

Queer's Progress

A novel

Steven Key Meyers

for my mother and father

But for you, too, Frank and Albert. You taught me a lot, for which I'm grateful. Rest in peace.

1. CUTEST GEEK I EVER SAW

MY FAMILY'S fucked up beyond the norm, OK? That's why I work like a maniac, to keep out of the house. Not that it helps when everyone I meet is so fucked up.

But even when I try to stay busy, things can slow up around me, trap me in syrup. Tuesday afternoon, nothing's going on, except the sun's pouring down hot honey, making people shift in their seats. Stays over the roof till late, but once it starts rolling for Jersey, even in wintertime they have to get out from under, move to the shade wedged beneath the high west windows. *Flee.*

So I'm standing in the cage thinking, *What now? What next?* This is 1991, January – the week after we start bombing Iraq. That first night they close the exits, just to get *out* of the 42nd Street Library everyone – even *us* – has to go through the front, no explanation, descend the marble staircases beneath the giant vaults with the sinking sensation of *What'd I do?* In the Great Hall guards want to see every scrap of paper.

But it's *war*. *Cool*, actually.

"You OK, Eddie?" goes Akesha.

"Fine," I snap. Poor Akesha. But she knows I have my moods.

The dumbwaiter chucks into place and I take out a load of books, punch in the numbers, spread them along the counter. Usually that causes a stir, people race up to get theirs. But no one moves. Which means the sun's washing out the lightboard.

"Eddie?" says Akesha.

"*What?*"

She goes off to tell her troubles to one of the girls. Everyone's fidgeting like ants under a magnifying glass. Nothing to do but watch. It amuses me. These are people who choose a chair in the morning like they're moving in for good – size up the neighbors, lay out their pads and pens (counting every one), pull the next chair closer and drape their coat over it. *Oy!*

Then through Genealogy's bronze double doors steps an *angel*. Shaggy head gilded by sun, green eyes snapping with thought, he walks through the room straight at *me*. Glances at the board, shows his number card and says, "Four-thirty-four, please," part of the load that's just come up.

"Hi!" I go. Don't know why. Startles a flash behind his specs. Cutest geek I ever saw. Now I recognize him, he's a regular. What have I been missing?

"Hello," he says, wary.

"So what're you working on, anyway?" I ask, shoving over a

pile of musty shit. "You always get the oldest stuff."

"On Walter Terse?" he says. "Annotating his diaries?"

"Yeah?" I say enthusiastically, thinking *who*? Which does not get past him.

"The 'Voluble Victorian'? English novelist-slash-essayist?"

"Cool!" I go. Above his red-gold beard his eyes are like jewels.

"Well, he mentions a lot of people and events that don't mean much anymore, so it's my job to try and figure them out so my boss can write footnotes."

"Wow!"

"Thank you," he says, and off he goes.

Flip his number off. A line's forming. Sun comes off the board, people converge.

"On break," I yell down to Alan.

"Eduardo, you can't just— Eduardo, come back here!"

Out of the cage, past the lascivious stare of the librarian on duty (what law is it says they have to be gay?), down the blazing shelves to the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Three fucking pages on "Walter Ivanhoe Terse (1827-1907), prolific novelist and social reformer fondly remembered as the *Voluble Victorian*." Very interesting.

Back to the cage. The line now epic in length. Snakes past the Bibles, where the regulars hunting lottery numbers curse the ones on line. Start working through the backlog. The girls never keep up, and Alan's hopeless. When things get busy he rises up from his lair to get in our way, though his tie and important expression reassure the ones waiting.

"Did you hear me, Eduardo?"

"I'm back, Alan, don't get your balls in an uproar."

Old line. Still works.

"Downstairs," he says. "Now."

OK, down the steep flight to the dark dusty corner where

rotting books hide his desk. Mildew's unbelievable.

"Sit down," he says.

"Can't, I'll get asthma."

"Eddie, your shift has *three* breaks, scheduled for—"

Yeah, yeah, we work it out. Boss has to show he's boss. No problem. Stand and wheeze a little, flip him my Goya urchin look and he rushes through it, creases in his forehead underlining his words: "—'cause I don't want to lose you, I know it's only part-time and doesn't pay much, but it's not so bad, really. I mean, *is it?*"

"I like it," I say. "Sorry, Alan, won't happen again." And upstairs we go. No one gets books to the people faster than I do.

Later I'm giving one to a woman, telling her when the other two arrive we'll light up her number again, give us a few, when I see the Terse guy heading for the return window. Go over to take personal delivery. Actually, I know his name from the call slips: Andrew Thomas. Two first names. Waspy enough, I don't think?

"Thanks," he says, sliding books beneath the bars.

"Find it?" I ask.

"No," he says. Smiles. "That is—"

"Every little bit helps?"

"It adds up."

"Would you agree *The League of Optimists* is Terse's best?"

Smile goes wide for a second. Good teeth. But the eyes go panicky, and *I* feel it, too: Something grabbing at my *crotch*? The *fuck*?

He stumbles towards the catalog room, and someone gooses me, really digs into my ass. "Hey, big boy, Alan says—"

It's Akesha. Downstairs where we hang out there's a Polaroid on the wall, seven of us jamming faces together. Five are girls, and one day I realize I've fucked every one of them. It's embarrassing.

“Oh Akesha, let’s go somewhere.”
“There’s that place,” she says. “In the stacks.”
“Eduardo!” calls Alan. Nods at the line.
Back to the salt mines.

2. CANCER

“NED HAMET, HIS 4:00 o’clock?”

“The doctor will be right with you, Mr. Hamet.”

My ghostly outline in her window unnerved me, though it did take the years off. A nurse put me in an examining room. Examining rooms make me nervous—autopsy rooms with padding. I preferred looking down at the ants negotiating First Avenue’s slush 20 stories below to sitting on the jointed slab and staring at instruments of torture ranged along the walls. Then I glanced across at the other wing. Amazing what they’ll do in a hospital with curtains wide open. Sickmaking.

Dr. Kushner bustled in. Top dermatologist in the city. Have to admire him, rolling up the big bucks healing people. Did I miss my calling?

“How are you, Ned?” Shook my hand and washed his, meaning no insult.

“Hello, Doc,” I said. “Oh, the usual: Two moles on my back,

plus this thing on my nose.”

“Have a seat, lie back.”

He meant on the slab. Cranked it flat, pulled down the light, and went out of focus as he came in close on my nose.

A negligible little growth, a freckle or mole like those that turn up on my back as regularly as rocks in spring plowing, all because when I was young no one knew to keep out of the sun. Hardly visible, but they drive me crazy. I know the procedure: Freeze them with that super-thin needle, sluice them off with laser beams or whatever, slap on a Band-Aid, wish me good day and leave it to the receptionist to charge me the outrageous fee ten minutes of the good doctor’s time goes for.

Being examined by a doctor’s a special kind of ecstasy, like conversing with God or being adored by a lover. I’m a hypochondriac, no denying that, but at least I don’t indulge in private hysteria. No, I make the rounds of the leading specialists, and do what they tell me, too: My drinking’s strictly medicinal, I shake my booty to music half an hour daily, and a rabbit would envy my diet (but I *insist* on regularity: A bowel movement in the morning takes a load off my mind).

“*Hmm,*” Dr. Kushner said pleasantly. This was a new note; usually he was reassuringly brusque. “Take off your shirt and lie on your tummy, we’ll do your back first.”

He rendered my back again flawless, but all I could think of—*roaring* in my ears—was the word I cannot say. I can say heart attack—my heart’s never given me a moment’s concern. I can say AIDS, which I intend never to get. But one word I *cannot* bring myself to utter.

Dr. Kushner had no such compunction. Turned me over and loomed again.

“Looks like a skin cancer, Ned,” he said. “Let’s take it off, get it biopsied.”

“*Can—?*”

I could go no further. One *horrifying* thought: *Die with my novel unpublished?*

“Probably just basal cell, though it could be squamous cell or malignant mela — Hold *still*. Even if it *is* a bad one, this should take care of it, unless it’s already metasta — Hold *still*, dammit!”

Is this what it comes to, a jolly sentence of death over First Avenue?

“Ned, you’re in your 60s, you have to expect —”

The worst day of my life darkened.

“Beg pardon, Doc, I don’t turn 60 for *months* yet.”

“Whatever.” *Whatever!* “Hey, this is nothing. Had a patient yesterday, nice young guy, acne into his 30s?”

“Don’t think I’d like him,” I said.

“Out of here by 4:30, walks down to 14th Street, gets stabbed.”

“Oh my God!”

“I mean, it’s New York: Jeep comes down the sidewalk, get out of the way, right? But this poor schmuck slaps it as it goes past. Reminding the driver of his manners? Guy gets out with a knife. I mean?”

“Did he die?”

“Course he died,” said Dr. Kushner. “What kind of story is it if he doesn’t die? Point is, one little skin cancer. And we haven’t even biopsied it yet, for goodness sake.”

Doctors are too close to death to know what it means. Off he sent me into the world with a Band-Aid across my nose. I felt grotesque. Leprous. Doomed. And on the 23rd Street crosstown bus came the first stab of what I knew was pancreatic cancer, the invariably fatal kind. And with church that evening!

I was going to ask the young man sitting next to me to hold me, just *hold* me, but at Broadway he bounced off the bus.

3. EXPECTING

AFTER WORK CATCH the uptown One at Times Square. By 137th Street I finish another chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* for Nineteenth-Century Novel. Five chapters to go, other homework, too, but the instant I get in Mami says go up to Suriya's.

"Can't, Mami: Homework."

"*Su mama me llamó.*"

"Mami, no —"

No arguing with your mother, is there?

Take the stairs, knock. Hear a shuffle towards the door. Opens on the robed figure and haggard face of Suriya, who's none too pretty the best of times. Very few teeth left, and she's not 30. Always had to turn off the lights to do it with her. But great hair — dreads like stuffed animals.

Her mother leans on a doorway, mad as hell. "Lock that door." Bites off the words.

Suriya locks it and puts her arms around me. "Eduardo."

I skip away. "Hey, Suriya, what's up?"

"*See?* She got news for you, big man. Take it like a man." Can't tell if she's fucked up or not. Always smells like crack up there.

"Eduardo," Suriya manages. Puts hands to her eyes and snuffles.

"Suriya, I got to go finish *Pride and Prejudice* —"

"Big man!" mama repeats.

"Eduardo, I'm late."

Fuck.

“We gon’ have a beautiful little baby.”

“And you gon’ marry her!” says Mama, charging over. “You play the game, you do the time! She too good for you—”

And on and on. I smile and nod and reassure Suriya, saying it’s all right, we’ll have such fun, I love kids, always wanted a son, we can do it tomorrow in Atlantic City if she wants, I’ll quit school and maybe her cousin can find a place for me, even a corner of my own, if so we’ll buy a Range Rover, red if she insists, though I prefer white.

She wants to fuck, but I tell her she has to take care of herself. Kiss her on the eyelids, temples, the backs of her hands, her fingertips, brush her lips lightly, give mama a bear hug and a smackeroo and, making no fast moves, leave. Even wait for the elevator so she has extra time to hang from her door admiring me.

Downstairs I luck out. José, Mami’s boyfriend, is home but off on troubles of his own, like maybe he lost his job again. He does maintenance work Midtown. Turns bloodshot eyes on me, but I know she didn’t tell him anything.

In my room I put on extra underwear, two extra shirts and my coat, load up my backpack with school stuff, head for the door.

“¿Eduardo?” says Mami.

“Where the fuck—?” goes José.

Last I hear. Race down the steps, past the guys getting high in the lobby—usually I hang, so they overlook it—and call Jaime collect from around the corner.

He’s not happy, but what’s he going to say, No, he’s fresh out of *floors*? We’re brothers. Closer, even—friends since 3rd grade. So I wait on the subway steps and when the One rolls in, run down, do a stunt over the turnstile and jump on. Don’t have a token or any money, either.

Getting to East Harlem's a bitch and I'm beat when I get there, but Jaime's glad to see me, actually. Things are going good. He's hooked up with our godmother Tia Luisa and is starting to get someplace. In New York if you tell someone it fell off the truck, their eyes light up. Won't pay retail, but they'll buy stuff they wouldn't otherwise. I mean, when the label says Calvin Klein, you love the way it looks, right?

So by the time I fall asleep, happy Elizabeth Bennett's landed her rich boyfriend at last, my wardrobe's been augmented by Calvin Klein underwear and a Ralph Lauren Polo shirt that might be real and a YSL scarf.

The scarf is for fags, though.

4. REWARDING PROPOSITION

I WAS A SAINT to show up at church that night. But why stay home to brood about my impending demise when I could do that anywhere?

Besides, when I called over to Gramercy Park to see if I had an 8:00 o'clock, Harry told me the Andrew he'd just scheduled sounded like a coming-outer.

While I waited for Harry's 7:00 o'clock to finish, there came a ruckus from someone struggling with the street door. Went down and let in a supremely nervous young man.

"Thank you," he said, and bounded up the steps and turned around twice before beseeching me, "Do you know where Gays Reaching Out—?"

"I'm GRO," I told him. "Have a seat, Andrew."

It staggered him. He looked cornered. Found out. Went white. *Oh, yes*, I said to myself: *Coming-outer*.

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