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Alex Jeffers

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postscript paragraph

This happened quite recently—just the other day, if you like, in the grand scheme of things. My intercom buzzed. Annie said, “Got a couple kids out here,” which is not at all the way she ordinarily speaks. “They say they’ll make an appointment if they hafta, but they’d really like it if you saw ’em now.”

In the background I heard an adolescent cackle I thought I knew. “Tell Toby to get out of the habit of pestering me during working hours,” I instructed Annie, thinking to enter into the spirit of the game, “and send him and his friends in.” Jeremy’s son—our son, in my own eyes if not the law’s or genetic science’s, in all the ways that mattered—sixteen, had entered another of those politely rebellious phases when he preferred to dicker with me than with Dad.

Annie laughed. “You’re slipping, Allen. How am I supposed to foster your aura of omniscience?” She hung up before I could reply, and a moment later my office door opened.

The first boy through the door I recognized—the student body wasn’t so large that I didn’t know practically all of them by sight, but Vik had done a certain amount of volunteer work for my office, for a credential to put on his college applications. Whether or not it would help, he was aiming for Berkeley next fall and I expected him to make it handily. Behind him came another senior, a strapping lad whose name vanished from my head the instant I saw him, a football quarterback; then two more youths whom I knew as well, of course; finally, smallest of the lot, my nephew Kit, grinning. “Hi, Allen.” *Uncle* had been dropped from my

name some months before, around the time his voice began to change. Watch out! he said with his hands.

"Hello, Mr Pasztory," the others chorused in ragged unison. Jonah—that was the football player's name—Jonah looked a little nervous. Vik, on the other hand, was beaming; and Kit was delighted. "You thought I was Toby, Annie said."

"Annie said *a couple kids*." I stood up behind my desk. "She said nothing about a *gang*. What do you guys want? I don't have enough chairs for all of you."

"We're not a gang." That was Kit.

"We're an organizing committee." This was a heroically tall, dangerously skinny boy called Alan, just to confuse matters. He was a junior and no, thank you, he had no interest in playing basketball.

"We've come to take you out for a soda, Mr Pasztory." Vik, very well pleased with himself.

"Out? For a soda?"

Exasperated, Kit shook his head. "Annie said you weren't busy. It's four o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Ice cream, too, if you're co-operative, Allen."

"Please, Mr Pasztory." Jonah's voice was surprisingly high for such a big youth, earnest. He glanced at the boy who had moved up beside him, then back to me. "We'd really appreciate a chance to talk to you, off campus."

It was still a game. "Don't wheedle at me, guys." Coming around my desk, I headed for the coat-tree in the corner. "I'll come along, on one condition: none of you makes a sound when I order pistachio."

It was still a game, but the stakes were raised a thousand-fold. There was no mistaking that glance of Jonah's, and I wondered why I hadn't heard rumors. In the usual way I would be the last adult to hear that kind of rumor, for very particular reasons, but I had my two spies lurking in the student body, sympathetic sources among faculty and staff. The other boy was a surprise, as well: Patrick was a shy, dreamy, studious kid, ugly with acne, whose precocious sonnets and sestinas were

published in the school's literary journal, who was working out his stutter with a speech therapist, who was never seen to go anywhere without a thick sci-fi paperback in hand. A nerd, in a word, a geek, a dweeb. In the instant of that glance from Jonah, Patrick had blazed with happiness: had been beautiful.

In the outer office, keeping it light, I told Annie I was being kidnapped. She grinned, said she'd keep alert for ransom demands and pass them on to the proper authorities. Around me, my escort did a credible imitation of a bunch of rowdy kids, but there was something about Jonah's guffaw I really didn't like to hear, and Annie's expression had a trace of the same concern I was trying to suppress. Leave early, I told her: the truth was, I was infiltrating the enemy camp, I was a double agent. "I can still pass for an eighteen-year-old high school senior, can't I?" I asked my nephew, who slapped my arm, hearty, and said, "Whaddya think, Vik? I'd say—a sophomore, tops." Another thing: Kit was a sophomore, a young sophomore, just fourteen, Vik nearly four years older. At Vik's age, I had been too much on my dignity to consort with underclassmen.

Without any dignity at all, we caroused down the corridor, down the stairs, out the door. It was a lovely fall afternoon, unseasonably warm but with a bite to the warmth. Individual trees blazed with color across the grounds. Off on the lawn by the academic buildings, a groundskeeper piloted a huge, noisy leaf-eating device across the grass, although the leaves had hardly begun to let go, had still to complete their annual display. Cliché though it be, autumn is my favorite season in New England. A few students outside our group waved to me, called my name, then went on in pursuit of their own errands. Hardly inexplicably, I felt well liked, popular, as if I had a place in this world. If I were to stroll alone across campus anyone at all, student, teacher, fellow administrator, would hail me, would fall into step beside me, we would joke and laugh, or we might start a serious discussion. The five boys crowded around me, herding me on their way, as if they'd forgotten I wasn't of their number—or as if, more aptly, I were a beloved

mascot. Exhilarated, I loosened my tie and made no conscious decision to play along with the charade, to believe their story as long as they were willing to keep on telling it.

"I've got my mom's van today," Vik said. "We could all squeeze in, but I thought maybe you'd like to take your own car, Mr Pasztory, so you wouldn't have to come back for it."

"Vik." I fixed him with a stern look. "All the rest of you, too. As soon as we get off school property and for the next hour, whatever it is, my name is Allen."

"Yay!" said Patrick, right on cue, without an ounce of irony, and gave me the biggest shit-kicking grin you could ever hope to receive, and I thought, before I could suppress the thought: Where the hell did you come from? When did you get to be so handsome—such a boy?

"All right," I said, wincing internally, rounding on myself. "Where are we going? Who's coming with me?"

The faculty parking lot lies behind the administration building, while those students privileged enough to have cars park way off on the other side of campus, near the upper school dorms. We split up. Kit, to be expected, came with me; not so expectedly, Jonah did too; surprising me, Patrick went with Vik and Alan.

Rounding the corner of the building, I saw Toby at a distance—I would have to be blind not to recognize Toby, at whatever distance. Typical teenager, he wore shorts, in October, loping off somewhere. Shorts meant he was out of classes; they weren't gym shorts so he wasn't heading for soccer practice, and I remembered Jeremy telling me his son had a date tonight. "A date!" Jeremy had said, in fact, trying to sound outraged, though it wasn't nearly Toby's first. "With a woman! I'm supposed to call them women, right, not girls? Thank God he doesn't have his own car." "Fuck you, Dad," Toby rejoined calmly across the breakfast table. "Julie's got a car. How else are we supposed to get out to the mall? You want to chauffeur us?" He pronounced it *CHOE-fur*. "Or loan me the Triumph?"



I waved after him, pointing him out to Kit in our private language, asked, what was Toby's place in this picture. Julie had access to a car, but she also had an early curfew: I figured his date was the reason Toby wasn't part of the conspiracy.

Give me a little credit, Uncle, Kit replied in the same terms. This is my issue. There was an edge both snide and resentful on his signs. I do my own thinking. I'm not Toby's little shadow.

Sorry, Nephew, I said, and then apologized as well to Jonah, bewildered, watching our hands fly. "I guess you didn't know, Jonah? My parents, Kit's grandparents, are deaf, so the whole family knows sign. Comes in handy sometimes."

"Not the whole family." Kit meant: not his father and siblings, and I told him flatly to shut up. Side issue, I said.

"Hey, that's neat." Jonah's brightening looked genuine. "Like a secret code, huh?"

I forbore from telling him it wasn't so neat for my parents, and we came to my car, I unlocked the doors, we all piled in. With his quarterback massiveness, Jonah seemed to fill the whole back seat. Kit, who no longer sulks, sat in the front, not sulking. When we got out onto the street, Jonah pulled himself together, leaned forward, said, "I can call you Allen now, Mr Pasztory? See, the thing is, Paddy thinks we should tell our folks and I'm scared shitless."

"Whoa! Slow down."

"Hey, Jonah." Kit was all sweet reason and threat as if Jonah weren't twice his size. "We agreed, it's all of us together. Just wait up, okay?"

"You can talk! You don't know my dad."

"And you don't know mine." As always, mention of Derek Sheridan brought venom to Kit's tongue.

"Stifle, both of you! I'm trying to drive, okay?" A few blocks further on, I added, "Sorry, Jonah. I think Kit's got the right idea, though. Especially if we're talking what Patrick wants, I'd like to hear from him too." They subsided: Jonah fell back against the cushions with a desperate sigh; Kit glared out the

window. “Hey,” I said, “we’re all friends, right? We’re all on the same side.”

This is my nephew at fourteen: he looks twelve. In his left ear he wears two elegant tourmaline and sterling studs. Today—it could be any day—he has on baggy, faded dungarees and a plaid flannel shirt, heavy black oxfords with white socks, a royal-blue baseball cap, bill forward. His hair (I regret this: Kit has lovely hair) is shorn convict-short, to the bone. Pinned to the pocket of his shirt is a loop of red ribbon; pinned to the right temple of his cap, a round black button displays an upside-down pink triangle. I have forbidden him to get a tattoo. What kind of tattoo he might desire I fear to imagine. Although I have not in so many words asked him, not recently, he swears to me—and, God help me, I believe him—that he is a virgin. This is my nephew: he has not spoken to his father since January.

Things were strained, things were tough. We could hardly blame the man for being upset (we blamed him for so much already) that his eldest child preferred to spend Christmas in his uncle’s household. So we sent the boy home (*home*, we called it) for New Year’s: we put this shy, sweet, thoughtful kid whom I loved, well scrubbed and well dressed and laden with gifts—we put him on Amtrak to Annapolis. He had lived with us for the best part of three years. Well, yes, he had visited his parents and siblings during that time: in our company. That is, I ran interference. I tried to protect him—vain attempt; we all did.

Brave, Kit didn’t cry until the train pulled out of the Providence station. Brave, he wiped his eyes, adjusted the earphones of his Walkman; took a book out of his knapsack and read through all the hours to Maryland. It’s a long trip. His mother met him at the station. In the car they chattered happily enough: yes, Allen and Jeremy and Toby were fine, Providence (his cat) was fine, school was fine. The first words out of his little brother’s mouth, when they reached the house, were, “Hey, you sick

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yet?" My sister (all the angels in the world bless and keep her) sent Ricky to his room before Kit could try to strangle him.

A week later—it was the new year now—Stephanie called and left a message on our machine. Jeremy was in New York; impulsive, Toby and I had driven out to Cape Cod for the day and the night. The message was stifled, sad, dignified. First she said, Allen, Jeremy, Toby, thank you. Then—though her voice broke—she said she was proud of her son. As if she had only the one. Then she asked us to pick him up at the train station.

But she had called the day before, when we were away. The house was silent. Lena, our downstairs tenant, too, had gone away for the holiday. Toby had followed the anxious cat into the kitchen to feed her. I called him back to the living room and played the message over again. Reading my mind, Toby spun away out of the living room, pounding up to Kit's bedroom on the third floor. I heard him calling, as I swept through our floor—Jeremy's and my bedroom in front, the study, both bathrooms, kitchen, Toby's bedroom in back. . . .

"He's got money, doesn't he? He's got keys. He could have got a cab from the station—he could have walked!" Toby looked up at me from where he sat on Kit's bed under the window, and scowled. "Where the hell is he?"

I do not favor suspense, I do not favor coincidence. It was mid-afternoon, more than twelve hours but fewer than twenty-four since Kit's train should have pulled into the Providence station. The phone rang and Jeremy said, "Are you panicking yet? He's here with me." Hearing my breath as I exhaled, he said, "I won't let you yell at him."

"He's in New York, with your father," I told Toby, who had followed me to the phone. To Jeremy I said, "I just want to know he's all right."

"*All right?* That's a question. He's not cheerful. He needs a shower. Eamon just took him down to the corner to get a sandwich."

We never learned the full story. Kit and his father argue—and a vicious argument it must be, thirty-nine-year-old father at-



tacking thirteen-year-old son—and son flees, catches the first train north. Somehow he can't quite face me or Toby, but he knows Jeremy's in New York. There are how many millions of people in New York City, and Eamon's home phone number is unlisted. At the publishing house where Eamon works, the switchboard has shut down for the evening. Where Kit spends the evening and night we don't know, he won't tell—he is lost to our ken, lost in Manhattan, till afternoon the next day when he shows up at Eamon's office, grubby and morose and with two new surgical-stainless-steel studs punched through the lobe of his left ear, looking for his uncle Jeremy.

Kit had been telling me since he was eleven that he was queer. This was why he had wanted to live with us: why, pursuing a complicated, distasteful, largely unspoken logic, his father originally agreed—washed his hands of the whiny little sissy shit and dumped him in our laps. I could only thank my brother-in-law, even as I wished to break every bone in his body. I wanted to ask whether he would prefer his son be as insensitive and cruel as he.

But Kit was not: simply, he was (claimed to be) queer. It was not an issue that could be sidestepped, but the meaning of the word seemed to have changed since I first learned it, applied it to myself. A nineteen- or twenty-three-year-old queer activist I had less in common with, it seemed, than with my middle-aged, married, heterosexual colleagues and neighbors. After he returned from New York, Kit made new friends, sought out new role models—college boys and girls who wore unrelieved black, whom he brought to the house for home-cooked dinners, who were polite to their elders, Jeremy and me, with the offhand charm of college kids, and as baffled by us as we by them. The vocabularies did not match up. They spoke of actions and zaps and civil disobedience; they marched on the State House when the latest version of the gay rights bill was strangled in committee; they staged a kiss-in on the university green. Kit was there. So too, standing up in solidarity with his queer brothers and sisters—and incidentally watching out for

Kit—was Toby. Jeremy and I stayed home, tending the garden or worrying about the mortgage, preparing a cauldron of spaghetti sauce and many loaves of garlic bread. Agitating for social change was a hungry business.

In his mother's van, Vik and the others had reached the ice-cream parlor near Blackstone Park before us. We got sodas, ice cream in cones or paper cups. Vik snickered audibly when, on the recommendation of the girl behind the counter, I chose black walnut over pistachio, but I noticed that he ordered the same.

What's all this about, I meant to ask when we crowded out onto the sidewalk. I was eyeing the comfort of a patio table in the shade of an immense canvas parasol. However, Vik—who seemed to share spokesman duties with my nephew—suggested we adjourn to the park, so we waited for traffic to clear, then jaywalked across to the broad green lawn and found congenial seats beneath a towering elm. Crisp fallen leaves crunched under our feet and when we sat on them. "Allen," Vik said.

Excepting Jonah and Patrick, close enough to hold hands although they did not, each sat in his own little puddle of open space. I felt in a way that we were emulating a classical Athenian gymnasium, five brave ephebes and their tutor, but there was Alan, of Korean descent, and Vik, whose parents came from Bombay. Kit and I, so far as we possessed an ethnic identity other than American, were Hungarian, Patrick Irish, Jonah clearly northern European of one stripe or another—barbarians all.

Now, Vik was a cheery young man, a sunny, delightful personality, always smiling. With his stark, pronounced features and dusky complexion, his languishing black eyes and brilliant white teeth and well managed jock physique, he was also probably the handsomest student in the school. He was also—and this is not incidental—near enough the top of his class and, despite this, popular every way you turned. A paragon, that is

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to say, courteous, respectful, kind, bright. He had asked me once, offhand, the previous year, if when I was in high school I had dated. Girls, he meant—he clarified, giving the word an upward tilt to acknowledge its inappropriateness. I said no, I'd attended a rural, boys' boarding school—there *were* no girls, if (I shrugged) I'd been interested. I didn't tell him I'd carried on a delirious affair with my roommate. In his case, he said, it was a cultural thing: his parents didn't understand the concept of dating. And smiled, rueful, accommodating, properly filial, and (I supposed I was to understand) patiently eager to leave home for the unhyphenated American liberty of college.

"Allen," he said now. He was not smiling. He sat closer to Kit than to any of the other boys, if not close. They exchanged tentative, dubious glances, as if bucking each other up. I said to myself: No, feeling abruptly sick, stopped my hands from asking a question Kit had every right to refuse to answer, and glared at Vik. There were, for God's sake, four years separating them and at that age four years is half a lifetime. Kit, dear Lord, had scarcely wriggled all the way through puberty. Vik—sweet Shiva—had more chest hair than I.

"We want to start a new student organization, and we want you to be our faculty adviser."

"I'm administration, not faculty," I said flatly.

"Does that matter?" Vik cocked his head to the side and blinked. "I mean, are there rules?"

But on another hand (how many hands does Shiva have?), I'd been only a year older than Kit when my prep-school romance began, and if he were going to have more than a crush on another boy he couldn't choose a more level-headed, responsible candidate. I still felt sick.

Alan cleared his throat. "Vik's not really the one who should be asking."

"We're all asking," Patrick put in.

"If some teachers—"

"No names, Kit," said Vik sternly. "We agreed."

Grimacing, Kit made a rude sign. I scowled at him, convinced all over again.

Setting his paper cup of ice cream on the grass before him, Alan raised both hands, palms forward. "First of all, Mr Pasztory–Allen," he said with a dignity that made his youth poignant, unbearable, "I want to say out loud that I'm gay, and I'm old enough to know it's not some kind of phase." He smiled suddenly, tentative, wondering. "You're the first adult I've ever told."

"Because you're about the only out gay man any of us know." Jonah's voice cracked out of treble into a scarily mature baritone.

Vik nodded. "Actually, I am the one who should be asking."

"Cause your motives are al-altruistic." Jonah's new voice sounded bitter. "Pure."

"Cause I'm the oldest." Shaking his head a little, Vik grunted with laughter. "Cause it was my idea." He laughed again.

"Cause, unlike the rest of us," said my nephew, grinning as well, in a knowing, bitter way that shocked me, "Vik isn't a snivelling faggot."

Jonah sneered. "Like I said."

My ice cream was melting, dribbling down the sides of the sugar cone onto my fingers. I stared from one boy to the next. "Start over from the beginning."

Patrick's glasses flashed. "The beginning? There's five of us—that's fff—" Face twisted, he leaned over to cuff Jonah's arm.

"Five beginnings."

"Well, one beginning," Vik began, more or less serious, "is Jonah and I are good buddies. I don't like to think about his other good buddies who'd cut him off or want to bash him if they knew for sure he was gay, and—" He glanced at his friend, looking angry for the first time in my experience. "I mean, look at them—Jonah and Paddy. They're in love! They're beautiful. And they have to hide. I really, really hate that. I mean—" He turned to look at me. "I mean, I'm happy for them and I can't let it show."

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Patrick took a deep breath and pulled his glasses off. “My ththth—”

“His therapist,” Jonah said, and Patrick slapped his shoulder again, annoyed.

“My therapist thinks my stutter’s a self-defense mechanism. I’m ssscu— I’m *afraid* of what I might say so I’ve fffixed it so I cccan’t say—I—” Inhaling deeply, Patrick handed his ice-cream cone to Jonah and clenched his hands together in a big fist, stared at them. “I don’t stutter when I’m all alone with Jonah.” Then he grinned at me, ferociously amused. “When I’m not, I ccan’t even say my own name.”

“See, Allen, it’s really my fault.” Kit was leaning forward, eager. There was a little chocolate mustache over his upper lip that I wanted to wipe off. Toby, scion of a hirsute father, had started to shave at twelve and a half, but Kit, I feared, wouldn’t be able to raise a respectable mustache—or an activist’s little chin beard and sideburns—before he hit twenty. “Week or two ago, a couple of huge jocks were giving me trouble over my button—” His hand went to the pink triangle pinned to his baseball cap.

“And your fag uncle?” I asked, sadly, resigned.

“Well. . . .” He moved his chin, looking down. “They didn’t mention you.”

“I happened to see it, Allen,” Vik said soberly, “just passing by, and I got just completely furious, enraged. There were *five* of them, not just a couple, and Kit’s so little—they could have tossed him hand to hand like a football.”

“I was handling it, Vik.”

“You were not, you stupid little shit. You were preaching at them, egging them on, making them madder.” Ducking his chin, Vik grinned ruefully. “Sorry, Kit. I don’t think they’re stupid enough to have hurt you, but you have no instinct for self-preservation.”

“I was madder than you were.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Kit?”



My nephew glared malevolently at me, shook his head, dismissive. "Because it's an old story, Allen. Vik's right, they wouldn't have hurt me. Everyone knows what happens to kids who mess with your family. It's folklore."

"That's right," Vik agreed.

Five years before, it was true, Toby had been beaten up by several of his classmates—beaten severely enough to be sent to the hospital, although he made a good account of himself and took two of them with him. By arrangement with the dean, I had had the perpetrators suspended for a week and lectured them until their ears blistered and one or two of them wept, letting them know it was solely on my account they weren't expelled. This unaccountable mercy (they would have expelled themselves, after I got done with them) brought them without exception over to my side. But those were eleven-year-old boys who didn't properly know what gay meant, and Toby was a bigger boy, at eleven, than Kit at fourteen.

"Anyway," Vik went on, "after I chased them away, Kit and I got to talking—"

"Talking, hell." Kit hooted, slapped his knee. "I was shouting at you louder than at them. You spoiled my fight."

"—and I got to thinking. I mean, Kit's got you to back him up." Lifting his hands against a sneaky attack, Vik tried to fend Kit off.

While those two scuffled, giggling, Alan leaned forward. "What Vik's saying, Allen—and I'm not sure I agree with him—is Kit can kind of get away with being out at school, because of you, and Toby. Nobody messes with Toby. But the rest of us...." He raised his hands, eloquently indicated his own spindly delicacy, fragile as a daddy-long-legs.

"People make fun of me already," Patrick added, "just 'c'ause—"

"'Cause you're *peculiar*, Paddy. 'Cause you're weird."

"Oh, just shut up, Kit." Annoyed, Patrick waved my nephew back. His voice perfectly steady, he said, "You really are an obnoxious little twerp sometimes. Nothing says I have to like you

just because we're both gay. It's not like we've got anything else in common."

Chastened, Kit subsided. Admiring, I nodded at Patrick, who blushed, the pimples on his cheeks flaring. "So, anyway," he went on, leaning forward in his seriousness, reaching for Jonah's hand, "I'm not especially wwwuhr—concerned about it getting around that I'm gay. The people who'd give me ggrief over that already give me grief, and enough of 'em know I fight dirty. I'm mainly discreet for Jonah's sake."

Blushing more fiercely than his friend, Jonah gave him a look of puppyish, shiny-eyed adoration and lifted their joined hands to his lips. Kissing the back of Patrick's hand, he looked up under his eyebrows at me with a gaze at once proud and imploring, and I firmly knuckled down a knot in my throat, concentrated on my ice cream.

"I can get away with being peculiar because I'm a pppoet—" This word pronounced with infinite scorn.

"But I'm a jock," Jonah muttered.

"Yeah, you're a jock—you're a public figure, you're a hero, you're a symbol of school spirit. And I kkkkeep ttelling you—" Scowling, Patrick pulled his hand out of Jonah's grasp. "I keep telling him him coming out would have, like, twenty times the impact of me doing it. Or Kit. Or even you, Mr Pasztory."

Stricken, Jonah had hunched his shoulders together to make a smaller target. "I'm scared, Paddy... Not what might happen at school, I can take care of myself, except they might try to get at me through you, Paddy—"

"Don't worry about me," Patrick said coldly, heartlessly.

"My dad says horrible things." Jonah squared himself up with poignant adolescent dignity, and I feared he would weep. "Last summer, the TV news was covering the Pride March, he said—" his voice changed, drawling, terrifying—"All those fah-king homosexuals wanta be women, oughta be cas-trated. Oughta be lined up and shot. He called up the station and shouted at them for half an hour about how they shouldn't be exposing his family to that kind of filth and perversion."

His father, I recalled suddenly, vividly, from Jonah's admission interview four years before, was a charmer—a cultivated gentleman lawyer who had read literature, philosophy, history; who admired Telemann and Scarlatti for their ornamental qualities, Beethoven for his passion and seriousness. He wanted Jonah to board (the family lived in a suburb of DC) because, he confided, going away to boarding school had been the most significant experience of his own youth—appealing so cunningly to my own prepster snobbery that I inferred we were to make a proper gentleman of the boy. Horrified, I remembered being seduced by the faint molasses glaze of a New Orleans childhood on his voice, remembered going against my own best judgment to admit his son, a sullen, overweight child whose primary-school record was hardly stellar. I gazed at handsome, passionate, frightened Jonah across the little patch of grass and couldn't square him with his younger self but could all too easily hear the vicious sentiments he recited repeated in his father's voice. I damned my own discretion.

"My mother says, It's just so terribly, terribly sad. It's an illness. They could be cured." Jonah's eyes were bright with throttled hysteria. "I don't want to be *cured*. I like the way I am. I'm—" Blinking furiously, he turned to Patrick. "I'm proud of it. But I'm so scared, Paddy—Paddy."

Patrick took Jonah into his arms, murmuring his name over and over, and Vik glanced away, embarrassed or shocked despite himself. If Jonah's father had known or figured out I was gay, what were the chances Jonah would be here now, able to reveal both his courage and his fear? What were the chances, even now, he might not yet try in despair to kill himself—the statistics were as plain as the incised epitaph on a gravestone—or, worse, be dragged off in a straitjacket to one of those reprogramming centers, torture chambers of an old Inquisition.

"All right, gentlemen," I said, steeling my voice to calm, to fortitude. "It's not as though I needed any convincing." What I wanted to do was gather them all into my arms, all five brave lads—even or especially Vik, the enlightened, kindly straight

boy—take them all home for cocoa and sugar cookies, make it all better. A wholly inappropriate response. “I hope you all know I’m here for you whenever you need to talk, but I think you had more in mind than just talking?”

I looked from one to the next. Even Kit was subdued. Alan visibly swallowed, his big Adam’s apple jumping in his throat. Jonah straightened up with conscious dignity but continued to clutch Patrick’s hand. Vik shook himself, cleared his throat. He glanced at Kit, then Jonah. “It was my idea,” he ventured, apologetic. The others nodded unsurely. Then, looking into the sky as if for inspiration, he flinched, blanched. “Shit! It’s starting to get dark—what time is it?”

“Quarter of six,” I said, consulting my watch.

“Oh, shit, shit! I’ve got to go!” He was panicking. “I said I’d have the van back by five!” He struggled to his feet.

“Vik, hold on.” Having met his parents, charming, unbending, traditional, I appreciated his panic.

“What?” shouted Kit, derisive. “You’re ready to stand up in public for queer liberation, straight boy, and you’re scared of getting home late?”

“My parents,” Vik said, “are followers of Gandhiji. They have always taught me to do only and exactly what I think is right. They trust me.”

“Vik,” I said, “I’m inviting you to dinner tonight, okay? I invited you an hour ago, only I forgot to tell you.”

He shook his head, still worried.

“Go across the street and call your parents, Vik. It’s all my fault and I apologize profusely. We’ll drop off the van on the way—you’re right around the corner from us, aren’t you? Say it’s—say it’s a kind of thank you for all the work you’ve done for me, if you want.”

“I don’t lie to my parents,” he said, but he dashed to the edge of the park and recklessly across the street.

“The rest of you, too. I’ll call your dorm master, Jonah.” He was the only boarder; I knew the dorm master. “Will your parents give you any trouble, Patrick? Alan?”

They shook their heads. "It's Friday," Alan said. "They won't mind if I'm late, long as I let them know."

"Mine don't much care one way or another," said Patrick, bitterly sarcastic. "They just dddon't know *what* to make of me."

"Allen—Mr Pasztory?" This was Jonah, getting unsteadily to his feet, nearly as tall as Alan and considerably more massive. "I mean, everyone knows about you, that you're gay, you and Toby's dad...?"

"Jonah," I said, going to him. I put my hands on his big shoulders, stretching to do it. "Remember when you came up from DC for your interview, four years ago?"

Puzzled, he nodded.

"You were a whiny, pasty, completely pathetic little worm. I almost didn't let you in. But you're not that anymore. You grew up. Hadn't you noticed?" I pulled him down into my embrace—he didn't resist—and I whispered, "Look, your father gives you any trouble at all, your mother says anything about trying to *cure* you, you send 'em to me. Okay? I'm little, but I'm really nasty."

His startled laugh twisted into something very like a sob and he returned my embrace hugely, nearly crushing my ribs, then, releasing me, stumbled a few steps away. Patrick followed at once.

Kit was staring at me. Word one, I began to tell him, warningly, but he simply grabbed my hand out of the air, halfway through the admonition, and clutched it, leaning into my side so that I had no choice but to knock off his cap and stroke his prickly scalp, recognizing him for my nephew. "Hey," I said, "do any of you know—is Vik a vegetarian?"

We talked until late, in the kitchen while Jeremy and I improvised dinner; in the living room while we ate; after, over ice cream and coffee—they all drank coffee, something that shocked me profoundly—planning the Gay-Straight Student Alliance. Jeremy was passionate, indignant, practical, crafty: the boys adored him (no more than he de-



served), and I retreated a little into the background, nursing a headache. When Toby got home from his date a little after eleven, he was immediately enthusiastic, only irritated that he hadn't been in on it from the beginning. He and Vik got into an amiable shouting match over which of them was going to be the token straight spokesman. "Boys," I said, despairing, "look, here's an idea—you both just God damn shut up! My head hurts."

"Oh, poor baby Allen!" Toby said, caustic, and went to make me a cup of chamomile tea, while Vik, asserting his alpha-male authority, had me lie down on the carpet and gave me a thorough, expert, impersonal massage that left me exalted.

Some time later, the phone rang. Jeremy called me over, looking a little worried. "It's Jonah's dorm master," he said quietly, handing me the phone. He was quiet, but a phone's ringing always enforces a moment or two of silence in any conversation, and Jonah looked up, the brightness of his eyes dulling in an instant. Patrick reached out to touch his neck and Jonah flinched. "Hey, Mike," I said, loudly cheerful, "you're calling to tell me what time it is and give me hell, right? What time is it?" I put my finger to my lips, warning, then touched the button that turned it into a speaker-phone.

"It's one-thirty in the morning, Allen," said Michael Flaherty into the tense, breathing silence of the living room. His voice was low, uncertain, as if he were afraid of being overheard, young. "Damn it, you know I'm responsible for these kids." Michael was twenty-three, fresh out of college, his first job. He had also, the month before, come to me for advice, much the way the boys had, though they weren't to know that.

"You signed Jonah out to me, Mike, I'm responsible tonight. I'm the loco parent. I've decided to keep him overnight. I'll get him back to you in the morning."

"You can't do that, Allen!"

"What are you worried about? If anyone gets interfered with it'll be me—Jonah's twice my size."

"Sweet Jesus!" he breathed. "Don't even joke about things like that, Allen."

Speculative, I said, "Mikey, do you remember the first time you got to spend the whole night with a boy—" his gasp was echoed by the boys—"really sleep with him, not just fool around in the back seat of a car or something? Wasn't it wonderful? I've decided to take an interest in Jonah and his boyfriend, who's a sweet fellow, they're good for each other. I have every intention of offering them an opportunity I never had."

"You can't do that!"

"Why not? I've got a spare room for them, with a bed in it; if they don't have condoms and lube I've got plenty they can use. I'll even throw in the safe-sex lecture. Mikey, why not? Are you envious?"

"Yes," he said after a long moment, pained, "yes, damn it, Allen, I am. I never have been able to spend the whole night with anybody, I've never had a place of my own. There were always people watching me." His voice broke. "I can't very well bring a man here."

"Mikey!" I said, startled. "Oh, Michael, that's terrible, you can't really mean it. . . . Can you? —Look, hold on, can you hold on a minute?" Putting him on hold, I turned to the half-circle of upturned, nervous faces. "Well, you heard me," I said, my voice steady. "None of you has to do anything you're not comfortable doing—I mean, you can all just split. Not you, Jonah, you're stuck here for the night. But the rest of you . . . Vik, Alan—Toby can give you a ride home. Patrick—Paddy, you're entirely welcome to stay, if you won't get in trouble with your folks."

"You're contributing to the delinquency of a couple of minors, Mr Pasztory," he said, his glasses gleaming, not stumbling over a single word.

"I know." I shook my head, weary. "It's a matter of principle. I'm going upstairs to talk to poor Michael now. Work out all the arrangements with Jeremy, boys."

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Upstairs in Jeremy's studio, I talked to Michael for two and a half hours, comforting him, trying to comfort him. I had not previously had to contemplate the traumatic effects of a consummate Irish Catholic upbringing—parochial school, Jesuit high school and college ... all those siblings, all those nuns and priests and their fetishist vestments, novenas and Hail Marys and scary sacred bleeding hearts; at least he hadn't been abused (sexually, at any rate) as an altar boy. In the end, I couldn't do much more than anoint surface sores that needed lancing, draining, to say nothing of the really dangerous scars and ulcers; helplessly to admire him for coming out of his toxic childhood, youth, young manhood with any self-respect at all. He wasn't out of young manhood yet, had precious little self-respect. I had not realized, from our earlier talk, that the poor boy wasn't properly out even to himself. He was less assured about his identity as a gay man than my nephew, ten years younger. He had never, he confessed, weeping and bringing me to silent tears of my own (I couldn't let him hear me)—had never even kissed a man; his experience of sex had been furtive, degrading, horrible: he hated himself. And I thought of the confident, competent, almost arrogant algebra teacher and assistant basketball coach everyone else saw when they looked at young Mike Flaherty, and I damned them all, every one, from the bottom of a very deep heart, to the bottom of a very deep hell.

By the time we let each other go—it was an embrace, a stranglehold across telephone wires, a mutual lifeline—my ear and jaw ached, but I no longer had a headache; I was too furious. We had determined that of course he could bring a man to his little apartment in the dorm if he was reasonably discreet about it, but that it wasn't the best solution—we had determined that the dorm was the worst place in God's creation for him to live. "I get ... bad thoughts about the boys, sometimes, they run around with nothing on but towels or underpants after their showers," he whispered. "It terrifies me, Allen. They're just babies, but some of them are so beautiful. It just

scares me to death.” I thought about two of those babies, presumably bedding down very happily on the convertible sofa in the study downstairs, stark naked, and felt just as scared—for Michael, of him.

We had determined that, despite his pathetic salary, the savings of living on campus simply weren’t worth it; we had determined that in December, when Lena—who had finally finished her dissertation, defended it, got a job—moved out of the first-floor apartment, Michael would move in. A month and a half: he’d make it through. The Thanksgiving break with us—I insisted—and a home-cooked dinner at our house every weekend. I expected an argument with Jeremy over the rent I had quoted Michael but I was determined: this was life or death, this was Michael’s sanity, his future, his happiness—our future, the future for every one of us. I hung up knowing I had acquired another son or nephew, in addition to Patrick and Jonah, Alan and Vik, Kit and Toby: that they would, all of them, just keep on breaking my heart and making me the proudest man in all the world.

I had been dimly aware, at some point, of Kit’s coming upstairs, whispering good night to me, and going through to his bedroom. I was still sitting in the low, comfortable armchair in Jeremy’s studio, drained, the silent phone beside me, when he came out again. “Hey, Kit,” I said wearily. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Either really late or really early. I don’t know. It’s Saturday.”

I had been sitting in the dark. There was a lamp on in his bedroom, so I could see him: he was wearing out-grown pyjamas of Toby’s, had taken the tourmaline studs out of his ear because it hurt to sleep on them: he looked like a little boy, a sleepy little boy up way past his bedtime. “Hey, Kit,” I said again. “You sure can cause a lot of fuss when you try.”

“I know.” He came to me then, climbed into the chair beside me. I put my arm around him. “Paddy stayed here tonight,” he said, “with Jonah.”

“I hoped he would.”

"It was brave and kind and clever of you to think of it. I think Uncle Jeremy was pretty upset but he couldn't say no."

"He'll get over it."

"Toby was scandalized. And Alan didn't know what to think—he doesn't have a boyfriend. I think he's a virgin, too."

"Too?"

"Like me."

"I was afraid to ask."

Kit chortled, snuggling against me. I yawned. A little later, I said, "I think I've lined up another faculty sponsor for the Alliance. But you all have to be very kind to Mr Flaherty, very gentle with him. He's a frightened young man—a whole lot more frightened than you, precocious monster that you are."

"That's 'cause he didn't have someone like you to watch out for him when he was my age, Uncle Allen," Kit said, nudging his sharp little shoulder further into my armpit. "You and Jeremy."

"Maybe. It's nice of you to say so, Kit."

"Mr Flaherty," he said deliberately, writhing a little, "is very good looking."

"Oh, no, Kit." I brushed my free hand over his bristly scalp, tender, resigned. "I'm not touching that. I'm too tired, for one thing. You know the rules."

"Wait till you're sixteen," he said, quoting, "unless you really fall in love. Always play safely. Stay away from anyone more than four years older, until you're twenty-one. I know the rules. I just said it to shock you."

"It's Mr Flaherty you would have shocked. Someone like you could do Mikey a lot of damage, Kit. Please be kind to him, for me, okay? What Mikey needs," I went on dreamily, "...is a nice, stable, absolutely not Catholic guy a year or two older than him, someone with a good sense of humor and a lot of patience and a little bit of craziness." I was running through all my young acquaintances in my mind, not finding a match—just as glad I wasn't finding one. Matchmaking I wouldn't stoop to. "Someone as pretty as he is."



"And what do I need, Uncle Allen?" Kit asked, a little catch in his voice.

"Kit? Oh, Kit," I said, understanding what I should have seen hours ago—what I had almost seen but dismissed because the truth was more distressing than my fears. "Is that it? That's what it's all about?"

I felt his little chin nod, where his head lay heavy on my arm.

"I'm sorry, baby, there isn't anything at all I can do about that. He likes you, though."

Indignant, Kit said, "He *likes* me the way Toby likes me. Like his kid brother."

"I'm afraid that's the best you can hope for. He'll keep on being a good friend for you, though, if you don't spoil it—like Toby will. You can't *cure* someone of being straight any more than you can of being gay. And you wouldn't if you could. Would you, Kit?"

"He's so handsome," Kit mumbled, squirming against my side where my ribs still ached from Jonah's hug, "and so good." A moment later, he added, with relish, "And so wild."

"Someone I know called him an astonishingly beautiful boy."

"Uh-huh," Kit agreed, sleepily.

"You're pretty beautiful yourself, you know, babe. And quite a boy." I drew him closer still. "You'll find someone. Someone'll find you."

"When I'm sixteen?"

"Maybe."

We were quiet. He lay in the crook of my arm like a tired puppy. My arm under Kit's back was falling asleep. So was the rest of me. I thought I heard him murmur something. "What?" I asked.

"I said," my nephew said very distinctly, "he has a nice, juicy, big cock too. I saw him in the showers after lacrosse practice."

"What?"

He leapt out of my arms, giggling fit to burst. "Hey, relax, Allen," he said, grabbing my hand, pulling me upright. "It's just

a schoolboy crush—I'll get over it. I'll just beat off a hell of a lot in the meantime." Laughing, he grappled me to my feet. "Time for you to go to bed, Mr Pasztory, right now! Come on. I'll help you."

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