have to say to his father's grave, if he had one, on his wedding day. If he had one.

Margherita also had her head down when she returned to their car. The entourage drove on quietly for a mile or so. Then Sam could see that Margherita had raised her head again. Paolo honked his horn, and Beppe and the others took up honking in reply.

They wound up into dry snowy clouds to the top of one of the foothills, where the monastery sat with the authority of the ages. The cou-

ple's friends had rigged a bicycle to a two-wheeled cart, and required Paolo to pedal his bride up the driveway to the celebration. They gave her a stick with a carrot on it. Paolo smiled and took off his tux jacket before he complied. Margherita blushed as the group cheered Paolo on.

Beppe parked at the end of the lane as well, and the four men walked behind the procession, laughing. Sam said to Beppe, "This is where you and Paolo went to school?"

Sam couldn't translate the mixture of smile and wince in Beppe's face. Maybe this is some macho expression you use, here, to keep your heart from being broken by the beauty of such a day.

Meanwhile, he observed Franco perking up at the table of pastries and champagne set out in the open, arched gallery of the monastery to sustain the party as they gathered. Franco picked up full glasses for all four men and handed them out, bubbling a little himself. He raised his for a toast, and asked Jeffrey, "What do you say, in America?"

Sam thought he was the only one who recognized the touch of wickedness in Jeffrey's smile as he raised his glass and his eyebrows toward Franco and Beppe.

"To the happy couple," he said.

Franco repeated carefully, "To the happy couple," returning Jeffrey's gesture. Beppe nudged Franco, and Franco translated the toast into Italian. Then Beppe also raised his glass.

Sam hid a grin that threatened to become a giggle behind his handkerchief. And he looked at Beppe, grinning back at him with what also looked like overflowing mischief. Sam shook his head and shrugged his helplessness to Beppe, who responded in kind.

Franco, meanwhile, proposed another: "To our friendship."

Sam joined the toast, but reflected that Franco did not seem to be in on the conspiracy.

Is it possible, he wondered, that Beppe is and Franco isn't? Could they have lived together for seven years without Franco knowing? Denial is a powerful thing. He shivered and watched a few snowflakes drift in the courtyard beside them.

Then the mother of the bride arrived to announce seating for the wedding dinner. The crowd pressed into the large dining hall, laughing at the confusion. Inside, a band of six men in blue jeans and white shirts

played a waltz. Franco was distressed to find there weren't seats available for the four men to sit together. But Beppe signalled Paolo and explained the problem. Paolo grinned and seemed to be teasing Beppe, but he spoke to one of the caterers, also in blue jeans, and an additional table was added to a long bank and places set for them.

"Whew," Jeffrey whispered. "I wouldn't have wanted to try to handle this dinner without you."

This warmed Sam's heart. Jeffrey was always so confident, Sam liked to hear him admit he needed him, sometimes. He agreed, "This is much better."

Franco spoke emphatically, "We want to be together."

Beppe smiled, with a slight tremor of worry passing over his forehead like the V of geese they had seen fly over on their way up the hill to the monastery.

Moments later, though, Beppe's face was more animated than usual as he introduced the bottle of the native Blanc de la Salle the caterer had put on the table. Another caterer approached with a platter of chilled salmon and laid a slice on each plate.

Beppe smiled his wide smile. "Buon appetito," he said.

Jeffrey replied, "Buon appetito," and speared two bites of salmon, hungrily.

Sam whispered, "You might want to pace yourself."

He held the menu in front of Jeffrey's nose. "That's just the first of four appetizers."

Jeffrey groaned, "Heaven."

Sam translated.

Beppe smiled. "So, he understands."

Sam said, "I was thinking, when we walked into that beautiful chapel this morning, with all that shining woodwork, that the architects of these places must feel they have done their job if walking in makes you want to say, 'Oh, God.' And then I was thinking, an Italian host feels the meal he serves you has done its job when you can't take another bite, and you say, 'Oh, God.'"

Beppe smiled and nodded. "Yes."

When he saw the caterer approach with a bottle of bright red Torrette to go with the prosciutto and melon, Sam emptied the remains of his

white wine under the table, and resolved to nurse a glass of the Torette for the duration. The hubbub all around him seemed sweet to him. And he would have been content to make a meal of the prosciutto and melon.

Paolo's friends were chanting for him to kiss the bride. Shy Paolo gave Margherita a peck. His friends groaned, "We want a kiss. A really big kiss."

Paolo's mother gave Paolo's father a big, brimming, old lovers' kiss, which made Paolo's father blush, but delighted the chanting friends. Jeffrey's hand landed lightly on Sam's leg. Sam touched Jeffrey's hand under the table to say, "Yes, I would like to grow old with you that vigorously, too."

He sipped the mountain red again. Franco joked about Paolo and Margherita's apparent virginity, and proposed a toast Sam didn't completely understand, but he assumed it was to their education.

Sam stayed with his old friend, the Torrette, while he ate the risotto, though he tasted the Chambave Rouge Beppe poured for Jeffrey. And when the veal tonnato arrived, Jeffrey teased him with fish faces, saying, "E' tonnato."

Beppe joined the game, imitating Jeffrey tasting and sighing. "Siamo arrivati nei sobborghi di paradiso."

Sam translated, "We have reached the outskirts of heaven."

Jeffrey laughed, after everyone else had laughed, which made everyone else laugh again. Sam's head began to spin, and he felt too hot. He excused himself for a walk.

In the cool late afternoon outside the dining room, three men smoked cigars and listened to the soccer game on a radio. Three young boys played billiards at a table set out in the courtyard.

Sam walked off into the woods to pee behind a stand of pines. The fresh air revived him some, so he strolled to the top of the hill behind the monastery and looked at the foggy valley below. He turned over the clues to the mystery of Franco and Beppe, restlessly. He kicked a few stones. He took in deep breaths of the pine air and sighed them out again. This relieved the overheated feeling. But he was still uneasy.

He shrugged. The only way out is through, he thought. He ambled slowly back down the hill.

At the banquet table, Jeffrey was managing to converse without his translator. As Sam approached, Jeffrey raised his eyebrows and said, "They want to know about my zoo."

"Your zoo?"

"Women in my life, you know, like Mouse and Bird."

"Oh-h-h. Your zoo," Sam said, mentally scratching from his list the clue marked "They never ask me about women."

He was about to say, "I am Jeffrey's zoo," when Franco said, "He doesn't tell. Even though we tell him everything."

Everything, Sam wondered. I was hoping there was something you hadn't told us yet.

Jeffrey had on his charming smile. "I tell them, honestly, it's been so long since I've had a girlfriend, I really don't remember."

Sam raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"But then I remembered Ellen," Jeffrey continued.

Sam's eyebrows topped their previous altitude record. He nodded again. "Ellen."

Jeffrey said, "It's true, she was my last girlfriend. It was a long time ago."

"Allora, tell us about Ellen," Franco said, leaning forward to receive some bawdy confidence from Jeffrey.

"I met Ellen in real estate school," Jeffrey said. "She was also a student. A very beautiful and intelligent woman. We went out a few times."

Franco leaned forward further. "Yes?"

"I liked her a lot."

Franco nodded, encouragingly.

"But it didn't work out."

Franco frowned. "Why?"

"Wel-l-l," Jeffrey said, "she was a lesbian." Franco didn't seem to understand.

Sam flipped through his dictionary. "Lesbica. Omosessuale."

Franco blushed and drew back as far as he could without leaving his seat. "Oh, poor Jeffrey. How sad. That is terrible. Disgusting."

He translated to Beppe, who said, in Italian, "There's nothing wrong with being a lesbian. That's just the way she is. Things can work out

well for her with the right person. Another woman. It just wasn't right for Jeffrey. As a lover. But they can be very good friends. I have friends who are gay. And they are good friends."

Franco was practically spitting. "No, no, no, no, no. I just can't accept it. That is very bad luck for poor Jeffrey."

Sam said, "I agree with Beppe."

Jeffrey said, "What did Beppe say?"

Sam translated.

Jeffrey said, "Yes, that is exactly how it was for me. Ellen is still beautiful and intelligent. We've become good friends over the years. And friends are important."

Franco translated to Beppe. Sam started to translate back to Jeffrey, and then remembered it was what Jeffrey had said in the first place.

"I think I'm getting tired of this translating," Sam said. "I seem to need another walk. I'll be back."

Hands in his pockets, and scarf wrapped around his neck, Sam walked out again, past the men who were listening to the soccer game. They had progressed from cigars to brandy. Two of the boys were still playing billiards, while the third nodded in his father's lap. Sam walked furiously down the tree-lined lane they had come up earlier.

Well, he thought, Franco definitely isn't. Unless he's in deep denial. Which may be. But I don't want to be too close to that. He's a big guy, and he could really blow up if he figures us out. It's a good thing we're leaving Monday morning.

But Beppe is still a mystery. He's the one I would have tagged in the first place. He's the one who seems to be in on it. He was sure making sure we knew he didn't have any judgment of Ellen and that he has gay friends. I think there's more we haven't figured out there.

These two seem so in love, some of the time. I just hate to think what it would be like to be in love with Franco, and so close, and hear that stuff. For seven years. Is it some long-suffering love, where Franco will eventually find a woman and move out and marry her and break poor, faithful Beppe's heart? Without ever knowing it? I wouldn't want to be around when that comes down.

Sam reached the end of the gravel lane. The tarmac road it fed onto was wider, but still narrow by American standards. He jogged a few

yards up it, in spite of his tight shoes. And back again. He flapped his arms and huffed frosty air and thought, I liked the mystery better when we didn't have it half figured out. I wish I hadn't studied this damned language, and we could sit together and smile and eat and drink wine and think we were more alike than we are, and never find out otherwise.

He shook his head and kicked his way back up the lane. And dammit, he thought, Jeffrey's closeted instincts were right. And I hate it.

As he walked back up the vaulted gallery, the sound of the celebration inside warmed him in spite of his irritation and sense of danger.

In the dining hall, Paolo was removing Margherita's garter to hoots and applause. He announced that all the single men should come up to the front, now. No hiding.

And he called his single friends by name. "And Beppe and Franco, come up front, and bring Jeffrey and his friend, too."

Sam joined the other three in front of the bandstand. There was a drumroll, and Paolo turned his back to them and shot the garter like a rubber band into the crowd. Sam only had a second to have a fateful feeling about its trajectory. Then it landed on Jeffrey's shoulder.

The crowd laughed knowingly. So did Sam, but it was a different knowing. Franco slapped Jeffrey on the back and said, "When you come to visit us again, you will bring your new wife with you."

Jeffrey smiled politely. Sam whispered to him, "You better not."

Jeffrey whispered back, "Let's just say I already have."

Out loud, Sam said, "Congratulations."

Then he turned to see Beppe winking at him.

That night, back in the matrimonio at Beppe's parents' house, Sam said, "I've started to think Beppe is and Franco isn't."

Jeffrey nodded. "While you were out walking, Franco went off to dance with some woman. And Beppe picked through your dictionary enough to say, again, that he didn't see anything wrong with gay people. Each to his own, as it were. And he also said, next time we visit, he hopes his English and my Italian will be good enough that we can talk without a translator. And guess what he wants to talk about."

Sam was half asleep on Jeffrey's shoulder. He said, "Hm-m-m?"

"He wants to talk about you—"

Sam's eyes flew open.

"—and Franco."

Sam flipped over and whispered, "Dammit. That makes it sound like there is something between them."

Jeffrey nodded and kissed Sam's forehead. "Beppe sounds like he's ready to say something. What we have to do is get him alone for a little while. But there's not much chance of that. In fact, when Franco came back from dancing with that woman and saw Beppe and me getting along so well without benefit of translators, he looked like he was about to hit one of us. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was jealous."

"He'd better get out of the pit of denial if he's going to protect any interest in poor old Beppe."

Jeffrey nodded, and chuckled.

"And me?" Sam asked.

"You what?"

"Do I have to protect some turf here?"

"What am I, a piece of real estate?" Jeffrey grinned.

"If so, at least you're a prime piece."

The whole situation made Sam feel like wrapping his legs around Jeffrey and holding on tight.

Jeffrey twisted away and searched in his bag for a moment. He turned back, holding a condom, which Sam helped him put on. As they started to move together, the headboard of the matrimonio bounced against the wall loudly. Jeffrey groaned and stopped for a moment. Then he held Sam tightly and rolled off the bed onto the carpeted floor. Sam started to laugh, stunned, but Jeffrey put his hand over Sam's mouth. Trying not to make noise made the sex more intense. Sam came, moments ahead of Jeffrey, biting his hand to keep from crying "Oh, God."

Sam woke up with a headache, sore muscles and a weariness with mysteries. Jeffrey was gone, but Sam could hear someone running water in the bathroom next door. The smell of espresso from downstairs held the possibility of comfort. With twenty-four hours until their flight to Naples, Sam wasn't sure he wanted to get any further into the mire of Beppe and Franco. And he didn't see much hope of learning more.

Jeffrey whistled into the room, wearing a towel around his waist, and carrying a tray with two cups of espresso.

"My hero," Sam said, accepting a cup. Then he looked at Jeffrey suspiciously. "Did you get the kiss, too?"

Jeffrey grinned and kissed Sam lightly on each cheek. "Franco isn't feeling well, probably too much wine, women and song. So he's staying with his parents, and we have a day and a night alone with Beppe."

Sam perked up in spite of himself. But he sat up too quickly and hit a dizzy level. He lay back down. "I better rest up for this."

Even though he had thought he would never eat again, Sam found himself working his way through a prosciutto sandwich at a bar in the Piazza di Città of Ivrea later that day. He washed it down with a lemon soda that tasted like real lemons, not like at home.

Beppe ordered espresso for the three of them, and Sam tasted, appreciating the sensation of untangling nerves. He said to Beppe, "Italy has slowed us down, at least."

Beppe looked satisfied.

The day was clear and crisp. Beppe suggested a walk to the ruins of the Castello San Maurizio. The three walked through a mile of narrow city lanes, and then up the long slow slope of Castelazzo Hill. The evergreens were scraggly and the air was wintry above the old town.

"Castelazzo? Does that mean the bad castle?" Sam asked in Italian.

"I'll explain when we get there," Beppe said.

As they walked, Jeffrey asked Sam to ask Beppe what his relationship was with the church.

Beppe laughed dryly. "I was raised to be a good Catholic. And I believed it all devoutly, when I was younger. Over the years, I disagreed with the church more and more. So, now, I don't go. But I have my own relationship with God. My own way of communicating. My own understanding of what He wants from us."

Jeffrey asked, and Sam translated, "What do you disagree with the church about?"

Beppe smiled again. "Birth control, abortion, divorce."

He looked at Jeffrey. "Sex outside of marriage."

After Sam translated, Jeffrey nodded again.

Beppe said, "And you?"

Jeffrey said, "I think the church is wrong on those issues. I also have had to work out my own communication with God. But, once a Catholic, always a Catholic."

After Sam translated this, Beppe nodded.

They had reached the top of the hill where scraps of a few very old fallen walls remained. Beppe indicated, with a sweep of his arm, the rich valley of the Dora below them, and the clear white Alps, beyond.

"Finally," he said, "the view is open."

Sam translated, and took in the mountains with deep gulps of cold air.

Beppe turned and pointed to the ruins. He said, "According to the legend of Ivrea, there was a miller's daughter, named Violetta, who married a peasant named Toniotto, in the 12th century, here. And the lord in this Castle San Maurizio wanted his right of the first night with her. She gathered the other peasants, and they agreed to revolt against the lord. She came to the Castellazzo with a dagger hidden in her hair, stabbed the tyrant, cut off his head, and signaled the peasants, who came and completely destroyed the castle. Later, the Monferrato family took over Ivrea and built the San Maurizio castle again. In the thirteenth century, it was destroyed in another revolt. In 1333, the city passed a law that no building will ever be built on these remains again.

"Every year, as part of Carnival, a man representing the city comes to this hill, picks up one of the stones from the castle, takes it down to the Ponte Vecchio on the river, and throws it in, to signify the freedom of the city from tyranny.

"This is the place I always come to have important conversations."

While Sam translated to Jeffrey, he saw Beppe was drawing strength from the story. When he reached the end, all three of them smiled together for a moment. Then Jeffrey said, "Tell him."

"Tell him what?"

"About us."

"Now?"

Jeffrey smiled and nodded.

Sam looked at Jeffrey, feeling as if he were still translating. "You want me to tell him we're gay?"

Jeffrey kept nodding and smiling, apparently enjoying Sam's surprise. "Aren't you the one who has been wanting to tell?"

Sam blushed. He looked at Beppe, who was waiting for translation. He gulped. Slowly, he said, "Jeffrey vuole che tu sapere che siamo omosessuali."

This sounded to Sam more like a line in a melodrama than his own voice. Beppe was still smiling, with a little wind in his hair and the ruins of the castle behind him.

"I know," he said.

Sam translated. Jeffrey nodded. He said, "Ask him how he knew."

Beppe replied, "It was not difficult to tell, for one who has had experience."

Sam grinned, "Ah, that raises more questions."

Beppe hesitated. "I have never told this to anyone before."

Sam said, "We're leaving for Naples in the morning. Then, all the way back to America. We won't tell."

Beppe nodded and indicated a low stone wall nearby. The three sat down, with Sam in the middle.

Beppe said, "I have had one relationship with another man. It ended badly."

When Sam had translated, Jeffrey asked, "And Franco?"

Beppe explained, "Franco and I are very close. We are like an old couple, aren't we? We love each other very much. But I wouldn't want to be lovers with him. He is very unpredictable. It wouldn't be safe."

Sam asked, "Does he know about you?"

Beppe said, "I told him I thought I could be attracted to another man. But he doesn't know about my experience. Nobody does. Except you."

Sam said, "How terrible not to be able to talk with anyone."

Beppe nodded with a bitter smile. "It is a great relief to be able to talk with you two. I didn't want you to leave without our having this conversation. I asked Franco to stay home today."

"Ah-h-h," Sam said, and Jeffrey echoed it, when he understood.

Then Jeffrey asked Sam to ask, "Does Franco know about us?"

Beppe shook his head. "He would be shocked."

Sam said, "We guessed that."

Beppe continued, "But he would come to understand. If you like, I will explain it to him a little at a time. That is what I did about myself. And he does accept this about me."

Jeffrey asked, "How has it been for you to live with him?"

Beppe explained, "At first, I was very attracted to him. I had to draw a definite line between us, and keep myself behind that line. After awhile I got to know him too well, do you understand?"

Sam nodded.

Beppe continued, "I didn't feel sexual about him anymore. Of course, it's been easier since then."

Sam explained all this to Jeffrey, who then asked, "Can you imagine being with someone else?"

Beppe looked at him with soft, black eyes. "Yes. Just recently I have begun to imagine myself with someone else. I wasn't ready before. So, of course, I didn't find anyone. But someday soon, I will. I will miss Franco. But it won't be as difficult for me to leave as you would think."

Sam translated. Jeffrey said, "Not as difficult as it will be for Franco. He doesn't really know how much he loves you."

Sam translated. He was astounded that his Italian could carry them into this conversation. None of this was covered in his practice dialogues. He felt like he was going on sheer necessity and inertia. And if he stopped to think about it, he wouldn't know a word of this beautiful language. It was like a fairy tale, standing among the ruins of the cursed castle and speaking to this man, whose language he really didn't know well enough for this conversation, about secrets that had never been spoken out of doors before.

Jeffrey said, "Ask him if Franco was jealous when he saw me speaking to him yesterday." Sam explained Jeffrey's question.

Beppe nodded, "Yes. Jeffrey understands well. Jeffrey's eyes speak without words, and they see what isn't spoken."

A good thing, Sam thought, since he doesn't speak the language.

Jeffrey asked, and Sam translated, "So, Franco was jealous?"

Beppe said, "When Franco came back, we started talking about how much I like Jeffrey, how much I like his mind and his manners and his eyes and so on. And Franco knows I could be attracted to a man. So, he asked me if there was something else. And I said there was."

Hold the dictionary, Sam thought. He said, "Let me be sure I understand this. Franco asked you if there was something else? And you said there was? Do you mean an attraction?"

Beppe nodded.

Sam asked, "A sexual attraction?"

Beppe nodded, again. "I understand you two are together. And I would never do anything about it. But I am attracted to Jeffrey."

"Ah-h-h-h," Sam said. "Hold on a minute."

He turned to Jeffrey and explained. Jeffrey smiled at Beppe. "I thought so."

Sam said, "Well, where was I when all this was going on?"

Jeffrey grinned. "Don't worry. You're our translator. We couldn't do this without you."

"Oh, yes, you could."

Jeffrey squeezed Sam's shoulders. "You can trust me, dear. This is just part of Beppe's coming out. And separating from Franco. He respects our relationship. We don't speak the same language. He lives ten thousand miles away. And we're leaving in the morning. And I love you."

"And if it weren't for me, your limited vocabulary, and the continental drift?"

Jeffrey kissed Sam's cheek, "Do you think I want to be with someone else?"

"That's not a direct answer."

Jeffrey grinned. "I'm very happy with you."

"And if I weren't here?"

Jeffrey stopped grinning. "I'm not going to be trapped into a hypothetical question. You're here. And I love you. And it's safe. Nothing's going to happen."

Jeffrey held Sam's hand. Sam fumed, "I don't know why it's hard to trust you."

Jeffrey spoke calmly, "I don't know why, either."

Sam smiled and pouted at the same time. Beppe asked, "Una discussione?"

Sam said, "E' come un matrimonio," which made all three of them laugh.

Beppe asked, "Do you consider yourselves married?"

Sam translated, looking at Jeffrey shyly.

But Jeffrey grinned and said, "As married as anyone could be."

Sam squeezed Jeffrey's hand.

Beppe asked, "And it doesn't make any difference to you that the church does not accept this?"

Sam saw a sadness cross Jeffrey's face that rarely surfaced. Jeffrey said, "I wish the church would. But I'm not waiting."

Beppe asked, "Do you believe you can create your own sacraments?"

Sam translated and listened with interest for Jeffrey's reply. Jeffrey looked at the ruins of the Castelazzo. "If by sacrament you mean some approval only the church can give, of course, we can't. But, if you mean passages in our lives, which change our lives, and which we need God's truth in, then, yes."

Hearing this in English gave Sam a shiver of recognition. It was something he and Jeffrey had never talked about. When he translated it into Italian and saw how much Beppe yearned for just such a relationship, he felt as if he were growing antlers to help him ward off Beppe's attraction to Jeffrey. He appreciated, for the first time, how seriously both Jeffrey and he took the relationship. And he also wished Beppe could see both of them when they were tired and short with each other and neglectful of the relationship. That it's not as easy as Beppe's fantasies. Not even as easy as his own.

Beppe mimed a glass to toast them. Using the first English Sam had heard him use, Beppe said, "To the happy couple."

Sam blushed. "Good English, Beppe."

Beppe stood. "I am glad we talked. It is very good to feel more free."

The three men put their arms around one another, in the darkening day. Then they walked down the hill, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

After the goodbyes at both Beppe's parents' house and Franco's, the three returned to Beppe and Franco's apartment in Torino, bearing fresh tortellini from Franco's parents' shop. Beppe cooked this, and decanted a bottle of his parents' wine.

As Sam tasted a little of the wine, and savored the pasta for what seemed like glorious hours, he thought he understood how the sacrament of food and friends had become even more important to Beppe as he became more estranged from the church. And he couldn't think of anything in his life that ever gave him that sense of union. Except sex.

Over dinner, Jeffrey asked Sam to tell Beppe about their circle of friends back home. And that he hoped Beppe would find this for himself, too. Sam described their community, and, as he found the Italian to do this with, he saw what a wonder it was to Beppe. Even the institutions Sam himself had grown a bit jaded with: the bars, the newspaper everyone loved to hate, the range of political groups from Gay Republicans to ACT UP, the Alice B. Theater, the parade. The gay Catholics. The gay weddings.

Beppe's jaw dropped. He asked, "Have you had a ceremony?"

Sam said, "No, but I might like to have one someday."

When he translated this interchange into English, Jeffrey said, "I didn't know that."

Sam said, "I didn't either."

Jeffrey considered it. "Maybe we will."

He and Sam raised their eyebrows at each other.

Beppe said he knew of two gay bars in Torino, and gay political groups in other cities. But he had always been too afraid to go anywhere near them. "Someday soon, I may feel brave enough."

As the night went on, no one wanted to end the conversation with any question unanswered. In the wee hours, Jeffrey said, "Ask him about his lover."

Sam asked, and a cloud passed over Beppe's face.

Beppe said, in low tones, "He was married."

Sam translated, and Jeffrey asked, "What happened?"

Beppe said, "He was very secretive and afraid. His wife found out and threatened to expose us unless we ended it."

Jeffrey said, "Just because the one man you've had a relationship with was furtive and ashamed, doesn't mean it always has to be that way."

Sam was exhausted, and translating was becoming difficult. But when he had expressed this hope, Beppe looked at him with soft eyes and said, "Knowing you two helps."

Sam laughed. And, when he translated, Jeffrey laughed too. They blushed. But it was true. Even with a relationship that was malnourished and limping when they arrived in Italy three days ago, they were still a better example than anything Beppe had seen so far. And that gave Sam,

at least, some inspiration to work on it. Because, he thought, what you can do in your relationship is not just for you, it's for the people around you, too.

Meanwhile, since they were urging Beppe to adventure out into new relationships, the final order of business was a discussion of safe sex. So, once again, Sam travelled where no grammar drill had ever gone before. And they extracted a promise from Beppe to play safe.

The few hours that were left to the night, Jeffrey and Sam tried to sleep in the *matrimonio* in Franco's room.

Sam asked, "Do you feel restless attraction in the air?"

Jeffrey said, "Less so, now that we've talked."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Silence is erotic. Like last night."

Sam blushed. The image of sex with Jeffrey didn't necessarily make him feel less vulnerable. He said, "You know, in the old days, you would have just done it."

Jeffrey said, "Not me. You would have done it in the old days. I was sitting home reading murder mysteries, remember?"

"Well," Sam sighed, "there is something to be said for marrying the only sexually conservative gay man in the universe."

"Except at home," Jeffrey said, and then he ran his tongue down Sam's ribs and belly. Sam felt hot, and the sex felt good, and he only wondered once if Jeffrey was thinking of someone else. Still, lying in the dark afterward, he did a mobility check, like he had all his life. What if Jeffrey changed his mind and wanted to be with Beppe? What if we broke up? I could find a way to buy him out of the house and business, or he would have to buy me out. I could start over. I have enough on hand to rent an apartment on Capitol Hill while we settle things. I'd just be single, again. I've done that before. I know how to do it.

Once he'd done that, he could go fall asleep in Jeffrey's arms, visualizing the other possibility. That nothing goes wrong that they can't work out. That they do go on, together. For years and years. Old lovers, still kissing, like Paolo's parents at the wedding feast.

In the morning, Beppe drove them to the airport and stood with them as they went through the line to check their baggage. When they reached the security line, Sam hugged Beppe first. Then, he busied himself with a buckle on his carry-on, rather than watch Beppe embracing Jeffrey. He heard Beppe whisper something to Jeffrey, and he wondered what language it was in.

When he heard Beppe say, in Italian, "One more question," he knew the hug was over, and it was safe to look up. He didn't have to translate that, since they had said it so many times by then.

Beppe said to Jeffrey, "You took communion."

Sam translated. And he felt like it was safe to fall in love with Jeffrey all over again when he saw him lift one of those eyebrows and say, "I just can't imagine God not blessing our love. Can you?"

I AM:  
An Artist's Statement

Jack Whitlow

I AM a private person. I AM an artist. My creativity is personal and private, and only occurs when I AM inspired. I AM inspired by whatever pleases me by its inherent beauty, its spirituality, its eroticism, and most of all, by light and its effect on what it touches, from the human figure to the changing landscape.

Many years ago I was censured for producing drawings that did not meet “community standards.” This resulted in a long struggle for freedom of self-expression. Having been given the artistic freedom to express myself has led to what you can see in my current work.

The creation of an artist is the creation of and by his spiritual self, created not for others but for himself. If others like his creation, it is for their own reasons, not for his.

This “I AM” statement in its original form was written in 1976 following a very dark period of my life. In the early 1960s I had had several drawings published in an early gay publication, Fizeek Art Quarterly, published in Washington, DC, by the Grecian Guild, a group of very brave gay men who dared to fight the establishment for the right to be seen and heard.

The magazine also published my name and address, and, unknown to me, the postal authorities began observing my mail and after about four or five years attempted to entrap me with manufactured “evidence” to make it appear that I was “trafficking in pornography.” They went to my employer, Texas A&M University, and to the city government. They came into my home and searched it thoroughly, finding nothing illegal, but my job was terminated. I was also forced to sell my home and to “get out of town” by the end of the month.

With no resources to fight back, I left. In Houston several months later, I was in a devastating automobile accident and, as a result, discovered the joys of painkillers combined with tranquilizers. My doctor was a gay man, attracted to me, who gave me total access to the drugs I wanted. In a very short time I was totally addicted.

Within two years, I had lost several jobs and wrecked several cars but somehow remained alive, though barely functioning. I became completely

dependent on my family and finally moved to Virginia to be with my sister. With her support and patience, I finally was able to break away from my troubles.

In Virginia, with the help of my best friend, I found the local gay community. I made many friends who encouraged me to pursue my art. Now almost 25 years later, I am still producing my drawings and constantly finding inspiration and encouragement to continue working.

## Contributors

Thomas J. D. Armbrrecht is Professor of French at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. In addition to his work in French literature and queer studies, he writes programs for German television. Among his recent publications are two articles about Julien Green, to be published in upcoming anthologies, and an article about Beur literature, which will appear in a new journal, *Etudes francophones comparées*. Although Tom no longer lives in Turkey, it is still one of his favorite places, and not just because of his enduring love of moustaches.

H. E. Francis, a native of Bristol, Rhode Island, is a university professor and author of several collections of stories. He studied at the University of Wisconsin, Brown University, and Oxford University (England), and taught for many years at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He has been the recipient of four U.S. Fulbright grants, one to Oxford, three to the chair of British and American literatures at the National University of Cuyo in Mendoza, Argentina. He is the author of five collections of stories, the most recent being *The Sudden Trees* (1999). He is a past winner of the Iowa School of Letters Award and many others. His work has been frequently anthologized, notably in the *O. Henry*, *Best American*, and *Pushcart Prize* volumes. He translates selected Argentine literature and divides his residency between Huntsville, Alabama (USA), and Madrid, Spain.

Oliver J. Haas is the pen name of a writer who has spent many years living in Asia. His work has appeared in *Gayme* (1998), and a book review essay is forthcoming in *Koinos*.

Marian Michener is a forty-eight-year-old administrative assistant who loves to dance and is in the process of moving in with her girlfriend in Seattle, Washington. Marian has an MA in Creative Writing from San

Francisco State University and is the author of the novel *Dreaming Under a Ton of Lizards* (previously published as *Three Glasses of Wine Have Been Removed from this Story*). Her short stories appear in the anthologies *Crossing the Mainstream*, *Ergo*, *Out from Under: Sober Dykes and Our Friends*, and *The Next Step: Out from Under Volume 2*. Periodicals carrying her stories have included *Common Lives Lesbian Lives*, *Womanspirit*, *The Guide*, *Women in Recovery*, *Rag Times*, *Out and About*, *The Northwest Gay and Lesbian Reader*, and *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*. The *Seattle Gay News* has published her stories and reviews as well as an arts and events column under her pen name, *Mercy Moosemuzzle*.

Jack Whitlow lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and maintains a studio at the d'Art Center in Norfolk, Virginia.