

Lonely Roamer & Foolish Child

by Louis A. Colantuono

I first talked to Jerry when he was a fifth grade student in my daughter's class. He just stood close to me at the Valentine's Day party, letting me fill his punch cup over and over again.

I am room parent; for the party I'd brought all the goodies – the heart-shaped boxes filled with little heart candies that have loving things written on them; punch, cookies, chocolate kisses, cupcakes, and the big heart-shaped cake I got from the bakery. This is just part of the job of room parent – the nice part of the job is serving it all to the children who smile sweetly with their sincere thank-yous, their eyes gleaming with instant love.

Jerry walked away for a moment, giving my pouring arm a brief respite. In no time at all he was back.

“Mr. Colantuono,” – a cute smile that said lots more than my name – “this is for you.”

It was one of those Valentine cards that say nothing and yet when you get them from the right person they say everything at the same time.

Blue, blue intense eyes staring with open innocence, showing his affection: Jerry had done this same thing to me at the Halloween and Christmas parties – but I'd had nothing but longing looks from him then, and no matter where I looked there he was staring at me.

He was a rough-featured but good-looking boy. I had to put him out of my mind because his constant staring was beginning to affect the front of my pants. So I wasn't unhappy when one of the girls came over to talk to me. “Mr. C.,” she said, “I, on behalf of our class, wish to thank you for this lovely Valentine's Day party. We are very glad that Di has a parent like you.”

“Thank you, everybody,” I said. “You know how much joy all these special days bring me.” My eyes met Jerry's eyes. I stammered a little. “It really is my pleasure to be here.”

My daughter made a face at me as usual. She hates me to come to her class, even though I'm all they can get for room parent. When the party was over and the children had run out of the classroom with their little party treasures, I kept her back to help clean up the mess. Jerry stayed

too.

“Dad,” Di said sarcastically, “Jerry said he was going to give you a Valentine's card.”

“And he did.” I took it out of my sweaty shirt pocket and handed it to her. “Isn't it a nice little card?”

“Huh. It says he loves you.”

“Hell, I'm glad somebody does. I know you don't love me, because you think I steal all of your friends.”

“That's right, you do. Every time I have my friends over and you're home they end up visiting you and not me.” She put her hands on her hips and scolded me just like grown-up women do in the soap operas. “I sure wish you would stop playing sick and go back to work.”

I wasn't playing sick. I'd had a jumper jump into my truck off a freeway overpass and he'd died. I'd been having nightmares and stomach problems ever since. I was only doing 55 but it was heavy Sunday traffic and I couldn't swerve or even try to stop my 36-ton five-axle truck.

“Okay,” I said. “I'll go to work again and then when you need me in all your little projects I won't be here, that's all. I was only going to take off until next fall when you get into junior high.”

“Sure you were! You've just got lazy not working your truck.”

The next day I started to clean up the shop and get my truck back in working order. It was a baby-blue Freightliner I called 'Daddy's Playhouse'. It had taken me two years to build it, custom right down to a chromed frame and chrome rear ends. It had an eight-foot square sleeper (sacrificed payload for playload) and a lot of other custom things, like TV and video-cassette player, a couple of eight-track stereos, a mini-reefer refrigerator. For the work I hired a helper. He was one of my lover-boys and his name was Jimmy. My wife complained about me starting my driving too soon. I ignored her.

“Jimmy,” I said, hiding out from the women in my own greasy sanctuary, “I'll need a kid to take care of the yard and stuff when I'm on the road.”

“Hire my brother. He's 12 but big for his age, and he works hard.”

“Didn't know you had a brother.”

“Well, Jerry knows you. He even gave you a Valentine's card.”

My knees just about buckled under me from the shock. I'd been making it with Jimmy for a long time – recently just on the side now and then because he is a girl-chasing closet case. If something goes wrong Jimmy runs to me to hug and kiss him and 'treat him like a girl'.

Jimmy made me sit down. He ran to the house to get my pills. My

wife came out.

“You're two hours late taking your medicine, Louie,” she reminded me. “I don't think you should drive your truck alone.”

“I won't. Jimmy will go with me and his brother Jerry will take care of things like run your errands and cut the grass.”

She went into the house happy. I stayed in the chair.

Jimmy smiled at me – his smile of expectation. He knew he'd get a workout in more ways than just loading and unloading my truck.

“Now look, Jimmy, you'll have to work. I won't tolerate drinking in my truck. If just one beer can is found by the fuzz on the floor of that cab, I could lose my I.C.C. status – and I don't even drink.”

“I promise, I promise. I've quit drinking anyway.”

“I know – 'cause you can't afford to buy any more!”

It took us a week of hard work to get my rig ready for the road. I could only do it a few hours at a time, then I had to rest. Jimmy and Jerry changed the oil and put in new oil filters; Jerry cut the lawn and cleaned up leaves until Jimmy needed his help with the truck again.

I was resting one day and playing around with my citizens' band radio base beside my bed.

“Yeah,” The Copper Head was saying, “So you're gonna truck out again the first of the week, huh Roamer? I'll warn everyone you're back on the road. 'Specially them freckle-faced boys. A-four.”

“You got it,” I came back. I get a lot of teasing about my morals, but no one pays any attention to it, like it's all one big joke.

The big Super Cummings twin-turbo 550 h.p. diesel started without one bit of trouble. I sat there in the cab, letting it build up air pressure to check out the hoses for leaks. They were all fine.

“Come on, boys,” I told Jimmy and Jerry, “Let's go get the trailer. That's next.”

We pulled out onto the road. Jimmy sat on the right-hand seat. He kept trying to get Jerry onto his lap and Jerry kept pulling away: he wanted to stay on the engine-cover out of his brother's reach.

“Leave Jerry alone,” I said. “You're distracting my driving. Besides that, you're upsetting my tummy. If you behave, Jimmy, I'll let you sit on my lap again.”

Jerry laughed. Jimmy is over six feet tall. I'm five foot four – and Jerry is five foot four, too. “I'll sit on your lap,” Jerry said, “or anyways beside you.” And he ran around behind and squeezed himself onto my seat while Jimmy gave me a look that could kill.

All we had to do to the trailer was add a little air to three of the eight

tires. When we got it home Jimmy went to work greasing it. We had the freon checked in the refrigeration unit: it was good.

That Sunday night I pulled out with the other trucks. Jimmy didn't mind riding with me. He talked on the C.B. for a long time to Tommy, who was one of my other little loves and still had his room in our house, who grew up and became a trucker himself, had a girl friend or six and was still loving to me if he and I were home at the same time (if not, I don't see him for weeks at a time). Seems I'm always raising my loves to leave me for other more interesting interests.

“How about a break on the I-9 for that Lonely Roamer. This is The Long Hauler looking.”

“Go ahead, Long Hauler,” I said.

“God, Dad, they said you was mobile again. That true?”

“It's true, old son,” I told him affectionately. “Thanks for the phone call. We're on the side.”

The first week went quickly, and well, but by the end of the second Jimmy started getting hard to handle. He had more money than he knew what to do with. He wanted to see his friends, buy them a beer and just be wild. I decided to take my finger off of him and let him have a night of fun. That was a mistake.

The phone rang at 4 in the morning. Jimmy'd got busted driving his friend's car drunk. He would have to appear in court Monday and I had to pull out Sunday night. It was only three weeks until school was out. I talked Di into going on one trip with me.

She hated the truck, hated the trip and hated the idea that I slept raw with her in the same sleeper cab.

“You're just nasty,” she told me. “You run around the house naked and you even sleep in this truck naked.” This started another argument between us. I tried to explain – her mother'd even tried to explain – that I was a nudist and didn't think of naked bodies as anything but natural and sexily beautiful to look at.

She wouldn't be convinced. She ranted and raved about my immodest behavior. Naked in my own peek-proof truck!

“Listen Di, I don't demand that you do anything but wash dishes for your mother. What I do is my affair. If I run around the house naked or sleep in my truck naked you can look the other way, it's your business.”

That ended the matter, but it did get me at odds with my wife when we got home. After all this I was ready to have another live-in lover. I went off to my room and picked up the phone and dialed The Phantom.

“Hello, you big hunk of man,” I said. “I need to find me a swapper for the next couple of months. Do you know of any I can trust with me and my new truck?”

“Not really, Roamer. I'll let Eddy ride with you for a week until you find one. I heard you're still sick and driving.”

“Yeah,” I told him, “I got chased out of the house for being lazy.”

“Whoever told you that, old Dad, had their head in their butt. I saw you pulled over on Five last week. You're still on malts, huh?”

“Yes. About five a day. I'll be down to get Eddy, then.”

“No, Lou,” Eddy broke in on their extension, “you rest up. My dad'll bring me to you.”

They were there in a couple of hours.

“I thought you had that tall Jim fellow swapping for you,” Eddy said. “Where is he now?”

“He got caught drunk driving. That means he'll never get a truck license.”

“Wow,” said The Phantom. “With all of the things you did for him, too. That is a shame.”

It was too – and I hadn't seen Jerry since his brother'd been picked up.

I spent the next nine days in sexual bliss, as I always did when Eddy rode with me. Four years ago Eddy had been just one big problem. I'd met them when his father's truck broke down in New York state. The Phantom stayed behind to get it fixed but I took Eddy with me back to California. He was mean and hateful then, and he'd just been expelled from school. But I didn't have trouble making friends with the boy – and after that he didn't actually seduce me – he raped me instead!

Later his father caught him having it off with another kid. Eddy called me. I drove down to the valley where they lived and rescued him from punishment. From then on sex was something The Phantom just left up to his son, and from then on things started going right for Eddy. He'd been riding with me on and off ever since.

At the end of those happy nine days Eddy had to return home – and I needed my neighborhood swapper back. I picked up the phone.

“Hello, is Jimmy there?” I asked his mother. “This is me, Louie.”

“No. Is it anything Jerry can do for you instead?”

“I have a trip to San Francisco in a couple of hours and I wanted Jimmy to come along and do his job.”

“Huh. Jimmy!” She sounded disgusted. “I wash my hands of that boy. He told me you were a queer, then he said you were doing things

with Jerry and he said if you called to say he quit... I don't believe a word he told me. If you want to take Jerry then you can come right over here and pick him up, Louie.”

“Thanks. Jimmy's right: I am queer. But I was only queer with Jimmy. I haven't touched Jerry.”

“You can still come over and get Jerry,” she said. “I trust you, Louie. You have done a lot for my children, or tried to.” She paused. “Besides, Jerry is old enough to say no when he wants to.”

She hung up. I had to phone her back to tell her to leave Jerry asleep: I would carry him out to my truck and he would wake up in it in the morning.

So I drove over and got a permission letter from his mother and brought out a big brown paper bag with Jerry's things in it to the truck, and, finally, the sleeping boy himself. I tucked him sound asleep into the sleeper cab. Then I roared off into the night.

The only way you can survive as an independent is to break the 55 mile-an-hour speed laws all to hell – and keep a sharp lookout for the Smokeys. It takes just as much fuel per mile to drive 55 in 10th gear as it does 70 in 13th, and the time you save is your profit. To compete with the companies you have to cover a thousand plus miles a day on a long haul.

For four hours I barreled along the freeways, then, when the sun came up, slowed down to sixty. Now Jerry woke up, thoroughly befuddled at the way his bed was bouncing around beneath him.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” I yelled. I was looking at him in my rear-view 'peekie' mirror I'd installed just to watch my lover boys play when I had more than one of them riding with me. “Who kissed you awake?”

“Where are we? I thought I was dreaming.”

“Almost into San Jose, hon. Maybe you really were dreaming. I phoned up to get Jimmy, 'and your mother let me take you instead.”

“Really?” He was coming alive, now. “Even after Jimmy told all those lies on me and said you and me was having sex? After he told Mother you were a queer?”

“Your mother said you were twelve years old and if you didn't know how to say no to something now you never would – or you'd better learn. I think she trusts you to do your own thing.”

He was hard and he slipped it out of his shorts and started rubbing it, showing off for me in the mirror. It wasn't a very big thing to show off yet, but it was nice and cute and he was real proud of it, and if I'm a size queen it's the other way around.

“Do you see this, Louie?” Jerry yelled over the roar of the motor working to climb a hill. “I am doing my own thing.” He laughed and so did I.

I reached back to playfully slap his hands and slip his unders back up to cover himself, but he rolled away from me, then got on his knees out of my reach and flag-waved.

“You know, Jimmy had no right calling you a queer,” Jerry shouted. “He’s the one’s that queer. I have to go to the bathroom. How do I do it?”

I showed him how to get to the little toilet behind the passenger’s seat. I told him he would have to sit, because of all the bouncing of the cab.

“Hey, I got a pointer, not a sitter, to pee with. What do you think I am, a girl?”

I asked him why he’d taken his underwear off.

He looked a bit sheepish. “Uh, I think I had a wet dream. Did you ever have a wet dream, Louie?”

“Yeah, I sure did. I had to help it every stroke of the way, too.”

Jerry dived across the cab at me, completely naked and smelling of sleep. “You’re nasty. Di is right, you’re just plain nasty,” he giggled.

I caught him under the arms and sat him on the seat with me. I had to reach both hands around him to work my two shifting sticks. When I brought my left hand back to the wheel my sleeve brushed Jerry’s hard, although I didn’t know it at the time.

“Louie, what did you do that for?” he asked me.

“Do what for, hon? You mean shift the truck?”

“No, when you shifted me on the way back from shifting the truck.” He looked up into my face and smiled with complete and happy trust. He really was in a good humor for just having waked up.

“Well, let me shift it right next time.”

He arched up to push himself out. “That’s to give you a bigger shifter. Otherwise you can only get two fingertips on me.”

I had to shift the rig again. When I went to pull my hand back Jerry grabbed it and put it on his own lever. “Now, shift me, too.”

He smiled when I shifted him.

“Do you know, I really love you a lot, Louie.” He looked back at me with his big blue eyes. “I think I have loved you ever since I was eleven.”

“That’s pretty serious, hon.”

“I’m a pretty serious person when it comes to who I want to love,” he said very evenly. “Jimmy forced me to do things with him, and with his

friends, too. I know you don't force anyone. I talked to Tommy.”

“What did Tommy tell you?”

“That if you're worth his love then you're worth my love, too.”

A station-wagon passed full of kids pulling their arms up and down to get me to give them a blast on the big air horn. I grabbed the blue horn wire and gave them a four-trumpet toot. They jumped on their seats and laughed and waved at us. That's one thing I love about running these highways: sending love from a simple thing like a toot of my big horns, or the nine musical ones mounted like a horseshoe on the back of my cab. I gave the kids a short tune.

“How'd you do *that*?” Jerry asked, looking at the buttons.

“By pressing these.” And I played the first bit of *Way Down Upon the Swanee River*.

“That's cool!”

“Heck, Jerry, you just don't have any idea how horny I can get.”

“How horny *can* you get?” Jerry asked quite seriously.

“Well, now, let's see how horny I can get.” I honked the city horn, then blasted the air horns, a door bell and a set of chimes. I stepped on a plunger that activated my illegal Bermuda Bell, too. “That horny enough for you?” I asked when I was all though.

“No. You forgot to ding my dong.”

I checked the mirrors. It was clear of the Bears so I let Jerry try the musical horns.

The C.B. speakers burst into life. “You sound a little out of tune today, Roamer.” It was a woman's voice. “Or are you just out of practice from being out of commission for so long, Lou?”

I fishtailed the trailer so I could see who was on my donkey. It was the two-tone blue Ford C.L. Nine-thousand that belonged to the Boobie Sisters.

“Negatory lady. I have a child here wants to know everything on this truck and how to drive it, too.”

“Does that child have a handle, Roamer?”

“Affirmative, lady trucker. Most of the boys I know got 'em built-in. A big ten-four. But he don't got no C.B. Handle yet, lady.”

“Well, you sure helped me give him one. You tell that child if he's foolish enough to drive with you, he is a very foolish child. That's a good handle for him – Lonely Roamer and Foolish Child. What is your little friend's name?”

“Jerry, his name's Jerry.” Then I turned to Jerry to ask, “That handle won't make you mad will it hon?”

“No, it won't,” Jerry smiled. “Does Di have a C.B. handle too?”

“Yeah. She's the Cloud Princess, because she fancies herself some kind of debutante, a beautiful debutante.”

Jerry didn't know what a debutante was but he did guess the handle meant Di was stuck on herself. I tossed him my bag of M & M candies, then I told him to get his clothes on because we would stop here for his eats and my malt.

“Hey!” I said into the mike, “are you Boobie Sisters going to spring for the eats?”

“We had to change our handles from Big Boobs and Little Boobs to Biggie and Smaller, Lou,” Smaller said. “We got censored by the moralists that won't let a couple of dyke sisters tell the world that Biggie's got 'em big and I'm flat as a flap-jack. A-four.”

“A-four, Smaller. They can't talk our talk or do our thing, but they sure got their long noses in our business.”

“Affirmative. They should learn to live up to their own morals before they can say anyone else's are wrong.”

Now Biggie wheeled her rig around me, because I was still in the rocking chair watching the beautiful boy that loved me tugging on his clothes.

“Hey, Jerry, where are your undies?”

“I left them off for fast undresses. When we come back from eating I want to be naked in the sleeper again. That's if it's alright with you.”

“Sure hon. This is a liberated truck. You do whatever turns you on.”

Jerry struggled into his pants, then looked out my little smoked glass bubble heart-shaped interlocked windows. Then he turned on the TV set. Then the eight-track. This was the first time he'd been back in the sleeper awake and he had' to see if everything worked.

“A truck with a bathroom, TV, two eight tracks with dirty tapes,” he said in my ear from over my shoulder. “This truck is class!”

In Oakland we went to the bulk mail house. There I dropped my trailer and pulled the tractor out to the waiting line. It would be half a day wait until they got the magazines out.

“What do we do now, Louie?”

“We get to sack out until two. I'm going to undress and get in the sleeper.”

“Don't you shut off the motor?”

“No, hon. The air cooler shuts down with the motor – it'd get awful hot in here.”

As soon as I had my clothes off and was lying on the bed Jerry dived into my arms and started hugging and cuddling me.

"I love you," I told him between kisses. "I don't know why anyone should love someone as funny looking as you are. But I love you anyway."

He nestled himself deeper into my arms, his smile showing me he knew I was teasing him about being funny looking. "Louie, no one's ever said they loved me before. What they always have done to me before is throw me face down on the bed, do me fast and then forget I'm even there."

"Jerry," I told him, with more kisses, "I will never forget you're there."

I woke up later, my alarm clock ringing fiercely in the cab, blond sweet-smelling head on my shoulder, light breath on my cheek. I carefully untangled myself from the sleeping boy, pulled on my pants, shoes and then went to get the trailer.

I'd been on the road for a good hour when I felt hands come around the seat from behind me.

"Hello, Daddy," Jerry whispered into my ear. "I love you so much." Then, annoyed, "Why didn't you wake me when you hooked up the unit? That's naughty. That's why I'm here – to help you."

He meant every word. He came around the seat. Pulling his naked bottom onto my left knee, I brought the truck, which had wandered a bit, back into the center of the lane, then kissed him. "I just wanted you to sleep, hon. If there was really anything to do, I would of woke you. Hell, a man should never be asked to go any place without his lover-boy."

Jerry smiled at me. He liked that. "How about if his lover-boy thinks he's a girl, like Jimmy does? Then should he go every place with the man, too?"

I didn't quite understand his question, but there was one matter I wanted to settle right then. "Jerry, you're not a girl. You're all funny-looking, rugged little boy."

"I'm not little," Jerry said. "I'm as big as you are, only you're fatter."

We were laughing, driving down the super slab at a flat seventy, tickling and horsing around on the same seat, when I spotted a cop up the down side of the on-ramp.

"Quick, get in the sleeper and put on some clothes!" I told him, pushing him off my lap while I tried to slow to sixty without leaving a tell-tail puff of smoke. "Hurry son. That Bear is on the roll."

The cop and I hit the foot of the ramp at the same time. I was just slowed to a hair under sixty. I hit the blinkers and cut out one lane with a courtesy flash of my headlights to let him in front of me.

Now my truck blocked the view of the cop's car completely from the traffic coming up behind me. Along came an XKE Jaguar slamming by us at seventy. The cop car lit up like a Christmas tree and off he went. I got out into the next lane, staying at my under-sixty, then passed them as the cop pulled the XKE over.

"Gosh Daddy, how'd you do that?"

"Takes practice, hon," I teased. "But what's with this Daddy thing?"

"Don't you like being called Daddy?"

"I love it," I smiled. "I just don't have too many of my lover-boys calling me Daddy. They tell other people I am their dad; that explains any show of affection that's seen between us."

"But I'm practicing," Jerry cut in. "I want to stay with you forever."

"Forever is a long time. You're twelve. You are going to grow up and find new interests. Forever could end tomorrow for us."

"No!" Jerry was upset. "It can't!" He looked at me eye to eye, and to do so he pulled off my Suncensor sunglasses.

I grabbed them back. "Hey, don't *you* ever do that again. I can't see without these things."

"I don't care! It just can't end.... ever."

I kissed him, and slipped my shades back on, and told him that he was getting upset over nothing. We would live one day at a time and we would love each other one day at a time, too. He finally agreed that we would love one day at a time, forever.

When we got home Tommy's truck was in the yard. And I'd almost forgot about the class party for Di and Jerry at the end of the year. Tommy hadn't. "What do you think we should get as a nicie?" he asked.

I went on with ideas I suddenly had – frisbies and a new fishing game with blind-folds I'd been mulling over. By now we were in my bedroom. "I forget, Dad, you're a perpetual child," Tommy said. He was teasing, but I could see by the way his green eyes got brighter (they always did when he was serious) that he meant it, too.

"That's right. When you're as old as me I will still only be as old as Jerry."

Tommy lay on the bed kissing me, a big husky boy, now, a half-foot taller than me, until Di came in without knocking.

"Oh," she said, very judgmentally, "why are you gaying off with

Tommy? I thought you would be trying to gay off with Jerry – since he loves you so much.” She slammed the door with no chance to get a reply.

When Jerry came back he jumped on the bed, all wiggling and excited.

“Daddy,” he asked sweetly, “can I spend the night?”

“Sure. If your mother says it's alright, it's alright.”

Jerry spent the night. And we had a lovely party at school for his class. I also got a small sample of Di's thoughts:

“Yes, Julie, Jerry spent the night in Tommy's room. Uggie. I hate Jerry.” She hated all of my boys. She hated everybody but herself. This wouldn't have been, except that I didn't have her for the first seven years of her life, before I married her mother.

Jerry spent every night at my house. He went home every day to pick up a little bag full of clothes, then he took over the other twin bed in Tommy's room, along with half of Tommy's dresser.

“Daddy,” Tommy told me when he got back from a trip to Arizona, “did you know that Jerry is moving in a pair of sox and aT-shirt at a time?”

“No,” I answered honestly.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” I told Tommy. “Have you ever seen me tell anyone what to do? Besides, have you ever seen anyone do what I tell them to do?”

“No!” Tommy laughed and tackled me and we fell on the bed and he kissed me like it was going out of style.

Jerry woke me up the next morning by snuggling into my tummy. “What would you like to do with me today?” I asked him.

“Nothing. I want you to do things with *me* today.”

He pulled me out of bed, helped me get dressed. Then we went fishing in the San Gabriel Wilderness. And we stayed out later than we should, so I phoned my wife. “Did you forget you have to make a run to New York tomorrow night?”

“I thought Tommy was going to take that.”

“Tommy left this morning for Portland.”

“New York!” Jerry had been listening. “Can I go to New York with you, Daddy?”

“Hon, will you phone up Jerry's mother and ask her if Jerry can go along?”

“I already did that. She just said Jerry lives with us now, it's okay. There your boy's honey. I don't know how you do it, but what can I

say?"

I hung up before the complaints started. Yes, my wife knows about my attraction to boys. She should. I married her the day I got off parole. She got told about me by my parole officer, my prison psychologist and the Department of Corrections therapist. We have a good understanding. I collect my boys and she tries to discourage them from having relationships with me, but not very successfully. This is a little different, but it's worked out for both of us. She takes care of the house and the bills. I take care of making the money, and making it with my loves.

That night Jerry crawled in bed with me. My wife came in. She asked him to sleep in his own bed. The hurt look Jerry gave me made me defend what we were doing. She shrugged and walked out.

"She's funny," Jerry said. "Here we are laying here with both our poles in the air and she didn't even act like she noticed."

"She noticed, but she won't talk about it." We fell asleep cuddled together.

At four the next afternoon the trailer was ready at the yard, loaded with 24 tons of Oxnard strawberries. Chuck had done that for me and now he was standing in the kitchen while I made him some coffee and started a grilled cheese for Jerry's snack. Chuck wanted to talk.

Chuck is my little run-away. He was the first boy I found when I got out of prison to love me. He loved me for nine years. Darn, I thought, while I told him to talk away, how the years passed! He'd been 13 back in '73 when I found him starving on the side of the road. He'd had the room Tommy later got, and where Tommy now felt he was being crowded out by Jerry a sock and a T-shirt at a time.

"Louie..." Chuck wouldn't call me Daddy any more, except on the C.B. Or in private. "I'm going back to Oklahoma. My brother wants me to help him start his own trucking company."

"Great." I tried not to let the sadness be heard in my voice. "What can I do to help you, hon?"

He wouldn't come right out and ask. I knew what was on his mind because he loved my old rig, the one we used before I'd saved enough to buy 'Daddy's Playhouse', and still used when my own rig was up for repairs. He loved that old truck more than he'd loved me in the past few years – and he'd loved me a lot.

"Well," Chuck said, "I was thinking..."

"You were thinking of your rig."

"Yeah. I was." He grinned sheepishly. "I want to buy it from you. I already found out what it's worth."

I got up from the table, where Chuck was swirling the coffee in his cup around in circles, and went to the stove, because the grilled cheese needed turning and I could feel my eyes were already starting to leak a few tears. You get used to someone in your life, and then he tells you he's going to move a thousand miles away and wants you to help him do it.

"You just take your old rig," I told him. "I want a third of your net."

Chuck jumped up and hugged me and kissed me. "Where do you want the trailer? I have it dropped in the field back of my place, now."

"You better take that trailer, too," I told him. "It is matched with the truck." A tear snuck out and rolled down my cheek. I didn't have my Suncensors on and he saw it.

"Oh, don't cry, Daddy!" He squeezed me tight. "I'll always love you. Besides, I'll see you on the road." Now we even had Jerry crying, and the two of them had never even seen each other before. "If you're Daddy's new love," he told Jerry, "take care of him." Then Chuck let me go and rushed out of the room, before one of us changed our minds.

"Poor Daddy," Jerry said, running to me with his mouth half full grilled cheese. "Don't get upset or you'll throw up again." He was right. I did.

I decided to drive the southern route through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas. It was hotter but a bit shorter.

"Maybe I should have talked Chuck into taking this rig," I told Jerry, who was sitting beside me as we pulled up into the pass beyond San Bernardino. "Then I could have traded his in and customized another for me."

"He wouldn't of went for that, Daddy. He got his truck and he wants to make his own life."

"How old are you anyway?" I teased him. "Who said he would not want me to help him?"

"He did. You weren't listening. I'm here to help you listen."

Now we were out of L.A. smog and into the desert. We sped with the sun going down behind us. I figured to drive the worst of the hot spots at night, not wanting to blow the tires to shreds from the heat of the road at noon.

Jerry sat on my lap talking into the C.B. "You got the Foolish Child in the playhouse here."

"Yeah," came an unrecognizable voice over the speakers. "Be a beaver driver, ma'am?"

"N...o," Jerry stammered, stuck for words.

"Tell him you're a beaver with a kick stand, hon."

"I am a beaver with a kick stand," Jerry said into the mike.

"You sure the hell must fall over a lot."

I took over. "Come back to the Lonely Roamer on your smart remarks there, son. My little friend here is all boy and he has enough of a kick stand to park you with."

"Hell, I'm sorry Roamer. This be The Dirty Old Man out of Needles. It's been a long time since you were motoring on this one. So how are you, Tommy?"

"He's not Tommy. He's Jerry, one of my younger sons."

"Damn, Roamer," he laughed, "how many rug rats ya got anyway?"

"I'll never tell. How many do you know about?"

"Let's see. There's that Indian boy, the Marlboro kid, that darling little blonde girl, Tommy, Jerry you said is this one's name. There's that boy Robin. I guess I met about eight of your children altogether."

"You forgot me," a familiar voice broke in on the C.B. "Eddy The Phantom's son." He laughed. "Hello, Daddy Lou." Another laugh. "Gosh, I was so excited when I heard you talking just now. How is your stomach?"

We chatted for a while. I talked and kissed with Jerry, and then I accidentally ran over a rattlesnake. I looked in the rear views. I could not see the damn thing behind us. I would be very careful getting out at Ehrenberg: that's the pay-through point between Arizona and California.

I kept a sharper watch on the road, hoping the dumb snake would drop off, but it wouldn't, and it was getting dark, now. I hoped Jerry wasn't a snake phobic like me. I'm even afraid of dead ones, forget the possibility of a live one hanging under my truck.

"Jerry, hon, did you see that big rattler that we passed over?"

"Yeah," he answered with his eyes as big as pies. Oh hell, he *was* a phobic. "What about it, Daddy. It can't get us in here."

I picked up the mike. "Hey, Phantom, I may have a live one under my rig. Are you going through at Ehrenberg?"

"I sure am, Louie. Me and Ed'll take care of it for you."

"Can it get in here, Daddy," Jerry asked. "If it's under the truck, can it crawl up into this part with us?"

"No. I have all new shifter boots that he can't get through." Jerry felt better, but I was keeping my eye on the vents and boots just in case.

In Ehrenberg Eddy and The Phantom flagged me over. They had three other trucks jackknifed around so their headlights would shine up

underneath the chassis of the trailer and truck.

“There it is, Dad.” Eddy had spotted it first. “It’s all wrapped around the front axle, and it looks plenty dead.”

I coaxed Jerry out of the cab. I didn’t want to sit in there looking too sissyish, nor did I want my lover-boy to look as bad. The way Jerry clung to me with fright made me look pretty brave.

Eddy joined us in the scales rest room. He kissed and hugged me, then he washed up, then he kissed and hugged Jerry. They seemed to like each other immediately. While The Phantom and I did our paperwork with the Customs the two boys went back to the truck, to talk about me, I figured. I let my boys have their secrets, but I try and never have any secrets from my boys.

When I got back to the truck they were in the sleeper with the modesty curtain drawn giggling and laughing, and it sounded so much fun I was tempted to peek. But then The Phantom came and sat on the other seat. He brought me a soft drink.

“You can lead out, Louie,” he said. “I guess I’ll be right on your taillights. Those two are playing ‘show me’ back there.” He had peaked through the curtain at them. “I turn off in Amarillo where I’m going to nap for a few hours.” In other words, I had to get Eddy back to him in Amarillo, and if I wanted to, or had the time, I could enjoy a little three-way loving.

It was still about a hundred out in that hot Arizona night – and back in the sleeper it sounded as though Eddy and Jerry had worked the temperature up to twice that as I pulled out onto the highway. About a half hour later the boys slid the curtains aside. They both lay on their elbows half out of the sleeper into the dog house to talk to me.

I was just climbing up the big hill east of the Colorado River when my headlights picked up a pair of white pants that looked like they were walking along alone.

“What the hell,” I said to the boys. “Why would anyone in their right mind be out here in the middle of the night?”

I pulled over, a little angry at having to stop on an up-hill, rolled down the window and shouted at the white pants, “Where the hell you from, fella?” The white pants turned out to belong to a wide-eyed boy who couldn’t have been more than seventeen. “Get in. Don’t you know better than to be out here hitching in a hundred and two degrees with a big full moon out?”

“No, sir,” he said. From his talk we could tell he was from the Deep South. “I just sat for hours back there at that police place and I finally

figured I would not of gotten nowhere if I didn't walk."

I glanced in the rear view as we started off again up the hill. The boys' eyes were dancing with suppressed laughter.

"Why did you say I shouldn't be out here in this heat?" the southern boy asked.

"Because of the night-hunting predators. What would you have done if you'd walked into a big diamond-back laying on the side of the road?"

"I would of screamed so loud the whole world would of heard me." Jerry and Eddy couldn't repress their laughter any longer. "And I mean scream, too."

"Are you a queer?" Jerry asked.

"No." The southern boy turned around and looked at the two kids in the sleeper. "The word is gay. And, yes, I'm gay."

"Good," Jerry said. "Now Daddy's got someone to blow on him to keep him awake. Come on, Eddy, let's go back to bed." They zipped up the curtain.

The southern boy looked at me real hard, little wrinkles of perplexity rippling his forehead. "My name's Jeffrey," he said at last. "I'm on my way home to Georgia."

"What puts you *but* here afoot, son?"

"I had a misfortune. I was picked up 'n offered a ride and a date, but my ride beat me up 'n robbed me."

I turned on the intercom to the sleeper. I asked Eddy where his dad was going. Florida was the answer. "Yes, Daddy Lou, we'll take him to Florida. I can always use someone to play with me, too."

Jeff laughed. "I think you're a little young for me. I like men, older men."

They teased each other back and forth over the intercom, and then they teased him into lying down over the engine cover to feel me.

"You're hard," he said. And by way of thanks for the ride he did a nice mouth number on me which the boys in the sleeper unzipped the curtain again to watch. Then I let Jeff climb back there and told my two lover-boys to leave him alone because he was really tired.

The sun came up, right into my eyes, as we came up the Salt River Valley towards Phoenix. I woke the three boys up to get breakfast at a truck stop in Buckeye. I had to smile watching Jeff dress – the boys, had told him he couldn't sleep in there with them unless he was naked. Jerry told me in the rest room that Jeff didn't wear any unders and that he smelled like a girl.

"Jeff is a queen," I told the boys. "He is very girlish, he is happy with

himself and he is very well-adjusted. In other words, he knows what he wants to be, and is.”

We went back to the counter where Jeff and The Phantom were getting to know each other.

“I think you better let Jeff sleep in your truck until I give you Eddy back in Amarillo,” I said to The Phantom. “Eddy's been hitting on him all night.”

“Sure, Lou. Be glad to.” I knew Eddy's dad wouldn't especially go for the 'sissy-boy', as Jerry had called him, but there aren't too many truckers I know who would turn down what is offered in that bouncing and sometimes boring cab of the rig.

Then in through the door came the Boobie Sisters.

“Hello, Roamer, Foolish Child, Eddy, Phantom and...”

“Jeffrey.”

“Jeffrey. Which one of you's got our sister load to New York?”

“What you hauling?”

“Oxnard strawberries.”

“Then you get to follow me,” I said.

“No, Roamer,” Biggie said. “You're going to stop and play around so we'll wait for you in New York.”

“Who said I'm going to play around?”

“You got two boys, at least, and boys with toys play around...” – they laughed – “with them.”

“You won't beat us by five minutes,” I said.

Back on the road again Jerry sat on my lap to C.B. talk and Eddy sat next to me on the engine cover.

“Brake I-9,” Jerry said. “We need a west-bounder for a Smokey report.”

“Clean and green, little girl,” the speakers blared. “Do you sound like a sweet young thing – come back.”

“Suck a grape,” Jerry said. “I'm a boy. My voice hasn't changed yet.”

The trucker apologized. “Are you in a road rig, sonny? And if you are, what kind of a road rig are you in?”

“That depends, driver, because it's this way. When my daddy drives this truck it's called a Freightliner. When I drive it it's called a Frightliner 'cause I scare hell out of all the little cars. And when my brother drives it it's called a Fruitliner because my brother is The Pink Pansy.”

Jerry was catching on.

In Amarillo I parked and crawled back into the sleeper with the boys

for two hours of loving and a little dozing in between before I took Eddy back to his father's truck. Eddy was always emotional when he left me – big hugs, kisses, hugs again. And then we parted: they to Florida and Jerry and me to New York.

For a while Jerry talked to Eddy on the C.B., then, when they faded out, to the Boobie Sisters, who were right ahead of us. Finally we switched back to the right channel to catch news of the road conditions and Jerry snuggled into me.

“I love you, Daddy,” he said. “You're about the greatest person I know.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, you let me eat anything as much as I want. You let me meet people and talk C.B. on this radio. You let me do what I mostly want to do. I just love you.” I bit lightly and nuzzled him on the back of his neck. “I love that, too. I like the way you give me a tongue bath. Besides that, Daddy, you take me everywhere you go.”

Jerry was turning out to be one of the most delightfully different boys I'd ever had the pleasure of knowing. I was finding this true minute after minute and mile after mile. Just when I thought I was too tired to keep up the pace he'd do something to ease the strain. Whatever Jerry did he did humorously and right.

We were in Missouri, now, driving on a drizzly day, the Boobie Sisters right in front of us. With Jerry trying to sit on my lap to drive all the time I was getting extremely uncomfortable. I had to piss. I moved him more onto a knee.

“What's wrong, Daddy? Am I too heavy for you?”

“No, hon, you're fine. The girls up there, they got a bathroom in their truck, but they aren't even thinking I'm driving alone.”

“You're not alone. I'm here to help you. Now, what can I do for you?”

I roared with laughter.

Jerry turned in my lap to look at me. “Maybe whatever it is I can steer and you can do it.”

“I gotta leak. Can you do that for me?”

“I sure can,” Jerry said, taking an empty milk carton out of the trash holder. “Here. I'll do it all. You just keep your hands on the wheel – and let 'em rip!”

It worked, and at the end he gave me a real friendly squeeze before he tucked it away.

“See that, Daddy? That's why I'm here.”

I kissed him. Then kissed him again. “The only thing you forgot is to zip me up.”

“No, I didn't forget anything.” Jerry jumped over me to get into the sleeper. “Wait a minute. Leave them pants alone, otherwise you'll ruin my surprise.”

He zipped shut the modesty screen. A minute later he popped out with his jeans on backwards.

“See this, Daddy?” He laughed. “Now we are a perfect match for me to sit on your lap.” He thought a minute. “No. That idea stinks, because you could get zipped up between the zippers.”

So he did a slow strip-show for me on the passenger side of the truck, and when he came back naked to sit on my lap we were still a perfect match.

Then, without warning, the girls ahead of me hit their brakes. I whipped out and passed them in a twinkling. When I looked in my rear-views they were far behind shifting to catch up.

“What the hell you do that for, Biggie?” I asked into the mike.

“I almost nodded off. I looked up and all I could see was that house trailer.”

“Wake up your sister.”

“It's not her turn to drive for another half hour.”

“Wake her up anyway.”

She did; they switched, and I let them pass me again.

Jerry rolled down the window a little to wave at them. Then he was jabbing me with his elbow: “Daddy, their tire's wobbly. Look!”

I grabbed the mike. “Pull over and park it, Smaller. You got a broken wheel. Easy. Don't step on the brake remember how I taught you. Just coast it to a stop.”

She did.

Jerry rushed into his clothes. I zipped, buttoned and belted my pants and climbed out of the cab to see what could be done.

Both wheels were broke. The only thing preventing an Oxnard strawberry disaster was a bound edge on a bud. I called Road Service. That meant four hours of sitting on the side of the road right across from a year-round fire- works stand, which Jerry, of course, made a bee line for.

“It isn't Fourth of July time yet,” Jerry said, puzzled.

“Here it don't have to be.”

Jerry was very surprised at what you could get: firecrackers by the brick, cherry bombs, sparklers, bottle- and sky-rockets.

He ran me out of twenty-five dollars in five minutes, and then another twenty-five an hour later.

“If I'd known you were going to do all this to me,” I said, “I'd of bought you your own damn truck to haul it away in.”

He was very pleased with his loot. It was more fireworks than he'd ever had in his life. We put them in one of the cubby-holes and then I locked it securely. It's illegal to haul fireworks, but we all do it one time or another.

“How much did he make you spend on him, Lou?” Biggie asked me.

“Not much,” I told her. Then she took Jerry across the road to get him some more. “Where'm I gonna put it all?” I said when they got back.

“I'll haul it, you old weight miser,” Biggie yelled back at me. “We got empty cubby-holes, too.”

I was going to tell her she sure did, but I didn't want to get my face slapped again.

The girls didn't dare touch their rig before there was a jack under the rear, so they sat in my cab listening to music and smoking and drinking soda from my mini-reefer. I crawled back in the sleeper with Jerry and snuggled with him a little. “How come you didn't tell me you taught Biggie and Smaller to drive?” he whispered. “And another thing I found out is they're not sisters. They're lovers just like us.”

Jerry liked to know about everything and everybody. Then he liked to tell me about it in private. He went on and on, about the fireworks and the busted wheels. I just agreed with him, until he ran down.

“Jerry, I like what you just said.”

“What that I just said? Setting off the rockets?”

“No, hon.” I kissed his nose. “I like the way you said they were lovers just like us.”

He smiled real big. “They are, Daddy. They told me that.”

We fueled in Cleveland. Jerry had been sleeping; I woke him up so we could get us some food and a bath. I took him into one of the stall showers with me because he didn't want to strip down with all the people watching and do it alone. In there I washed his face and his neck and his back. He kissed my face soapy from the suds on him. Then our bodies were slippery and he was squirming on me, and pretty soon we were oblivious of the hurry and scurry of the other busy truckers on all sides of us, the intensity of the love between us blossoming there under that Vibromassage shower head. It ended all too quickly with a climactic finish and a slight disturbance.

“Has anyone seen The Lonely Roamer?” a boy's voice asked.

“Yes,” I shouted. “I'm right here in number four.”

He was about thirteen, freckled and cute and he did a double-take when he saw Jerry come out of the shower with me. The girls had asked him to tell me they were all ready to roll.

It took a few extra kisses to cool us down so we could dress. “You get more loving every time,” I told Jerry. “I love everything about you, hon.”

The boy who had called us waved when we passed through the drivers' lounge. He was watching cartoons on the TV. Drivers tolerate a lot of things as long as the little sucker belongs to a trucker...

We reached New York in ten hours with the Boobie Sisters right in front of us and got an old friend to guard the rig while they unloaded it at the market and I took Jerry for a whirlwind tour of the sights: the World Trade Center Towers, Statue of Liberty, even Greenwich Village and the gay section, where we got a lot of mixed looks.

“Where we gonna sleep?” Jerry wanted to know. “Not in the truck again, are we?”

“Yes. We can't leave a hundred-thousand dollar rig in the street by itself in this town.”

So after supper we went back on the turnpike and parked in the country at a special place I knew where there was the ruins of an old factory and a stream rushing by and nobody else around. That's where we spent the night, in combinations of sleeping and making love, until, in the wee hours, we just had to stop kissing and hugging and telling each other things and fell asleep in a nice warm tangle, all mixed up.

I slept through my alarm. Jerry woke me up only to have me fall back to sleep on him again.

“Wake up, Daddy, or I'll bite a chunk out of this bottom,” he said, patting me there.

But it didn't work. So he got a cube of ice out of the mini-reefer and rubbed it all over me. That's an awful way to come alive in the morning after loving it up all the night before.

We drove back to the city market and hooked under the trailer which they were loading for the return trip to L.A. The long drive and lack of sleep was getting to my stomach. I didn't say anything about it to Jerry but he sort of knew. I could see he was keeping an eye on me a little closer than usual. But when you're twelve, being with a sick man is no fun.

“I wish you had a game or a toy in this truck,” he said with his cute smile. “I just like to do more than sit.”

I'd already thought of that. I looked into his intense blue eyes, his darling little pencil points of dimples, his strong firm little chin, his blond, blond hair, his eyebrows so blond that they stood out saltily against his tanned forehead.

“If you want to sit on the other seat over there,” I told him, “and be out of my reach for five minutes, hon, then I can arrange something that might appeal to you.”

“Can't I let it appeal to me here? Why don't we just lay in the sleeper and hug?”

I had already pulled the box out from under my seat. He canceled the sleeper request when he saw what was in it.

“A real slot car set! You can't plug that into a truck, can you, Daddy?”

You could, in the cigarette lighter. He had it running in minutes on top of the engine cover. And as we left New York and pulled back onto the turnpike with our new load he was sitting on my lap so he could steer the rig and drive the slot cars, both at the same time.

I told him we'd spend a night in Las Vegas on the way back, in one of those big hotels.

“Wow!” he said. “Can I gamble?”

“Not legally, hon. But there's not too much I do that is legal.”

“I can see that. You're doing almost 80 now.” He wrinkled his nose and put a finger in his ear to itch it. “But you only speed. You don't do anything else illegal, do you?”

“Love you,” I answered.

“That's not *illegal*,” Jerry reasoned, “because I love you too.”

I didn't want to tell him how illegal our love really was. As far as he was concerned our love was as alright as it ever could be. My love for him and my other boys, this was something he considered great, like his loving it up with Eddy or anyone else he wanted to love with.

I got a bad stomach cramp as we were cruising along the Lake Erie shore just after leaving New York State.

“Daddy, you gotta stop driving for a while,” he told me. “Look, here's a park area. I'll sit here and play with these slot cars and watch you rest.”

I was feeling too weak to argue. I rested there, lying up in the sleeper. I watched his profile while he sat sideways on the seat running both of the cars around the track. His concentration showed in the way his face

was always changing. I liked how his nose reshaped itself when he bit his lower lip because his favorite car was getting beat by his unfavorite car, the continuous smoothing out and corrugating of his forehead while he watched the two cars to cheer on his winner.

We spent the night near Chicago in a motel with a swimming pool. He didn't have a bathing suit, so I gave him a pair of nylon bikinis in black to wear.

"Are these swim trunks?" he asked.

"Do they look like swim trunks?"

"Yeah, they do." Jerry inspected himself, twisting around, in the full-length door mirror. "They fit me great, too."

"Come on, hon. Stop posing so sexy or we'll have to cancel our swim."

Jerry came over with a big 'I dare you' grin. I caught him in my arms, then ran my tongue from his belly button right up to his throat. He pulled away, quickly ran for the door, where he paused, looked over his shoulder and shot back, "You'll have to catch me first!" then leapt right over the railing. I ran to the balcony, terrified. When I saw him waving at me with a big grin from the middle of the pool below I had to run back into the room and throw up in the toilet. This time there was blood.

I lay down on the bed. A few minutes later Jerry was back dripping and his blond head seeming smaller with his hair wet.

"Gee, Daddy, you look awful!"

"I guess I'm not up to swimming with you after all," I said.

The manager came by to tell me a lady on the porch across the court had asked him to see if Jerry's bikini was really a proper bathing suit. I thought it was and the manager thought it was, too.

"She must be funny," Jerry said after the manager had left. "I guess she has never seen a weenie before."

"Only in hot dogs," I joked. "That's if she opened the buns."

It took me too days of resting often to get from Chicago to Las Vegas. In those two days Jerry and I got even closer. He almost became a part of me, as though I'd opened my mouth and he'd moved right into my body with me. I'd had this same feeling for Chuck and then for Tommy. Now that Chuck was gone Jerry was doing his best to fill that emptiness that a man has from the loss of one love even though he has two others.

It was a hard feeling to examine, and I didn't want to examine anything that took my mind off trying to get my load into California.

We sent cards from everywhere, to my wife and Di, to Tommy, to Eddy, to Chuck at his brother's home outside Tulsa, to Jerry's mother:

Mississippi paddle wheel boats from St. Louis, mountain peaks from Denver, the Mormon Church from Salt Lake City. In Las Vegas I drove straight to Circus-Circus and got us a room for the night. Jerry checked out the hotel while I rested up for a while. It seemed like I slept for hours and I woke up feeling a bit better. After showering I went in search of my little love. I found him playing space invaders with another boy around his own age. I stood by the juice bar to watch them where I couldn't be easily seen. I didn't want Jerry to feel he had to lose his entire youth because of what he and I had between us.

I ordered a malt and sat at one of the little candy-striped tables. I watched them for a long time, until Jerry said something to the other boy and turned and saw me.

"Hey, there's my dad," he said loudly, and dragged his friend over by the hand. "That's what he looks like dressed."

They both laughed. The other boy was dark blond, a little shorter than Jerry. We shook hands.

"This is Joey," Jerry said. "We came up to see how you were doing an hour ago and you were sleeping."

"Hello, Joey. Where do you live?"

"I live in Los Angeles," he said shyly.

This was one of those one question, one answer boys that can warm up to you real quick if he trusts you.

"Did Jerry tell you that the rig's fine, the driver is what got broke down?" I said. "Or has he just got my keys so he could show you the truck?"

Joey's face turned beet-red. Jerry had done a lot more than show him the TV and the eight-track and the musical horns. I gave my lover-boy an 'okay' wink.

A few minutes later Joey's dad came over and introduced himself and we spent a pleasant, but early, evening driving about Vegas. The main thing, at night, are the lights. They advertise places all stacked too close together for me, but I like the lights and the crowds as long as I don't have to be out and on the street. Looking at it all from Joey's dad's car was just perfect.

At the end of the evening we snuck the boys into the edge of one of the casinos and let them try a couple of the one-armed bandits. The machines spun their dials and made their clicks – and swallowed up the silver dollars they'd been fed. But the boys acted like just pulling on those levers had been the real thrill, so we went away happy.

It was arranged with his dad that Joey would spend the night with us –

his mother had a headache or something and was glad to be alone with her husband. When I came out from showering in my room the two boys were lying in the bed I'd used.

"Right here is where you got to sleep, Daddy." Jerry patted the space between them. His big, wide-toothed grin said the rest.

"Right up the middle, huh?"

"Yep," Jerry said. "Joey is ready, too. We both got middles." They did. Hard middles. Jerry had been telling Joey a lot about me.

"Jerry..." – I hugged him – "Joey..." – and I hugged him – "I just don't know what to say."

"Then shut up and be sexy," Jerry said. So we were.

Morning found me accidentally tickling my own foot to wake them, they were all so tangled up with me. I made Joey do some nice trampoline work on the other bed to make it messy, and we were safe in our unders when his father knocked on the door.

All shyness had gone out of Joey at the breakfast table. "Mom, guess what happened when the elephant saw me in the shower last night?"

I shuddered.

"It said, 'How can you breathe through that thing?'"

"With such a mouth," his dad laughed, "you better ride with Louie and Jerry, and then wash it out with soap before you come home."

The trip home was all down hill. With Jerry's permission, Joey got to sit in my lap and steer the big rig, because Jerry set himself down on the motor cover with his feet on the side of my chair, his knees bumping my elbow as he gave his new friend advice on how to drive.

"With you and Jerry," Joey told us, "I think my folks would let me go to the moon and back. I am in heaven right here." He squeezed my knee.

We dropped him off, a few miles from where I lived, and then we pulled up in my drive. Tommy and Eddy ran out of the side door in their unders, and then all was confusion as I sat leaning over my wheel feeling sad and dizzy and ready to be sick again. It was part the long drive and not enough sleep, part coming back and knowing the old rig Chuck had grown up in would be in Tulsa now, and Chuck wouldn't be there to help Tommy go unload, or drop by that evening, or next week, even. Jerry was acting with the two older boys like he was Daddy driver, giving orders for his fireworks to be handled gently, for my clothes to be thrown into the wash, and then telling them how sick I'd been all the way back from New York. My wife and Di were hanging in the door just sort of

watching it all.

“That little fire's sure consuming Dad,” Tommy teased. Then, to me, “You'd better let me sleep with you tonight.”

I couldn't think up anything to say.

“See that, Eddy? The little sucker done got to the old man.” Then Tommy opened the door and lifted me down from the cab like I lift Jerry, and like he was twenty-six rather than sixteen. “You lost five pounds from playing games, huh?”

“No, I gained a hundred and thirty pounds because you stopped loving me.”

“Aw,” teased Eddy, “I still love you. Tommy don't.” They didn't know what they said wrong, but I just sort of slithered into the house and lay down on my bed. The boys must have had a conference because later all three of them came in. They didn't tease me or taunt me.

“Dad,” Tommy said, “I am sorry you lost Chuck. We will try to sort of all take his place.”

“I'll come up from the valley whenever I can,” said Eddy.

Jerry said with a big hug, “And I am here to love you forever.”