

1.

“NED HAMET, HIS TEN O’CLOCK?”

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

The nurse put Ned in an examining room, where he waited beside the window, preferring to look down at the ants 20 stories below negotiating First Avenue’s slush to sitting on the jointed slab surrounded by instruments of torture.

Dr. Kushner bustled in.

“How are you, Ned?”

Ned had to admire him—top dermatologist in the city, rolling up the big bucks healing people. Had he missed his calling?

“Hello, Doc,” said Ned. “I’m fine, just the usual: Two freckles 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, went out of focus as he came in close on Ned’s nose.

A negligible little growth, a freckle like those that turned up on his back as regularly as rocks in spring plowing, all because when he was young no one knew to keep out of the sun. Hardly visible, but they drove Ned crazy. He knew the routine: Freeze them with that super-thin needle, sluice them off with laser beams or whatever, slap on the Band-Aid, wish him good day and leave it to the receptionist to charge the

outrageous fee ten minutes of the good doctor's time went for.

Being examined by a doctor is a special kind of ecstasy, like conversing with God or being adored by a lover. Ned was a hypochondriac, no denying that, but at least he didn't indulge in private hysteria. No, he made regular rounds of the leading specialists, and did what they told him, too: His drinking was strictly medicinal, he shook his booty to music half an hour daily and a rabbit would envy his diet (but he *insisted* on regularity: A good bowel movement in the morning was a load off his 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 his back again flawless, but all Ned could think of – *roaring* in his ears – was the one word he *couldn't* say. He could say AIDS, which he intended never to get. He could say heart attack – his heart never gave him a moment's concern. But one word he could *not* bring himself to utter.

Dr. Kushner had no such compunction. Looming again at his nose, he said, "Looks like a little skin cancer, Ned. Let's take it off, get it biopsied."

"*Can – ?*"

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 One *horrifying* thought: *Die with my novel unpublished?*

"Probably just basal cell, though it could be squamous cell or malignant melano – Hold *still*. Even if it *is* a bad one, this should take care of it, unless it's already metasta – Hold *still*, dammit! Ned, you're in your 60s, you have to expect –"

The worst day of Ned's life darkened.

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

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

“Don’t think I’d like him.”

“Out of here by 2:30, 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 didn’t die? Point is, one little skin cancer. Get another, we’ll take *it* off, too. And we haven’t even biopsied it yet, for goodness sake.”

Doctors are too close to death to know what it means. Dr. Kushner sent Ned off into the world with a Band-Aid across his nose. He felt grotesque. Leprous. Doomed. And on the 23rd Street crosstown bus came the first stabs of what he *knew* was pancreatic cancer. And with church that evening!

He was going to ask the young man next to him to hold him, just *hold* him, but at Sixth Avenue the kid bounced off the bus.

2.

EVEN WHEN EDDIE tries to stay busy, things can slow up around him, trap him in syrup. Nothing's going on, except the sun's pouring down its hot honey, making people shift in their seats. Stays over the roof till afternoon, 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 he's standing in the reading room cage thinking, *What now? What next?* This is 1991, week after we start bombing Iraq. That first night's a new world! They close the exits, and just to get *out* of the 42nd Street Library everyone—no exceptions, not even *Eddie*—has to go through the front, descend the marble staircases beneath giant arches with the sinking sensation of *What'd I do?* In the Great Hall guards demand to see every scrap of paper. But it's *war. Cool, actually.*

"You OK, Eddie?" goes Akesha.

"Fine," he snaps. Poor Akesha. But she knows he has his moods.

The dumbwaiter chucks into place and Eddie takes out its load of books, spreads them along the counter, punches in the numbers. 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 the girls.

People are fidgeting like ants under a magnifying glass. Nothing for Eddie to do but watch. But it amuses him. 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 pencils (counting every one), pull the next chair closer and drape their coat over it. *Oy!*

Then through Genealogy’s shiny bronze doors steps a shaggy-headed *angel*. Gilded by sun, green eyes snapping with thought behind his glasses, he walks the length of the room straight at Eddie, shows his number card and says, “Four-thirty-four, please.”

“Hi!” goes Eddie, startling a flash behind the specs. Cutest geek he ever saw. Now he recognizes him, he’s a regular. What’s he been missing?

“Hello,” says the geek, wary.

“So what’re you working on, anyway?” Eddie asks, shoving over a pile of musty books. “You always get the oldest stuff.”

“On Walter Terse? Annotating his diaries?”

“Yeah?” says Eddie enthusiastically, thinking Walter *who*? Which does not get past him.

“The ‘Voluble Victorian’? English novelist-slash-essayist?”

“Cool!” goes Eddie. The geek’s eyes are like jewels.

“Well, he mentions a lot of people and things that don’t mean much any more, so it’s my job to try and figure them out so my boss can write footnotes.”

“Awesome!”

“Thank you,” he says, and carries his books away. Eddie flips 434 off.

A line's forming. When the sun goes off the board, people converge.

"On break," Eddie yells 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 regulars hunting for lottery numbers curse the ones on line. Eddie starts working through the backlog. The girls never keep up, and Alan's hopeless. When he rises up from his lair he gets in everyone's way, though his tie and important expression reassure the ones waiting.

"Did you hear me, Eduardo?"

"I'm back, Alan. Don't get your bowels in an uproar."

Old line. Still works.

"Downstairs," says Alan. "Now."

OK, down the steep flight to the dusty dark corner where rotting books hide his desk. Mildew's unbelievable.

"Sit down."

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

"Eduardo, your shift has two breaks, and they're scheduled for—"

Yeah, yeah. They work it out. Boss has to show he's boss, no problem. Eddie stands and wheezes a little, flips him a Goya urchin look, and Alan rushes

through it. No one gets books to the people faster than Eddie does. Creases in Alan’s forehead underline 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,” Eddie says. “Sorry, Alan, won’t happen again.”

They go back upstairs.

He’s giving a lady one of her books, telling her when the other two arrive they’ll light up her number again, give them a few, when he sees the Terse guy heading for the return window and goes over to take personal delivery. Actually, he knows his name from the call slips: Andrew Thomas. Two first names. Waspy enough?

“Thanks,” says Andy-Tommy, sliding books beneath the bar.

“Find it?” Eddie asks.

“No.” 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 in that red beard. But the eyes go panicky, and *Eddie* feels it, too: Something grabbing his *crotch*? The *fuck*?

Andy-Tommy stumbles towards the catalog room and someone gooses Eddie, really digs into his ass.

“Hey, big boy, Alan says –”

It’s Akasha. Downstairs where they hang out there’s a Polaroid on the wall, seven of them jamming their faces together. Five are girls, and one day Eddie realizes he’s 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, nodding at the line.

Back to the salt mines.

3.

NED WAS A *SAINTE* to show up at church that night. But why stay home to brood about his impending demise when he could do that anywhere?

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

While he waited for Harry to finish his 7 o’clock, there came a ruckus from someone struggling with the street door. Ned went down and let in a supremely nervous young man.

“Thank you.” He bounded up the steps and turned around twice before beseeching Ned, “Do you know where Gays Reaching Out—?”

“I’m GRO,” Ned told him. “Have a seat, Andrew.”

It staggered him. He looked cornered, condemned, found out, went red, went white. *Oh, yes*, said Ned to himself: *Coming-outer*.

“I’m Ned.”

“Andrew,” said the other, groping for his fingers like a drowning man for his straw.

“They’re still in our room. Be a minute yet.”

Sitting down, Andrew refused the offer of a mint, but asked, “What is this church, Episcopalian?”

“*Mais oui*. They give us the space. How did you find out about GRO?”

“Signboard?”

Ned nodded. He supposed there must be a certain appeal to coming out under institutional auspices. Once Harry and his counselee left, he ushered Andrew into GRO's room of dirty tan paint, battered wooden desk, plastic chair and vinyl couch.

"I'll be settled in about two minutes," he said, looking for a pen that worked and observing Andrew. Virgin of 26, he guessed, wearing what could be his father's clothes (particularly if Dad bought his pants by mail) and hiding his own advantages with an odd haircut, beard and black-framed glasses. Even so, Ned found his face forgivable. The glasses made his eyes smaller—glasses can seal off an entire personality—but they had a quality anyway. Homosexually virgin, he meant; thought he might well be married. Could picture his intellectual wife.

Ned put his mints on the desk with his cigarettes and matches, opened the notebook, read aloud, "Kevin five dollars," and looked in the cash box.

"Oh!" said Andrew, and handed him a \$5 bill. "Here."

Ned made a notation and asked, "Mind if I smoke?"

"No."

He did the best Paul Henried you can lighting up one cigarette while sporting a Band-Aid across your nose. Filled his lungs and, looking upwards, slowly breathed out. Ned always did smoke well. Andrew was too polite to say anything about the bandage, or perhaps too preoccupied to notice it—he was shaking like a murderer on the verge of confessing.

Ned asked, "Are you a minister?"

“No,” said Andrew, *fear* in his voice. “No, I’m not a minister.”

Ned took another drag. They had an hour.

“Why would you think that? I don’t even believe in God.”

“Is that a prerequisite? No, your appearance, your manner, your speech. Were you raised in a religion?”

“Roman Catholic.”

“It fits,” Ned noted. “Oh, how it fits! Are you married?”

“No, I’m not married.”

Ned took a drag. A man coming out at 40 or 50 has its sad side, though he’ll do what he can, but Andrew was young and not unattractive—a more rewarding proposition for a counselor.

“Harry didn’t write down any specifics,” he hinted.

“Well,” said Andrew. “Well, today I met—or didn’t *meet*—but we spoke—but it’s like looking through glass. . . Well, here’s the thing: I’m gay, I know it, but I have no sexual life, and don’t know how to start one.”

He said it and lived.

“I must have missed school the day everybody else got clued in.”

Like dynamiting a dam. Always is. Talked nonstop for 40 minutes. The usual. Distant father, fairweather mother—two of those suburban parents who find support in their own rigidity. Hated sports. Never liked dating girls. In New York since finishing his Master’s the year before, apparently sentenced to solitary confinement. Nodding acquaintances, no friends. Lonely, unhappy, thoughts of suicide. Just that day he’d walked through the New York Public

Library's reading room, eyes glued to the denim glow of a page's crotch, and panicked – *ran* – when his idol actually *smiled* at him!

"How long have you known?"

"Since I was – three?" said Andrew.

"Isn't it amazing?" Ned remarked. "Children aren't even *thinking* about sex, but gay kids feel branded from birth. I *hoped* things were getting easier for you young folks."

His job did interest Ned. Library research takes a knack he respected, and he'd looked with interest into the first published volumes of Walter Terse's diaries. He even liked his clumsy novels, for Terse wrote about the world he lived in, not the Never-Neverland of his day that preceded the Hollywoodland of ours as fiction's usual setting.

"Why aren't you teaching?" Ned asked.

"Tried, but hated it. Everyone *told* me I liked it, but the sound of my own voice bores me."

"Are you a private scholar?" Meaning rich.

"No, no, but the Terse Project's funded by the NEH, foundations, all that. I'm full-time, and Professor Onorato also has a full-time editor, plus a student crew of research assistants."

"I see."

Not exactly virgin, but he called his few episodes "squalid": a guy in the woods once, another during junior year abroad, and –

"This is hard to say."

"Take your time." Smoke wreathed leisurely ceilingwards.

"I live in the East Village, way over on 10th Street near Avenue C? Lower East Side, really. Across the

airshaft’s a guy who vacuums naked, scrubs floors naked, with the curtains open.”

“Every building has one,” noted Ned.

“Well. I’m ashamed to say this.”

“You gave him back his own medicine?”

Andrew blinked. “Yes.”

“Did you get together?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How was it?”

“Next day he sealed his windows in plastic.”

Ned had to laugh.

“Slip him our number. He’s got bigger problems than you do.”

“That kid at the Library who spoke to me today? Guess that’s why I’m here. He’s really cute.”

“But is he *gay*?”

“I don’t know. The girls certainly like him.”

“Andrew, Andrew, Andrew: You don’t want straight men, not when you’ve come out to yourself.”

“I don’t think he’s straight. I have a feeling.”

“He’s white?”

“Hispanic, maybe?”

“Then he comes from a world different from any you know, and you shouldn’t read *anything* into what he might do or say.”

“Ned, may I ask how old you are?”

“Twenty-three-and-a-half,” Ned said promptly. Andrew laughed. “I run this little operation. First session’s to figure out who should counsel you. In your case I think *I’m* the right one. If you agree—” Andrew nodded. “Then if next Tuesday at eight’s good—”

“One thing,” Andrew said in a suddenly strained voice. A silence asserted itself. Bit of a surprise.

Usually by now they were making Ned dictate a list of cruise bars. Sexuality long repressed tends to explode.

He popped a mint. Felt quite curious.

“This guy through the airshaft. I have a thing on my testicles, I think it’s a chancre.”

“Pronounced *chancre*. When did you go to bed with him?”

“Last August.”

“*August*? Get syphilis in *August* and wait until *January*—? Give me a look.”

Ned locked the door and Andrew stood up, undid his pants and pulled down his briefs. They always came in horny and seductive, but *this* was a new one on Ned.

No record-breaker, but definitely nice, and it wasn’t no chancre.

“That’s like a *mole*, you’ll have it the rest of your life, it’s *nothing*.”

Endless gratitude and relief as Andrew zipped up. A knock at the door, and Ned unlocked it to his 9 o’clock regular, Billy. One look at Andrew and—Billy’s problem was they all looked like gods.

“Next week then?”

“Yes,” said Andrew. “Yes, Ned, and thank you!”

Left considerably more chipper than when he arrived.

The door closed and Billy said, “I’m in love!”

“Billy, he’s not your type, plus he’s a coming-outer. He needs a lot of help.”

“Oh shit,” said that rotten Billy, rolling his eyes. “I know what *that* means.”

4.

AFTER WORK EDDIE catches the uptown One at 42nd Street. By 137th Street he’s finished another chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* for Nineteenth-Century Novel. Five chapters to go, but the instant he gets 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?

He takes the stairs, knocks. Hears a shuffle towards the door. It 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 him.
“Eduardo.”

He skips away. “Hey, Suriya, what’s up?”

“*See?* She got news for you, big man. Take it like a man.” Eddie can’t tell if she’s fucked up or not. Always smells like crack up there.

“Eduardo,” Suriya manages, putting hands to her eyes and snuffling.

“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. Eddie smiles and nods and reassures them, says it’s all right, they’ll have such fun, he loves kids, always wanted a son, they can do it tomorrow in Atlantic City if she wants, he’ll quit school and maybe her cousin can find a place for him, even a corner of his own in a good Dominican neighborhood, if so they’ll buy a Range Rover, red if she insists, though he prefers white.

She wants to fuck, but he tells her she has to take care of herself. Kisses her on the eyelids, temples, the backs of her hands, her fingertips, brushes her lips, gives mama a bear hug and a smackeroo and, making no fast moves, leaves. Even waits for the elevator so Suriya has extra time to hang from her door admiring him.

At home José, Mami’s boyfriend, is home early, eating silently, off on troubles of his own, like maybe he lost his job again. He does maintenance work Midtown. Turns bloodshot eyes on him, but Eddie knows Mami didn’t tell him anything.

In his room he puts on extra underwear, two extra shirts and his coat, loads his backpack with school stuff, heads for the door.

“¿Eduardo?” says Mami.

“Where the fuck – ?” goes José.

Last Eddie hears. Races down the steps, past the guys getting high in the lobby – usually he hangs out,

so they overlook it—and calls Jaime collect from the corner booth.

Jaime’s not happy, but what’s he going to say, No, he’s fresh out of *floors*? They’re brothers. Closer, even—friends since 3rd grade. So Eddie waits on the steps until the One rolls in, runs down and does a stunt over the turnstile. Doesn’t have a token or any money either.

Getting to East Harlem’s a bitch on the train and he’s beat when he gets there, but Jaime’s actually glad to see him. Things are going good. He’s hooked up with their godmother, Tia Luisa, and is starting to get somewhere. 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. After all, when the label says Calvin Klein, you love the way it looks, right?

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

The scarf is for fags, though.

5.

“BENIGN?” NED ASKED when Dr. Kushner came on the line.

“Basal cell cancer, Ned,” the doctor told him, “but no biggie. Get any more, we’ll take them off, too, OK. . .? OK?”

Ned’s nerveless hands dropped the phone. Who knows how long Dr. Kushner spoke into the empty air?

But life goes on. His incision healed, that hateful Band-Aid came off and Ned had every reason to hope he was in remission.

And by Andrew’s second session he was making real progress. Andrew sweetly said talking to him was *solving* his problems, not papering them over, that since meeting him he felt airborne, as after flinging off his pack on a hiking trip; too poetic for Ned, but he complimented his perceptiveness. Meanwhile, his Skye terrier, Doldrums, humped Andrew’s leg nonstop.

“By the way, do you like Harry?” Ned asked. As before, Harry had vacated the room for them. Though not Ned’s type, he was a good man, even if Dolly growled at that black beard.

“He seems nice.”

“Do you find him attractive?”

“I wasn’t thinking in those terms.”

“He likes *you*. Poor man just turned 40.”

“What’s tragic about that?”

“Oh Andy, in the gay community – We’re great at so many things, so tolerant. Until it comes to *age*, where we’re the *worst*. Already two friends of mine have killed themselves because they got old.”

“That seems. . .”

“Yes?”

“Stupid.”

“You’re 26? Be 30 soon enough.”

“And 40, 50, 90—I hope. Hope I live to tell the tale.”

“You warm an old man’s heart.”

Ned explained frankly that before being set on the prowl by himself, Andrew needed a certain acclimatizing to the gay world, a certain *hardening*, and mentioned several gay churches that might be about his speed.

“They have coffee hours, Andy: Easiest way in the world to meet people.”

Also he imparted the whole secret to successful technique, which, whether working a church or bar or sidewalk, consists of being relaxed, being oneself and expressing one’s desires directly—and never, *never* communicating any hint of need. Gays can scent *need* a mile off, and they don’t like it. (*Fear* is a different matter altogether.)

“It’s all eye contact, Andy. The *eye* contact that goes on! But it’s simple: See someone you like, turn your head away, then look back—with *impact*.” Naturally he demonstrated. Andrew jumped a mile.

“Not sure that’s me, Ned.”

“You’re not attracted to men you run into?”

“I don’t want to see someone and go to bed very next thing. Doesn’t that devalue it? I want to get to know him first.”

Ned breathed smoke.

“You’re right,” he replied. “I know it. I gave up sex for that very reason.”

“Gave up *sex*?”

“Worn out by it all, bored down to my toes by three decades of being trash. (There, I’ve told you my age.) It *is* a brutal kind of game, separating your cock from your heart.”

“You’re *celibate*?”

“Not any more—in theory. Turned my head around, and now when I have sex it’s warm and meaningful, with someone I like and respect. Not that it’s as frequent as I’d like.” Stubbing out his cigarette, he looked at Andrew *hard*. “Andy, do you find me attractive?”

Panic behind those glasses. Getting old is so humiliating. Ned had no doubt what his honest answer would be, but Andrew seemed too nice, too polite to be candid.

And he was right.

“Sure,” said Andrew.

A worm crawled through Ned’s groin.

“Then I have a proposition to keep you out of trouble. See, I’m being upfront. You want to have sex right *now*, after putting it off your whole life, and outlets like parading nude across your airshaft don’t do it for you.” Andrew blushed scarlet. “Don’t want you to end up in jail, *or* for your first experience to be someone who’ll chalk you up as another trick. Billy drives me home. Why don’t you wait and come with us?”

Ned rubbed Dolly’s ear. Now *his* heart was thumping.

“OK,” said Andrew. “All right.”

And a knock on the door, which turned out to be Billy.

AFTER BILLY’S SESSION, they found Andrew scanning a parish newsletter with the look of a man who’s told a lie and now has to pay for it. Not unnatural that he wasn’t fantasizing about sex with men Ned’s age; Ned understood *entirely*. But surely Andrew saw that in his day he’d been a handsome man—*very* handsome? The bones keep their place, even if the skin slips past. But though his white corduroys and sculpted gray hair denied it, Ned’s day was perhaps a while ago.

But he was confident that between Andrew’s legs were rebel stirrings at the idea of having sex right now, *tonight*. (Being young is so humiliating.)

Billy drove them west, his head turned to the backseat (“Library research! My God, how fascinating! Do you like Stephen King?”). They fetched up across Ninth Avenue, where the sky traced pious outlines of gables and steeples.

After saying goodnight to Billy, Ned went inside, turning on lights and floods and putting Dolly in the garden. Then he called to Andrew to advance.

Ned’s apartment was a floor-through low rather than lofty, his treasures displayed to advantage. He had taste—more taste than money, of course, but over time he’d found some nice things. That shining green garden made an effective backdrop to his 18th-

century English furniture, so masculine in its firm outlines.

Hanging up Andrew's coat, he installed him in the leather wingchair, handed him a glass of Jack Daniel's and sat down on the couch opposite. Andrew looked around, impressed. Ned, too, savored his drink.

Andrew pointed to a closed door. "Is that—the bedroom?"

"Living room. Never use it. Sleep in here. It's a Castro convertible."

"Why don't you use it?"

"It's—hard to explain. Took 20 years to furnish just how I want. Some real prizes in there."

"Can't take it with you, you know."

"So they say, in the most malicious blow to human happiness ever struck."

When Andrew had drained his glass Ned pointed out the little Klee beside his chair and an angry Marsden Hartley, and Andrew stood up to see them better. Ned coaxed up his erection, turned him around by the shoulders—smiling as he showed no resistance—and pressed his mouth and groin to Andrew's.

And what happened? Andrew's knees sagged. He'd kissed girls, but never a man, not even those he'd had sex with.

"Why don't you take off your clothes?" Ned murmured, tossing cushions, pulling out the bed and undressing.

He slipped in nude next to Andrew, and they kissed lying side by side. Then Ned ranged up over him, sure he'd like the weight bearing down, even if Ned's body was softer than his. Reversing positions, Ned pulled at his hips, gluing him to himself while

Andrew moaned. Turning him over again, Ned moved down until his mouth caught his penis. Andrew arched, breathless and disbelieving.

When he came up for air, Ned said, “You have a very attractive cock, I *must* say.”

“I wish it were bigger.”

“It’s fine. Bigger than mine.”

Was this true? Investigating, Andrew pressed his face to him and took him in.

“Uhh!” said Ned. “Let me show you what I like. Don’t come in my mouth.”

His slick mouth tasting Andrew again, his hand squeezing while guiding his lips up and down, Ned put him on a spittle-thin film of sensation, the world sliding on the axis of his penis. How Andrew moaned!

“Like that,” said Ned.

Andrew did the same to him, getting more lost to himself, Ned expected, than ever in his life before, forgetful of everything but Ned’s silk-textured stiffness, his contours catching Andrew’s mouth in a perfect fit.

“When I come,” Ned gasped, “don’t move your head even half an inch.”

And with a crisis of cries and springs and swells – and an iron clamp on Andrew’s head – Ned frothed his splash in his mouth, for blissful seconds Lord of the Universe.

“Oh my,” he managed at last. “Andy, you have a *talent*.”

“Thank you.”

“No, no, thank *you*.” His hand found him again. “Do you use lubricant when you masturbate?”

“No.”

“I’ll show you.” Squeezed lotion into his palm. “Jergens. I swear by it.”

Coating Andrew, he began an insistent, up-and-down squeeze, slowing at his moans, then speeding up, torturing him, wrenching him to the bottom of his being until white cords splashed his chest in surrender and he couldn’t utter a syllable.

“*There.* You liked that? You’ll be ready for springtime. When a young man’s fancy turns to sex.”

Only when Ned, sitting against the couch back, was halfway through a cigarette could Andrew speak.

“Aren’t you supposed to feel sad after sex?”

“Maybe straights do, not us. I see you’re ready for more, but I need my sleep. If you want, we can do it again next week.”

“Not before?”

Ned considered. “Give me a call,” he said, and gave him his number.

NED KNEW THAT SOMEDAY whether a boy is gay or straight will strike no one as of more interest than whether he’s blond or brunette, prefers baseball or football. There won’t even be a name for an orientation so normal as gay. *Someday.* Will Manhattan Island still rise above the waters when that day arrives? Ned wasn’t holding his breath.

Until the millennium, then, it was necessary for *someone* to lay on the hands and introduce young gay men to the traditions they’re heir to. Most work things out for themselves, but shame and guilt still trap so many.

Ned reveled in this surrogate fatherhood; a father’s what he was meant to be all along. It was his

foremost satisfaction in being gay. Young men are touchingly grateful for attention, correction, approval and initiation; so unbelievably hungry for fathers. And why not? The profoundest truth Ned knew is that a boy cannot grow up without one.

When he conceived the idea of GRO, recruited experienced friends as peer counselors and secured from Father Albright the use of a room in his parish house, Ned entered upon his true vocation: *fatherhood*.

Coming out was natural for him. He didn’t mean the public confession that’s *de rigueur* these days (if you have to confess it, can you feel so great about it?); when he seduced all but three of his fellow 7th graders (it’s those three he still remembers), he’d no idea that what he was doing was *coming out*. But after living as trash since age twelve, he found his salvation in counseling others—in giving back to the community. By now he had many sons.

Andrew wasn’t atypical of gay virgins, if a little older than most. His dad was one of those who never play catch with their sons, who pass up the joy of transmitting their manhood, take the hands-off approach to the most hands-on job there is. Go figure!

And his sexual nature was never acknowledged (though you couldn’t tell Ned even the densest parent doesn’t *know*), much less encouraged. Certainly he swallowed his father’s attitude whole—grew up despising gay people, for 26 years heard ringing in his ears the booming *No!* fathers install in their sons, so gratuitously and cruelly in their gay ones. It held him back, made him avoid people—kept him immature when he should have been growing up. But if he didn’t date, took several attempts to finish his education, shunned close friendships, why should

Dad care? Life's hard, honey, get used to it. You're on your own. Sink or swim.

Someone has to clean up the mess. The worst cases Ned leaves to the shrinks and the jailers. But when people call GRO for help, he's there for them. Andrew when he stumbled through its door was as estranged from himself and society as a not absolutely unhealthy person can be. In going to bed with Ned, he was affirming his identity as a gay man. Ned's privilege was to be the agent of his release, to insure that his first experience came not at the untender mercies of the bars or streets, but in his bed, under controlled conditions, Ned doing his best to show him how loving gay sex can be.

Naturally it worked both ways. For Ned virgins were the most fun, and in this life you have to grab at what pleasures you can. And performing the oldest act there is helped keep him young.

Plenty of men can't stand virgins, avoid them like the plague. Ned would admit they never know what to do, even when shown are not immediately proficient, but to him that's their charm. That nervous enthusiasm conquers him every time. No matter what he looks like, Ned will go to bed with a virgin.

Sometimes from sheer overwhelmed *newness* they fall in love with him, or think they do. Those cases require a deft touch, for while conquest's fun, occupation's a bore. Ned disengages as nicely as he can.

Purists might disqualify Andrew from virginity, what with his furtive few. But his entering Ned's bed marked his debut in the world of guilt-free sex. That was the crucial difference; that's what Ned was there for.

– QUEER’S PROGRESS –

SHE WATCHED LIFE, after coming to London, with a sort of despair—motivated and busy, always, always progressing. Even people pausing on bridges seemed to pause with a purpose; no bird seemed to pursue a quite aimless flight. The spring of the works seemed unfound only by her. . .

Elizabeth Bowen,
The Death of the Heart

NOW I BEGIN to reap the benefits of my hazards.

John Bunyan,
Pilgrim’s Progress

Queer's Progress

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