



Street

Boy

Dreams

Kevin Esser

When his final attempt at heterosexual romance ends with a whimper, Peter seeks solace in a bottle of Scotch. But it's Gito, a 14-year-old streetkid who sneaks into the bar selling candy, that distracts Peter's attention from his dreary love life. The lonely teacher offers Gito shelter from an abusive home. And as the defensive youngster begins to open himself to the older man, Peter feels the tug of another kind of romance. As both man and boy fight awkwardly against their growing attraction, *Streetboy Dreams* becomes one of the most touching and unusual love affairs in literature.

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Ariel's Press

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For Wallace Hamilton,

who began it all

&

Luis Miguel Fuentes,

Patron Saint of the Streetboy Dreamers

one

“**So** that’s the end of that,” Peter said, crumpling the letter and tossing it across the bedroom into the waste basket. Bull’s-eye. Another fling at heterosexuality ended, neatly and without malice. Susan had seemed better than the others; but weeks of familiarity, then intimacy, had exposed the quirks, the imperfections, the annoying habits. She was, after all (and he should have known better by now), like all the rest. “So that is definitely that.”

He pushed aside the ungraded tests on his desk, then put on his cap and ventured into the drizzly streets. Glancing at his passing image in a store window, he discovered the hunched and harried figure of a fugitive. He needed to lose weight, especially around the gut. Patting his stomach, he fancied that “Time waits for no man” should be amended to “Time weights every man.” He smiled — a bit ruefully — wishing the pun were wittier, or at least more grammatical.

He crossed the street to the Figaro, a bar where he knew the men and women drinking around him would be neither too strange nor too familiar, offering polite smiles of recognition but, mercifully, no intrusive chatter. Tonight he wanted to drink alone. Or rather, not alone, but in peace, without the subtle torture of sparkling conversation.

Wishing that one of the booths were empty, he ordered Scotch and water. He disliked sitting at the bar, especially when it was crowded like tonight. “There you go, Mr. Versani.” The bartender pushed the drink toward him. Peter took a sip, then a gulp; caught his breath, gulped again. Listening to Miles Davis on the jukebox and waiting for the Scotch to warm him, he ventured a glance left, right. Seeing no one he recognized, he breathed more easily and began to relax.

He finished his drink and ordered another. The alcohol was working. He could feel it warming his legs, his arms, his shoulders. The music on the jukebox suddenly sounded very loud. He let his head roll in a slow circle, massaged his neck, sighed. Catching the eyes of a young woman down the

bar, Peter smiled. He wondered if he would have smiled five minutes earlier, before the Scotch had done its handiwork.

He felt a draft as the door behind him opened. “Want some candy, mister?” someone asked. The voice was young, husky, bold. Peter turned on his stool and saw a boy speaking to a man near the door. With a shrug, the boy turned away from the man, hoisted his cardboard box and walked to the bar. “Want some candy?” he asked again, showing the box to a young couple near Peter. The boy’s red stocking cap was pulled down over the ears, covering all but a few curly strands of his dark hair. Peter, catching himself with a grin in the opposite mirror as he watched the youngster, looked away quickly. Then the boy was beside him. “Want some candy, mister?”

Peter looked around. His heart beat rapidly; he felt a sudden, tight breathlessness; perhaps he had downed the first drink too quickly. The boy was watching him, scowling, holding the dirty cardboard box with even dirtier hands.

“What kind do you have?” Peter asked, staring perhaps too intently at the box.

“Here, I’ll show you.” The boy set the box onto the bar. Peter glanced up. The boy’s scowl had given way to an eager little grin. His teeth were strong, straight, the canines sharp, gleaming white in the dim neon.

“So do you want somethin’ or what?”

Nodding, Peter looked down at the candy spread in front of him. “Which ones you want, man?” the boy demanded. He no longer smiled. Peter picked out two pieces, then handed the boy money and told him to keep the change.

“Hey, that’s five bucks.” The youngster held out the money, his head slightly cocked, eyes squinting.

“You coming back tomorrow?”

Without taking his eyes from Peter’s face, the boy slid the money into his jeans pocket. “I guess I might... I don’t know, though.”

Peter picked up his drink, drained it, set the glass back onto the bar. “I’ll buy more candy if you do.”

“I don’t know,” the boy said again. “I’ll see.” He stuffed the candy back into the box, turned and crossed to the door with a swagger.

Peter waited until the boy had gone ... ordered another drink. A double. He wished he had asked the youngster’s name. Perhaps he’d find it out tomorrow. If the kid returned. Which of course he wouldn’t. Peter remembered the hand accepting the money — the slender fingers, dirty nails,

sinews, veins. Yet, though he tried, he couldn't recall the boy's face. It had been very young and dark, but faded now like the image from a dream as he tried to conjure it. Still, what did it matter? The kid had been a scruffy little nuisance, nothing more.

Feeling very tired, Peter downed the rest of his drink and walked home.

two

Peter had never felt more sickened by the routine of lesson plans, classes, staffings. He was afflicted by a constant shortness of breath, a vague edginess. At first he had attributed his symptoms to a mild hangover; but a week had passed since that night at the Figaro, and the malaise still lingered.

Now and then he recalled the boy. He wondered rather guiltily whether the youngster had returned to the bar with his candy. What a lousy trick, leading the kid on! Still, no harm had been done. And as Friday evening approached, Peter found himself toying more and more seriously with the notion of returning to the Figaro. Perhaps the boy would be there; perhaps not; either way, it was of no real concern.

• • •

The usual faces were at the bar. Amazed at his luck, Peter found an empty booth near the jukebox. He had just finished his first drink and ordered another when the boy came through the door, the candy box tucked under his arm. Peter watched him work his way across the room. When their eyes met, the boy's shoulders appeared to stiffen; but the reflex was as fleeting — and impossible to interpret — as the twitch of a finger.

Peter greeted the boy with a nod, drained his second drink. He could feel the blood pound in his head.

“You want somethin’ tonight?” the boy asked, stepping up to the booth. As before, the stocking cap was pulled low over his ears.

Peter shrugged, an odd mingling of embarrassment and exhilaration scrambling his thoughts. “I couldn’t make it the other night,” he finally said. “Did you come?”

The boy set his box on the table. “I come here all the time. It don’t matter.”

Peter watched the youngster’s face — it had eluded him for the past week. He studied the skin, smooth and naturally dark, the color of cocoa; he

studied the fragile chin and small, fine nose, the high cheekbones, the big dark eyes set deep beneath thick brows — all delicate, exotic, evoking the Mediterranean, perhaps Italy or Greece, Turkey or Morocco. As he watched the young face, he realized that the boy — who might have been the son of a Roman prince and his Egyptian consort — was indeed racially mixed. And very attractive, for such a ragged little scoundrel.

“Sit down and have a drink,” Peter said, realizing at once the absurdity of the invitation.

“I don’t think they’ll serve me, man,” the boy answered, the sarcasm evident in his voice.

Peter laughed, and picked a piece of candy from the box. “You’re not eighteen?”

“Do I look eighteen, man?”

“No, I guess not.” Peter turned the candy between his fingers. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen, I guess. Why you care?”

“I don’t.” He called the waitress and ordered another drink. The boy waited, slowly scratching his neck. “Sit for a minute, warm up before you go back out.” Peter paid the waitress for his drink, sipped.

The boy — still watchful, silent — sat down across the table. “You gonna buy somethin’ tonight?” he finally asked.

“Yeah, I will, I will.” Peter swirled the ice in his drink, eyed the boy’s faded denim jacket. “Don’t you get cold wearing just that?”

The boy glanced down, touched his sleeve. “It don’t bother me. It only gets cold at night now, and then I stay with my cousin and some other guy.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yeah, man, my cousin.” The boy reached toward Peter’s drink. “Can I taste that?”

Peter looked around. The youngster’s boldness surprised and amused him, but he couldn’t help feeling a bit unsettled, vaguely threatened. “You’re not eighteen, remember?”

“Come on, man, just a taste! It’s O.K., I drink all the time.”

“Oh, fine!” Peter said, laughing softly. Again he looked around, then pushed the glass across the table.

The boy nearly drained the glass, then licked his lips and sighed like a contented pup. “Man, it really warms you up good!”

“Finish it,” Peter said, “but don’t let the waitress see you.”

The boy complied, sucking the ice to get the last drop. As he handed the empty glass back to Peter, their fingertips brushed. "I gotta go," he said. "So whatta you want?"

Peter picked up the candy bar he had chosen earlier, then pushed a five-dollar bill across the table. "Here."

"Are you rich, man, or just nuts?"

"I like kids," Peter laughed.

"Well, thanks a lot." The boy hoisted his box as he stood up... pulled down his stocking cap more snugly. "I'll catch you later."

Feeling a mysterious churn akin to panic in his stomach, Peter stammered, "Hey... wait a minute... just a minute."

The boy was already walking away. He stopped. "You want somethin' else?"

"I was just wondering... what's your name?"

With a laugh that sounded almost scornful, the boy said, "Gito. Gito Lopez."

"Gito," Peter repeated, testing the soft "g" on his tongue, letting it linger, an agreeable new taste. "Is that a nickname?"

"I don't know what it is. It's just my name." The boy pushed open the door and was gone.

three

Peter was up early next morning. By noon, he had finished his paperwork for the weekend; by five, he had finished dinner and was on his way to the Figaro.

A booth was still empty when Peter arrived. Facing the door, he settled in, then downed three drinks rapidly. He soon felt the warmth — and the familiar giddiness — returning. He grinned at the swirl of his own thoughts. He knew he should be home, doing something. Anything but this. He hated the messy disorder and confusion of other people's lives, had always felt pride in holding himself apart from the fray. So what was he doing here at the Figaro on Saturday night? He wanted to see the boy again, of course; but that was purely curiosity. The kid was fascinating, intriguing, offbeat, like a character from a De Sica film brought to life. And, as the film progressed, Peter's interest mounted, he felt eager for the next scene. Still, he realized the importance of remaining disinterested, detached. There was always the danger of becoming mired in the day-to-day muck. Silly, though, to be thinking in those terms about a fourteen-year-old street kid. What involvement could come out of their acquaintance?

Finishing his drink, Peter decided to be sensible and go home. He was fumbling with his change when the door opened. Sure it was the boy, Peter smiled and dropped a quarter on the table. The coin spun in a blur, clattering to a standstill against the wood. But a stranger came through the door. Letting his breath escape in a long sigh, Peter picked up the quarter and left the bar.

The street was empty, quiet, awash in the dim glisten of streetlights. Splashing through a puddle, Peter saw the play of a shadow on the sidewalk in front of him. He peered through the darkness: Gito was walking towards him as silently as a prowling cat.

“Hello!” Peter nearly jostled the boy as they passed on the narrow sidewalk.

The boy's cheek, softly touched by streetlight, glowed like dark satin. “Who is it?” he asked, fear in his voice.

“I talked to you at the bar,” Peter said. “You don’t know my name. I’m Peter. I bought candy from you.” He felt desperately awkward, as if there were some unknown guilt to be explained away, to be excused.

“Oh, yeah,” Gito mumbled, but his tone said he didn’t recognize Peter. His hands were shoved into his jeans pockets; either from the cold or from impatience, he shifted from foot to foot.

“You don’t have your box tonight,” Peter said, impelled by his uneasiness to say something, anything.

“No, I don’t got my box. You want more candy, I’ll have it Monday.”

Peter attempted a laugh. “I’m just used to seeing you with the box.”

“Yeah.”

“Your name is Gito, right?” He felt a thrill in his stomach as he pronounced the name.

“Yeah, right. You a cop or somethin’?”

This time, Peter’s laughter was genuine. “No, I’m not a cop! I’m a teacher.”

“I figured you must be a cop. Whatta you want? Am I in some kinda trouble or what?”

“No! I just wanted to say hello.”

“Yeah, well, I gotta go.” Gito sidled away, hands in his pockets.

“You smoke?” Peter asked, panic gripping his chest.

“Smoke?” The boy stopped, scratched his cheek.

“I mean... like grass? Do you ever smoke dope?”

The boy chuckled. “You gonna give me dope, man?”

“No, I don’t have any. I thought you might.”

“You really want smoke, man?” Gito moved forward a step, lowering his voice.

“Well, it depends. I’d have to try it. It’s been a long time since I smoked any.” Peter watched the young face, trying to read the bemused expression. “I figured you’d have connections.”

For the first time, Gito smiled easily. His smile was a bit lopsided, creating a deep dimple in the left cheek, a smaller, more shallow one in the right. Charmed by those dimples, and by the flash of fine white teeth, Peter smiled back.

“Why’d you think that, man?”

“You’re a tough kid, right?” The grip on Peter’s chest loosened, his breath came easier.

“Yeah, sure,” Gito laughed.

“You’ve been around, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Hey, man, you sure you’re a teacher?”

“Don’t I look like a teacher?”

“You look O.K., but you don’t act like one. I mean, you don’t talk like one.”

“You don’t like teachers, huh?”

“Not the ones I know, man! They’re just a bunch of fuck-ups.”

The man and boy paused for a moment of mutual reappraisal. From the next block a car horn sounded. Gito glanced in its direction; when he looked back, his smile was gone. “I gotta split.”

“What about our deal?”

“That’s a bunch of nothin’, man!” the boy snapped, angry, backing off. “Teacher’s don’t smoke no shit!”

Peter followed his partner in their slow dance. “Maybe I don’t now, but I did. What’s the difference, anyway? You still afraid I’m a cop?”

“No, man, you ain’t no cop. I know that.”

“What’s the matter, then?” Peter asked, walking faster to keep pace with the boy.

“Listen, I’ll catch you later, man.” Gito turned quickly and jogged off, his sneakers slapping against the wet pavement.

Peter began to shout after the boy, then stopped himself. Somehow, the situation had swerved out of control. He should never have said all those things to the kid. He must have been nuts to ask him about smoking grass! Absolutely nuts.

four

Peter slept late Sunday, not rising until nearly noon. He had a mild hangover, but there was also a slight nausea and uneasiness that had nothing to do with Scotch. The conversation with the boy — and Gito's sudden, final flurry of anger — replayed itself over and over, each repetition accompanied by a cold wave of shame. No damage had been done, of course; but Peter had a glimpse of his own recklessness — a moment of glaring indiscretion — which powerfully disturbed him.

He fixed himself a drink, guzzled it, fixed another. As the day wore on and the vodka did its work, the knot in his stomach loosened. Warmed by the alcohol, safe in his apartment, Peter regarded his earlier panic as childish, pointless, self-indulgent. He had gotten a little tight and acted a bit foolishly. So what? Was he stupid enough to believe a fourteen-year-old kid could care about it, even remember it? In the future, he would guard his words carefully; behave himself.

By Monday, the fear had faded, leaving in its place faint tremblings of euphoria, an eagerness for nightfall, impatience with workday trivia. The memory of his indiscreet behavior lingered, but Peter felt confident he could temper his enthusiasm in the future. There would be no more nonsense about buying and smoking grass. At the time, it had seemed the best strategy for winning the boy's confidence, but he realized how hasty and ill-conceived a notion it had been. From now on, he'd make no more mistakes like that.

After work, Peter headed straight for the Figaro. As he walked he deadened his appetite with frequent nips from his flask of vodka. Forgetting about food, he concentrated exclusively on Gito, wondering about the boy's abrupt show of fear and anger Saturday night. Had the youngster been in trouble? How did he live? Where? Peter could see the Figaro's sign flashing from the next block. He took a long pull from the flask. Was Gito an orphan? If so, was he being cared for? Peter realized there lay the source of his concern for the boy. He had developed a fond interest in the kid; he didn't like the idea of Gito's being neglected or, worse, abused. Peter had cared for

foster children in the past and was willing to lend his support again, if Gito needed help. How could Peter make the kid believe that without arousing ugly, unpleasant suspicions? He'd have to proceed with tact and caution, allowing the boy to make the first move.

By the time he reached the Figaro, Peter was feeling fuzzy, lightheaded. Hoping Gito might already have arrived, he surveyed the room, his eyes adjusting to its dimness. But the youngster was not there.

The booths were full. Damning his luck, Peter found a barstool and began his vigil. Keeping his eyes on the door, he fought his jitters with a quickly downed succession of drinks. He had a lot to discuss with the boy — if he played his hand judiciously — and didn't want his nerves interfering.

Watching the hands of the clock behind the bar, he began ordering doubles. By eight o'clock, the bar was too noisy, too hectic. Peter caught himself nodding and wiped a dribble of Scotch from his chin with a soggy cocktail napkin. Lifting his glass to take another drink, he realized that someone was speaking beside him. The voice came to him in snatches, gradually snagging his attention. Nearly spilling his drink, he spun on his stool and discovered Gito.

"You O.K., man?" the boy was asking. "You fucked up?"

"Gito?" Peter muttered. Although standing quite close, the boy appeared distant, fuzzy. As if awakened abruptly from a fevered sleep — sweaty, groggy — Peter became suddenly horribly aware of his own drunkenness, and for a brief, lucid instant, felt a shiver of panic, a rush of nausea. But like an ember crumbling to ash, the moment of lucidity flickered and vanished in a swirl of confused voices, clangorous music, jostling bodies.

Gito was speaking again. "Man, you really do get fucked up!" There was a lilt of amusement in his voice. "I thought you was just shittin' me before."

"You're late."

"Late for what?"

"You're late," Peter repeated, his words muffled, as if spoken through a mouthful of bread. "I wanted to talk to you."

The boy shrugged. "So talk. And anyway, what you got to say to me? You ain't my daddy."

"You don't have a daddy."

"How you know that, man?"

"You told me, you live with your cousin, remember?"

“Yeah, my cousin.” Gito eyed Peter with the wary sidelong gaze of a ruffled tomcat. “You’re a weird dude, man. First I thought you was just some kinda stuck-up asshole, you know, but you get fucked up like everybody else, and you always be talkin’ to me.”

“You seem like a nice kid.” Peter lifted his glass, found his mouth after two tries, took a long drink. “I don’t talk to everybody. But you look like a good guy.”

“You talk so fuckin’ weird, man!” The boy laughed. “Hey, you want more candy?” He pointed to the box sitting on the bar.

Peter squinted down at the box. For a moment he considered it, not quite recalling its purpose, then shook his head. “I don’t like candy.”

“What the fuck you talkin’ about?”

Peter looked up at the boy. “I don’t like candy. I never eat it.” The two looked at each other for the space of two breaths, smiled slowly, then broke into laughter.

“That’s a crazy fuckin’ thing to do,” the boy said, “buyin’ shit you don’t like.”

“I’m a crazy fucker, I guess.” Peter raised his glass. “Shit, it’s dry!” He broke into a fresh spasm of laughter.

“Yeah, man, I guess it is.”

Tickled by Peter’s befuddled behavior, Gito regarded him with a smile both amused and slightly baffled. There was a new quality in his voice — something relaxed, easy, almost gentle — that Peter, even through his haze, recognized immediately with a vague pride and relief.

“Why don’t we blow this joint, kiddo,” Peter muttered.

“Whatta you mean?”

“I mean I’m sick of this place. And I’m in desperate need of another drink. So you see, my friend, our situation requires action. Urgent action.” Unable to stop himself, Peter erupted in laughter.

“You really wanna go someplace with me?” Gito asked, his eyes squinted nearly shut.

“Your face will freeze like that if you’re not careful,” Peter confided, leaning closer to the youngster. “And, yes, I’d like to go someplace with you. Why not? You’re the only friend I’ve got here, right?”

“You’re not really my friend. You just bought some shit from me, that’s all. Shit, man, I don’t even know you.”

“Sure you do! I’m Peter, remember? I’m a teacher, and I buy shit I don’t need, and I drink too much. What more is there to know?” Gripping the bar, he pulled himself off the stool and, swaying slightly, stood beside Gito. “So where do we go?”

“I don’t think I should go nowhere, man. This don’t seem right, you know? What if you’re some kinda fuckin’ weirdo, man?”

“Your tact is wonderful, Gito. Gito, right? Strange name. What exactly is a Gito?”

“I got another name, but I don’t never use it.” The boy’s tone was defensive, a bit hurt.

“So what’s your other name that you don’t never use?”

“Gilberto.”

“Well, I think I prefer ‘Gito’,” Peter said, wandering towards the door. Reluctant, a bit confused, the boy grabbed his box and followed “So, Gito, where did we decide to go? I really need a drink.”

“I said I wasn’t goin’ nowhere.”

“What’s the matter, is it past your bedtime?” Peter bumped into a man coming through the door, staggered back, caught Gito’s arm.

“Hey, watch it, sucker?” Gito twisted out of Peter’s grip. “And fuck that shit about my bedtime, dude! I do whatever I fuckin’ wanna do.”

The night was clear, breezy, cool enough to send a shiver through Peter as he stepped out. “Well, then, let’s get a drink! You like to drink, don’t you?”

“Sure I like to drink. You think I’m some kinda fuckin’ faggot, man? Shit, man, I drink all the time.”

“Listen,” Peter paused a moment to order his thoughts. “What we should do is go to my apartment to drink.”

Gito raised his hand, backing away. “No, thanks. I mean, I think you’re O.K. and everything, but I don’t think that’s a good idea, you know?”

“Just one drink. Hell, it’s still early!”

“Maybe some other time, man.” Gito backed away. “I really gotta go.”

“Your cousin waiting for you?” Peter asked, facing the fact that the boy’s decision was set.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, O.K. then, if you don’t want a drink, there’s nothing I can do.” He waved weakly. “Take it easy.”

No longer pursued or pressured, Gito stopped. “You really wanna get fucked up with me, man? Even bein’ a teacher and everything, you wanna drink and get fucked up and stuff like that?”

Peter smiled. “Why not? Like I said, you’re a nice kid. I like you. Listen, Gito, I don’t have a lot of friends, O.K.? When I meet somebody I like, well, I like to have a few drinks, have a good time. Life is shitty enough already without passing up the few good people who come along, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Gito let his gaze drop to the sidewalk. “But you’re a grown-up. Why you wanna mess around with me?”

“I like people better before they grow up,” Peter said. “They get stale after they’ve been on the shelf too long. I prefer the company of children. And animals.”

“I’d kinda like to get fucked up,” Gito admitted, “but I can’t right now.”

“Some other time, O.K.? I’m always game for a few drinks. But let’s do it soon.”

“Yeah, that’s O.K. Next time I see you probably. But I don’t know, man. I gotta see.”

“O.K., we’ll see,” Peter said, nodding.

“Yeah, O.K.” Gito turned and loped away down the street, vanishing like a skittish elf into the night.

Peter stood in the middle of the empty sidewalk, gazing after the boy. He caught himself listing, jerked upright, turned slowly around. His head was swirling, filled with a swarm of emotions. Dragging himself home, battling a rising swell of nausea, he tried to make sense of what had happened. The entire episode seemed a mess — poorly handled, chaotic, unresolved. Scraps of their dialogue drifted through his memory like debris from a shipwreck, but nothing seemed to make sense. There was no hope of salvaging the wreckage tonight, of refitting the pieces. Only sleep was important now.

five

What had been lost? What gained? Peter lay in bed, curled on his side, weighing the consequences of the previous night, making no attempt to get up for work. If he could only recall everything that had been said, perhaps he could assess the damage. But his memory was pocked with long, frightening gaps. His head throbbed with pain piercing as toothache; sweat dampened his pillow. The bedroom, littered with discarded clothing, was filled with sunlight — hot, stark, white. There was a soft hum, like the dry hiss of air in a tomb, coming from somewhere.

Peter had the growing though still vague sense that no harm had been done, despite his recklessness. He remembered parting with the boy on friendly terms; but the events leading up to that parting were disturbingly hazy. Something had been mentioned about getting together with the boy for a future drinking session. But when? Moaning, he rolled onto his back and threw an arm across his face.

Slowly his memory returned. He remembered reaching a rather affable understanding with Gito. He had joked with the boy, gained his trust, become more than a nameless face. Savoring that realization, Peter concluded that his gains, after all, did outweigh his losses.

But he wondered again when he was to rejoin the youngster. He wanted to see Gito as soon as possible; wanted to pursue his original intention of finding out more of the boy's situation, which meant going easier on the booze in the future — a frequent resolve, infrequently kept. Of course there was the small matter of work the next day, making any immediate rendezvous impractical. But he had to see the boy.

Against his more prudent judgment, he decided to return to the Figaro the next evening.

Still feeling a bit jittery, Peter heard the school bell ring a merciful end to his ordeal. He gathered his papers and bolted for freedom. It seemed the day would drag on forever; but now the cage door swung wide before him. He allowed himself to smile, took a deep breath of air, and set his course for the Figaro.

Entering, Peter was startled to discover Gito sitting near the jukebox, looking as defiantly nonchalant as a criminal awaiting sentence. Paralyzed for a confused moment, Peter started across the room.

“That kid know you, Mr. Versani?”

The bartender was twirling the end of a striped towel, pointing to Gito.

“Yeah, he knows me.”

“Well, I can’t have him around here all the damn time. If he’s a friend of yours, I want you should keep him outta here from now on.”

“Is he in some kind of trouble?” Gito was occupied reading the songs on the jukebox, his face glowing red, green, red above the blinking lights.

“He will be if he keeps cornin’ in here.” The bartender gave his towel another twirl. “But he says he knows a guy named Peter, a teacher, so I figured he meant you. I told him to wait in the chair and then get out. I don’t wanna be an asshole, but I can’t have kids in here. I seen this kid before, but I can’t have him cornin’ here all the time.”

“I understand. I’ll talk to him. Sorry.”

Peter crossed to the jukebox. He was beside Gito when the boy looked around — head tilted, lips parted, face upturned in an unguarded moment. But the expression was fleeting, almost instantly replaced by a scowl.

“I talked to the bartender.”

“That cocksucker,” Gito muttered fiercely.

“Did he give you trouble?”

“Shit, man, he don’t bother me!”

“He said you gave him my name.”

“Man, I come lookin’ for you!”

“No kidding?” Peter grinned, delighted by this feisty boy. “You were looking for me?”

“You said you wanna get drunk, so I come lookin’ for you. But I gotta leave pretty early.”

“Where do you live?”

“You wouldn’t know where I live, man.” He stood up, the subject obviously closed. “So are you gonna buy me some booze, man?”

“Why don’t you call me Peter?”

Gito grinned, crinkling his nose. “I can’t do that shit, man. You’re an old guy. I mean not real old, but grown up.”

They were already out the door, ambling up the sidewalk. “Well,” Peter said, “you can call me by name. It’s up to you. Where would you like to go?”

“Shit, man, it’s your idea. I just wanna get fucked up is all.”

“You drink a lot?”

“Anytime I can. Hell, me and Chico get fucked up all the time.”

“Chico?”

The boy’s expression suddenly tensed, showing uneasiness, perhaps fear, as though a confidence had been betrayed.

“Chico’s your cousin?” Peter asked, testing his limits.

“Yeah, he’s my cousin.” Gito looked away. He had a way of walking on his toes in a jaunty, almost dainty strut. “So where we goin’?” he demanded, impatience rising in his voice.

“You’re too young for bars, and I don’t want to get you, or me, into trouble, so how about my apartment?” Before the boy could answer, Peter said, “I really don’t feel right about this, Gito. I shouldn’t be helping you get drunk.” Seeing the boy about to protest, he said, “I know I invited you Sunday night. But I was pretty loaded. I probably shouldn’t have said all the things I did.”

“You wanna get rid of me or what?”

“No, not at all. We can have something to drink. I just don’t want to feel like a damn pusher. I could get into a lot of trouble.”

“Now you soundin’ just like a fuckin’ teacher. I better split.”

Peter touched the boy’s arm, rough denim beneath his fingers. “Wait a minute! Settle down. I know you’re old enough to drink. But I don’t want to get into trouble. If you want to get drunk, that’s O.R. I’ll probably even join you. But all of a sudden I started feeling pretty lousy about this — the way I’ve handled it, I mean.”

“Your’e talkin’ jive shit again, man. I just wanna get a buzz on, that’s all.”

“Yeah, maybe I’m talking crazy.” They stopped at the corner. “So... you want to use my apartment? I’ve got vodka, orange juice, a little beer, a little wine.”

“I dig wine.” Gito patted his belly. “Yeah, that’ll be O.R. for a little while. But I gotta leave early.”

“Let’s get movin’!”

Peter felt nervous as a teenager on his first date. Walking home with Gito, he again tried to find out the youngster’s history, without success. The boy would not be drawn out; though not refusing to talk, his displeasure was evident through his petulant tone and evasive, one-word answers. Peter relented finally, deciding to let his allies — time and alcohol — do their work. But showing Gito his apartment, he felt uncomfortably devious, and couldn’t help questioning his motives. What was he doing with this youngster? He should be sitting at his desk, grading tests, listening to his favorite old Caruso records — not helping a young boy get drunk. “Do you go to school, Gito?”

The youngster — gazing about the apartment, his mouth slightly open — shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Did you go today?”

“No, man.”

“When was the last time you went?”

The boy shrugged again. “I don’t know, maybe last week.” He looked around. “So where’s the wine?”

“I’ll get it. Sit down, get comfortable.”

In the kitchen, Peter brought out the vodka and guzzled some straight from the bottle. He coughed as the alcohol blazed down his throat, fdling his eyes with tears. He caught his breath, guzzled again, then replaced the bottle in the cupboard. With warmth surging through him, he grabbed the wine and returned to the living room.

He found Gito seated on the sofa, watching TV. There was something subtly changed about the boy’s appearance; but it was several seconds before Peter was able to pinpoint the difference: Gito had removed his stocking cap. He looked younger without it; but there was something else. His hair — a wild tousle of jet black curls — made his face thinner, smaller, more fragile. Huddled on the sofa, his hands folded almost genteely in his lap, he suddenly impressed Peter as very vulnerable, very alone.

“Drink up.” Peter handed him a glass of wine.

“Thanks.” The boy’s face glowed pale ash in the television’s flicker.

Peter sat in the corner. He watched the boy for nearly an hour as the wine passed back and forth. Something mysterious in that young face — something soft around the mouth, something gentle — seemed at odds with Gito's eyes, burning with a keen, wary energy. This mingling of the disturbed and the dis turbing, the haunted and the haunting, produced a jarring beauty that left Peter confused and agitated: enthralled.

"You mind if I smoke, man?" Gito asked, looking slowly around at Peter. Though not yet slurred, his words were carefully articulated.

Peter sat up straighter, cleared his throat. "I guess it would be O.R." He finished his wine, reached for the bottle, found it empty. Standing up to get the vodka, he swayed, then caught his balance. "I'm tighter than I thought," he mumbled.

Gito was already rolling a joint from the grass spread on a magazine in his lap. He looked up, grinned. "You fucked up, man?"

"More than I'd like to be." Peter crossed the room, navigating unsteadily around the furniture.

"Shit, man, I'm fucked up too." Gito moistened the rolling paper with quick stabs of his tongue, then grinned again. "But I'm gonna feel even better in a minute." He smoothed the joint with his fingers, rotated the tip between his lips and struck a match.

By the time Peter returned from the kitchen with the vodka, the boy had smoked nearly half a joint. The living room was thick with its sweet fragrance. "That smells good." Peter sat down next to Gito on the sofa, took a deep breath. "It's been a long time since I smelled dope."

Gito filled his lungs with smoke. His voice tight, he held out the joint. "Want a hit, man?"

Peter waved it away. "I quit smoking back in college." He held up the bottle. "Just booze now."

Gito toked again, held his breath, then blew the smoke out his nostrils in two thick streams. "Man, I thought you wanted to score some dope last week." His voice was a husky whisper.

Peter sipped the vodka. "I just wanted to talk to you. So I made it up." He laughed, letting Gito take the bottle.

The boy took a swig. "Whew! That's good shit. Man, am I ever gettin' wrecked!" He handed the bottle back, then took a long, noisy drag.

Peter glanced at the clock on top of the television. Nine o'clock. He had to work tomorrow, and here he was drunk, getting drunker — an intolerable

situation. Beside him, Gito sucked on the roach, slumped far down on the sofa, his legs spread wide.

“Don’t fall asleep, kiddo,” Peter laughed, nudging the boy’s arm.

Gito turned towards Peter. “Shit, man, I gotta get goin’.” He stirred, attempted to rise, giggled at his own clumsiness. Managing at last to sit up, he dropped the dead roach into an ashtray. His gaze roamed about, settled upon Peter. “I should get goin’,” he repeated, then licked his lips. “Man, I’m dry.”

“You want a beer?”

“Yeah, man, O.K.”

Returning from the kitchen, Peter found the boy swigging from the vodka bottle. “Hey, take it easy!”

“It’s O.K.” Gito’s words began to slur. “There’s nothin’... no problem. It’s O.K.” He took a slug of beer, then collapsed on the sofa with a loud sigh. “I gotta go pretty soon.”

“Yeah, you probably should.” Peter popped open a beer. The tab clicked, hissed.

“I gotta go pretty soon,” the boy mumbled.

Peter sipped beer. It tasted bitter, created a stir of nausea in his gut. He had been drinking too heavily, too often, in the last two weeks. It was time to stop this nonsense; events were spinning out of control. He set his beer onto the table and turned to Gito, determined to send the boy home. Too late. Gito was sprawled beside him, passed out, the can of beer still clutched in his hand. This was not what Peter had planned, or expected. He had wanted to find out about the boy, assess his condition, help him. Instead, he had supplied him with booze — and a place to drink it — and now, as just punishment, he was saddled with the boy.

He stood up, feeling wobbly indeed. What was he to do with this youngster? Timidly, he leaned forward to touch the boy’s shoulder. No response. He whispered the boy’s name, and nudged him harder. Nothing. With a sigh, he pulled the beer can from Gito’s hand. The room, already dark, became silent when Peter switched off the TV. Gito’s deep, even breathing punctuated the stillness like the soft puffing of a bellows.

Contemplating his next move, Peter watched the boy — now little more than a silhouette in the darkness — and smiled. He stepped closer, gripped Gito’s ankles — feeling the hard bone within his grip — and lifted the boy’s legs onto the sofa. “There you go, my boy,” he whispered, placing Gito’s

head gently upon a small pillow. His fingers lingered in the thick curls; he caught a whiff of unwashed hair. The odor struck him as rather agreeable, even appealing. He backed off, battling a tightness in his belly, a crawling of fear. He didn't want to leave the boy, yet he realized there was nothing more he could do. Gito looked comfortable enough; his denim jacket would keep him warm until morning. Even so, Peter decided to provide him with a blanket. He spread it carefully over Gito, brushing his fingers across the boy's cheek. The skin was warm, much smoother and softer than a woman's. The boy let out a tiny moan and turned his head. Peter jerked back, the breath knocked out of him. He stood frozen, terrified. But the boy was still asleep. There was no danger.

Backing away, Peter ached for another touch of that soft cheek, then turned and retired to the bedroom, pulling the door shut behind him.

Feeling remarkably fit and alert, Peter woke up before his alarm went off. Going to bed at an early hour had, apparently, been his salvation; he was able to face the day with a clear head and less pain than he'd had any right to expect. Then he remembered the boy.

He threw back the covers and pulled on his pants. In the living room, the pungent, musty fragrance of marijuana was still strong. Peter walked softly. Gito was on the sofa, flat on his belly, one arm dangling to the floor, the blanket in a twisted mess around his waist. His lips were parted, moist; his cheek, flushed. Black curls hung in loose ringlets across his dark forehead.

Peter called the boy's name. Gito groaned and writhed onto one side. His eyes still shut, he stretched, groaned again, yawned. Peter moved closer. "Come on, Gito, time to get up."

Blinking like an infant waking from a long nap, the boy opened his eyes and looked around. Peter had never seen a gaze so utterly baffled. "Time to get up, pal."

Gito pushed himself up on his elbow. "Where the fuck am I, man?" His voice was little more than a croak.

"In my apartment. You passed out here."

"Oh, I remember." The boy fell back and closed his eyes. "I feel like shit, man."

“You’ll feel better when you get up,” Peter said, rooted awkwardly in the middle of the room, unsure of his next move.

“Oh, man, I’m gonna get my ass kicked good,” Gito moaned. He sat up slowly, rubbing a hand through his dark tangle of hair. “I’m really gonna get my ass kicked around the fuckin’ block.”

“It’s my fault.” Peter felt suddenly uneasy. “I shouldn’t have given you so much booze. I’m sorry.” He leaned against the back of the sofa. “You should have called somebody about sleeping here.”

“Well shit, man, I gotta go right now.”

“Are you really in trouble, Gito?”

“I don’t know, man.” The boy pulled the blanket off and swung his feet to the floor. “This is all just a big fuckin’ mess.” He peered groggily at Peter. “Don’t worry, man, you won’t get in no trouble.”

“Yeah, well, that’s good. But I’m more worried about you.”

“Ah, fuck it!”

Peter was taken aback, thinking the profanity directed at him, until he noticed the boy’s eyes, which appeared distracted, without malice. Frightened nearly to tears, Gito was obviously furious with himself.

“Don’t worry, pal, everything will turn out all right. Can I help out?”

“No, thanks.” Gito rubbed his head with both hands. “I’ll get by, man. Ain’t no problem.” He stood up, looked around the room to get his bearings. “I need my hat.”

Peter saw the red stocking cap nearly hidden beneath the sofa. When he handed it to Gito, the boy pulled it down over his ears, then looked around to locate the door. “Catch you later, man.”

“You O.K. for sure?”

“Ain’t nothin’ you can do.”

The door slammed shut. Peter sat down on the sofa, picked up the blanket and held it in his lap. The apartment had never seemed emptier. He sighed, feeling entirely responsible for the boy, hoping that Gito was, at least, in no physical danger. From now on, it would be in everyone’s best interest if Peter avoided the Figaro — and the boy — altogether. He had hoped to do some good, but now the opposite appeared more likely. He tossed aside the blanket, and with another, deeper sigh, headed for the bedroom.

six

The weather had been warming steadily for several weeks. Peter — watching television and feeling uncomfortable — walked to the window and opened it to let in air. From the street below, he heard the crack of a bat, children's voices, laughter. A warm breeze brushed his face. He leaned from the window, trying without success to see the children playing below. Two weeks ago, before leaves had sprouted on trees, he could see them through bare branches. Now, all life on the street was hidden.

He turned away and wandered back to the sofa, considered fixing himself a drink, decided against it. He'd been dry for five weeks and didn't care to tamper with a good thing. And he didn't like drinking alone.

The television droned on. Finding it difficult to concentrate, Peter abandoned the effort and picked up a magazine. He thumbed through the pages, stopping at an ad for Jamaica. Strange, advertising an entire island. The boy in the ad was young and dark, balancing on a rock in the middle of a lagoon and wearing the skimpiest of bathing trunks. Imagining the wonder of a vacation in Jamaica — or anywhere else, for that matter — Peter let the magazine fall to his lap. Perhaps he'd dip into his savings and go abroad this summer, after classes ended. A bit of diversion was long overdue.

He looked at the clock. Still early but late enough for bed. He flipped the magazine onto the cushion beside him, grateful another day had ended, eager for the nothingness of sleep.

Peter paused on the steps outside the school, free again after eight hours of drudgery. The afternoon sky was cloudless, pale blue; the breeze warm, scented with lilac. It seemed a pity going back to an empty apartment on such a splendid day. But there was paperwork to be done; and besides, where else was there to go? Wondering about supper, he headed home.

He was stooped over examining the sparse rations in his refrigerator when he heard a tap at the door. "Who the hell can that be?" he muttered. In the living room, he hurriedly smoothed down his hair. The tapping repeated, stronger, more insistent. "Who is it?" he called, one hand on the latch.

"It's me... Gito... Gito Lopez."

Peter paused, startled into sudden paralysis.

"Can I come in?" A faint note of desperation in his tone.

Peter hesitated another moment, then swung the door open. "Yeah, come on in," he said, fighting a quaver in his voice. He opened his mouth to say more, but the words died in his throat as he saw Gito's face bruised, scratched and slightly puffed around the left eye and cheek. He watched the boy stride past him into the room and sit down on the sofa. "You look terrible. What the hell happened to you?"

Gito shrugged, trying very hard not to cry. "I couldn't stand it no more."

Peter sat down. "Who hurt you, Gito?"

"It don't matter who." The boy swiped brusquely at his good eye, angered by the welling tears. "I just didn't have nowhere else to go 'cept here."

Peter reached across the sofa and patted the youngster's shoulder. "It's O.R., pal. Just take it easy." He gave the shoulder a squeeze, feeling the hard blade of bone beneath the denim jacket. "I'm surprised to see you after all these weeks. But I'm glad you're here."

"I thought you was pissed at me," Gito murmured, glancing at Peter and looking a bit calmer. "But I couldn't think of nobody else to come to."

"I'm really glad you came, Gito. But what happened?"

"I just got a little busted up is all."

"By Chico?"

"Chico?" Gito squinted in confusion. "Shit no, man, it ain't Chico! Chico's just a kid. He's my friend."

"Did he stay behind?"

"Yeah, man, I think he's still at the house." He sat back against the arm of the sofa, freeing himself from Peter's hand. "I shouldn't talk about it."

"It's all right, Gito, nobody will hurt you here," Peter said, groping for the right words and dying for a drink. "Would you like to tell me about it? Tell me what happened?"

Gito stared. "I guess maybe it would be O.R. But I don't know, man." He touched his bruised eye. "Maybe I shouldn't even be here."

“Hey, you did the right thing,” Peter said. “I mean, Jesus, look at your face!” He paused, waiting for the boy to respond. But Gito pawed gently at the red scratch on his cheek and remained silent. “Why don’t you at least take off your hat?”

The boy pulled the stocking cap off his head. His hair fell free in a thick tumble of curls, longer than Peter remembered. “I rip things off for some guy,” Gito suddenly said, fiddling with the cap in his lap.

“Yeah?” Peter leaned closer, taken a bit by surprise.

“I rip stuff off,” Gito repeated, glancing up at Peter, then down again at the cap. “I rip stuff off for a guy who sells it, and then he gives me money for dope and shit like that.”

“You sell candy, too?”

“Yeah, man, I did, but not no more.”

“And what about Chico?”

“He rips stuff off, too. But he ain’t very good at it. We stay at the guy’s house, t think he’s my uncle.”

“Your uncle? Not your cousin?”

“Chico’s my cousin.” Gito looked up again. “You got any more wine, man?”

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Peter said. He disliked the idea of once again serving wine to the boy — especially under such odd circumstances — but realized at the same time that a small glass could do no harm; in fact, it could be the best way to calm the youngster’s nerves.

Gito poured himself a full glass and gulped it greedily. A trickle of wine ran down his chin onto his red T-shirt. He paused to catch his breath, refilled the glass, and drained it again in three noisy gulps.

“So... your uncle hit you?” Peter tried to bring Gito back to the discussion. He took the bottle away from him and set it on the table.

The boy lounged against the arm of the sofa. “Yeah. But I ain’t sure he’s my uncle. He said he was when my mama died, but I don’t know for sure.”

“What about your father?”

“I never saw my daddy. He was from Mexico. But I got the same last name.”

“Was your mother Mexican, too?” Peter asked.

“No, man, she weren’t no Mexican. She was black, man. But her daddy was white, from Chicago.” The boy reached across Peter, grabbed the wine, and refilled his glass. “That fucker ain’t gonna gorilla me no more!”

“Your uncle?” Peter asked, puzzled.

“Yeah, man, that asshole!” Tears once again glistening in his eyes, Gito took a sip of wine. “I don’t wanna talk about that no more.” He took another sip. “My birthday was last week.”

“Yeah? How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

“I thought you were already fourteen.”

“Well, you was wrong.” Gito sounded a bit flustered, very impatient. His tone softened. “You sure you ain’t mad ’cause I came here? I don’t know you too good, but I needed somewhere to go.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“You never came back to the bar, so I figured you were pissed at me about somethin’.”

Peter shook his head. “I wasn’t pissed at you. I’ve just been busy. Hey, did you get into trouble after you left here the last time?”

“Yeah, man, I guess so. But, shit, I get in trouble all the time anyway.” He refilled the glass.

Pondering his next move, Peter sat and watched the boy. Through the window, he could hear the sounds of children playing. “So what’s your plan, Gito?” he asked finally. “What are you going to do?”

The boy shrugged, as Peter had expected he would. “I ain’t goin’ back to that motherfucker,” he said, shaking his head. “I thought maybe I could stay here for a while,” the last bit said very quickly, eyes averted.

“Here?” Peter sat up abruptly.

“Well, I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind too much. I guess I could go someplace else... but I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind. It would just be for a little while, man. But I guess I can’t, huh?”

“Well, just a minute. Give me a minute to think about it. I mean, it’s sort of a shock.” He looked at the boy’s blackened eye, his scratched cheek, his dirty tangle of hair. Several weeks before, he had pledged himself to help the boy if necessary; now, very obviously, that help was needed. But so much time had passed since then!

“Listen, man, don’t do me no fuckin’ favors,” Gito grumbled, pouring wine awkwardly into his glass. “I’ll get by, you know. I ain’t no dumb punk.”

“Settle down.” Peter took a sip of his wine and looked again at the youngster’s face. “You really want to stay here?”

“It don’t make no difference, really, I guess.” Gito stared towards the blank TV.

“Well,” Peter chose his words slowly, “if you need a place to stay, then it’s O.R. I sure as hell don’t want you getting beat up again, by anyone. So, if I can help out for a while, you’re welcome to stay.”

The boy’s shoulders slumped, his jaw relaxed, as he stared down into his wine. “Shit, that’s good,” he said softly, glancing at Peter. “Don’t worry, man, I ain’t no trouble. And don’t worry ’bout me rippin’ you off or nothin’, cause I ain’t gonna.”

“Well, it’s a deal then.” Peter leaned forward and slapped the boy’s knee. “You want to sleep here on the couch? Is that O.K.?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s O.K.!” Gito said, breaking into a very broad smile.

Gazing at the dark beauty of that face, Peter felt dryness in his mouth, a mild ache in his stomach. “You hungry?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Gito poured the last of the wine into his glass. “I’m feelin’ really hungry all of a sudden. But I ain’t got no money.”

“Don’t worry, you’re my guest... for a few days. Then we’ll see what happens.”

“You be payin’ for my food, man?” Gito asked, uneasily.

“For now.” Peter spoke over his shoulder as he walked to the kitchen. “Then we’ll see what happens.”

They ate together at a small restaurant. Peter disliked eating out alone and hadn’t dined there for months. He was surprised by the jump in prices since his last visit. But he couldn’t begrudge the cost of the meal, not when he saw the excitement on Gito’s face. True, the youngster was rather drunk, but his delight was due more to an unmistakably boyish exuberance than to booze.

They walked home the long way, through the park. Although the evening was warm and calm, the boy still wore his stocking cap — and, of course, his blue denim jacket. Peter realized, as they neared the apartment, that he had never seen Gito without the jacket. He wondered briefly what the boy’s body looked like, then chased the thought from his mind.

Fishing the keys from his pocket, Peter saw a black Buick approach from the next block. He thought nothing of it until Gito muttered a curse and ducked into the nearest doorway. Like a rabbit mesmerized by a cobra’s stare,

the boy watched the car pass, venturing out of his niche only after it had turned around the next corner.

“Who the hell was that?” Peter asked him.

“I thought it was somebody, but it wasn’t.”

“Your uncle?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t.”

Peter didn’t pursue the subject. Gito had been through enough for one day; no sense in stirring him up again.

Upstairs, while Peter fetched pillows and blankets, Gito quietly watched TV. Groggy from the wine and very sleepy, he appeared relaxed, happy. Peter found it pleasant having him around; he liked the feeling of another body nearby. The apartment had been too empty for too long.

He pointed to the sofa. “Everything is all set up.”

Gito looked around. “Hey, that’s really good, man.”

“You going to be O.K.?”

“Yeah, I’m O.K. now.” He crossed to the sofa and poked at the cushions. “Hey, man, that’s really nice. Thanks a lot.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“You know, I had a good time tonight,” the boy said, staring at his feet, creeping from behind his defiant, cocky facade for the first time.

“So did I,” Peter said. “I’m glad you’re here.” He stepped past Gito, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Sleep well. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The boy nodded. Peter hurried to his bedroom, the feel of those soft curls still warm on his hand.

seven

As Peter had feared, Gito presented problems, foremost among them, school. As a teacher, Peter could hardly condone the boy's continued truancy. Gito, of course, was more than content to sit in the apartment all day, smoking grass and watching TV — and raiding the refrigerator. But Peter had other ideas. The boy would have to be sent to school, and he would have to be put in touch with the appropriate welfare agencies. If Gito had been reported as a runaway, Peter might be in some kind of trouble. What kind of trouble, he wasn't sure; but the possibility certainly existed, and it scared the hell out of him. For the moment, though, he felt that the boy deserved a bit of time to himself. Physically, and emotionally, the poor kid needed a few days — perhaps a week — to recuperate. But only a week; then things would have to change.

In the meantime there was a more immediate problem: for three days, Peter had come home from work to find Gito stretched out on the sofa, still wearing the denim jacket, and still unwashed, dirty and unkempt as the day he'd turned up on the doorstep. The apartment had begun to smell strongly of sweat and filthy hair and even filthier clothing. Having hinted at the matter the first day of the boy's stay, and having been blithely ignored, Peter decided after the third day that he'd had enough.

"You think maybe you should think about taking a shower?" he asked Gito, sounding less firm than he'd intended.

The boy looked at him from the sofa. "Yeah, pretty soon."

Peter sat down next to the youngster. "Now listen, Gito, there's no reason for you to stink, which you do. I mean, maybe you didn't have any choice before, but you do now, so I want you to get cleaned up."

Gito appeared startled by Peter's mild scolding. "You ain't my fuckin' daddy!" he said, his chin lifted in defiance.

"I'm not your father, I know, but I'm all you have right now." The boy remained silent. "I know you're old enough to wash and take care of yourself, so I'd like you to do it. There's no reason to be an ass about it."

“Don’t try pushin’ me around, sucker!”

“Nobody’s pushing your around, and you know it,” Peter grinned, poking the boy’s foot with his own. “Come on, don’t be stupid! Hell, you’ll feel better after you’ve had a shower. Go ahead, and then we’ll get something to eat.”

“Well, I guess,” Gito muttered, sitting up. “But I was gonna do it anyhow, so don’t think it was your idea, ’cause it ain’t!”

“That’s fine. Now, you know where everything is in the bathroom, right? The towels, the soap and the shampoo? And you know how to use the shower?”

“Shit, man, I ain’t no fool!” the boy said, walking past him. “I’ll take care of it.”

Peter held out his hand. “Why don’t you give me your jacket.”

Gito turned around, his lips pressed together in an almost comical display of impatience. Eager not to offend the boy, Peter suppressed a laugh.

“Yeah, I guess so.” He tugged off the jacket, revealing dark, slender arms. Beneath the red T-shirt, his chest and shoulders appeared thin, very lean.

Peter took the jacket. “You should probably take off your other clothes here, too,” he said, suffering suddenly from uncomfortable shortness of breath. “It’s so small in there.”

“That’s O.R.,” Gito said. He walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Peter turned the jacket in his hands. It smelled of sweat and marijuana. He threw it on the sofa, then hurried to the kitchen and drank as much vodka as rapidly as he could without making himself sick.

Holding the bottle, Peter wandered back into the Jiving room. He stared at the bathroom door. The boy was inside. Just behind the door. Peter listened for the rustle of clothing, the rasp of a zipper — any sound of the boy undressing — but heard nothing. He put the bottle to his lips, tipped it, guzzled until he felt himself about to gag. There was a metallic noise from the bathroom. From the sound of it, Gito was fumbling with the faucets. Peter wondered if the boy had finished undressing. Was he leaning over the bathtub in his underpants? Or had he already removed them? There was a splash of water in the tub, a rush of spray as the shower nozzle was switched on. Peter stepped closer to the door, guzzled again from the bottle, listened. The rush of water continued steady for a moment, then changed subtly, becoming

quieter as a body stepped beneath it. The boy, Peter knew, was now standing in the tub, the spray beating against him.

Taking another drink, Peter shuffled back across the room and sank onto the sofa. He tried to calm himself. What the hell was wrong with him? A boy was taking a shower in his bathroom, nothing more. What had sent him running for the booze? What kept him huddled on the couch, short of breath, nearly trembling? He knew only that he wanted to open the bathroom door, to see the boy, to be near him. But was caring about Gito so terrible? And if not, then why this fear? Why this ache clutching at his stomach?

He chugged more vodka. The shower was turned off. Peter suddenly felt very warm, lightheaded, dopey. He set aside the bottle. This was all wrong — wrong! His mind swam with vivid pictures of Gito stepping from the shower, drying himself with the towel. Peter couldn't have felt more vulgarly sly if he had been peeping through the keyhole into the bathroom. Was he becoming some sort of pervert? Sure, he was gay, but he'd cared for foster children in the past without the slightest problem. He was no pederast! True, neither of the youngsters had been particularly attractive; one, in fact, had been grossly overweight.

Enough! All this damned worrying was a waste of time. Pondering motives and emotions had always bored Peter. He took pride in stoicism. If he became angered or lonesome or depressed, he gritted his teeth and got by just fine without resorting to all sorts of pointless, frivolous introspection and self-analysis. Too much scrutiny of one's feelings could lead only to trouble. Best to do some work, read a book, listen to music — anything but dwell on tedious emotion. So, maybe he did want to see Gito. There was nothing wrong with that. Not really.

The door of the bathroom opened. Steam swirled into the living room. Gito, a long white towel wrapped around his waist, stepped from the steam. His hair was drenched, hanging in long black tendrils across his forehead, over his ears, onto his neck nearly to the shoulders. His skin, still wet, glistened as dark and smooth as slick copper. Draped in the towel, he looked especially exotic, reminiscent somehow of an Indian fakir, a streetboy from Tunisia or Morocco, a young athlete from ancient Greece.

"You look better," Peter said. He wished now that he had put away the vodka. "How do you feel?"

Gito walked barefoot across the room, moving with the sprightly grace of a trim colt. "I feel O.K.," he said, sitting down on the sofa. A bead of water

dripped from his hair onto his shoulder, trickled down his breast past the small brown nipple, came to rest finally on his belly, just above the navel. “What about my clothes? I only got what I wore here.” He saw the vodka, picked up the bottle, took a drink.

“We can wash them tonight,” Peter said. The towel was wrapped tightly around the boy’s middle, covering him to the knees. It opened in a narrow slit as he sat down, exposing his leg up to the hip. “There’s a laundromat about two blocks from here.”

“And what the fuck am I gonna wear?”

“You can stay here till I get back. Or you can wear something of mine.”

“It’d be too big,” Gito said.

Peter shrugged, taking the opportunity to more closely examine the young body. Though thin, it appeared healthy enough. The chest was firm; the belly hard, flat, ridged on either side with delicate muscle; the legs long, slender in the calves, dark, perfectly hairless. “You could put on some things, roll up the cuffs, tighten the belt. It would be O.K.”

“I’d look like a turkey, man,” Gito said, still wincing from a long pull of vodka, his naturally husky voice momentarily reduced to a hoarse gasp. “Maybe I should just put my old stuff back on.”

Peter glanced over his shoulder into the bathroom, where the boy’s clothes — red T-shirt, jeans, underpants, white socks and sneakers — were thrown together on the floor in a ragged heap. “Forget it, kid. And that’s enough booze, too!” He grabbed for the bottle, from which Gito was drinking much too rapidly. The boy jerked it away. “Come on, Gito, give it to me!” “I want to get fucked up!” the boy grumbled, taking a defiant sip. “I ain’t done nothin’ but grass for three fuckin’ days, man.”

“That’s another thing I want to talk to you about. Your smoking, I mean.”

“Oh, man, don’t start that shit,” he said, wearily shaking his head. “You gotta loosen up, man!”

“Loosen up,” Peter muttered to himself, then raised his voice. “Come on, Gito, no more drinking tonight!”

“Fuck, man, you been drinking,” the youngster protested. “I can tell by your eyes. So don’t bitch at me!” He took a very long pull from the bottle, then shivered as if afflicted with a sudden, violent chill.

“So, are you coming with me or not?” Peter asked, trying to sound very sober after Gito’s observation.

“No, you go.”

“And what about eating?”

“Bring me a hamburger from the corner.” Gito stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles, making himself very much at home. The towel slipped open a bit wider, exposing more of his hip.

“Yes, boss,” Peter said, bowing as he rose from the sofa.

Gito watched him and smiled. “You’re nuts, man,” he said with a brief, throaty laugh. “Are you bringin’ me a hamburger?”

“Yes, I’m bringin’ you a hamburger!” Peter called, heading for the bathroom. He gathered the boy’s clothing, fetched his own cap, and paused at the front door. “Easy on the booze, O.K.?”

Gito smiled again, already rather drunk. “Don’t worry!” he yelled, holding up the bottle as if it were a trophy. “I’ll save you some.”

• • •

The room, lit only by the pale flicker of the TV, was quite dark when Peter returned. About to switch on a light, he discovered Gito sprawled across the sofa on his belly, snoring quietly, the empty bottle on the floor. The towel, though still covering him, had tugged itself free at the waist, exposing the entirety of his right side from shoulder to toe. Leaving the room dark, Peter crept to the sofa and laid Gito’s folded clothing on the floor. The back of the towel was still dark and soggy from the boy’s wet ass.

Peter stood for several minutes watching the boy sleep, wondering how to make him more comfortable. He couldn’t let the kid lie there all night wrapped in a wet towel. He had to remove it and cover him more warmly.

He leaned down and lifted the back of the towel between thumb and forefinger, baring the boy’s buttocks. Feeling cool air on his bottom, Gito squirmed, and with a tiny moan, slid one knee as far forward as possible, pressing his groin more snugly against the cushion. In the dim light, his sleek cocoa skin glowed a soft, cool rose.

Peter held up the towel. “Beautiful,” he whispered. The boy’s butt was smooth and unblemished as a baby’s, the cheeks plump, solid, firmly rounded. Still restless, Gito squirmed once more on the cushions, slowly grinding against them with his hips.

“I’ve got to get this out,” Peter murmured, tugging at the towel, still pinned beneath the youngster. He gripped it with both hands and pulled with

a slow, steady force. The towel came gradually free, tipped Gito onto his right side, facing him away from Peter at an awkward angle. Roused by his discomfort, the boy moaned, then opened his eyes and looked up groggily.

“Sorry I woke you,” Peter whispered, paralyzed by surprise and embarrassment. “I was trying to get this wet towel off and cover you up.”

Gito stared, his head still flat on the pillow, mouth parted, jaw slack, still very much in a stupor. Although appearing awake, he obviously heard, saw, and understood little of what was happening.

“I’m going to get this off you,” Peter said, more confidently now, pulling at the towel. As it came free, Gito fell back limp against the cushions.

His hand trembling, Peter began very gently to dry the boy’s back, starting between the shoulder blades, wiping down past the ribcage, around the waist. He shifted to the boy’s feet, toweling off his calves, the smooth hollow behind each knee, his thighs. Gito muttered something incomprehensible. “I’m just going to dry you here,” Peter said, pressing timidly against the boy’s buttocks. Half opening his eyes, Gito smiled. Encouraged by the look of pleasure on the youngster’s face, Peter wiped more firmly. Gito raised his behind slightly and flexed the cheeks; Peter could feel them tense and relax — briefly hard, then soft, then rock-hard again. He pressed down with both hands, began a gentle massage through the towel. Watching Peter with a sidelong gaze, Gito emitted a soft, throaty giggle. Yet, despite the boy’s undisguised delight, Peter dared not remove the towel and touch his flesh directly.

The boy giggled, his toes wiggling slowly, digging into the cushion. “You like that?” Peter asked, pressing in easy circles around the towel. Gito replied with a quiet grunt, smiling almost blissfully. Peter pressed his palms flat, then rubbed his thumbs slowly back and forth along the tight cleft between the buttocks. Letting out another husky giggle, the boy raised his ass higher and began sliding one leg back and forth across the cushions, his toes flexing more eagerly. “Does that feel good?” Peter murmured, squeezing with both hands now at the cheeks, tensed hard beneath the terrycloth. “Yeah,” Gito breathed, his leg sliding rapidly against the cushion.

Peter straightened up. His heart thumped, almost robbing him of breath. That damn vodka had him doing crazy things again! Gito muttered incoherently, his leg stretched out straight and still. Stooping down, Peter snatched away the towel, took the blanket from the back of the sofa and spread it over the boy. “Now get some sleep,” he whispered, brushing the

hair from Gito's face. Freshly shampooed, the curls smelled clean, felt thick, fluffy. "Get some sleep."

eight

Peter jerked upright in bed, certain he had overslept and would be late for work. But as his head cleared he realized it was Saturday, and he slowly relaxed. Remembering Gito — and the massage — he felt panic returning. He hadn't meant to get the kid worked up! How was he to know Gito would react like that to a simple massage? But would the boy even remember? Worse, how was Peter to know if he remembered? The first moment of eye contact would tell the story — if Gito was still around. Peter would not have been surprised to find him gone.

He rolled out of bed, pulled on his clothes. Gito was already dressed in the living room, munching on an apple and watching TV.

“Morning!”

Chewing, the boy turned and lifted his head in mute greeting. He looked clean and neat in his newly laundered clothes; there was nothing else unusual about his appearance or manner.

“You feel O.K.?” Peter asked, casually walking into the kitchen for some juice.

“Sure,” Gito yelled back, his mouth stuffed. “Why?” Back from the kitchen Peter said, “You had a lot to drink last night.” He held up the empty bottle.

“That shit don't bother me.” Gito jutted out his chin. “I feel O.K.”

“Well, that's good.” Peter sat down, feeling a bit calmer. “You want to go somewhere today?”

The boy took a last bite of apple. “Like where?”

“What about the park?”

“What park, man?”

“The forest preserve, outside of town...”

Gito shrugged. “I ain't never been there.”

“Well, we should go.” Peter pointed to the boy's face. “How's your eye and cheek? They look a lot better.”

“They’re good,” Gito said, gnawing at the apple core. “What’s at the park, man?”

“Grass, sun, a beach, swimming, fishing...” Peter’s voice trailed off. The boy sat up straight. “You can fish and swim and stuff like that?”

“Sure. It looks warm today. But you can’t swim without trunks. We’ll have to get you some.”

“What about fishin’?”

“I have poles. All we’d need is bait. We can buy that at the park.”

“Could we fish today?” Gito asked.

“Sure we can.” Peter was able to breathe freely again. “And then maybe we can go swimmin’ sometime, too? I mean like later on, like maybe next week?”

Peter laughed. “You going to be here next week?”

“Shit, I can get out if you want!” the boy muttered, slouching back. “I can leave. It don’t matter.”

Peter laughed again. “Boy, you are the touchiest little punk I’ve ever know!” He tossed a pillow at Gito’s head. The youngster swatted it down, but smiled. “You can stay here as long as you want, but we’ll have to see about school.”

“School, shit!”

“Yes, school!” Peter picked up the pillow and playfully batted it against Gito’s head. He had learned by now to shrug off the boy’s surly asides. “But that’s next week. Right now we gotta get ready for the park.” He stood up and headed for the kitchen. “We should take lunch...”

Peter showed Gito how to put the worm on his hook, how to operate the reel, how to cast. Clumsy at first, the boy soon exhibited a certain flair for the sport, plying his fishing rod with a skillful energy. Though very impatient — seldom waiting for a bite before reeling in his bait and recasting — Gito never became bored. Just being at the lake — near the water and trees in the warm sunshine — seemed to exhilarate him. Never settling down, never resting, he roamed constantly from his pole to a nearby patch of woods, back to check his line, then off again to explore among the trees.

By noon they’d caught six small bluegills. The boy wanted to keep them all, regardless of size. “We’ll catch more later,” Peter reassured him after releasing the little fish. Too excited to remain downcast for more than a moment, Gito then strolled with Peter to a shady patch of trees behind the beach.

“You hungry?” Peter asked, sitting on the grass beneath a large oak.

“Yeah.” Gito fell to his knees. “Shit, I’m too hot!” He pulled off his jacket and tossed it onto the ground.

“I wondered when you were going to take that off.”

They ate in the shade, laughing at the antics of a blue jay and a squirrel. Peter loved being with the boy — loved the moist glimmer in his eyes, the excited bob of his head when he laughed, the huskiness of his giggle. He found himself wishing that the boy were his own son, that he had been able to raise him, teach him, love him. He imagined caring for Gito as a very young child — bathing him, changing him, wrestling and cuddling with him. But there was more — something he found harder to ignore. Even now, sober as a chaplain, he couldn’t stop dwelling on the massage of the previous night. Each detail remained precise, vivid: the rosy tint of the boy’s skin, the squirming hips, the hard, flexing cheeks of the butt. These images sprang from something deeper, darker than simple affection. Still, Peter refused to label his feelings. Did he really want Gito? This boy? True, he had never cared much for men his own age, finding their rough whiskers and sagging bellies and hairy chests extremely unpleasant. But did he want a boy? He couldn’t accept that. He was no pervert! He might be gay, but he wouldn’t stoop to molesting a child. Of course, he would never hurt Gito, no matter what. He wanted to protect him, to make him happy. And how could that be wrong? How could loving him possibly be wrong?

Gito wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “I’m gonna go back and fish some more.” He jumped up, grabbed his pole and bait, and loped off towards the beach.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Peter pushed himself to his feet. He cleaned up the bags and wrappers, then rejoined the boy.

Gito was much more subdued than earlier. After wandering off once to explore the beach, he settled down beside his pole to relax. Lying on his stomach, his feet raised back and clapping lightly together, he watched his line with a contented, peaceful gaze. His forehead was beaded with sweat; his black hair tossed in the warm breeze.

“You hot?” Peter asked.

“Yeah, a little.”

“Me too.” Peter took off his shirt.

The boy watched him, then sat up and pulled his own T-shirt over his head. “That’s better, man!” Cross-legged on the sandy bank, he leaned back

on his hands and lifted his face to the sun.

“It’s nice here,” Peter said.

“Yeah, man, the sun feels good.” Gito ran a hand up and down his ribs, prominent beneath taut skin.

“You already look tanned,” Peter remarked, eyeing the boy’s flesh — a smooth, pale brown made lustrous by sweat and sun.

Gito looked at his chest & arms. “You think I look bad?”

“Hell, no!” Peter said, startled by the question, and by the boy’s uncharacteristically meek tone. “You look fine. I wish I had skin like yours. It’s great.”

Gito looked down again, as though seeing himself for the first time. “My mama was a lot darker than me.” He turned his arm, inspecting it. “I’m real light, really.”

“You look fine.” Peter glanced at his line resting back in the water.

“I wish we had some wine.” Gito scratched at his belly. “Can we get some tonight?”

“I don’t know about that. I can’t keep getting you drunk.”

“It’s Saturday, man!”

“I don’t know...”

“Come on, man, don’t be such a fuckin’ drag.”

“Well, O.K... . but Monday we find out about school.” “Yeah, I guess,” Gito said, gazing out over the water. “I wish Chico was here. He likes wine.”

“Maybe he can visit sometime. What about your uncle? Does he know where you are?”

“No, he don’t know.” The sadness in his voice disturbed Peter. “It’d be neat if Chico could be with us.”

“We’ll work it out,” Peter said, eager to boost the boy’s spirit. “We’ll get some wine tonight, right?”

Gito glanced around, smiling again, his brief melancholy dispelled. “Yeah, man, that sounds good.” A warm puff of breeze ruffled the curls on his forehead.

Peter stared across the sofa at Gito. “We’ll have to get you more clothes.”

The boy poured the last wine into his glass and peered down at his T-shirt and jeans. “Yeah,” he mumbled, “that’ll be O.R. I don’t need much.” He held up the empty bottle. “We need the next one, man.”

Peter fetched the fourth bottle from the kitchen, nearly knocking over a lamp as he maneuvered unsteadily around the furniture. Gito laughed watching him. “You’re fucked up good, man!”

“Why do I do this to myself?” Peter moaned, smiling despite himself at the comical misery in his voice. He picked up a pillow and started swatting Gito’s head. “And it’s all your fault!” he yelled, face contorted in mock fury. “It’s all your fault, you little punk!”

The boy laughed so hard that he nearly choked. He grabbed ineffectually at the pillow, which Peter continued batting against his head. Finally, panting with exhaustion and still laughing, they both fell back.

“Drink up!” Peter handed Gito the new bottle.

“I thought you didn’t like gettin’ me drunk.”

“That was before. Now I don’t care.” In fact, remembering the massage, Peter wanted the boy drunk, letting his imagination linger on what might happen if Gito were to pass out again.

He drank his entire glass of wine in four quick gulps, feeling himself swirling deeper. The boy slouched beside him, legs stretched out straight, one hand clutching the wine bottle, the other curled in a loose fist on his thigh. Peter wanted to touch him so badly that his heart felt swollen, sore in his chest. Shit, maybe he was some kind of pervert after all. He wanted the boy, wanted him naked — and there was no denying it. If that made him weird, then goddammit, he was weird, and to hell with it! He was sick to death speculating and worrying about it.

He grabbed the bottle from Gito, feeling exhilarated, oddly defiant. Maybe he did want the boy. So what? Did that make him evil, sick? He filled his glass, handed the bottle back to Gito and downed half his wine in one gulp. But how had he deceived himself for so long? How had he mistaken his passion for simple altruism, fond curiosity, innocent affection? However he’d done it, there was no more disguising the truth. Draining his wine, staring at Gito, Peter smiled with joyful discovery; so he loved the boy: so be it. Facing the fact for the first time, he felt a bit disoriented, anxious, but he’d adjust. It might take a while, but he’d land on his feet.

“What you smilin’ at, man?” Gito asked, looking at Peter with his old suspicious glare.

“I like having you here.” Peter took the bottle and refilled his glass.

Nodding groggily, the boy reached for the wine. “Gimme some more,” he muttered, squinting his eyes nearly shut in an effort to focus on the bottle.

Peter felt uproariously drunk; until tonight, he would have been terrified, without quite knowing why, being so drunk, so near the boy. Now he felt only joy, delight, an exuberant energy. Tomorrow, very likely, he'd regret his recklessness, perhaps even feel disgust for his newfound passions; but none of that mattered now. Tomorrow, with its prospect of cool, dispassionate sobriety, could go hang itself.

"I'm gonna take a shower." Peter announced. "I stink like a fish." He stood up, pausing to steady himself, then started for the bedroom. "You take a shower, too!" he called over his shoulder. "You stink worse than I do."

Gito glanced around and nodded, then looked back at the TV.

Peter fetched his robe and crossed to the bathroom. He felt wildly bold, daring, indiscreet, as though his recent admission of desire for the boy were a drug more heady than wine. Leaving the door of the bathroom open, he removed his clothes, staring the entire time at the top of the boy's head, just visible above the back of the sofa. Still wearing undershorts, he turned on the water and adjusted its temperature. Facing the open door, he lowered his shorts. Although fearful the boy might turn and see him, Peter couldn't bring himself to shut the door. Staring at the back of the boy's head, he was almost paralyzed by the thrill of danger trembling in his arms and legs, tingling in his groin. He could see the TV beyond the sofa; but its sound was inaudible beneath the rushing of water. The tingling in his groin grew stronger. He felt himself become erect, slowly at first, then, his embarrassment heightening his excitement, very rapidly. Now he wanted Gito to turn and see him. Or so he thought. But when the boy's head moved slightly against the cushion, Peter panicked and rushed behind the safety of the shower curtain.

He showered quickly, turned off the water, peered out. Gito still had not moved. Peter emerged furtively and began drying himself on the same white towel the boy had used the night before. Still, he made no effort to close the door. Too drunk to reason clearly, he knew only that some sort of encounter with Gito was more likely with the door open, especially if the boy were to see him naked. Precisely why, he couldn't say; but perhaps, somehow, the boy would become excited, decide to take off his own clothes in imitation of Peter, as he'd removed his shirt at the beach. Besides, there was something madly titillating about standing naked so near the boy, even without his knowledge.

As Peter finished drying, he flirted with the notion of walking naked into the living room, but lost his courage at the last moment and put on his robe.

He crossed swiftly to the sofa and sat down. "I'm done," he said, reaching for the bottle. "Let me have some wine."

Gito looked slowly around, extended the bottle with a wavering hand. Seeing Peter seated next to him in nothing but a robe, he squinted, let his gaze wander up, down, up again.

"Go ahead, take your shower." Peter grabbed the wine, his erection concealed behind an upraised leg. "Then we can drink the last bottle."

"There's another bottle?" Gito got up, apparently too drunk to argue. "Shit, I forgot." He started for the bathroom, then turned around, swaying precariously. "What the fuck am I gonna wear, man?"

"Just use the towel for now," Peter called back. "We'll find you something later."

Nodding, Gito turned and stumbled into the bathroom, nudging at the door as he passed. It closed only partially, leaving a wide crack through which he remained visible. Facing away from Peter and moving very clumsily, he pulled the red T-shirt over his head, struggling to free his elbows. His hair flopped back over his ears in a long, curly mane. He threw the shirt onto the floor and unfastened his jeans. Trying to tug them off without removing his shoes, he lost his balance, stumbled backwards, sat down with a thump on the toilet. With the jeans pulled down to his knees, he yanked off his shoes and socks, then stood up again, letting his pants fall around his bare feet. From the side — wearing nothing but his tight underpants — the boy appeared as sharp and straight as a blade, his whole body a beautiful dusky rose. He stepped out of his jeans toward the bathtub, leaned down and turned on the water, his buttocks stretched round and taut beneath the white shorts. Straightening up, he stepped slightly to one side, concealing himself behind the bathroom door.

Peter moved across the couch, but still could see only part of Gito's body. He was about to get up and move closer when the boy slipped the underpants down his legs, dropped them to the floor, and stepped into the tub. Catching only a glimpse of the boy's ass before the curtain was drawn, Peter fell back on the sofa. Still battling a knot of fear, he guzzled from the wine bottle, took a breath, guzzled again, trying to reach a depth of sheer, blissful abandon.

The shower turned off. Peter peered into the bathroom. He heard the curtain pulled aside but the boy, apparently drying off behind the door, remained out of sight. Lifting the bottle, Peter gulped almost frantically until

it was drained. He tried to set it onto the table, knocked it over, tried again. He managed finally to line it up next to the three other empty bottles before collapsing back on the sofa, noticing vaguely through the blur that his erection had sagged. Then Gito emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a short yellow towel, sending Peter's erection back to full strength.

"I'm gonna need clothes," the boy muttered, his tone sulky, his words slightly slurred. He dropped onto the couch, holding the towel closed at the hip, then looked down toward his lap. "This fuckin' towel is too small, man."

"I'll find something for you." Peter rose from the sofa, turning to hide his erection. "I'll get the other bottle, too." He weaved to the bedroom, rummaged around until he came up with a T-shirt and some old cut-offs, then fetched the wine from the kitchen. Coming back into the living room, he succumbed to a marvelous, reckless giddiness, a defiant disregard for propriety, feeling as suddenly and utterly shameless as a three-year-old. Casting away all caution and modesty, he walked to the couch, making no effort to conceal the bulge beneath the robe, and tossed the T-shirt and shorts to Gito. "Try these."

The boy glanced around, his gaze settling quickly on the bulge. He smiled, amazed. "Fuck, man, you got a hard-on!" Peter laughed. So that was that! His fear of the boy's reaction had been as misplaced and unnecessary as everything else in his life. He sat down and handed Gito the bottle, wondering whether he should let his robe fall open.

"Why you got a hard-on, man?" the boy asked, his eyes nearly drooping shut, his head nodding groggily. "You like me, man?" The boy took a drink from the bottle, waiting for an answer from Peter, who had been startled into silence. "You like me?"

"Sure," Peter said finally. "'Course I like you."

"I figured you did 'cause you was feelin' me last night," the boy mumbled, then swigged again.

Peter, feeling a vestige of fear, managed a smile.

"You was feelin' me up good, man," Gito mumbled again. "I don't remember too much, but you was feelin' my ass, I know."

"You mad?"

The youngster shrugged, "ft don't bother me much." He wiped a dribble of wine from his chin. "It felt O.K. so it ain't no big deal." He looked at Peter, smiling — all dimples, white teeth, cocoa skin. "That's why you got a hard-on, man."

“I guess maybe it is,” Peter murmured, overwhelmed by the boy’s admission. He eyed Gito’s face, his chest, his belly, the yellow towel covering his hips. He wanted to open his robe and expose himself to the boy’s gaze; wanted even more to grab that skimpy yellow towel, pull it aside, bare the hidden thighs and genitals. But he still couldn’t be sure of Gito’s feelings, which made any move risky, potentially disastrous.

Then he remembered the magazine in his bedroom — an old issue of Playboy that he’d bought for its interview with Charles Bukowski. “I’ve got something for you,” he said, standing up and crossing the living room as hurriedly as his clumsiness would allow. He suppressed a twinge of guilt, feeling very much the wicked old seducer of an unwary child. But, then, Gito was hardly the picture of innocence; he had known about the massage, yet cared not a whit. With a little encouragement — a bit of stimulation — there was no telling what he might do. Peter, certainly, had no clear idea, but he wanted something to happen, and realized how catalytic a little pornography could be.

He returned quickly with the magazine and tossed it to Gito, then sat across the room to observe its effect. The boy took a sloppy drink, then letting go the towel, picked up the magazine. From his position across the room, Peter could see the flat brown hip unveiled as the towel slipped away.

“All right!” Gito mumbled, leafing through the pages. “Fuckin’ pussy, man.” His grin was more lopsided than usual, the dimple in his left cheek very deep.

Peter reached beneath his robe, hoping the boy would look up. “You like those pictures?”

“Yeah!” Gito flipped to the next page. Then, taking another drink, he lifted his eyes and saw Peter. His smile grew even wider. “Hey, check it out, man! You jackin’ off!”

Peter smiled back, nodding, exulting in a total surrender to impulse. He let the robe fall open, and stroked himself slowly beneath Gito’s gaze. The youngster giggled, shaking his head in joyous disbelief. “You jackin’ off!”

“Feels good!” Peter said, himself not believing what he was doing, but unable — unwilling — to stop.

Gito looked a bit flabbergasted, as well as delighted. He took another swig of wine, peered down at the magazine on his lap. Perhaps inspired by Peter’s example, he reached his free hand beneath the magazine and began rubbing himself through the towel. He continued to stare at the pictures, his

smile becoming more crooked, bleary, rapturous, the magazine rocking rapidly in his lap.

Still holding himself and feeling dizzy, Peter crossed to the sofa and sat down. Gito looked around at him and smiled, his nose crinkling, then returned to the pictures. The boy moved his hand onto his belly and down beneath the towel, which slipped a bit farther. Letting his hand slide slowly between his legs, he threw back his head, closed his eyes, moaned.

Almost blacking out, Peter jerked upright with a startled gasp. Trying desperately to focus, he looked at Gito. The boy was gnawing his bottom lip and grinding his hips. He had dislodged the magazine from his lap, leaving the towel loose atop his stroking hand as he rubbed himself more vigorously. Seemingly in agony, he opened his mouth, sucked in his belly very hard, hollow. Drawing his legs up, Gito propped the heel of each foot onto the edge of the couch and spread his knees.

Not touching himself, Peter ejaculated watching the boy, his semen shooting in a powerful arc onto the carpet at his feet. He could feel himself sinking much too deeply now. Able to hear, but not see, the boy's stroking hand, he wanted to yank aside the towel obstructing his view. But he couldn't; his limbs were too heavy; his eyes drooped closed. The last thing he saw before passing out was Gito — mouth open, knees spread wide — still rubbing in a frenzy between his legs.

Waking with a start, Peter stared at the clock. It slowly came into focus. Fifty-three. Dawn was pale rose outside the window. Still very drunk, he pushed himself up on the sofa and gripped his head between his hands. Groaning, he noticed the dark stain on the carpet. Christ, how was he going to clean that up?

He looked around and discovered Gito, still wrapped in the yellow towel, sleeping beside him. The boy was curled on his side, his back to Peter, his legs dangling off the couch. Slowly, Peter pushed his hand beneath the towel and began stroking the hard, smooth hip. With a long moan, the boy flexed his back catlike and looked over his shoulder with bleary, squinted eyes, then let his head drop back on to the cushion. Peter slid his hand down the boy's hip onto his buttocks and ran his forefinger back and forth in the snug little crack — moist and very warm. Gito moaned, "What the fuck you

doin'?" and rolled his hips. Peter ignored him — surprised by his own boldness — and cupped one cheek. He gave it a squeeze, feeling for the first time the firm plumpness of a boy's ass. "Roll over," he said, again gripping the youngster by the hip.

Gito resisted, pulling the towel more securely around his waist. "Fuck off!" He pushed himself up and staggered to the bathroom. The strong, tart aroma of semen wafted from the cushion where he had been sleeping.

Peter followed him to the bathroom. "You O.R., Gito?" he yelled in through the closed door.

"I got cum on me," the boy answered, sounding rather pitiful. There was a pause. Then the door opened. Wrapped in a long striped towel, Gito scuffled out. "Hey, man, you was jackin' off before." He stepped around Peter with a weak smile.

Peter smiled back. "And you were, too, little pal."

"Fuck, man," Gito said, shaking his head, "this is some nutty place you got here. I ain't never seen no grown-up heatin' off before neither."

"Does it bother you?" Peter asked, wondering just how far he might go.

Gito again shook his head, "Fuck, man, it don't bother me, not if you like it."

"If I like it?" Peter asked, not quite understanding. As they talked, he nudged the boy's shoulder, guiding him back to the couch.

"It's your joint, man. You can do whatever you want, and it's cool, you know? But I ain't never been nowhere like this." He glanced around at Peter. "You queer, ain't you man?"

Peter laughed. "Yeah, I am. But I don't go around jerking off in front of every boy I meet. Are you? Gay, I mean?"

"Shit no! I ain't no fuckin' fag."

"Jesus, that sounds terrible. I am, remember?"

"Oh, that's O.K. I don't care if you are, man. I always figured you was queer, anyway."

"You figured I was? How could you have known that?"

"You always be lookin' at me funny, so I knew you liked me. And like last night, when you was feelin' my ass... well I knew then, too. Anyway, man, you bein' queer is O.K."

"Well, good." Peter felt confused, fatigued, a bit numb. Never fond of discussing himself, he felt even less inclined now.

Gito stood up. "I need some clothes," he said, standing with one hip lolled to the side, the towel dangling to his knees.

"On the floor, by the couch." Peter pointed to the cut-offs and T-shirt.

Gito turned, picked up the clothes, then carried them to the bathroom and changed quickly. With an embarrassed frown, he returned to the living room. The shorts were much too large for him, riding low on his slim hips; one good shake would have sent them to the floor. The T-shirt, also too large, hung down to mid-thigh. "I look like an asshole," he said, staring down at himself.

"You look O.K." Peter smiled. "Come on, let's get back to sleep. We both need it." He looked at the dirty sofa. "You can sleep in my bed."

"With you?"

"It's a double bed," Peter assured him. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No, man... but I ain't no queer. I don't think we should do nothin' together."

"That's O.K., if that's the way you feel."

"I don't think we should do nothin'," the boy repeated, whether trying to convince himself or Peter was not clear.

"Anyway, you should sleep in the bed. The couch is dirty."

"Yeah, well, it's O.K. for now, I guess," the boy said walking to the bedroom.

Exhausted, Peter followed him.

nine

Before leaving for work on Monday, Peter revived the subject of Gito's schooling. Nothing had been said about it since Saturday night. Sleeping until past noon, they had spent a quiet, sleepy Sunday devoted to recuperation. But now, Peter wanted the matter settled. "I'll talk to the principal today about enrolling you," he said, gathering his books and papers. "Then we'll get in touch with Children and Family Services."

"I don't think so, man," Gito answered, still curled on his side in bed, the sheet pulled to his waist.

"What do you mean by that?" Peter turned around, faced the boy.

"I don't like school, and I don't like no fuckin' welfare workers neither. I went through all that shit when my mama died."

"You have to go to school, Gito. We already decided that. You agreed."

"That was before, man," the boy mumbled, rolling onto his back. His bare chest looked very dark against the white sheets. "But I changed my mind now. I ain't goin' nowhere. And if you try to push me around, I'll just split."

Flustered, Peter took a step towards the door, then stopped. "You've got to go to school! I can't let you stay here all day without going to school or reporting to the state. I could lose my goddamn job!"

"Then I'll split, man."

"No," Peter said, shaking his head, speaking softly. "You can't leave."

"Then I'll stay, but I ain't goin' to no school. And I want Chico to come here, too."

"What?"

"Chico can come here, too. I'll get him and bring him back." The boy touched below his eye, the skin still purple.

"Chico? How can he stay here?"

"I thought you said he could visit."

"I did," Peter almost shouted, "but he can't stay here!"

"Well, just for a while."

“Just for a while.” Peter sat down at the end of the bed. “What about your uncle? What if you run into him?”

“I won’t, man.” Gito tossed off the sheet and swung his legs to the floor, the cut-offs bagged almost comically around his hips. “I know how to stay away from him.”

“I must be nuts,” Peter mumbled.

The boy picked up the undershirt and pulled it on. “Shit, man, I don’t need no school anyway. It’s just a fuckin’ waste of time.”

“Oh, sure, you’ll do just fine the way you are.” He chuckled. “I feel like I’m being blackmailed, for Christ’s sake. I can’t believe it.”

“Shit, man, I ain’t doin’ no blackmail. I just be leavin’ if you come down on me, is all.”

“It’s the same thing.” Peter rose from the bed. “I’ll see you tonight, then.”

The boy smiled, already opening his plastic bag of grass. “Yeah, man, catch you later.”

• • •

Gito’s habits remained unchanged as the days passed. He spent almost all his time sprawled in front of the TV, smoking grass, snacking, studying the pictures in Playboy. Occasionally, he ventured outdoors in search of Chico — using an extra key Peter had given him — but always returned quickly, alone, to resume his customary position on the couch.

Peter allowed the boy his routine, treating him strictly as a houseguest, no longer worrying about his responsibilities as a surrogate parent. This decision made life easier, and more pleasant, for both of them. Peter did not, however, surrender interest in the more mundane details of Gito’s affairs, and, by the end of the boy’s second week in the apartment, had persuaded him to venture downtown for new clothes. At first, Gito maintained a show of cool indifference for the project. But soon, warmed by the attention — and money — lavished upon him, he became more enthusiastic, rushing up and down the department store aisles, rummaging eagerly through the racks of T-shirts and jeans and shorts. He changed his mind constantly, choosing and re-choosing the same shirt a dozen times before arriving at a decision.

He had already chosen two gaudily striped T-shirts, a new pair of jeans, a yellow tank top and gym shorts, and an armful of underwear and socks

when he spotted the swim trunks. “I gotta get some of those!”

Peter agreed. “Get something nice. You want to look good.”

Paying little attention to Peter, Gito smiled as his eyes fell upon a pair of scarlet briefs — no more than a glorified jockstrap on the mannequin. “Those are sharp,” he said, picking a pair off the rack. “Check it out, man! You dig these?” He held them up.

“You want to wear something like that?”

“Shit, they’re sharp!” Gito declared, holding them up. “I bet you like ‘em, don’t you?”

“Why do you think that?”

“You’d like to see me in these, I know.” The youngster had a sparkle in his eyes.

Peter said nothing. Since Saturday, he had been detecting something vaguely devilish in the boy’s attitude — comments, glances, poses that could be interpreted, with very little imagination, as gently flirtatious. Nothing overtly erotic; in fact, their relationship had become the very model of propriety. Although sleeping in the same bed, they never touched, never indulged in horseplay, never undressed in each other’s presence. Still, Peter couldn’t help wondering about the boy’s subtly coquettish behavior — and where it might be leading.

“Can I get ‘em?” Gito dangled the scanty trunks between thumb and forefinger.

“Sure, whatever you want.”

Strolling home, they discussed weekend plans, deciding finally — at Gito’s urging — on a trip to the beach. “I never been swimmin’ for real,” he said, clutching a bag of new clothes in each hand.

“It’s been a long time for me, too.” Jiggling the keys in his hand, Peter stepped past Gito to unlock the door of the apartment. “I hope it’s a nice day tomorrow.”

Though the day was a glorious dazzle of warm sun and surf, there were very few people on the beach. “It’s still too early in the year,” Peter remarked, spreading a blanket on the sand.

Gito shrugged. “That’s O.R., I don’t like lots of people.” He was wearing the yellow tank top and shorts over his swimming trunks. “So what

do I do, man?"

"Just go in the water when you're ready," Peter smiled. "You can undress here."

"What about you?"

"I don't care much for the water." Peter reclined on the blanket. "But you go ahead."

The boy tugged off his shirt, kicked off one shoe, then the other, peeled the canary yellow shorts slowly down his brown legs, stepped free. "How do I look?" he asked, posing in his skimpy red trunks.

"You look nice," Peter said, close enough to touch the boy's knee.

Gito glanced down at himself and tugged gently at the elastic, snug around his slender hips, then trotted off towards the water, his bottom only partially covered, the flesh of each cheek jiggling above and below the narrow band of red elastic.

"You little tease," Peter whispered, wondering how long he could keep his hands off the boy, convinced he was being tested. But what was Gito's game? Was he asking to be taken, or merely indulging in a bit of coy mockery?

The day passed in a gently drifting montage of breaking surf, warm breeze, vivid blue sky. Gito spent almost all the time frolicking in the water, jogging back to the blanket only occasionally to catch his breath and lounge briefly in the hot sun.

By afternoon, even his enormous energy was spent. He returned puffing to the blanket after a final romp in the surf, water streaming in silvery sparkles from his tangled hair, down his chest, his arms, his legs. He flopped onto his back beside Peter, spread-eagling in total surrender to exhaustion. "That was great! I ain't never had a better time." He rolled his head to one side and looked at Peter. "What about you, man? You have a good time just sittin' here?"

"I don't mind." Peter smiled. "I like to watch you."

"Cause you think I look nice?" Beads of water sparkled on the boy's cheek; strands of black hair plastered his forehead.

"You know that."

Two children, appearing as tiny, darting silhouettes against the bright surf, were shouting far up the beach. From the other direction, a young woman and her little girl slowly approached. Otherwise, the beach was deserted.

The boy pushed himself up and sat cross-legged facing Peter. Picking up his shirt, he reached into the little pocket and pulled out two joints & a book of matches. He held them out in his palm. “The smoke that satisfies,” he said with a smug grin.

“You gonna smoke here?”

Gito glanced over each shoulder. “Shit, man, there ain’t nobody around ’cept them two,” gesturing towards the woman and her daughter, who had settled themselves thirty or forty feet away down the beach, very near the water. “And they ain’t gonna see nothin’.” He set one joint next to him on the blanket, put the other between his lips, lit it. “You sure you don’t want none, man?” He offered it to Peter after taking a hit.

“Yeah, I’m sure... Where the hell do you keep getting that stuff, anyway?”

“I got friends.” Gito sucked in again. He lifted his head slightly, holding his breath, then exhaled in a soft hiss. “I can get other shit, too. Like acid.”

“Where do you get the money?” Peter asked, suspecting the answer, recalling Gito’s history of petty thievery.

“I get by.” The boy took another hit; the blackened end of the joint glowed orange.

“Well, just be careful.”

“Don’t worry, man, I ain’t gonna get you in no trouble,” Gito mumbled, trying to hold in the smoke as he spoke. A bit of ash dropped onto his stomach. He jerked, and swatted it off.

“Just be careful, anyway.”

“I think I know where Chico is,” Gito remarked.

“With your uncle?”

“No, I couldn’t find him there.” The youngster toked again. “But I think I can find him.” He looked at Peter and continued in an odd crooning voice. “You’ll dig him, man.”

“Is he your age?” Peter asked, unsure how to interpret the boy’s tone.

“Just about.” After a final hit, he extinguished the roach in the sand, then picked up the second joint. His upraised leg lolled to one side, stretching the elastic more tightly across his crotch, creating a firm little bulge. Usually modest about revealing himself, the boy seemed not at all bashful now — as long as the swim suit hid just enough. “His mama was from Mexico,” he continued. “She was my daddy’s sister.”

“What about his father?”

“He’s just some white dude, about like you.” The boy sucked deeply at the second joint, holding his breath so tightly a tiny squeak escaped his throat.

“Well, I’ll be glad to meet him,” Peter said. He could feel the sting of sunburn on the bridge of his nose. Gito’s face, too, now had a ruddy glow.

“I’m getting’ really stoned, man,” the youngster mumbled huskily, thick-tongued. His eyes were watery, unfocused. He took another deep hit, exhaled through his nose. “This stuff... this is good. It’s really dynamite shit, you know?”

“I’m glad you like it,” Peter said, amused by Gito’s bleary expression. The boy leaned back against one elbow, his bent leg sprawling farther to the side, nearly touching the blanket. “Grass always made me horny,” Peter commented, staring between the boy’s legs.

“Yeah?” Gito said, blowing out another stream of smoke. “You ever fuck chicks?”

“Oh, sure, I’ve tried that. Many times.”

“And guys, too?”

“No, I’ve never had sex with a guy.”

Gito laughed softly. “You queer and you never fucked no guy?”

“That’s right. I’m a coward. I’ve never done anything I’ve really wanted to do.”

“What about last week when you was jackin’ off?”

There had been no mention of that night until now. Confronted with his indiscretion, Peter felt an uncomfortable rush of blood to his face. “I’ve never done anything like that before. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I wish I had a chick to ball right now,” Gito smiled, gripping the roach carefully between his fingertips. He took a noisy hit, then placed his free hand on his crotch. “Grass makes me horny too, man.”

“I bet the girls are nuts about you, huh?” Peter watched the boy’s hand.

“Yeah, I do O.K.” Gito sucked at the final tiny bit of roach, then ground it into the sand. “Shit, man, I’m gettin’ a hard-on.” He let his hand slide in slow circles between his legs. “I feel like I’m gonna bust.” His moist, bloodshot eyes were nearly shut, his body beginning to rock on the blanket.

Peter glanced around at the woman and her daughter seated nearby. “Take it easy,” he muttered, “you’ll get us arrested.”

“It’s O.K.,” Gito murmured, making no attempt to restrain himself, his hand rubbing faster. “It’s O.K.”

The little girl, playing in the sand, ventured too close for Peter's comfort. He scrambled across the blanket and seated himself beside Gito, whose head was thrown back, his mouth open, his curly black hair stirring softly around his ears. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked, nudging the boy's arm.

Gito opened his eyes and looked around. "I can't help it, man, I'm too fuckin' horny," still massaging himself, but more slowly. "I'm really stoned, man." He gave a sudden, crooked grin. "You wanna do it?"

Peter glanced over his shoulder, then back at the boy. "Do what? We can't do anything here."

"Shit, man, go ahead and touch it," Gito mumbled, tilting his hips, offering Peter his crotch. "You can touch it if you want."

Peter glanced around again. The little girl was squatting in the sand, building a crude castle. "I can't do that here," he hissed. "You're going to get me thrown into jail, for Christ's sake!"

"Just do it for a second," Gito pleaded, hand clasped between his legs, thumb rubbing across a rounded bulge beneath the red elastic. "Just for a second, man."

"I shouldn't do this here." Peter tried to suppress his panic. He stared down at the boy's bare thighs — smooth, tawny, powdered with dried salt. "This is crazy." He reached between the boy's legs.

Gito tipped his hips higher, thrusting them against Peter's hand. "Go ahead," he muttered, closing his eyes.

"We can't do anything here," Peter droned, his stomach aching with fear, excitement, desire. He pressed his palm flat, feeling Gito's erection like a hard, straight finger beneath the cool elastic. Pushing down more firmly, he began a slow massage between the boy's legs. "That O.K.?"

"Shit, yeah!" Gito moaned, rolling his hips, digging at the blanket with his fingers.

Casting another glance over his shoulder, Peter discovered the girl's gaze upon them. "We have to stop," he whispered. "The little girl's watching."

"Just another second," Gito whined, rubbing a hand across his own breast, twisting his hips more vigorously.

Peter was unable to stop his hand. He gripped the thin shaft through the elastic and stroked back and forth across its stiff length. Still grinding his ass

against the blanket, Gito started shaking his head. "Don't do it no more." He pulled away from Peter's grasp. "Cut it out!"

Peter released him. "What's wrong?" he asked, alarmed, totally bewildered.

The boy, panting, hugged his knees to his chest. "I ain't no fuckin' queer," he said, attempting to catch his breath. "I just don't want you to do no more, is all. So just fuck off!"

"You asked me!" Peter said, trying to keep his voice lowered, all the old terrors of child molestation returning.

"Just forget about it, man," Gito said, staring at his feet. "It ain't no big deal. I just ain't no faggot, O.K.? So forget it."

"We'd better go," Peter said, dangerously close to losing his temper. He looked around, struggling against anger, fear, confusion. The girl was once more playing with the sand castle. "Come on, Gito, let's go." He stood up and gathered the blanket and towels, then strode up the beach, leaving the boy to follow.

Peter's fear passed as he drove home, leaving only his anger. He didn't like being used, or taken for a fool, especially by someone he cared about as much as the boy. Of course, he had set himself up, playing along with Gito's every whim, letting him drink and smoke as he pleased, indulging his exhibitionism on the beach. How inexcusably foolish he'd been, allowing the boy to maneuver him like that.

Gito was very quiet, clearly aware of Peter's displeasure. Apparently there was a limit to even his effrontery. Huddled against the car door, gazing silently out the window, he seemed properly abashed. "I guess I gotta leave now, huh?" he asked finally, his voice soft, as though he might have been crying.

"Why should you have to leave?" Peter responded, touched by the boy's pitiful tone, almost guilty now for his anger.

"Cause you're pissed at me for doin' what I done."

"Well, I guess I am... but I'm not going to throw you out because of that." The boy did not turn, or answer. "But you have to tell me what you're trying to do, Gito. I feel like you're really playing games with me."

“I ain’t tryin’ to do nothin’ bad,” Gito replied, his fingers fidgeting in his lap.

Peter waited, said nothing.

“Ain’t nobody ever said I looked nice before, ’cept you,” the boy continued, lowering his eyes and staring at his lap. “It kinda made me feel good, you know? But sometimes it’s kinda scary, too. Shit, man, I don’t know how to say it. I’m still too fuckin’ stoned.”

“I understand. You said it just fine. Now get some sleep until we get home.”

Already breathing evenly through parted lips, Gito slumped heavily against the door. Keeping his eyes on the road, Peter laid his hand on the boy’s smooth leg and slowly stroked it from knee to hip, back and forth. “I wonder if you like me at all,” he whispered, letting his hand linger on the thigh as he drove, needing the comfort of the boy’s warmth — and feeling suddenly very lonely.

ten

Peter returned from work on Tuesday carrying a white deli bag, wondering as he unlocked the door whether Gito would like mortadella — after all, it was just bologna with a kick. The kid could pass for Sicilian; maybe he'd have a taste for Italian food, too.

He shut the door behind him and looked around — Gito was not there. Suppressing a flash of panic, Peter set down the bag and crossed to the bedroom — empty. The boy's clothes were still thrown on the chair; he wouldn't have run off and left them behind. Most likely he was still out looking for Chico, or buying more grass. Still, Peter could not entirely dispel his uneasiness at the boy's absence.

He didn't have to wait long. Putting the mortadella in the refrigerator, he heard the key rattle in the lock, then Gito's voice. About to respond, he heard a second voice, also a boy's, softer than Gito's, not as rapid and brash. He hurried to the living room and found Gito wearing his yellow tank top and jeans, showing the apartment to a strange youngster.

"This is Chico." Gito looked a bit nervous.

"Welcome." Peter introduced himself, and shook the boy's hand.

Chico smiled back, revealing a slight gap between his front teeth. His face was a lustrous golden brown, with the small chin and round cheeks of a cupid. "I'm not gonna stay too long," he said, averting his eyes, his voice shy, gentle.

"That's O.K.," Peter laughed. "Relax. Sit down. I'm glad Gito found you."

Chico's blond hair, a deep butterscotch, was much shorter than Gito's, and more loosely curled, with rich glints of gold. "Yeah, thanks."

"You guys hungry?"

"Yeah, man, we're starved," Gito said. Chico followed him to the couch.

Peter made sandwiches with mortadella. To his delight, both youngsters seemed to enjoy it. Gito talked excitedly throughout the lunch, but Chico said little — typical, Peter suspected, of this boy with the big sad eyes.

“Chico’s gotta go,” Gito said, finishing the last of the sandwiches.

“Yeah, I do gotta go now,” Chico agreed, getting up from the couch. “Thanks for the food and stuff.”

“You can stay longer if you want.” Peter followed the boys to the door. He couldn’t help noticing, as he walked behind them, how differently they were built. Chico was the more rugged of the two — no taller than Gito, but heavier, stronger in the hips, with sturdy, sloping shoulders. Though still very much a child — blessed with all the slim, supple beauty of youth — his figure hinted at future muscularity. Peter could see in him the nascent power of a wrestler, a boxer, a sprinter. Gito, a very different specimen indeed, appeared delicate beside him — more of a soccer player, perhaps, with a lean, graceful body designed for endurance and fluid speed.

“No, thanks,” Chico said, opening the door to let himself out. “I really gotta go.”

“Are you going to come again?”

Chico shrugged, staring at his feet. “If I can.”

“Is it O.K. for him to come back?” Gito asked.

“Sure.” Peter looked at Chico. “You’re welcome anytime. And if there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Chico glanced up, apparently to confirm Peter’s sincerity.

When the boy had gone, Gito walked back to the sofa, a bit uneasy, his confidence still shaken after Saturday’s incident at the beach.

“He’s a nice kid,” Peter said, not sure how to take Chico’s visit.

“Yeah, I found him today.”

“Why couldn’t he stay any longer?”

“He’s got shit to sell.”

Peter sat down beside the boy. “You guys are really into drugs, aren’t you?”

“I got some acid,” Gito remarked, mumbling almost inaudibly, wary of Peter’s reaction. “Chico scored some for me. It gets you really wired, man.”

Peter didn’t attempt to hide his displeasure. “You are really going to mess yourself up, Gito,” he said. “But I went through the same stuff when I was in college, so I won’t try to stop you. Just be careful.”

“I can handle it, man!” Gito said, his old pugnacity flaring up.

Peter smiled. “Well, mean old Gito’s back!” He grabbed the boy’s shoulder and gave it a playful shake. “Just be careful, dammit!”

• • •

Peter came home every evening expecting to find Gito either in a daze or a frenzy, already high on acid. But the boy apparently was saving it for a special occasion, indulging only in grass. Coming home Friday and once more finding Gito in his customary slouch in front of the TV, Peter allowed himself a sigh of relief, grateful the boy was not indisposed for the night. “I’ve got someone I’d like you to meet tonight,” he announced.

Gito sat up straight, very much surprised, not at all pleased. “Meet who, man?”

“My brother and his family. I’d like you to meet some new people.”

“Shit, man, I ain’t no good at that kinda crap.”

“Come on,” Peter said, his tone firm but gentle. “Put on a clean shirt and pants. I want to get going as soon as possible.”

Wearing his old red T-shirt and jeans, Gito stood up and started grudgingly for the bedroom. “I’ll put on another shirt, man, but I ain’t gonna change my pants, too.”

“It’s a deal,” Peter said, glad for that much cooperation. “Don’t worry, you’ll have a good time.”

In the car, Gito’s nervousness increased; Peter had never seen him so agitated. “I shouldn’t never have done this, man,” the boy muttered, his fingers drumming on the arm rest. “I don’t like lots of people. Fuck, I hate this!”

“Relax... you’ll like Tony and his family. I don’t like a lot of people either, but Tony is O.R. Everything will be fine.”

The boy was warmly welcomed into Tony’s home — a handsome old two-story house, its screened front porch littered with all the artifacts of a young family: a sewing basket sitting open on its wicker stand; a card table strewn with the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; a child’s tricycle; a pair of boy’s tennis shoes and socks; an old Zenith radio; a collection of seashells spread across the window ledges; two green wicker chairs; and, of course, a swing. The comfortable clutter seemed to relax Gito, who flashed his familiar cocky grin as he was introduced to the family: Tony — bearded and barrel-chested, burly as an operatic baritone; Lydia — small, dark, vigorously cheerful; Gary and Dennis, their twin sons, wide-eyed with floppy brown hair and dark, narrow faces.

After introductions, there was a confused scramble as the twins bolted upstairs, Lydia rushed off to the kitchen, and Tony brought out wine, bellowing good cheer. “Now you fellas take a glass,” he yelled. “Get a glass! Drink up! This is a special occasion. Come on, Gito, you have a little wine, too.” He toasted his young guest, then kept the talk and the laughter flowing until Lydia gathered the family for dinner.

Gito seemed overwhelmed as first two platters of antipasto, then a bowl of spaghetti with tuna sauce, were brought to the table, followed by salad, followed by roast chicken and a spinach-mushroom casserole — each dish in turn perfuming the dining room with garlic, olive oil, oregano, rosemary. Watching the boy’s face alternate between joy and astonishment as the meal progressed, Peter couldn’t have been more pleased.

After dinner, Gito was sent upstairs — much to his discomfort — with the twins. Peter stayed downstairs with Tony and Lydia, trying to answer their questions about the boy. Tony, especially, seemed perplexed. “How long is the kid stayin’ with you?” he asked, stroking his beard, idly swirling the spoon in his coffee.

“I don’t really know,” Peter shrugged. “Things are sort of up in the air.”

“And he doesn’t go to school?” Tony sounded more and more puzzled.

“Well, not right now, but he will. He needs some time to rest up and recuperate.”

“He got beat up pretty bad, huh?”

“Yeah, you can still see a bruise around his eye. He’ll be O.R. He needs time.”

Peter wished he could reveal the whole story to Tony and Lydia. But he had never found the courage to tell them of his homosexuality. He sometimes wondered if they suspected — even hoped they might — but his various relationships with women had apparently thrown them off the scent. How would they respond to his feelings for Gito? Perhaps be shocked, disturbed, offended. Perhaps not. But he couldn’t risk finding out.

After a bit more discussion — and several Stregas — it was decided that Peter and Gito should spend the night. The boy didn’t seem pleased when Peter gave him the news. “Where the fuck am I gonna sleep, man?” he grumbled. The twins giggled.

“Hey, watch the swearing while you’re here.” Peter lowered his voice. “You can sleep here with the twins.”

“With them little kids?”

“I’ll be down the hall in my old room,” Peter said, ignoring the question. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

“Yeah,” Gito muttered, “it was O.K.”

“Come on.” Peter nudged the boy’s arm. “Admit you had a good time.”

“It was O.K.,” Gito repeated, “but I don’t like hangin’ around with little kids.” He sputtered, “I’d rather be with you!”

Peter smiled. “I’d rather be with you, too,” he whispered. “Listen, we’ll do something tomorrow after we leave here, just the two of us. O.K.?”

“Yeah, I guess so... but I ain’t no little kid you can just fuck around with!”

The twins giggled again. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Gito.” Peter turned away before the boy could say anything else embarrassing. He kissed his nephews good-night, wishing their lips were Gito’s.

• • •

Awakened by a knock at the door, Peter checked his clock: almost midnight. He swung himself out of bed. One of the twins — Gary, he thought — stood in the hallway, very upset.

“Uncle Peter, you gotta come quick ’cause that boy you brought is actin’ real funny.”

Peter hurried past Gary into the bedroom. Gito was sitting fully clothed on one bed, sweating and shivering as though with fever. Peter knew at once what had happened. “You take that acid?” he whispered into Gito’s ear.

Gito looked around with a jerk, his eyes round and startled. “I gotta pee,” he said, staring like a blind man at Peter’s face. “I gotta pee.”

“O.K., come on.” Peter lifted the boy by the arm. “You kids go back to sleep. Everything is O.K.”

“Is that boy sick?” one twin asked, crawling beneath the covers.

“Yeah,” Peter said, trying to keep his voice low, terrified that he might awaken Tony and Lydia. “But he’ll be all right now. He’ll sleep in my room.” He led Gito down the hallway to the bathroom. “Go on, I’ll wait here.”

He stood outside the door, listening to the boy’s urine streaming into the toilet, hoping the twins had not seen or heard or understood too much of what had happened. But why had Gito dropped acid now, after everything had gone so well? Unless he had deliberately meant to disrupt the household,

and — in the process — upset Peter. If that had been his plan, he had succeeded splendidly.

The door opened. Looking drawn and sweaty, Gito stepped out hesitantly. “Shit, man,” he murmured, desperation gripping his voice. “Shit!”

“What kind of acid was it?” Peter asked, leading the boy into his bedroom.

“Windowpane,” Gito nearly gasped.

“Terrific” Peter sat the boy down. “Now what the hell am I supposed to do with you?”

Slumped and trembling like a victim of severe shock, Gito did not look up, did not speak, did not respond in any way.

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth,” Peter said, massaging the side of his head, fighting off a headache.

The boy looked up, his face suddenly very red, tears welling in his eyes. He murmured something Peter could not understand, then curled onto his side — still crying, still trembling — on the bed. Peter sat beside him and put a hand on Gito’s hip. “I’m sorry, pal. That was a lousy thing to say. Just settle down. Can you sleep?”

Gito shook his head, curled himself more tightly.

“Well, just relax,” Peter said, petting the boy’s hip. “You’ll start to come down in a few hours. Nothing can hurt you here. You’re O.K. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Gito’s teeth began to chatter. Peter moved closer. “It’s O.K. now,” he crooned, petting the boy’s hair. “I won’t leave you.” He moved his hand down to the boy’s neck, massaging the tough, slender muscles.

Gito turned onto his belly, buried his face in the pillow, groaned. Peter continued massaging his neck and shoulders. “You’re all right. Just relax. You’re O.K.” He worked his hands down the back, onto the boy’s behind. Gito groaned again. Peter massaged the buttocks through the denim. “I know you like this.” He squeezed with both hands. “I just want to make you feel a little better. Is that O.K.?”

Gito mumbled into the pillow, then turned his head. “Yeah,” he breathed, his eyes clamped shut, face tense. “Go ahead.” He clawed at the pillow. “Go ahead.”

“I won’t hurt you. I promise I won’t hurt you. I just want to make you feel better.” Peter slid his hand beneath Gito’s hip.

The boy's eyes sprang open. "I don't think you should do that, man! You shouldn't mess with my cock. I ain't queer."

"It's O.K.," Peter said, unfastening the cold little copper button on Gito's pants. "Everything is fine." He gripped the zipper and pulled it open with a soft rasp. "Lift your butt," he murmured, groping inside the boy's jeans, letting his hand come to rest on the soft penis.

Gito grunted and raised his hips. "This ain't right," he moaned, twisting at the pillow, his eyes once more clamped tight. "I ain't queer, man!"

Ignoring him, Peter gripped the boy's penis between his thumb and forefinger and gently jiggled it. It began to stiffen. "Is that good?" he asked, teasing it to full length. The boy nodded, squirming his ass. "You feel so nice," Peter said, the boy's penis rigid between his fingers. He spread his hand flat and cupped the testicles, hard as pebbles against his palm. Gito began flexing his hips, sliding his moist, bone-stiff erection across Peter's hand. Whining softly, he spread his knees and pumped faster. "I think it's gonna come out," he groaned, his face turned to one side, contorted in seeming agony.

"Not yet!" Peter almost cried, fumbling in his pocket for a handkerchief. Then he froze. Someone was tapping at the door. "Don't worry, it's all right," he whispered, pulling his hand from beneath Gito. He hurried across the room and opened the door.

Tony, disheveled, was in the hallway. "Everything O.K. in there?" he asked, very sleepy. He glanced around Peter at the boy on the bed. "He O.K.?"

"Gito just felt a little sick. I think he ate too much."

Tony rubbed his fingers through his hair. "I heard you when I was takin' a leak, so I thought I'd check things out. See you tomorrow, Pete." He turned and plodded down the hall, still slowly rubbing his hair.

Peter closed the door and walked back to the bed. "It's O.K."

"What's wrong?" Gito asked, almost whining, shivering more violently.

"Nothing," Peter whispered, petting the youngster's back through the sweaty T-shirt. "Everything's just fine now. Do you feel O.K.?"

Still trembling, his jaw working as he ground his teeth, Gito nodded, but said nothing.

"I want to see you before we finish." Peter grasped the boy's hip. "Turn over."

“No, man, don’t look at me!”

Peter rolled Gito onto his back. “Let me see you, please,” reaching for the boy’s open fly.

Gito shook his head. “Sorry, but I can’t cum now.” He quickly refastened his jeans.

“Then at least do this.” Peter grabbed hold of his own erection, tearing off his pajama bottoms.

Gito whimpered. “Don’t hurt me, man.”

“I won’t hurt you,” Peter said, stroking himself. “I won’t, I promise.” He climbed onto the bed, straddled the boy’s hips with his knees. “Do this for me, please.” He grabbed one of Gito’s hands and brought it to his erection. He could feel the boy shivering beneath him. “Do this for me,” he murmured again, placing the young fingers around his penis, sliding them up and down. Slowly at first, then faster, Gito began to pump by himself. His own hand no longer needed, Peter released his grip, leaned forward, touched the boy’s cheek with his lips. “You’re my baby,” he whispered, kissing the warm ear, damp with sweat. The fist around his penis stroked faster, drawing up sap. He gripped Gito’s head with both hands and pressed his lips greedily against the moist young mouth — then felt semen gushing out of him. The boy grunted as it splashed against his chest.

Peter lay exhausted for a moment, then rolled off Gito. “Are you sleepy yet?” he asked, cleaning the boy with his handkerchief.

“Now I’m queer,” Gito groaned between chattering teeth, starting to cry. “Now I’m a fuckin’ faggot.”

“You’re just Gito,” Peter whispered, kissing the youngster’s cheek, tasting the salty tears. “You’re a good, beautiful kid.” He took the boy in his arms and held him close in the darkness.

Tony had been behaving oddly all morning. He finally took Peter aside after breakfast. “I don’t want that kid around here anymore,” he muttered, stroking his beard.

“What happened?” Peter asked, trying to sound calm.

Tony lowered his voice even further. “That kid took something last night. I don’t know what. He tried to give it to the twins. Damn! Can you

imagine that? What kind of little prick is he, anyway? I don't want him around here anymore, that's all."

"They told you that?"

"Yeah, they told me. Where's your friend, anyway — in bed? What did he take? Acid? Speed?"

"I'm not sure. I'll get him up, and we'll go." He paused and looked at his brother. "I'm really sorry, Tony. I didn't know about the twins."

"I know you didn't, Pete. It's not your fault. It's the kid. He's got problems, I know, but he'll have to work 'em out somewhere else, away from my boys."

"I'll get him. Sorry." He rushed upstairs. Still fully dressed, Gito was curled atop the sheets, his hair spilled in dark ringlets upon the pillow. Peter called him, then poked his shoulder. The boy gasped, rolled onto his back, opened his eyes.

"We have to go, Gito."

The boy closed his eyes, then blinked at the bright sunlight. "What's goin' on, man?" he asked, still a bit dazed.

"My brother found out about the acid. We've gotta go. Get up."

Remembering everything in a rush, Gito threw his arm over his face and groaned, "Oh, fuck, what I do last night? Shit!"

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get going. Come on, get up."

"I feel terrible." Gito peeked out from under his arm. "I feel shitty."

"You'll feel better after we get home."

Gito slept on the couch that night. Peter wasn't surprised at his decision. "Are you afraid of me now?" he asked, watching the boy from the doorway of his bedroom.

"No, man." Gito pulled the blanket over his body. "I ain't afraid of you. But I feel funny sleepin' with you. I keep tellin' you I ain't no queer." He turned onto one side and shut his eyes.

Peter wandered back into the bedroom. No doubt the boy was telling the truth. Like any young adolescent, he was pliable, curious, fond of sexual experimentation — but he almost certainly wasn't gay. Of course, that didn't preclude further contact between them. But it did kill the joy within Peter,

hopeful until now that his desire might be reciprocated. As always, he had hoped for too much.

eleven

Like an incompatibly married couple resigned to each other's company, Peter and Gito continued to coexist uneasily from day to day. No more was said about the night at Tony's, but the tension lingered, straining the relationship, making each day an exercise in sullen tolerance. Peter often tried to reach the boy — to tap some source of warmth or enthusiasm within — but Gito had withdrawn, becoming once again the surly, uncommunicative kid who'd sauntered into the Figaro weeks before. There was no trace of anger or malice, just coolness, a glum detachment, as if, through fear or confusion or distaste, he'd shut a part of himself off from Peter. It seemed likely that his days in the apartment were numbered; he appeared bored, restless, ready to move on.

Fearful of this possibility, by week's end Peter resorted to an already proven ally: pornography. Making a special trip to Dave's Adult Bookstore before coming home on Friday, he bought a selection of explicit magazines, straight and gay, for the boy's delectation. He felt seamy about the whole affair — and knew in the long run it would solve no problems — but he could think of no more effective way of piquing Gito's interest. And the boy did brighten up considerably as he leafed through the pages. "This is O.K., man," he said, turning one girlie magazine to study its centerfold. "Why'd you buy this stuff?"

"I knew you liked them."

Gito picked up a gay magazine. He flipped through its pages, smiling. "This shit is crazy," he muttered. "But f don't dig guys suckin' cock." With an embarrassed giggle, he tossed the magazine aside and resumed his perusal of the naked girls.

Feeling just a flicker of disappointment, Peter watched from across the room, pleased to see Gito excited again. "Have you seen Chico lately?" he asked, eager to make conversation with the youngster after days of gloomy silence.

“He got in trouble for sellin’ dope, but he’s O.R. now. He’s stayin’ with his aunt, I think. You want I should bring him here?”

“Would he like to come?”

“Sure, he liked it here.”

“Why hasn’t he been back, then? Why haven’t you brought him?”

“I just been feelin’ kinda weird, is all. I didn’t want nobody else around.”

“And you’ve been thinking about leaving, too, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Ain’t no real reason to stick around here no more.”

“This could be your home, Gito, if you’d like it to be. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” the boy said, staring with embarrassed intensity at the magazine in his lap. “I know that. You’re an O.K. dude and everything, but I can’t stay here forever and go to school and stuff. I just can’t do that crap.”

“I hope you’re not afraid I’m going to keep bothering you — like at Tony’s. I’m not some kind of sex fiend. I mean I don’t go around seducing little boys all the time, believe me. But I really thought you wanted me to do what I did the other night.”

Gito shrugged. “It ain’t that, really. I didn’t mind what you did, but it just ain’t right all the time.”

“What about the beach?” Peter asked, struggling against hurt feelings.

“I was stoned,” Gito said, his voice quiet, uncertain.

“Is that all? Is that all there is to it?”

“Just ’cause I like you and mess around sometimes don’t make me queer!” the boy cried out. “That’s what’s wrong with you, man! Just ’cause I like you, you wanna make me a fag like you!” Dropping the magazines on the floor, he sprang from the couch and hurried out, leaving Peter alone in the apartment, too flustered to react in any way.

Peter awoke early Saturday, hopeful Gito might have returned during the night. But the living room was empty. For the first morning in a month, there was no sound of the boy’s voice, no sign of his curly head resting against the back of the couch. Listening to the dead hum of silence, Peter shuffled to the kitchen. He poured a glass of orange juice, brought out the vodka — untouched for weeks — and mixed some in. A young voice shouted from the

street below. Peter froze, listened a moment, then walked to the living room, sipping his drink. He sat down and stared at the blank TV screen.

He had finished his first juice and vodka, and was standing up to fix himself another, when he heard footsteps in the hallway. The light tread stopped outside the door; there was a muffled exchange of words, a giggle; a key clattered within the lock. Sitting back quickly onto the couch, Peter tried to appear calmly indifferent as the door opened: Gito and Chico.

“Where did you guys come from?”

Gito grinned as if he'd been gone only a moment. “I found Chico,” he said, throwing himself beside Peter on the sofa. “We found some speed and some shit to drink.” He held up a large bottle of port, already half empty.

“You found this stuff?” Peter laughed, a bit giddy with relief at the boy's return. “And you're speeding now, too?”

“Just a little.” Gito appeared pallid and frazzled, but very cheerful. “We been up a long time.”

Peter looked around at Chico standing bashfully by the door, a paper bag clutched in his hand. “Come on over, pal!”

Grinning, Chico set the bag onto the floor, ambled to the couch and sat between Peter and Gito. “I'm really buzzin',” he said in a sheepish, gently amused voice. He accepted the wine from Gito and took a long drink.

“It's a little early for a party.” Peter took the bottle as it was passed to him. “But I guess this is a special occasion.” He winced at the strong, unpleasantly sweet taste, then handed the bottle back to Chico. “How long can you stay?”

“I guess it don't really matter too much.” The boy shrugged, took a sip of wine before passing it back to Gito. “I kinda got thrown outta the place I was stayin' at.”

“So you don't have any place to stay?”

“Not right now.”

“He wants to stay here,” Gito interjected, slouched at the far end of the couch, sipping from the bottle.

“If it's O.K.,” Chico said. “Just for a while.”

“Yeah, it's O.K.,” Peter assured him, wondering suddenly how many more vagabond youngsters were roaming the city. He was sitting very close to Chico — close enough to feel the warmth of his body, smell the tang of his sweat, see the golden fuzz on his slender, bare arm. The boy wore tennis shoes but no socks; a faded pair of jeans frayed at the knees; a button-down

shortsleeved white shirt, its collar twisted under in back. His bare ankles were dirty; his dark blond hair, though short, was a mess of tousled curls, badly in need of brushing. “Did you bring anything else to wear?” Peter asked.

The boy pointed to the paper bag he’d dropped near the door. His fingernails were filthy. “I got shorts and another shirt, and I got socks, too. But I don’t got much, really, I guess.”

“You don’t need no more shit than you got, man,” Gito muttered.

“No, I guess not.” Chico took back the wine, timidly agreeable.

“So what we gonna do today, man?” Gito addressed Peter as if nothing unusual had happened the night before — as if, indeed, the entire past unpleasant week had been wiped from memory.

“Well, Jesus, I don’t know,” Peter said, slightly overwhelmed by events of the last few moments. Released so suddenly from the long grip of tension, and responding to the alcohol, he felt exhilarated, lightheaded. “Why don’t you guys take me somewhere?” He swigged from the bottle, then handed it back to Chico.

“Like where, man?” Gito held out his hand, awaiting the wine.

“I don’t know,” Peter said. “It’s Saturday, there must be a party somewhere. Don’t you fellas know anyone we could visit?”

“Why you wanna do that, man? We don’t know no guys you wanna know.”

“I feel like doing something different. Anywhere you take me is fine.”

Gito looked at Chico. “Where can we go, man? You got any ideas?”

“What about Pilon’s?” Chico suggested, almost whispering.

“Let me know when you decide.” Peter got up from the couch. “I have to get dressed.”

They finished the wine by noon. Then Peter and the boys ate a quick lunch of salami and cheese and set off into the city.

“Shouldn’t we get more to drink?” Chico asked, walking behind Gito and Peter along the sidewalk, unable to make even a simple suggestion without framing it as a question.

“Yeah, man, we do need more,” Gito said. “I’m startin’ to come down. We gotta find a bodega, man.” He looked at Peter. “I still don’t know why you wanna go to Pilon’s.”

“I know you don’t,” Peter said. He slowed down a step, allowing Chico to catch up. “How you doin’, pal?”

The boy grinned, showing the gap in his teeth. “I’m O.K.,” he said, striding with a brisk little step, his hands in his pockets, head lowered.

“I’m glad you’re with us.”

Chico grinned again, but said nothing.

“Yeah, he’s a fuckin’ laugh a minute,” Gito said over his shoulder.

They took the subway downtown. The tunnel, smelling of tar and urine, was already hot. The cars, scarred from years of abuse, were defaced with almost stunning savagery. Standing between the boys and swaying to the movement of the car, Peter felt a bit nervous about venturing into the lair of this mysterious Pilon. It had been many years — too many — since he’d departed so drastically from his safe, comfortable routine. The time had come for an adventure. He hoped he wasn’t trying to be one of the boys in an unattractive, comical sense; he simply wanted to shake himself up a bit, and could think of no better way than by thrusting himself headlong into a strange, unpredictable situation. Besides, he’d been curious for months about Gito’s home turf. Now that Chico was becoming an increasingly important and delightful part of his life, his curiosity was doubled.

Shoving past a throng of shoeshine boys, Peter and the youngsters climbed from the subway onto a congested sidewalk. After the long ride through underground darkness, the bright sunlight and confused swarm of bodies came as something of a jolt. Threading his way through the crowd, Peter glanced excitedly about, trying to take in all the new sights and sounds and smells. Mexican groceries and restaurants were everywhere; food stalls lined the streets; music, coming in scrambled bits as they moved along, seemed to issue from every door way — rock, mariachi, jazz — now Jimi Hendrix, now a wailing saxophone, now a Spanish tenor singing “Cielito Lindo,” all in cacophonous succession.

Gito led the way through the congestion; he glanced over his shoulder. “Let’s stop here!” he yelled, turning into a small bodega.

Peter followed the boys. The shop was dim, redolent of chilies and garlic, onions and tomatoes and stale beer. A stout old woman, her gray hair pulled back in a tight bun, sat on a rocking chair behind the counter, watching a small black-and-white TV.

“Hey, abuelita!” Gito shouted above the clamor of the television, pounding the counter.

The old woman looked around, then smiled as she saw the boy. “Ay, Gito!” she exclaimed, her voice a nasal squawk. “Qué tal niño?”

“I’m O.R. I just been gone for a while.”

“Dónde vives ahora?” The woman rocked in the chair, cupping a hand behind her ear. “Nunca te veo.”

“I moved,” Gito shouted, passing quickly over the question. “We need wine. Nos falta vino!”

“Qué quieres?” the old woman yelled back.

“Vino!”

The woman nodded, pointing to the shelf along the back wall.

“She’s deafer than shit,” Gito muttered, going to fetch the wine.

Trying to look pleasant, Peter nodded to the old woman, who stared at him from behind the counter. She returned the friendly nod, then smiled as she noticed the boy beside him. “Ay, Chico, estás aquí también! Ven acá, mi hijo. Dáme un beso.”

Chico stepped behind the counter and kissed the woman on the cheek. She patted his head as he leaned down. Gito returned with two bottles of wine. “Come on, Chico man, we gotta go,” he said, waving his cousin out from behind the counter. Then, to Peter, “You gotta buy these, man.”

Peter nodded, pulling the money from his pocket. “Cuánto?”

“It’s six bucks, man.”

Peter laid the money on the counter, close enough for the old woman to reach.

“We gotta go, abuelita!” Gito backed away towards the door. “Hasta luego.”

“Adios, muchachos!” the woman yelled. “Cuidado!”

Outside on the sidewalk, Gito giggled and shook his head. “She’s O.R. for an old lady.”

“She’s nice,” Chico said.

“Is she really your grandmother?” Peter asked.

“Naw,” Gito said, “but I known her for a long time, though.”

“She’s nice,” Chico said again.

A brief distance more brought them to an old tenement, its windows fluttering with wash. Young men and their girlfriends lounged on the front steps.

“Oye, Gito, qué pasa, man?” one man shouted. He looked about twenty; a red bandanna was tied around his long black hair.

“That’s Pilon,” Gito muttered to Peter. “Let me talk to him.”

“He’s tough,” Chico said, staying behind with Peter.

“Pilon?”

“Yeah, he’s a tough dude.”

Speaking to Pilon, Gito gestured toward Peter, said something, gestured again.

“Is everything O.K.?” Peter started to feel uneasy.

“Yeah, it’s O.R. Pilon digs Gito. You’ll be O.K.”

After a bit more discussion, Gito returned. “It’s all right,” he said, flashing his dimpled grin. “Pilon says we can go upstairs. He’s even got some shit, too.”

“Let’s go,” Peter said.

He walked with the boys to the stoop and greeted Pilon.

“Yeah, man, I heard you is an O.R. dude, you know?” Pilon said, nodding slowly as he spoke.

“I told him some stuff about you,” Gito said, continuing up the steps.

“Yeah, man,” Pilon went on, “you done good for my little brother here, you know? I like that, man. Gito here, he’s some fine little dude, man. He’s my little bother. And you done good for him, and that’s all right, man.”

“He’s been a good friend to me, too,” Peter said, feeling much easier now. “Thanks for letting us visit your apartment.”

“Hey, man, like it ain’t no big deal, you know? I watch out for my friends, man. Pilon always watches out for his friends.” He winked at Chico. “Oye, Chico man, how you doin’, brother?”

The boy smiled, then trotted up the steps behind Gito. Peter followed them inside.

Pilon’s apartment — lit by a single red lightbulb — was hot, hazy with smoke, glowing pale rose. A young couple danced in the middle of the room, swaying arm in arm to the music blaring from the stereo. Peter felt a shiver of nostalgia for his college days, when there had been nothing at all extraordinary about pink lights and loud music and getting drunk in the middle of the day.

“Give me some wine, man,” Gito said, taking one bottle from Peter. “I’m gonna sit over there.” He sauntered across the room to an overstuffed chair, flopped down and began to drink.

“Come on.” Chico waved to Peter. “We can sit over here.” He started for the couch, then stopped and looked around. “Is that O.K.?”

“Sure,” Peter smiled, “let’s sit down and have a drink.”

Sharing the wine with Chico, Peter watched the couple dance in the middle of the room. Other couples, drifting in from the hall, soon joined them, all of them drinking, smoking, shouting.

“It’s getting sort of crazy in here,” Peter yelled.

The boy smiled, then took a long drink from the bottle and handed it to Peter. “Pilon has good parties,” he said, his face and arms glowing with a coppery luster in the red light. “You like it here?”

Peter lowered the bottle from his lips and handed it back to Chico. “Yeah. It reminds me of the old days. My old days. I like seeing you and Gito having a good time, too.”

“He used to live here,” Chico shouted, pointing across the room at Gito, who was swigging from his wine bottle and talking to an older girl seated on the arm of his chair.

“What about you?”

“Naw, I never lived here, not really. But I slept here lots of times.”

The bottle was almost empty. Peter felt comfortable with Chico — more at ease and relaxed than he’d felt in weeks. With Gito — even at the best of times — there was always an ambiance of tense energy, a faint sizzle of danger. But Chico demanded nothing. Though less infectiously boisterous than Gito, there was a pleasant warmth about him — a calm, sweet shyness — that Peter found as attractive, and far more restful.

“You wanna see the roof?” Chico asked, holding up the bottle to see how much wine was left.

“The roof?”

“Yeah, it’s real nice up there.”

“Let’s go.” The full force of the wine hit Peter as he stood up. Weaving slightly, he followed the boy through the noisy crowd. Still talking to the girl, Gito stayed behind.

Pilon and another young man were already on the roof, seated on the ledge of the building and smoking grass. “Oye, Chico, you want some grass, man?” He held out the joint... then glanced at Peter. “You want some, man?”

Peter declined the offer, but watched as Chico accepted the joint and took a hit. “Hey, Pilon, I dig your party,” the boy murmured, trying to hold in the smoke. He exhaled, then took another hit.

“Gracias, hermanito,” Pilon laughed. “I like my friends to have a good time, you know?” He jumped to his feet, then beckoned his friend.

“Vamanos, man, we got shit to do. Hey, Chico man, keep the joint.” With a wink, he swaggered away across the roof.

“He’s O.K.” Chico sat down on the ledge. The denim fly of his jeans was faded almost white and creased back; the zipper was stretched tight and pulled partly down.

“You’re going to bust your pants,” Peter remarked, leaning against the ledge and peering down into the street. The evening was warm, alive with the staccato of car horns, the faint wail of singing, the laughter and shouts of boys playing stickball.

Still smoking the joint, Chico looked down and touched his zipper. “Yeah, I guess they’re kinda small.” His neck glistened with sweat.

“Would you like some new clothes, like Gito’s?” Peter shook the wine bottle, heard a shallow splash, took a drink.

“Yeah, I guess that would be really cool.”

Peter handed him the bottle. “Here, you finish it. We’ll get some more.” He reached out and straightened the boy’s collar. “You’re really hot,” he said, wiping his fingers across the sweaty neck.

“I think I been speedin’ too long.”

“You feel O.K.?”

“Yeah, just kinda wired.” Chico extinguished the roach against the slate ledge, then finished the wine in one long guzzle. Looking around, he smiled at Peter. “I think I’m gettin’ really drunk.”

“You should be. You’ve been drinking for a helluva long time. You do pretty well for a little guy.”

“You think I’m too little?”

“No,” Peter laughed. “Hell, no! I didn’t mean that.”

“Sometimes I think maybe I’m too short,” the boy said, staring down over his shoulder at the street.

“No! I think you look great. How old are you, anyway?”

“I’m just thirteen now.”

“Well, Jesus, you’re not short at all! Don’t think that. You look just fine.” Peter remembered a day three weeks before, when he had given Gito the same assurance. The memory jarred him. What was he doing with Chico? Was being with this boy a betrayal of Gito? If not, then why did he suddenly feel like such a traitor?

“We really should get more to drink,” Chico said.

Peter nodded, afraid of the fondness he felt for this boy. There was no excuse for it. No excuse for wanting him — or Gito, or any other boy. He'd resigned himself to his affection for Gito, believing it an isolated, even noble passion; but this seemingly indiscriminate desire was another matter altogether. Then again, he didn't lust after every boy he encountered; Gito and Chico were only two of the countless thousands of youngsters he'd met, known, taught, counseled. How much more discriminating could a man be?

"Can we maybe get somethin' to drink?" Chico asked, beginning to look a bit concerned by Peter's distracted manner.

"Yeah, I think we should." He clapped the youngster's knee. "I'm ready."

Pilon's apartment was almost empty.

"I think I've had enough," Peter muttered, handing the wine bottle back to Chico, who was slumped beside him on the couch. Peter could see Gito across the room, huddled in the overstuffed chair with the girl.

Chico accepted the wine and took a sip. "I don't feel too good." Holding his stomach, he lifted the bottle to take another drink, then stopped. "I feel like maybe I'm sick."

Peter laid his hand on the boy's sweaty forehead. "You do feel a little hot," brushing back the damp blond hair with his fingers. "You've been speeding too long. Maybe we should go home. It's getting late." He looked at Gito, who was now nuzzling the girl's neck, fondling her breast. Peter watched him, feeling a quiver of jealousy, disappointment.

"Is it O.K. if I go home with you?" Chico asked. "I mean like with you and Gito."

"Of course it's O.R. You can stay as long as you like." He paused. "Why the hell did he come to me after getting beat up?" He nodded towards Gito. "He could have come here, or lots of other places, I'm sure. Why to me?"

Chico shrugged, cradling the bottle against his chest. "I don't know for sure. But he felt real bad, and he liked you a lot, so he went to find you."

"But you stayed behind," Peter said, pawing slowly at his throat, speaking very softly. "Weren't you afraid of getting beat up too?"

"Oh, I left right after Gito did. I went somewhere else."

Peter looked back across the room. The girl's hand was on Gito's crotch. "Well, I guess he'll be staying here a while." Peter stood up.

"Yeah, he's kinda busy now," Chico said with a quiet laugh, then got up from the couch and started for the door.

Peter trailed behind, trying to catch Gito's eye as he crossed the room. The boy was much too involved with the girl to notice.

Pilon was outside on the stoop, drinking beer with a group of friends. The night air was warm and perfectly still.

Chico moved slowly down the steps ahead of Peter. "We gotta go, Pilon."

"Oye, man, you leavin'? Where's Gito, man?"

"He's upstairs, with Miriam."

"Way to go, Gito man!" Pilon crowed. "Gettin' some pussy, hah? Oye, Chico, what about you, man? Where's your little bit of pussy, hah? Tu no tienes ninguna?"

Already on the sidewalk, Chico grinned and shook his head. "No, not tonight. I gotta go."

"Hey, man, don't you want no cerveza?" Pilon shouted, holding out his beer.

"No, thanks," Peter said, "but thanks for everything else." He paused at the bottom of the steps. "Let Gito know we left, O.K.?"

"Hey, man, no problem!" Pilon called back. "I tell him, man, don't worry."

With a quick wave, Peter turned and walked off, following Chico along the dark, empty sidewalk.

twelve

Monday morning arrived, and Gito still had not returned. In his place on the couch, curled beneath the blanket, Chico slept. About to leave for work, Peter stopped and gazed at the boy. He'd felt almost resentful of him at first, as though Gito's place had been usurped. But no impression could have been more unfair. Chico continued to prove himself the sweetest, most compliant of boys, grateful merely for a place to sleep and an occasional kind word. Fond of him from the start, Peter couldn't help but regard him with increasing affection. It was an affection, however, that he was determined to keep purely platonic. He suspected that Chico must know — through Gito — of his homosexuality, but there was no point in raising the issue to find out. He simply would not allow himself to encroach upon this boy's emotions as he had done with Gito. It was wrong to become involved with a child so young. He'd tried once, and had come perilously close to doing real harm to both the boy and himself. Chico could stay as long as he pleased, but he would be treated as nothing more than a pleasant guest, free to come and go without the slightest emotional commitment.

At noon, Peter phoned the apartment, but there was no answer. Apparently Chico had gone out; just as obviously, Gito had not returned. Peter tried again a bit later, and still there was no answer. After work, he phoned a third time, again without success. Walking home, he stopped at the deli to buy something for dinner, then hurried home.

He paused in the hallway, afraid of what he might — or might not — find inside. From the sound of the TV, he knew that someone was home. "Stop being an idiot!" he muttered to himself, opening the door. Chico was alone, on the couch, staring at something in his lap, concentrating so intensely that he remained unaware of Peter's arrival. There was something odd about his expression and posture. Peter closed the door softly, stood a moment watching the boy, then rattled the deli bag to attract his attention. Chico gasped and looked up swiftly. Peter suddenly realized what the boy

had been doing. "I'll put this away," he said, holding up the bag and hastening from the room.

In the kitchen, he smiled and shook his head, feeling very sorry for Chico. The poor kid. Not familiar with Peter's routine, he'd been literally caught with his pants down. Preoccupied, Peter only now realized that Gito still had not returned. Perhaps Chico would have news of him.

Peter gave the boy sufficient time to compose himself, then returned to the living room and sat down on the couch. "Did you go out today?"

Chico nodded. "Yeah, I was gone for a while." His eyes were lowered, his hands folded in his lap, feet tapping the floor.

"Did you see Gito?"

"Yeah, I did. He's still at Pilon's. He's O.K."

Peter looked at the magazines strewn on the couch. He couldn't tell which one the boy had been studying. "Did you like these?"

Chico nodded. "I found 'em over on the shelf, over there," pointing across the room. "Is it O.K.?"

"Yeah, sure. Did you like them?"

"Yeah, they're pretty good." Chico grinned slightly, began to blush.

Leave the kid alone, Peter told himself. There's no reason to embarrass him any further. "So Gito was O.K., huh?"

"Yeah, he's stayin' at Pilon's for a while, until like maybe Sunday when Miriam goes back to Chicago."

"He likes Miriam, huh? Well, that's good. I'm glad he's having a good time." Peter paused, nodding, staring without seeing at the television. "But he's coming back on Sunday?"

"Well, he said he might."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Not really." Chico shrugged. "Nothin' important, at least." He glanced at Peter, then down again. "Do you mind me stayin' here? I mean just bein' here like this by myself, without Gito?"

Peter looked around at the boy. "No, not at all. In fact, it would be very lonely around here without you. I've gotten used to having someone around."

"Like Gito?"

"Yeah, like Gito." He could tell that the boy was unsettled about something. "Can I ask you a question, Chico?"

The youngster nodded.

“Why are you staying here when Gito is at Pilon’s? Wouldn’t you rather be with him? You really don’t know me very well.”

Chico cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “I kinda feel like I know you, ’cause Gito talked about you all the time. And you’re real nice. Like I mean you never get mad and start hasslin’ me and tryin’ to hit me or nothin’.”

“Why would I want to hit you? Why would anyone want to hit a nice kid like you?”

Chico looked up, checking Peter’s face for evidence of mockery, then broke into a smile. “I thought you was makin’ fun of me,” he said softly.

“No,” Peter laughed. “I’m serious. Why the hell would anyone hit you? Who did it, anyway?”

“Shit, lots of guys,” Chico replied, surprising Peter, who had never heard the boy swear. “Guys like to knock me around,” he continued, shaking his head slowly, still smiling, “’cause I don’t like to do a lot of stuff I’m supposed to.”

“Like what?”

The boy shrugged, then gestured in weary bafflement. “Oh, I don’t know, really. Like basketball and stickball. I don’t really like to play too much. But there’s other things, too. Like guys will go out cruisin’ for chicks and stuff like that, but I don’t think that’s really so cool, so they’ll call me a sissy and start pushin’ me around. And they do it for other stuff, too. Anyway, you never act like that.” Made uneasy by Peter’s silence, he glanced around. “Does that sound nuts? It probably doesn’t make no sense.”

Peter smiled at the boy. “Oh, it makes sense all right. Too much sense. I was just thinking about how mean some people can be. It’s too bad people can’t get along.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

Peter could hear the boy’s stomach rumbling. He took a deep breath and sat up straighten “Well, enough of that stuff, right? How about getting something to eat? You hungry?”

Chico grinned. “Yeah, I really am hungry. But you’re not gonna buy my food again, are you?”

“Sure. Hey, listen, I’ve lived alone all my life. I’ve never had to use my money for anything except my own food and rent, so I’m loaded. Besides, it makes me happy to buy things for you, so I’m really being selfish, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Chico said, grinning. But behind the grin, Peter again detected a trace of tension, stemming very clearly from some matter still unresolved in the boy’s mind.

“I’m gong to take the day off tomorrow,” Peter announced. “I’ve been good long enough. Would you like to do something special tomorrow?” He gathered the magazines and took them back to the bookcase across the room.

“Like fishin’ and swimmin’ and stuff?”

“Gito told you about all that, too?”

“Yeah, he told me.”

“Well, how about it? Where would you like to go?”

“It doesn’t really matter.”

“Come on, now, it’s up to you. Where do you want to go?”

“Well,” Chico grinned, picking at a loose thread on the cushion, “could we go someplace where there’s like a lot of trees and stuff?”

“What about the park?”

“No, I mean like someplace new.”

“New?”

“Yeah, I mean... well, it’s stupid.”

“No, go ahead. What?”

“Well, I just meant someplace that Gito didn’t go to.”

Peter smiled. “Of course we can go someplace new. In fact, I think that’s a damned good idea. I know lots of good places in the country.” He walked up behind the couch and patted the boy’s head. “We’ll do that tomorrow. Now let’s go eat.”

The car stopped on the side of the dirt road. There was no sound in the woods but the persistent chirping of birds, the soft rustle of leaves. Sunlight swam in yellow splashes across the forest floor. “We have to walk a ways to get to the clearing.” Peter stepped from the car, looked around, then took a deep breath. “God, it’s nice here, isn’t it?”

Chico was on the other side of the car. He returned Peter’s smile. “Yeah, I like it here. I never been anywhere like this before.” He wore a yellow T-shirt, red gym shorts, white knee socks and tennis shoes.

Peter circled the car. “Well, let’s get started!”

They strode off along the crude path that ran through dense old trees, Peter leading the way. He turned often to check on the boy and warn him of low branches and stray groundhog holes; but otherwise, they hiked in silence, enjoying the dim tranquility beneath the trees, the occasional cool breeze, the darting squirrels and birds. With Gito, Peter would have already been edgy, wondering what the day might bring; not so with Chico, who radiated calm.

“You getting tired?”

“No,” Chico said, tramping along the brushy path. “I feel really good. This is cool.”

Not quite as fit as the boy, Peter was beginning to feel winded when at last he spotted a clearing. The woods became sparse, thinning to saplings and low hedges, then to an expanse of grassy hills rolling green beneath a vivid blue sky. To their left, the hills sloped down to a shallow ravine where a brook ran shimmering back into the forest. Peter pointed out the water. “We can wade along that later. But let’s rest for a while.” Placing an arm around Chico’s shoulders, he began to climb the gentle slope.

Nearly at the summit, Chico bolted ahead, slipping once onto his hands and knees as he scrambled the remaining feet. His red shorts were sweat-stained, gathered tightly between his buttocks as he clambered. Quite plainly, he wore no underwear. “I beat you!” he panted, facing Peter excitedly.

“Why, you dirty scoundrel!” Peter laughed, grabbing the boy around the waist and wrestling him to the ground. Chico giggled and rolled away, coming to rest on his back in the tall grass. “It’s nice here,” he said, staring up at the sky, his arms flung out straight.

“I knew you’d like it.” Peter sat beside him. “I used to come here with my brother when we were kids. It’s so peaceful here. No people, no noise, nothing to worry about or be afraid of.”

Chico crossed his arms over his chest. “Would you maybe rather be here with Gito?”

Peter peered out across the forest. “Is that what you think?”

“Well, Gito’s your real friend, and I know you like him a lot, so I thought maybe you’d like it better if he was here instead of me.”

Peter shook his head; he wished he could take the boy in his arms. “No, Chico, not at all. Don’t think that way. Of course I like Gito. But I like you, too. I like you a lot. You’re a very special kid.”

Chico smiled, but he said nothing.

“Are you ready to eat?” Peter lifted the bag of food that he’d brought along.

The boy sat up. “Yeah, I guess I’m pretty hungry.” His legs, slightly bent at the knees, were the same smooth golden brown as his face and arms.

“Is that what was bothering you last night?” Peter handed him a sandwich. “I mean that stuff about Gito being my ‘real friend’?”

“Yeah, I guess it probably was.” Chico took a bite of the sandwich, paused a moment to chew. His red shorts were bunched up in the crotch, leaving his thighs bare to the crease of the groin. “I figured you liked Gito a lot more than me.”

“Well, I’ve known him longer than I’ve known you, but that doesn’t mean I like him better. You’re different from Gito, so I like you both for different reasons.”

Apparently satisfied with Peter’s explanation, Chico continued eating his sandwich in silence, gazing contentedly across the wooded valley.

When they finished their lunch, Peter collected the wrapping paper and stuffed it into the bag. “Do you want to explore along the stream now?”

Chico sprang nimbly to his feet. With outstretched arms, he ran ahead down the slope, almost slipping in the tall grass. Catching his balance, he scurried to the bottom, then turned and waited for Peter.

“You’re going to have to carry me home if you don’t slow down.”

Heading towards the brook, Chico laughed. “You’re not that old!”

Peter climbed down beside him into the ravine. “We have to take off our shoes and socks.”

Chico complied, stepping into the shallow stream. “Ay, Jesus, it’s cold!”

Peter felt the slippery pebbles beneath his feet. “Yeah, but it’s nice,” he said as the cold water surged around his knees. “It’s a long way back, so let’s get going.”

Chico pointed into the forest. “This way?”

“If you want to get out alive.”

The boy started off, trudging against the current, his strong young buttocks straining beneath his shorts. Peter watched him as they worked their way along the stream. Bright wedges of sunlight slanting through the overhanging trees shimmered here and there against the water.

“This is really cool!” Chico called back over his shoulder, his legs glistening wet. “It’s like bein’ in the jungle or somethin’. Like bein’ a real explorer.”

“I know. I always feel that way.”

After a while they came to a long bend in the channel, where the water suddenly deepened, coming up to Chico’s thighs. Small trout darted in silver flashes against the pebbled bottom. “There’s fish in here!” The boy stopped, peered into the water. “Do they bite or anything?”

“They won’t hurt you, don’t worry. You’ll probably bump against some of them, but they’ll just swim away.”

“That’s really weird,” Chico said, staring down and slowly stepping forward. “I never seen real fish, I mean like swimmin’ around.” After a few more steps, he smiled then shouted over his shoulder. “I can feel ‘em hittin’ my legs! It’s like they keep crashin’ into me.”

The stream became more shallow. Peter recognized an especially large oak tree, its trunk scarred by lightning. “That’s where we get out. Up there at that big tree. The car’s up above on the road.”

“Already?” Chico splashed lightly at the water with his fingers as he walked.

“Already!” Peter laughed. “My God, I’m exhausted!”

They climbed onto the rocky bank, then stood for a moment looking at the stream. “I wish we could do it again right now,” the boy said.

“Well, not right now... but we’ll do it again sometime. We’d better get going.”

Chico put on his shoes and socks, then started up the steep hill to the car, his wet shorts clinging to his bottom as he climbed.

Driving back to the city, Peter reached across the seat of the car and nudged Chico’s arm. “So did you have a good time?”

“Oh, yeah! I guess it’s just about the best day I ever had.”

“You’re so different from Gito.”

“You think I’m O.K.?” Chico asked. He spoke softly and stared out from the window.

Peter was slightly puzzled by his question. “I think you’re very O.K.”

“So like it’s all right if I stay at your place for a while?”

“You really want to stay with me?”

“Yeah, I really do, a lot. It’s like real safe there, at your place. I feel good when I’m there, like nobody can bother me.”

“Well,” Peter said, “you know it’s O.R. with me. But if you’re talking about staying for more than a few days, then we’ll have to decide on a few things.”

“Like what?”

“Like going to school...”

“Oh, I like school O.R.” Chico looked at Peter now. “I go sometimes, whenever I can, and I like to read stuff when I get a chance.”

“Well, like I said, you’re a lot different from Gito. But even if you go to school, there’s other problems. I mean you can’t just start living in my apartment. You’re only thirteen. What about your family?”

“I guess my mama’s back in Mexico again,” Chico said. “And my popi, he lives here, but he don’t wanna see me now, so I stay with my aunt sometimes, but she don’t want me around much either.”

“And your uncle?”

“Ah, I hate him. He’s a chump.”

“So where would you be staying if you weren’t with me?”

“Maybe with Pilon, maybe with my Tia Yolanda. She’s O.R., but she’s old and gets real mean sometimes ’cause she’s got bad teeth that hurt a lot. But I don’t know really.”

“Well, we’ll see what happens,” Peter said, feeling dubious; he’d already been through much the same scene with Gito.

“But you think maybe I can stay?”

“Let’s just wait and see what happens.”

thirteen

As the week passed, Peter felt a growing sense of nervous anticipation, as though a friend not seen for years were returning from abroad; it seemed certain, from Chico's information, that Gito was coming back on Sunday. Though eager to see the boy, Peter had definite reservations about his return. Chico had become established in the apartment. His presence was comfortable, pleasant; the arrangement seemed, so far, to be working out nicely. Gito's return could do nothing but complicate the situation, probably for the worse. Still, he was a friend and Peter could hardly turn him away. Then, too, there was an undeniable flair and excitement about Gito. Though he might sometimes be trouble, his very presence was invigorating.

Since their outing in the forest, Chico had mentioned nothing about staying in the apartment, though it clearly remained on his mind. Peter hadn't revived the topic either — fearful of being disappointed, he refused to commit himself. After all, Chico might easily change his mind, leaving Peter with nothing but grief. Better to remain detached and noncommittal — at least for a while. Still, he didn't want to make Chico uneasy or feel unwanted. "You comfortable here on the couch?" he asked. "Sleeping, I mean?"

Chico was concentrating on a TV show. He glanced around. "Oh, sure, it's O.K." He looked back at the television.

"What if Gito comes back tomorrow? Then what?" Chico looked around again. "I guess I can sleep on the floor."

"I can't let you do that. Would you mind sleeping in my bed? There's plenty of room."

Chico shrugged. "It's O.K. with me, if you don't care."

"Well, it's settled then," Peter said, not quite sure he liked what was happening. "If Gito comes back, you can sleep with me."

"You want me to, really?" Chico picked at the bottom of his T-shirt.

"I don't mind at all." Peter smiled. "I'm just glad you took a shower yesterday."

“I like your shower.” Chico twisted the bottom of his T-shirt around his finger.

“Well, that’s good. Hey, by the way, did Gito say when he was coming back tomorrow?”

“Naw, he never tells me stuff like that. I guess probably in the afternoon sometime, but I don’t really know for sure.”

“Well, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Chico glanced up at Peter. “You glad he’s comin?”

“Sure, I’ll be glad to see him. Won’t you?”

“Yeah,” Chico said, “I guess so.”

• • •

Peter was in the kitchen drying the dishes after Sunday dinner when he heard Gito’s voice. He threw the towel onto the counter and hurried out to the living room. Wearing his familiar red T-shirt and jeans, the boy was standing near the couch, jiggling the apartment key in his hand. He smiled when he saw Peter. “Hey, man, I’m back!”

“So I see.” Peter was amused by the youngster’s arrogant announcement. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m O.K.” Gito sat down on the couch beside Chico. “Shit, man, I had a great fuckin’ week! Miriam is one foxy chick. She’s got salsa, man!” Chico was laughing. “Hey, Chico man, you don’t know how good pussy can be! You gotta try it, man.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Chico said, his smile fading.

Peter sat down across the room. “So what’s next, Gito?”

“What do you mean, man?”

“I mean, what are you going to do now? You thinking about staying here for a while, or what?”

Gito shrugged. “I don’t know. Why? You say in’ I should go?”

“Boy, you sure haven’t changed! You are still the damnedest, surliest punk Pve ever known.”

“Then you ain’t sayin’ I should go?”

“I’m not saying anything! I’m asking.”

“Well, I might stay a little while,” the boy muttered. “I could go lots of other places if I wanted, but maybe I’ll stay here for a while.”

“Gee, thanks”

“So you got somethin’ to drink, man? You got some booze?”

“Are we going to start that crap again?” Peter hadn’t had a drink since the night of Pilon’s party.

Gito went into the kitchen. “Shit, I’ll get it myself.”

Peter grinned at Chico. “Well, he’s back.”

Chico, with a faint smile, nodded.

Already drinking, Gito returned with the bottle of vodka. “You still got my clothes, man?” He sat back down on the couch.

“They’re in the bedroom.”

“Well, that’s good.” He took a quick drink... cast an impatient glance at Chico, then at Peter, both of them silent, staring. He took another swing from the bottle, then glanced around again. “Well, fuck, I guess maybe I better split,” he said, starting to rise. “You guys don’t want me here no more.”

“Wait a minute!” Peter raised his hand. “Sit down, please.” He paused, shaking his head. “You’re right to be mad, and I’m sorry. You haven’t done anything bad. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’m glad you’re here. Really. It’s good to see you.”

Not entirely convinced, Gito resumed his seat and took another drink. “What’s wrong with you guys, anyway? You’re both actin’ all fucked up, like I done somethin’ wrong.”

“We’re just happy to see you!” Peter said, his tone deliberately comical. He crossed to the sofa and sat down beside Gito. “We’re just so overwhelmed to have you back that we forgot our little ol’ manners.” He put his arm around the boy’s head and pulled it against his chest, rubbing his knuckles across the scalp.

Gito laughed, trying to jerk his head away. “Stop it, turkey!”

“Not till you promise to be a good boy and never to drink or smoke or swear again, ever in your life!” Peter rapped gently against the scalp with his fist. “And you have to promise to get a haircut before your head disappears!”

Laughing, Gito managed to free himself. “You’re nuts, dude! You actin’ like you’re stoned or somethin’.”

“That was kinda funny,” Chico said, watching from the other end of the couch.

“Oh yeah?” Peter wheeled around and grabbed his head. “Now it’s your turn to suffer!” He rubbed his knuckles across the blond curls until Chico begged for mercy, gasping with laughter. Then he slumped back. “Christ, I’m in lousy shape!”

“Do that again,” Chico said, still smiling.

“Are you kidding? That’s enough horseplay for one year. Go hire somebody else to beat you up.” He put out his hand. “Now give me a drink.”

Discussing Gito’s week at Pilon’s and watching TV, Peter and the youngsters passed the bottle back and forth for nearly an hour. Seated between the boys, Peter found himself becoming quite drunk. “I gotta stop.” He sat up straighten “I’ve got work tomorrow.”

“Hey, Chico man,” Gito said, grinning, “did the Man here get you to go to school yet?”

“It’s too late for this year.” Peter passed the bottle from one boy to the other without taking a drink. “There’s less than a month left. But if he’s interested next year, then we’ll see about it.”

Gito chuckled. “Chico digs school, don’t you, Chico man?”

“Yeah, it’s O.K.” Chico was more than usually quiet this evening.

“Don’t tease him.” Peter poked Gito. “It’s good he likes school. I wish you did, too.”

“Well, I don’t, so fuck off!”

Peter pushed himself up. “Well, on that cheerful note, I’ll bid you adieu.”

Gito looked around. “What you sayin’?”

“I’m going to bed,” Peter said, crossing to the bedroom. “You can sleep on the couch.”

“What about Chico?”

“He’s going to use my bed.”

“With you?” Gito twisted his head to look over the back of the couch, an odd note of surprise in his voice.

“Yeah.” Peter hoped the boy would say nothing embarrassing.

“I’ll be there in a little while,” Chico said, taking the bottle back from Gito. “Is that O.K.?”

“Sure, take your time. You won’t bother me.” Peter turned and walked into the bedroom. Again he hoped that Gito would say nothing — deliberately or otherwise — to upset Chico. But the matter was out of his hands; besides, he was too tired to worry about it.

Awakened by a strange noise, Peter lay confused for several moments, then peered into the darkness. Standing near the foot of the bed, Chico was unbuttoning his shirt. Peter remained silent, watching the boy's shadowy form.

Nearly stumbling on the rug, Chico crossed the room and threw his shirt onto the corner chair. He undid his jeans, lowered them, stepped free. In his underpants, he walked to the bed and sat down. His back, shining smooth as pearl, was hunched forward, its ridge of vertebrae bumpy beneath the skin...

Peter intended to close his eyes for only a moment. But he reawakened with a start. He looked around for Chico, then realized the boy lay beside him. He watched Chico's peaceful little face, listened to his breathing. He hadn't wanted the boy so near, so easy to touch. He wasn't strong enough to fight such extravagant temptation night after night. About to turn away, he found himself suddenly staring into Chico's eyes. "You're awake," he whispered.

The boy stared, his lips parted, the sheet pulled up to his chin.

"Are you O.K.?" Peter asked, still whispering, puzzled by Chico's melancholic expression.

"Yeah." The boy also whispered. "I'm all right."

"You look kind of sad, or worried about something. You sure you're O.K.?"

Chico nodded, his hair swishing against the pillow. "I was just afraid that when Gito came back you'd like him more again. I guess that's stupid."

Peter put his hand on the boy's head and patted the blond curls. "You shouldn't keep thinking that. You're my good pal, too. Don't worry about Gito." He stroked the fuzz on the boy's neck. Seeming to yield under the caress, Chico moved closer. Peter felt a shiver of surprise, excitement. "You feel better?"

"I feel O.K." Chico licked his lips. "Did you see me last week? When you came home that first night?"

"Monday night?"

"Yeah, that night. Did you see me?"

"Not really," Peter said, unsure how to reply. "I mean, I saw you on the couch, but just for a second. Has that been bothering you all this time?"

"A little," Chico whispered.

"You always keep everything inside," petting the boy's neck. "That's bad. You should let me know if something's bothering you."

“I don’t like to make trouble.”

“You’re no trouble. Now what about last Monday night?”

“Aw, nothin’, really. It just made me feel kinda stupid.”

Peter smiled. “No, don’t feel stupid. It’s O.K., and perfectly natural.” He gave Chico’s neck an affectionate squeeze. The boy snuggled closer. Peter could feel the young chest and legs, warm against his own. “You want me to hold you?”

Chico nodded, his mouth open, eyes staring with an odd intensity. Peter took him in his arms, wanting very much to touch him, to love him, but afraid to make the next move.

Chico’s head nuzzled against his shoulder. He knew he shouldn’t hold the boy; he’d resolved from the start not to become involved with him. But he hadn’t reckoned on Chico offering himself. Or was he misreading the boy’s behavior? Was this cuddling merely a show of innocent, childish affection?

“Is this what you did with Gito?” Chico asked.

Peter could feel the boy’s warm breath against his chest. “With Gito? What did he tell you?”

“Don’t get mad.”

“I’m not mad.” Peter brushed his fingertips in slow circles between the boy’s shoulder blades. “I just wanted to know what Gito said.”

“Well, he didn’t say much. Just that you like guys, and that you kinda messed around with him sometimes. But it’s O.K. I mean you shouldn’t be mad at him or nothin’ ’cause he didn’t say anything bad.”

Peter stared into the darkness, breathing in the fragrance of Chico’s hair. “How long have you known about that?” he asked finally.

“A long time.”

“And you don’t care? You know I’m gay, and it doesn’t bother you?”

The boy shook his head. “No, I like you. I like it here a lot.”

“Did anybody ever hold you like this before?” Peter hugged the boy closer, one hand on his bare back, the other petting his soft, curly hair.

“No... nobody, ever.”

Peter held the boy’s head against his chest. “Did you ever make love to a girl, like this?”

“No... I don’t think I like girls too much, really. It kinda scares me that I don’t. But that’s why I wanted to meet you, ’cause Gito told me about you.”

“Does Gito know how you feel? About girls?”

“Oh, no!” Chico gave a start in Peter’s arms. “I could never tell him anything like that”

“He knows about me, and he doesn’t care.”

“That’s different. You’re a grown-up and everything. But I’m his cousin. I couldn’t ever let Gito know.”

“O.K.,” Peter soothed, “don’t worry about it. Nobody has to know, except you and me. Just relax. You’re all tightened up.”

“Is it O.R. that maybe I don’t like girls?” Chico asked, starting to relax. “I know I should but I just can’t.”

Peter kissed the top of the boy’s head, the hair soft against his lips. “It’s hard to be different, I know,” he said, still trying to believe that this beautiful boy in his arms was gay. He hadn’t counted on that. “But you’re a brave kid. I mean, after all, you told me, right? So you’ll be O.K. Don’t worry about what other people think.”

He stroked the boy’s ribcage, kissed him behind the ear. He slipped his hands inside the boy’s underpants and massaged the lean young buttocks, tensing firm beneath his grip. Chico giggled, startled, delighted. Peter lowered the underpants down the boy’s legs. “Raise your knees,” he mumbled. Chico obeyed, allowing the shorts to be slid over his feet. “That’s good.” Peter pulled the underpants from under the sheet, caught a whiff of the boy’s rich, musky scent. Propped up on one elbow, he switched on the lamp and pulled back the sheet.

Shivering slightly, Chico covered his genitals with both hands. “I’m not very big.”

“I don’t care about that.” Peter took Chico’s hands and pulled them apart. He gazed down at the sturdy young body — sleek and golden brown. Only the tiniest wisp of blond pubic hair was visible above the penis: a trim, graceful little piece of art, neatly circumcised. “You’re really pretty. But you’re still soft.”

“I’m sorry,” Chico almost whimpered.

“That’s all right.” Peter slid his hand between the boy’s legs.

Chico moaned and raised his knees, letting his thighs slowly spread open. Peter coaxed the warm flesh to erection, then removed his hand. The boy’s penis, standing straight between his pale thighs, twitched like a stiff red finger aching to be touched.

Peter turned off the light, then hugged the naked boy tightly against him. “I’m kind of new at this, too.” He kissed the boy’s cheek. “But everything is

O.K... Everything is just fine.” He reached down between Chico’s legs and found the penis waiting for his caress.

Fearful of waking the boy, Peter dressed quietly. He flirted with the notion of calling in sick for work; but sleepy and mildly hungover though he was, he decided against it. Buttoning his shirt, he glanced at Chico — curled on his side, bare to the waist, his round face as peaceful as an infant’s beneath its halo of blond curls. Peter was troubled by the night’s lovemaking. The boy should have been getting up for school and joining friends his own age — not lying asleep in his adult lover’s bed. Of course, Chico had asked to be taken. There was no doubting that. His passion had been total, genuine, unmistakable. He was only thirteen, sure — but what did age have to do with the quality of love?

Peter walked to the bed and sat down. With a sigh, Chico stretched and rolled onto his back, twisting the sheet down his hips, baring his lean, golden belly. Yawning, he opened his eyes, discovered Peter. “Is it time to get up?” he asked, his voice husky with sleep.

Peter brushed the back of his hand across the boy’s cheek. “I’m on my way out, but you can stay in bed.”

Waking more fully, Chico became aware of his nudity. He pulled the sheet up to his chest.

“How do you feel?”

Chico shrugged, rubbing his eyes with tight fists. “I guess I’m O.K.,” he mumbled, then looked at Peter. “Is what we did last night all right? Are you mad at me or anything like that?”

Smiling, Peter smoothed the hair from the boy’s face. “Hell, no! I think what we did was just fine. Did you like it?”

“Yeah.” Chico averted his eyes and broke into a grin. “I did, a lot. I was just like kinda scared that maybe you’d be mad this mornin’ or somethin’ like that.”

“Nope,” Peter replied, “nothin’ like that.” He leaned down and kissed the boy softly on the lips. “Now I have to go,” he whispered. “I’ll see you tonight after work, O.K.?”

“Yeah, O.K.,” Chico said quietly, still grinning.

Entering the living room, Peter found Gito stretched out on the couch, his eyes open. “Why are you awake so early?” he asked, crossing to the door.

“I couldn’t sleep real good,” the boy muttered.

“You sick? Did you drink too much?”

“Maybe, man. I don’t know. I just couldn’t sleep, is all.”

“Well, take it easy.” Peter gave a wave of his cap and opened the door.

“Is Chico in there?” Gito called out, rising onto his elbow. “In the bedroom, I mean?”

“Yeah, he’s in there,” Peter said, wondering what the boy was really asking.

“Is he stayin’ around here much longer?”

“You’re the one who wanted him here, remember?”

“Shit, I guess so.”

Peter had to smile. “Why are you mad at Chico, anyway? You keep picking on him, and now you don’t even want him around.”

Gito dropped his head back down on the couch and pulled the blanket up to his chin. “I ain’t mad at nobody, man. I was just wonderin’ how long he’s stickin’ around here, that’s all. Don’t make no big deal out of it.”

“Well, you can talk to him yourself when he gets up,” Peter said. “I’ve gotta go.” He put on his cap and shut the door behind him.

Gito’s attitude did not improve as the days passed. He remained petulant, sullen. Familiar by now with the boy’s moodiness, Peter let him sulk, confident he’d cheer up again sooner or later. Why he was so surly and irascible, Peter couldn’t say. Perhaps he missed Miriam; or perhaps he was simply bored; there was no telling for certain. With Gito, there never was.

In the meantime — while Gito was still roaming the streets, or sitting glumly in front of the TV — Peter busied himself with work, and with Chico. They continued to sleep together, making love at least once a night. Chico seemed inexhaustible, unflaggingly passionate. For the first time in his life, Peter had a sense of real joy, of real worth. Until now sex had been merely a bloodless charade, performed with women for the benefit of relatives and friends. But with this beautiful boy, sex was a joy, a wonder, a glorious celebration of love. Peter had known fleeting moments of such passion with Gito; but it had been unrequited passion snatched drunkenly in dark rooms, often ending in harsh words & even harsher recriminations — and giving no more joy than a grope in a public toilet.

And yet, after nearly two weeks with Chico, Peter still felt occasional pangs of guilt, as if he’d somehow betrayed Gito. He loved Chico, yes — who wouldn’t? The boy was bright, attractive, loving, gentle — everything Peter could ever want. He was a terrific kid. But Peter continued to feel an

emptiness — a gnawing sense of discontent — that no amount of lovemaking with Chico, however passionate, could satisfy. He wanted something more.
He wanted Gito.

fourteen

Whistling, Peter unlocked the door and entered the apartment. “I’m free!” he shouted, feeling as blessedly liberated as his students. “No more work for three months!”

Gito, sitting alone on the couch, looked around and grinned.

“You look happy for a change.”

The boy shrugged, then returned to the TV.

“Happy, but not talkative,” Peter chuckled. He looked around the living room, crossed to the kitchen, then to the bedroom. “Where’s Chico?”

“He went out after lunch.”

“Out?”

“To score some grass”

“Aw, Gito, why’d you do that?”

“Do what, man?” The youngster sat up straighten “I didn’t do nothin’!”

“You shouldn’t have sent Chico out for grass. He’s no good at that stuff.” Peter shook his head. “I won’t even ask where you got the money.”

The boy gave a contemptuous wave of his hand.

“Damn it, Gito, I don’t like it when you use Chico that way! He’s not like you. He’s no good on the streets. You know that!”

“Fuck, man, you don’t know nothin’ about Chico! You don’t know nothin’ about nothin’!”

Peter sat down slowly on the couch. “What’s eating you, anyway? You’ve been a pain in the neck ever since you got back from Pilon’s.”

“I’m O.K.,” Gito said, sounding calmer.

“Well, damn it, I don’t like to see you so unhappy all the time. Is something wrong? Are you mad at me or Chico?”

Gito continued staring at the TV. “I’m O.K.”

“You’ve got such a damned hard head.” Peter waited, hoping that the boy would say something more. Then he shrugged. “Well... So when is Chico coming back?”

“When he’s done, man.”

He looked at his watch. "Isn't it getting sort of late? Shouldn't he be back by now?"

"Yeah, I guess maybe he should. But Chico's pretty slow."

"Yeah, I know. That's exactly why you shouldn't have sent him."

"Quit tellin' me what I oughtta do, man! I'm sick of that shit."

"Then why do you stay here, you little smartass?" Peter sprang up from the couch and switched off the TV. "You're sick of my shit, huh? Well maybe I'm sick of your shit! You ever think of that? Maybe I don't like you hanging around here all day with your goddamn long face and your goddamn wisecracks!"

Gito, his mouth open, stared.

"Well?" Peter tried to catch his breath, already beginning to feel ashamed of his outburst.

Gito stood up.

"Where are you going?" Peter asked, his shame turning to panic.

"I'm gonna find Chico," the boy said softly.

Peter followed him to the door. "I'm coming along."

Gito turned quickly to protest, then said, "Yeah, O.K."

They traveled in silence through the subways, along the crowded sidewalks, into the heart of the city. Gito moved with the fluid stealth of a panther stalking its prey. He never turned, never spoke, never slowed his pace. His eyes darted from side to side as he prowled, taking in every gesture, every face, every detail of clothing. Finally, he stopped. "I'm gonna talk to that dude," he said, pointing to a young man leaning in the doorway of a music shop.

Peter stayed behind. The boy approached the man, smiled and began to converse. They were too far away for Peter to hear their conversation, but he could tell by Gito's face that the news was not good. Something had happened to Chico. He knew that now.

Gito returned, looking grim.

"Well, come on," Peter said, "get it over with. What's wrong? What happened?"

"That was Diego," Gito said, pointing to where the young man had been standing. "He was Chico's connection." He paused, glanced warily about. "I shouldn't even be tellin' you this, man."

Peter grabbed the boy's arm and ushered him to a bench near the curb. He brushed aside an old newspaper and sat down, pulling Gito beside him.

“What are you talking about? After all these months you still don’t trust me?” He was still holding the boy’s arm, shaking it. “And anyway, I don’t care about that ‘code of the streets’ crap! The point is, something happened to Chico. I want to know what.”

Gito tugged his arm from Peter’s grip. “Hey, take it easy, man!”

Peter could see the imprint of his fingers on the youngster’s forearm. “I’m sorry if I hurt you. But I want to know about Chico.”

“His daddy took him.”

Peter shook his head. “What do you mean? What are you saying?”

“His daddy was drivin’ by and saw Chico and took him. At least that’s what Diego says. He even took our dope, too.”

“I don’t care about your grass,” Peter muttered. “I can’t believe this.” He silently watched the traffic inch its way along the congested street. So Chico was gone. Just like that. Somehow it seemed that Gito was to blame. Not that he had done anything intentional, of course. But he did have a knack for hurting people around him, and then going merrily on his way, blithely unrepentant.

“You O.R., man?” Gito asked softly, troubled by Peter’s expression. “You lookin’ real bad.”

Peter peered at the boy. Perhaps he was being too rough on Gito. He wasn’t a bad kid. Never malicious or deliberately cruel. Blaming him for his wayward lack of consideration was as unfair as blaming an elephant for its wrinkles.

“You O.R.?” the youngster asked again.

“So where did Chico’s father take him?”

“That’s somethin’ I don’t know, man.”

“Well, we’ve gotta find out! Right now. We’ve gotta find out.”

“Take it easy, man. I’ll find out, I promise. But not now, man. It’s too late.”

Chico was gone, and there was nothing to be done about it. Peter rested his hand lightly on the boy’s neck. Gito flinched, then relaxed, regarding Peter with a dubious, sidelong gaze.

“I can’t believe Chico’s gone,” Peter murmured. “Can you find him tomorrow? Do you know where his father lives?” A bus roared to a stop in front of them, nearly gagging Peter on its acrid diesel fumes.

“I can find him, yeah... if I gotta.”

“Don’t you want to know if he’s O.K.?”

“Aw, man, he’s O.R. His daddy gets drunk a lot, but he don’t never hurt nobody. Chico’s O.R. And anyway, he got by O.R. before he met you, so what’s the big deal now?”

Gito was right. Chico was a kid from the streets — nothing more. Peter had known him for... what? Three weeks? A month? “You sure he’s going to be all right? He’s not going to get beat up or anything?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Gito poked an empty beer can with his foot. “Chico’s daddy don’t hurt nobody. Sometimes when he’s sober he likes havin’ Chico around, that’s all. And then he throws him out again. But he don’t never hurt him.”

“Well, I hope you’re right.” Peter gently tugged at the curls on Gito’s neck. “Your hair is too long. You should get it cut.”

“You mad at me?” the boy asked, shoving the beer can from foot to foot. “I mean ’cause of Chico? You mad at me now?”

“No, Gito, I’m not mad at you.”

“And you don’t want me to go away?”

“No, especially not now.”

“Then things are O.K. again, like before Chico showed up?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, I mean you been a real drag with him around.”

“Then why did you bring him to the apartment in the first place?”

“I don’t know for sure.” Gito kicked the beer can, watched it roll with a clatter into the gutter. “I guess I felt kinda lonely when I first came to your place, ’cause you was still kinda like a stranger to me.”

“But you don’t feel that way now?”

“Shit, no!” Gito said, grinning. “It’s just about the best place I ever stayed at.”

“What about Pilon’s?”

“Aw, it’s O.K. there, but it’s always crowded and stuff. And Pilon is O.K., you know, but he’s just a kid really.”

“He’s not an old man like me, huh?”

“Shit, man, you’re not old or nothin’ but you’re different from Pilon. I mean, you’re almost kinda like somebody’s daddy or somethin’, you know?”

“Thanks... I think.” Peter smiled. “I never knew I was such a terrific guy.”

Gito gave another grin, his face dimpled and elfin beneath its shaggy mane of black curls.

“But why are you glad Chico’s gone? Was I really so terrible with him around?”

“Fuck, man, when he’s around you never drink and you never wanna go nowhere or do nothin’. And you never even hardly talk to me! Shit, man, when I brought him around, I didn’t think you was gonna like him more than me.”

Peter had to smile. How sadly insecure these vagrant boys were, and how desperately competitive for any bit of affection.

“Well, sorry about that. And I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier.” He gave Gito’s neck a gentle squeeze before removing his hand. “I guess we’d better get home.” He stood up. “And I don’t like Chico more than you, by the way. I’m sorry you thought that.”

Gito returned Peter’s smile. “Yeah, O.R. And I’ll try to find Chico tomorrow. It ain’t gonna be easy, man, but I’ll try.”

Gito stayed out all day Saturday, and again Sunday, returning with a weary shake of his head and the same refrain: “I can’t find Chico, man. He just ain’t nowhere!”

On Monday, he again returned alone to the apartment; but his expression had changed. He looked stunned, almost dazed. Peter leapt from the couch when he saw him. “What the hell happened? What’s wrong?”

Gito grinned wanly, scratching at his arm. “You’re not gonna believe this, man, but I just found out where Chico is.”

“Where is he?”

“Mexico.”

Peter sat back down on the couch. “Mexico? You’re right — I don’t believe it. Mexico?”

“I shoulda known, man,” Gito said. “His daddy took him there before, a couple times. Shit, I even went with ‘em once when my mama was still alive.”

“Mexico,” Peter mumbled again. “Well... damn! Is he coming back?”

“Sometime, I guess. But I don’t know when.”

“We should go down there. How would you like to go to Mexico?”

“Aw, you’re nuts.”

“No, I’m serious,” Peter said, smiling. “You know where Chico’s father took him, right?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. Probably Taxco. I mean, I know they went there before, but I ain’t sure now.”

“It’s worth a try.”

“Just to find Chico? Shit, man, that’s crazy! He ain’t your kid.”

Peter shrugged. Maybe his idea was crazy. He had never been one to go about tilting at windmills and didn’t care to start now. And, in truth, he’d already become reconciled to Chico’s absence. But he felt he owed the boy something, no matter how brief their relationship. Besides, he’d wanted to take a trip for some time. Why not to Mexico? And why not with Gito? (That in itself was an interesting prospect.)

“We’ll go! I know it sounds crazy, but I want to do it.”

“And you want me to go, too?”

“Yeah, definitely.” He stood up, crossed the room, gave Gito a light clap on the shoulder. “So what about it?”

“Man, you must be nuts! What you gonna do if we find Chico anyway? How you gonna talk to him, even, with his daddy around?”

“I don’t know. We’ll just have to wait and see, I guess.”

“Man, you must be nuts!” Gito muttered again.

“Yeah,” Peter said, “I must be.”

fifteen

The bus pulled out of Mexico City airport an hour late. Trying to rest his arm on the metal ledge beneath the window, Peter jerked it away. “Christ, that’s hot!”

Gito wiped his face on his arm. “The whole fuckin’ place is hot, man! And it don’t matter what you wear, neither.” He gestured towards his orange T-shirt and denim cut-offs. “It’s still too fuckin’ hot.” His bare legs were beaded with a fine, even sparkle of sweat.

“It’s not usually this hot this time of year.” Peter felt groggy from the heat and jet lag. “I’d kill for a cold shower and a beer.”

“No shit, man.”

“We’ll find a decent place to stay in town and then relax a while.” Peter pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face, his neck, his arms. “Then tomorrow you can find Chico.”

“If he’s around,” Gito remarked under his breath, picking at the frayed leg of his tight shorts. “And what if he ain’t around, man?”

“Then there’s nothing more we can do.”

The bus arrived in Taxco late, stopping in front of a small café in the center of town. Peter carried the one valise that comprised their luggage. He climbed down into the narrow street. The day was a sizzling sunburst; waves of heat shivered above the dark cobblestones. The bus driver had recommended the nearby Hotel Plata. After a short hike through fierce heat, Peter spotted its sign in the next block. “We’re almost there.” He glanced at Gito, reached out and gave the boy’s hair a quick tousle. “Aren’t you glad now that you got your hair cut?”

Gito tugged at a curl on his forehead. “You think it’s too short, man?”

“No, not at all. It looks real good. Very handsome.”

The boy grinned. “Aw, man, knock it off!”

“O.K., but I still think you look terrific.”

Still grinning, Gito walked on in silence.

They were greeted at the Plata by a suspicious woman behind the desk. She engaged in a very cool exchange of formalities, then, reluctantly, offered them the register. Peter signed it, then looked up, grinning. “Es mi hijo,” he said, hoping to quell the woman’s suspicions.

“Oh, your son!” she said, also speaking in Spanish. She glanced at the names in the register, then at Gito. “And he looks like you, too,” she smiled.

“You think so?”

“Of course! You have the same coloring. And the same eyes. Oh, I can tell!”

Peter picked up the valise and swung his arm around Gito’s shoulders. “Come on, son,” he said, heading upstairs, trying hard not to laugh.

The room was terribly hot. Peter set his valise onto one bed, then switched on the air conditioner. It came to life with a violent clatter, settling after a few clangorous moments into a low, steady rumble.

“Check it out, man!” Gito let his gaze roam slowly about the room. “This ain’t too bad.”

“It’s O.K. for the money. It’s dirt cheap.”

“But it’s still too fuckin’ hot.” The youngster pulled off his shirt and wiped the sweat from his shoulders, chest, and belly.

“It’ll cool off after a while,” Peter said, watching the boy — beautifully dark and slim in his tight denim cut-offs. “I wonder if they have a shower.”

“I need a beer, man.”

“After we clean up, we’ll go out and get some.” Peter inspected the facilities. “No shower. Just a tub. Who’s first?”

Gito flopped down on one of the beds. “You go ahead, man. I’m beat.”

Peter was dying to cross to the bed and yank off those snug blue shorts, but instead he backed slowly into the bathroom. He’d craved Gito for months; not even his relationship with Chico had cooled his desire. He’d always wanted Gito. But he’d been patient — very patient — contenting himself with merely a glimpse of the boy’s ass and a brief, blind grope inside his pants. But that was no longer enough. He had to see all of the boy — every sleek, stark naked inch of him.

Disturbed by his almost violent desire, he shut the door behind him.

Gito was dozing when Peter returned from his bath. The room — comfortable now — had cooled off considerably. Remaining near the bathroom door, Peter toweled his hair and watched Gito. The boy lay on his back, one leg stretched straight out, the other hanging off the side, dangling

nearly to the floor. Peter finished drying his hair, then threw the wet towel with a deft flick of his wrist across Gito's bare stomach. The youngster gasped and jerked upright on the bed.

"I'm sorry," Peter laughed. "I didn't think it would hit you."

Realizing what had happened, Gito smiled and stood up. "You scared the shit outta me, man!" he said, scuffling barefoot into the bathroom. "I'll get done real fast so we can get outta here." He closed the door.

Peter buttoned his shirt and tucked it in. He felt in one pocket for his comb, then in the other, realizing after a few moments that it must have dropped out in the bathroom. He hesitated near the door, then shrugged and went in.

Already in the tub, Gito looked around with a loud yelp of protest.

"Sorry, I lost my comb." He spotted it near the sink and picked it up. Turning to leave, he peered into the tub. The water was very soapy and he could see nothing but the boy's glistening brown knees poking through the white suds. "O.K., I found it." He held up the comb, backed away. "Hurry up."

Gito emerged from the bathroom soon after; his shorts were already on and his arms and legs were still flecked with lather.

"You could have dried off first," Peter laughed. He fetched a towel. "Stand still," he said, wiping the boy's back.

"You don't gotta do that, man." Gito's impatience was mingled with a trace of something tense, uneasy.

"I know I don't have to. But I want to. Here, let me dry your hair, then we'll get going."

Chewing his bottom lip, Gito allowed Peter to continue. "You really don't gotta do that."

Peter rubbed the towel briskly over the boy's head, pressing the hard scalp with his fingers, watching the dark curls fluff and thicken. "That's better." Gito remained strangely silent, looking away. Then, gently, Peter reached out and touched the boy's chest. Gito jerked to attention.

"Finish dressing," Peter said softly, "then we'll go."

The youngster turned away, pawing with a slow, distracted motion at his own breast.

“Not bad, huh?” Peter remarked, relaxing in the evening shade and sipping at his beer. The Cafe Estrella was nearly deserted. From the curb, a ragged group of shoeshine boys — some standing, some crouching — watched with dark, languorous eyes.

“I wish I had a beer.” Gito gave his glass of soda a disdainful nudge.

Peter shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do. Just relax and enjoy yourself. It’s a beautiful night.”

Gito muttered again, glancing at the shoeshine boys. “What are those fuckers starin’ at, man?”

“They bother you?”

“I just don’t like nobody starin’ at me, that’s all.” He took a drink of soda, then lowered his voice. “I used to do that once.”

Peter leaned forward, startled to hear the boy offering information about himself. “Shine shoes?”

“Yeah, man, I used to do that. Down by the subway, with Chico and lots of other guys. But I ain’t done it now for a long time.”

“Was that when your mother was alive?”

Gito looked up at Peter, not quite sure whether to continue. Then he nodded. “Yeah, when my mama was alive. She made me go to school a lot... but I hated it, man! So lots of times I just skipped out and took my box to the subway instead.”

“Your box?”

“Yeah, man, my shoeshine box!” The youngster took a sip of his soda. “But school was for chumps, man! I didn’t mind history too much, I guess. I kinda liked all that stuff about Indians. And those Roman guys, too. And who were those dudes with the horns, man?”

“The horns?”

“Yeah, like on their hats.”

Peter smiled. “The Vikings, you mean?”

“Yeah, man, those Viking dudes were tough. I liked them O.K.” Gito paused, gazing at the young boys on the curb. “But I hated that math and English stuff, and all that other shit. So lots of times I just split. But sometimes my mama she caught me, and then she really tore my ass up good! She hated it when I skipped school, man.”

“You miss her?”

“Sometimes, I guess I do.”

“How long have you been alone?”

“About three years.” Gito rattled the ice in his glass, then looked up at Peter. “But I ain’t alone, man! I got lots of friends. I get by real good.”

“Friends aren’t enough sometimes.”

“Well, I do O.K.”

“So what happened after your mother died?”

The boy wiped away a light beading of sweat from his forehead. “Aw, man, nothin’ much really. Just a bunch of welfare mess and other crap like that. And this dude who said he was my uncle showed up, so I went to stay with him for a while, then with Pilon, then back with my uncle. Whoever had room, you know?”

“And you came here to Taxco when you were younger?”

“Yeah, once when I was real little I came here with my mama and with Chico, ’cause lots of my daddy’s people live around here — in Iguala and Cuautla and other places like that. But I don’t remember nothin’ much about bein’ here, really. It was too long ago, man.”

“Is your father still around here?”

“Shit, man, I don’t know where that sucker is!”

The boy took another drink of soda, then looked down, trying to hide a sheepish grin. “I ain’t never talked about myself like this before. Not to nobody.”

“I’m very flattered.” Peter gave the youngster’s forearm a pat. “I’ve wanted to know more about you for months. Thanks for telling me.”

Gito looked up with a broad, gleeful smile. “You remember that first time I met you, man? And you let me finish your drink...”

“That was the second time. I talked to you once before that, but only for a couple of minutes.”

“You sure, man?”

“I’m sure, believe me. I was sitting at the bar, and you came in with your candy and asked me if I wanted any. In fact, it was the same day that I broke up with Susan.”

“Who’s Susan, man? Some chick you was fuckin’?”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself. She was, I hope, the last of many.” Peter finished his beer and stood up. “Well, let’s get going.”

Strolling back to the hotel, he nudged the boy’s shoulder. “What made you think of that night at the Figaro, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Gito shrugged. “Tonight just made me think of lots of stuff.”

Timidly, Peter put his arm around the boy's shoulders. Gito stiffened for an instant, but did not pull away. Peter kept his arms around the boy as they walked back to the hotel.

sixteen

Gito left early the next morning, hoping to find someone who might know of Chico. “This ain’t gonna be easy, man,” he muttered on his way out the door, looking and sounding unlike his usual cocky self.

Shortly afterwards, with no idea of who or what he might encounter, Peter also set off into town. Several foreigners roamed the narrow cobblestoned streets, all of them in full tourist regalia, cameras ready. Peter avoided them, trying to blend inconspicuously into the background.

He stopped at the Estrella for a cup of bitter coffee, then moved down the street to another, larger cafe — the Troya. Most of the tables were taken by tourists, but Peter managed to find a quiet, sunny corner to himself.

While ordering his beer, Peter inquired about Chico; but the waiter was not familiar with the family. Peter thanked him, then settled back to wait for his drink. The next instant, a small shoeshine boy appeared beside him.

“Shine, señor?” the youngster asked, speaking a halting English in his cheerful, piping voice.

Peter nodded, placing his foot on the boy’s box. “Hablo espanol.”

“I’ll give you a good shine.” The boy smiled, eager to converse in Spanish. “I do a good job, don’t worry. No polish on the socks.”

Peter watched the small boy’s flexing shoulders and curly, downturned head, imagining Gito must have looked much the same once. “What’s your name, son?” He put his other foot onto the box.

The boy looked up with a smile. “Pablito, señor.”

Peter asked him about Chico, describing the boy as precisely as possible. “Do you know anything about him?”

“I don’t think so. I’m sorry.”

“That’s O.K... I didn’t think you would.”

The little boy, still smiling, returned to Peter’s shoe, buffing with quick, energetic strokes. With a final swipe of his cloth, he looked up, eyes sparkling, teeth gleaming. “I’m done!”

Peter pulled some change from his pocket. “You’re a very handsome boy,” handing Pablito the money.

The boy smiled wider. “Do you want me to go with you?”

Peter laughed, unaccustomed to this sort of bright, easy candor. “Go with me?”

“I know a place,” the boy said, nodding. “Behind the barbershop.” He stood up with his box and took a tentative step. “Do you want to go?”

“O.K.,” Peter said, uneasy about accepting the invitation, but too intrigued to decline. “Let’s go.”

Pablito led him down the street to the barbershop, where he ducked quickly into an alley. He set his box onto the ground and faced Peter. “You have to do it fast.” Smiling, he unbuttoned his ragged white pants.

Peter stepped closer.

Standing in a bright patch of sunlight, the small boy slid the pants down his thin brown legs, then lifted his shirt to show himself to Peter. “It’s O.K.?”

Peter nodded.

Pablito looked at his penis with an eager grin. “You can make it stand up,” he said, his voice sprightly as a little bird’s.

Peter sank slowly to his knees in front of the boy.

Clutching two bottles of wine purchased at the Estrella, Peter returned to the hotel late in the afternoon. He felt troubled by his encounter with Pablito, and a bit ashamed — yet oddly exhilarated. He’d never met a boy so totally, cheerfully uninhibited — not at all like Gito, with his suspicious, secretive ways.

He sat down on his bed, glad to be back in the air-conditioned room, out of the terrible heat. Wondering if Gito had had any luck tracking down Chico, he opened one bottle of wine and took a long drink. Then another. He let his mind wander back to the alley behind the barbershop, wishing it had been Gito and not the little shoeshine boy standing so shameless and eager in that bright patch of sun.

Peter was still lost in reverie, sipping the slightly flinty wine, when a knock at the door snapped him to attention. Gito — looking glum and very tired — stepped in as the door opened.

“It ain’t no good, man,” he said, wiping the sweat off his face. “I guess Chico ain’t here no more.” He shuffled past Peter and collapsed, spread-eagled, panting, onto his bed.

“What happened?”

“I found some dude that knows Chico’s daddy, and he said they were here, but they left.”

Peter sat on his own bed. “We missed him. Damn!” He took a drink. “Where did they go?”

Beginning to cool off and relax, Gito let out a long sigh, then looked at Peter. “I met some other dude who says they went to Cuernavaca, where Chico’s mama is, ’cause they’re all gonna live together again. At least for a while.”

“Let’s go to Cuernavaca. How far is it?”

“Aw, man, leave it alone! We done enough already. And anyway, you shouldn’t keep messin’ with Chico. He’s with his mama and daddy now, so just quit messin’ with him, man!”

Peter set the bottle on the nightstand between the beds and stood up. He stood staring out the window into the sunny street. “His mother and father are together now?”

“Yeah, man, and everything’s cool with ‘em for a while, so quit jackin’ around.”

“I guess you’re right,” Peter mumbled. He’d done enough already. Maybe too much. Chico was with his family, and Peter had no right — legal or otherwise — to interfere. “I just wish I’d had a chance to say good-bye.”

“Don’t worry, man, you’ll probably see him again sometime. His mama and daddy don’t never stay together for too long — and then he’ll be back.”

“It still makes me feel lousy.” Peter recrossed the room.

“Anyway, man, what’s so terrific about Chico?” the boy asked, impatience creeping into his voice.

“That’s not the point, Gito. Chico was a nice kid, and I wanted him to be happy. If he is happy now, then that’s fine. But I wanted to make sure, that’s all.”

“I’d be happy if I was with my mama and daddy,” Gito said softly.

“I suppose. Maybe I’m being selfish... I don’t know.”

“Naw, man, you ain’t selfish, really. But you just get too fired up sometimes.”

Peter laughed, recognizing the wisdom of the boy's comment. "I'm Italian... what do you expect?" He picked up the bottle and took a drink, then handed it to Gito. "You want some?"

"Yeah, sure I do."

"Keep it," Peter said, picking up the second bottle. "I'll work on this one." He returned to his bed and flopped down, then lay gazing out the window, drinking wine.

"This is more like it, man," Gito sighed after a while, swigging from his bottle — nearly empty now. "I wish I had some grass, though."

"You're always wishing for something you don't have."

Gito grinned, then drained the last of his wine. "So what we gonna do, man?" He set the empty bottle on the nightstand.

"I don't know. I guess we'll go home." Peter dragged himself to his feet, feeling quite drunk. "Home sweet home," he muttered, stepping to the boy's bed. "Where the beer and the cantaloupe foam." With a weary chuckle he sat down beside Gito and held out the bottle. "Here, go ahead, finish it. Save me from myself."

"Yeah, O.K." The youngster took it from Peter's hand, grinned. "That was kinda funny yesterday, when that lady thought I was your kid"

"Yeah" Peter reached out and mussed the boy's hair. "My beloved son."

"Hey, man, don't go gettin' weird on me or nothin'."

"Aw, relax for a change!" He grabbed the bottle back from Gito and drained it in one gulp.

"Hey, man, I thought you said that was for me!"

"I changed my mind." Peter felt almost angry — but not sure why. He gave the boy's arm a light rap with the back of his hand. "Why the hell are you so damned disagreeable all the time? You're always telling me to loosen up... well, why the hell don't you loosen up?"

"What the fuck you talkin' about, man? What you want me to do?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess. Just forget it." He laid his hand along the boy's neck and stroked the soft cheek with his thumb. "Is it O.K. for me to do this?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Gito said, almost whispering. "I don't mind."

"You're so damned beautiful," Peter murmured, beginning to massage the slender neck.

Abruptly the boy pulled away and sat up on the edge of his bed, facing away from Peter. "Please don't do that, man. Let's just go get somethin' else

to drink. O.K.?”

Peter cleared his throat, fighting his anger and frustration. “Swell idea. Very good idea, indeed. You have brains as well as looks.” He stood up and started for the door. “Let’s go to the Estrella. Or the Troya — that’s not a bad place either.”

“They won’t serve me, man,” Gito remarked with an impatient mutter.

Peter stopped near the door to reconsider his plan. “Why do I always forget how young you are?” He paused another moment, staring at the boy, then opened the door. “Come on — we’ll get some wine at the Estrella and take it to that little park near the church. There’s a fountain there. It’s nice. I saw it today.”

The sun had set by the time they arrived at the park. The fountain, softly splashing in the darkness, was surrounded by a group of boys — two of them nimbly kicking a battered soccer ball back and forth. Peter, clutching a bottle in each hand, ambled across the grass to a bench near the fountain, then sat down with Gito.

“You ever play soccer?” he asked.

“No, man — where would I play soccer? Ain’t no room for that in the city.”

“I guess not.”

He handed one bottle to Gito, then guzzled from his own until he ran out of breath... glanced at the boy. “I’m really tight. Good ’n’ bloody tight! Salud!” He guzzled again. A dribble of wine ran down his chin; he wiped it away “So we came to Mexico for nothin’,” he muttered. “Chico’s gone, and I never even got to say good-bye. Damn! That just isn’t fair. It isn’t fair at all.”

“Aw, fuck Chico!”

“I did,” Peter laughed softly. “You didn’t know that, did you?”

Gito’s head snapped around. He opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind, then tried again. “Well... shit! Then fuck you, too!”

“Why the hell do you care, anyway?” Peter took another deep drink, spilling more wine down his chin. “He wanted me to do it, believe me. And you know what, kid...?” He paused to take another drink, then looked at the boy. “You know what? Every time I made love to Chico, I pretended it was you.”

Gito didn’t move.

“But you don’t care about that, right?” Peter guzzled again, then lowered the bottle, coughing. “Damn, I’m drunk!” He jabbed Gito’s arm with his

elbow. “You don’t care who I screw around with, do you? As long as it’s not you.”

He peered through the darkness at the boys near the fountain — and discovered them staring back. “You don’t give a shit what I do, right?” he mumbled, pulling a hundred peso bill from his pocket.

Gito glanced at him, but still did not answer.

Peter waved the money, nodding to a boy about Gito’s age. The boy stood up and sauntered forward. He was thin and wiry with long back hair plastered in sweaty strands across his forehead and ears. His dark green shorts were tattered and very snug, his white T-shirt slung across his neck like a boxer’s towel. He stepped in front of Peter and flashed a gap-toothed grin. “You want me?” he asked in Spanish, reaching down and fondling his own crotch.

Peter nodded, patting the bench. “Sit down, friend. Here, have some wine.” He handed him the bottle. “What’s your name, anyway?”

“Felipe,” the boy said between swigs from the bottle. He regarded Gito with a leery glance, then sat back, took another drink and wiped his mouth on his hand. “Go ahead and do it.” He spread his legs obligingly.

Peter slipped his hand inside the boy’s shorts, where he found the penis already half up, beginning to harden.

Felipe raised his hips. “Take my pants down,” he muttered in an urgent, breathless voice.

“Here?”

“Take them down,” he repeated, nodding. “Go ahead. Hurry up!”

Peter gripped the elastic band of the boy’s shorts in both hands and pulled them down to his dirty knees. Felipe’s penis flipped out stiff, twitching.

“Farther!” the boy said, his voice almost desperate. “Down farther.”

Peter slid the shorts to the boy’s ankles. Stripped clean to the skin, Felipe spread his legs wide. “Do it fast.” He took another hurried drink from the bottle, then set it beside him and slouched down further on the bench.

“Hurry up!”

Peter glanced at the other boys near the fountain, all of them lazing on the ground, chatting among themselves, and showing no interest in Felipe’s business.

“Come on!” the boy said, impatient almost to anger.

Peter ran his hand between the damp young thighs, then gripped the boy's hard penis and stroked it slowly. Squirming jaybird-naked on the bench, Felipe wiggled one foot free from his tangled shorts and propped his leg up on the bench, letting his thighs open even wider. Then, moaning something about his "eggs," he began fondling his testicles — drawn up as hard as two marbles in their sac. "Suck it!" he muttered, lifting his hips. "Go ahead, suck it quick before it comes out!"

Peter hesitated; drunk as he was, he still could not bring himself to perform so recklessly in public.

Felipe pushed Peter's hand away and grabbed his own erection. "Too late!" he groaned, turning his back to Peter and raising himself on one knee. He bent forward at the waist — his smooth scrotum, nestled between his thighs, just visible from the rear — and, with a final stroke of his fist, sent his semen spewing like ribbons of pearl onto the grass, his lean brown buttocks flexing with each spurt.

Grinning, he turned around and pulled up his shorts. "Sorry, but I didn't want it all over me." Then he started to kneel. "I'll do you now."

"No, don't bother." Peter handed him the money.

"O.K.," Felipe shrugged. "Thanks." He turned and jogged back to his friends. "See you later!"

Peter looked around; Gito was gone. Somehow, in the past few minutes, he'd slipped away. Peter leapt up, almost keeling over as he gained his feet, and started back to the hotel. After a few shaky steps, he turned to retrieve his wine, then thought better of it and hurried on his way.

The woman welcomed him from behind the desk when he returned to the Plata. She could hardly have mistaken his condition, but seemed unoffended, undisturbed, greeting him with a rather benevolent smile. "Your son is already upstairs," she said, handing Peter his key. "I let him in earlier. Is he well?" In a softer tone, she added, "He's such a handsome young boy!"

Peter tried to hide the slur in his speech. "He's fine, thank you." He held up the key, heading for the steps, smiling. "Thanks... thank you. We'll be fine."

Upstairs, he clumsily unlocked the door and stumbled into the dark room. "Gito?" he murmured, groping forward. "Are you here?" He managed to cross to the beds. "Gito?" he called again, a bit louder. He found the lamp and switched it on. The boy was already in bed, facing away from Peter; the

sheet was pulled as far up as it would stretch, nearly covering his head. His shirt, shoes, and socks were thrown in a pile on the floor.

Peter sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. "You O.K.?" He nudged the boy's hip.

Gito's shoulders lifted in a shrug.

"I'm sorry," Peter said quietly, trying to control the tremor in his voice. "I don't know what to say. I didn't want to hurt you, believe me." He paused, staring at the back of the boy's head. "Or maybe I did, I don't know. I'm no good at apologies, I guess. But I'm drunk, so at least I can speak my mind, which I couldn't do before 'cause I'm such a goddamned coward..."

He paused again; his hand, he noticed suddenly, was stroking Gito's hip. The boy still did not respond. Peter tried again. "What I'm saying is that I'm sorry, dammit, and I love you, Gito. You're mad now 'cause of that kid in the park, but that's nothing... less than nothing. Christ.... anyway, I'm sorry." He leaned down and said into the boy's ear: "And listen to this... I'm gonna say it again in case you missed it before... I love you, kid. Whether you like it or not, I love you! So there!"

Gito turned his head slightly. "It's O.K. Just forget it." There was no hint of emotion in his voice.

"I won't forget it." Peter rolled the boy onto his back. "If you're mad or hurt, then cuss me out or do something! But don't just lie there."

Gito put his arm across his face, covering his eyes. "I just wanna go home, that's all."

"Talk to me, Gito!"

"I just wanna go home," the boy whispered again, a tear trickling down his cheek. "Maybe to Pilon's or somewhere."

Peter watched him, wondering what to say or do. He wiped his own eyes and cleared his throat. "Maybe you're right," he said finally. "Maybe you should go back to Pilon's. Well, anyway... I'm sorry I couldn't help you the way I wanted. And I'm sorry if I screwed up your life more than it already was. But that's over and done with. So... I guess we'll leave tomorrow."

He wiped the boy's tear with his thumb. "Don't cry, pal. You'll be better off without an old drunk like me."

"I'm not cryin'," Gito said, rolling back onto his side.

"I just wish I understood you better. I wish I knew how to make you happy." Not quite sure of what he was doing or why he was doing it, Peter stretched out on the bed, wrapped his arms around Gito and kissed the boy on

the neck. "My little son," he whispered, smiling. "My boy. My beautiful Gito." He kissed the boy's bare shoulders.

"Don't!" Gito flexed his back. "It ain't right."

"Of course it's right," Peter mumbled, sliding his lips back and forth across the shoulders. He pulled back the sheet. Still wearing shorts, Gito curled himself tighter and cradled his knees.

"Take them off." Peter reached down to unbutton the shorts. "Please take them off."

Gito shook his head. "Not here, man. Not right now."

"But I gotta do something!" Peter groaned, pulling down his own trousers and undershorts. "I'm too damned worked up..." He pressed his penis against the boy's back and began sliding it up and down. "I need you," he breathed into Gito's ear. "I need you." Then, pumping faster against the smooth brown skin, he ejaculated. Feeling the semen splash onto his back, the boy flinched and let out a soft gasp.

Peter lay still against the boy, letting his breath return, then stood up and fetched a towel. "I won't touch you anymore," he said, wiping the boy's back. "I promise I won't do that again."

"I'm splittin' when I get home, man."

"I know."

"I just can't do what you want."

"I know," Peter said again. "I don't like forcing myself on you. I hate it. And I hate you, and I hate myself..." He threw the towel onto the floor. "And I'm done trying to get you to like me. To hell with the whole thing."

Gito pulled the sheet back over his body. "I'll split from the airport when we get home."

"Yeah, I think that's probably a good idea." Peter stumbled back and fell onto his bed. "To hell with the whole bloody thing..."

seventeen

Slumped on the couch in his apartment, Peter slowly stroked the stubble on his chin. First Chico. Then Gito... In one terrible week, he'd lost both.

As agreed, Gito had gone his own way from the airport, taking with him nothing but the clothes on his back and a twenty-dollar bill that Peter had hurriedly stuffed into the pocket of his jeans. There had been no farewell embrace. Not even a handshake. With downcast eyes and a mutter of "Catch you later, man," the boy had quickly disappeared into the crowd.

Peter stood up, wandered to the window, gazed out. There were the usual sounds of passing cars, shouting children. Everything was the same, day after day — as if Gito had never walked into the Figaro with his box of candy. Peter smiled, recalling the boy's bold refrain: "Want some candy, mister?"

He crossed to the door, unsure of his destination, knowing only that he had to go somewhere, do something. He refused to slide without a fight back into his old, deadly routine. He'd been brooding alone in his apartment nearly a week; now it was time to move on.

He walked downstairs, out into the street, forcing himself along step by step, one foot after the other. He came to the subway, where a pair of shoeshine boys reminded him suddenly of Pablito. (Cheerful little Pablito, lifting up his shirt: "It's O.K.?") Peter smiled, and walked on.

He wandered all afternoon through the hot, crowded streets, watching faces, bodies, gestures, expressions. He stopped once to sit on a bench and rest his feet, then resumed his trek, going nowhere, searching for nothing. Perhaps, vaguely, he hoped to encounter Gito — but he couldn't say for sure. His only clear purpose was movement away from a past he could no longer bear — away from loneliness, frustration, pain.

Finally, struggling with growing despair — a feeling of overwhelming hopelessness — he turned for home. Climbing on the subway, he again passed the shoeshine boys. This time one approached: a sturdy youngster

about twelve or thirteen, wearing a dirty white T-shirt, faded tan corduroy slacks and a Cubs baseball cap turned backwards on his shaggy mop of light brown hair. His nose, small and upturned, splashed with freckles, wrinkled in a smile. “I give the best shoeshines in the city.” he said, speaking in a rapid, nasal voice. He set down his box. “Only a quarter. Fifty cents for the deluxe job.”

Peter laughed. “That’s quite a bargain.”

“You bet it is!” There was something charmingly precocious — yet innocent — about his manner.

“Well, go ahead.” Peter lifted his foot onto the box... watched the crouching boy for a few moments before taking a ten-dollar bill from his pocket. He almost reconsidered and put the money back, then decided to plunge ahead — and let the consequences be damned.

“What do I get for this?” he asked, holding out the money for the boy to see.

The youngster looked up, betraying no surprise. Weighing his response, he glanced back down at the shoe, then up again. He spoke more quietly than before. “Where you wanna go?”

“My place?” Peter replied, not quite sure how to proceed.

“Yeah, that’s O.K.” The boy completed a hasty job on the shoes and stood up, smiling. “Let’s go. And I’m hungry, too. You got anything to eat? I’m really starved!”

A bit overwhelmed by the boy’s high spirits, Peter had to laugh. “Yeah, I have some food. Whatever you want.” Still laughing to himself, he led the youngster home.

“My name’s Willie,” the boy said, roaming around the apartment, inspecting every corner. “My ma calls me William when she’s pissed at me, and some guys call me Bill, but I like Willie the best, so that’s what you can call me.” He walked with a bounce, snapping his fingers, fairly seething with energy. Spotting the skin magazines on the bookshelf, he stopped and picked one up, then looked around with a delighted grin. “I like pictures like this, especially the ones with the naked ladies. I got some at home, too, and I use ‘em at night to jack off with, ’cause I can come now like my big brother.”

“You just like the ladies?” Peter asked, sitting against the back of the couch, watching the youngster.

“Sure! I ain’t funny. I mean, I like gettin’ my dick sucked by anybody, it don’t matter who, but I won’t suck cock or take it up the ass. So if that’s what you want, I’ll just split right now, ’cause I’m not into faggot stuff. Hey, you got anything to eat? I need some food real bad.” He flipped the magazine back onto the shelf and bounced into the kitchen.

Peter brought out salami, cheese and fruit. “Is this enough?”

“Yeah, it looks good.” Willie began eating cheese, pacing the kitchen.

“I’ll make you a sandwich,” Peter said, cutting the salami. “How late can you stay, Willie?”

The boy came back to the table for more cheese and shrugged. “As late as I want, really. My ma don’t care. I get to do whatever I want. What kinda cheese is this? It’s pretty good.”

“It’s provolone.” He handed the boy a sandwich. “It’s Italian cheese. You like it?”

“Yeah, it’s good. I like all kinds of food, though. Anything. I just like to eat, I guess.” Willie took a big bite of his sandwich, then continued pacing with a peppy little bounce. “So whatta you wanna do? Anything’s O.R., as long as it’s not kinky or somethin’ really weird.”

“You do this a lot?” Peter asked, still standing near the table, watching the boy roam round and round.

“Couple times. Once or twice. Not much. I ain’t a hustler or nothin’. But I like to have some fun, and I need the money, too. This sandwich is good. You got lots of good food here.”

“Thanks,” Peter laughed. “You’re a terrific dinner guest.” He pointed to the boy’s backward cap. “You like the Cubs?”

“Not much.” Willie popped the last bit of sandwich into his mouth. “My ma’s boyfriend gave it to me so that I’d like him better... but I still think he’s a prick.” He wiped his hands on his pants. “You ready to do somethin’? I can strip down.”

“That’s fine,” Peter said, not sure what he wanted from the youngster.

Willie sat down on the edge of the table and took off his shoes and socks.

“You going to undress in here?” Peter asked, more and more amazed by this boy’s impulsive behavior.

“Sure. I like to take my clothes off with somebody watchin’. Sometimes I get a hard-on just thinkin’ about bein’ bareassed with somebody lookin’ at me.”

“No kiddin’.”

Suddenly, Willie looked around at Peter with an odd, devilish grin. “You got a pool table?”

“No,” Peter laughed. “But there’s a Ping Pong table in the basement. I haven’t played in years, but I used to be pretty good.”

“I never played Ping Pong, but that’s O.K. Last week I was with some guy who had a pool table, and we played strip pool. But Ping Pong is O.K., too. Where is it? Can we use it? You wanna do that?”

“Strip Ping Pong? I don’t know... it’s not my basement. I mean, there could be other people from the building down there.”

“Well, let’s find out. And let’s take some food, too, ’cause I’m still kinda hungry.”

“Sure, O.K., I guess so,” Peter said, still uneasy, but determined to finish what he’d started. “Whatever you want is O.K. — like I said.” He put some fruit in a plastic bag.

The basement was empty. Peter flicked on the light and set the bag on a chair near the door. “We’re in luck,” he said, forcing a nervous grin.

Willie padded barefoot across the linoleum floor, stepped up to the Ping Pong table. “This is gonna be great! Come on, show me how to play.”

Peter picked up his paddle. “It’s pretty simple. You just hit the ball back and forth on one bounce, or on the fly, and the first player who gets to twenty-one wins. And, of course, I guess we’re adding your new rules, right?”

Willie, bouncing lightly on his toes, picked up his paddle and nodded. “Yeah — every three points, whoever loses has gotta strip. Go ahead.”

“O.K., boy, I’m gonna beat the pants off ya!” Peter snarled. He rolled his shoulders, took a deep breath, then served. The ball zipped past Willie, untouched.

“Wait a minute!” the boy laughed. “That’s too fast.” He retrieved the ball and tossed it back.

“Tough... now get ready.” Peter served again, sending the ball in a skidding blur past the youngster’s paddle.

“Come on!” Willie yelped, pounding the table and laughing harder. “Gimme a break!”

Peter picked up the ball bouncing near his foot. "O.K., this one is going to be a little slower." He cocked his arm. "Now get ready." This time, Willie managed to slap the ball back; it arced long and missed Peter's end of the table.

The boy set his paddle down. "O.K., I go first," rubbing his hands together. He unfastened his trousers, pulled them off, and threw them onto the floor. "O.K., let's keep goin'."

"I get two more serves, then it's your turn." Peter held up the ball. "Ready?"

"Yeah, yeah, come on," Willie said, grinning in only his cap, T-shirt, and underpants. "I'm ready."

Though he showed improvement, the boy lost the next two points, then sent the first of his serves bouncing into the net. "Well, my turn again!" he announced with a gleeful clap. He removed his cap, tugged off his T-shirt, then put the cap back on. "O.K., here goes!"

He sent a crisp serve over the net; easing up, Peter returned the ball gently. Gaining a feel for the game, Willie managed a nice rally before finally losing the point.

"You're gettin' there," Peter encouraged.

Bouncing around in his backward cap and underpants like a boxer waiting for the bell, Willie nodded in happy agreement, then served again — but carelessly, sending the ball skipping in a pitiful clip-clip into the net. "Nuts!" He grabbed the ball back... posed to serve again. "O.K., here it comes."

This time it was Peter's turn to be careless; with a sloppy, overconfident swing, he rifled the ball errantly past Willie's hip.

The boy whooped and threw up his arms. "Your turn to strip! Hah! I did it!"

Peter laughed, then shrugged and took off his shirt. "O.K.," picking up his paddle, "go ahead. You have one more serve."

Willie lost that point, as well as the next. He was a nimble boy, gaining skill with each rally, but he could never muster quite enough finesse to defeat his older, vastly more experienced opponent. Yet losing seemed to faze him not a bit, and his eager, cheerful grin never waned.

"It's ten to one, my favor," Peter said, bouncing the ball on the table.

Willie nodded. "Yeah, come on, I'm ready."

Peter drew back his paddle. “All right, here we go.” He served the ball sharply, caught a crisp return from Willie, then another, sent a lob back, then a low volley — and finally, with a skidding return that the boy could not quite handle, won the point.

“Nuts, nuts, nuts!” Willie cried, beating his fist on the table. He tossed down his paddle and looked up smiling. “This goes next, I guess” He threw his cap beside his T-shirt and pants, then glanced down at himself and snapped the elastic band of his underpants. “Not much left.”

“Not much.” Peter retrieved the ball from beneath the table. “I’ve got three more serves. Then it’s your turn again.”

Willie fought almost frantically for the next two points, but was terribly overmatched and lost them both. “Come on,” he said, grinning and bouncing. “Come on! One more!”

Peter cocked his arm and served. The boy snapped the ball back once, twice, again — then, trying for a winner, sent a low linedrive into the net. “Oh no!” he yelped, bending over and laughing.

“Go on, take them off.”

“O.K.,” the boy smiled, “here goes.” He gripped his underpants and, with a coquettish shimmy, peeled them slowly down to his knees. He pulled out one foot, then the other, letting the shorts drop to the floor. “Now I’m raw,” giggling as he ran his hands up and down his ribs. His small, thin penis was already partially erect, dangling at a crooked angle beneath his hairless belly.

“You want to keep playing?”

“Sure!” Willie said, still bouncing on his toes, his penis bobbing between his legs.

“Go ahead, then... serve.”

The boy nodded and whacked the ball across the net, then swung and missed as it flew back in a white blur.

“Aw, darn!” He turned to retrieve the ball, his little white butt jiggling as he loped across the room. Panting softly, he returned to the table with a very stiff penis. “I’m really gettin’ hard,” he grinned, staring down at himself. “I don’t think I wanna play any more. Here, watch me!” He cupped his scrotum and let it slide loosely around his palm. “You like my nuts?”

“Very nice,” Peter replied, feeling foolish.

“Keep watching me,” Willie said, massaging himself while walking slowly to the door. “I like it when you watch my dick.” He licked the fingers

of his free hand and smeared the saliva onto his erection, turning it a glistening red. At the door, he stooped and emptied the plastic bag, then carried it back across the room, his penis poking out straight and wagging with each step.

“O.K., now watch me,” glancing at Peter with a grin and climbing onto the Ping-Pong table. “Keep watchin’ what I do.” Kneeling, he began to masturbate himself with slow, easy strokes. He leaned back, rocking slightly at the knees, bouncing his ass up and down against his calves.

“I’m gonna come pretty soon,” he gasped. “Pretty soon... Now watch! Watch it come out!”

Peter wandered forward, nodding. “I’m watching,” he murmured.

Stroking faster, Willie arched his back, then grabbed the plastic bag and slipped it over his penis. “O.K., here it conies!” With a violent buck of his hips and a loud groan, he ejaculated into the bag.

“Did you see that?” he asked, trying to catch his breath.

“Yeah, I saw it.” Peter started collecting the youngster’s clothes.

Grinning proudly, Willie held up the bag, the pale ooze of his sperm pooled at the bottom. “Look at it... look at my stuff!” He was still kneeling on the table, his penis drooping skinny and red between his stark white thighs.

“Here you go, little friend.” Peter handed the boy his clothes. “I’ll take the bag.”

The youngster gave it to him. “Is that all you want me to do?” He climbed down off the table. “Don’t you want me to do anything else?”

“No, that’s plenty,” Peter said, holding the bag of Willie’s sperm.

“Well, O.K., if that’s what you want, then it’s O.K. by m e.” The boy pulled on his T-shirt, then his underpants and trousers. “I had a neat time, though. I really got my rocks off good. Did you like it?”

“Yeah, it was great. You were terrific.”

“You don’t look very happy.”

“I’m just fine.”

The boy picked up his baseball cap and pulled it down on his head. “I need my shoes and socks, then I’ll go.”

“Yeah, fine,” Peter said, following Willie to the steps. He paused, tossed the plastic bag into a garbage can near the door, then continued upstairs.

eighteen

Peter finished his meal at the diner, grabbed two mints from the bowl near the cash register, then headed for home. He'd been eating out almost every day for a month, having no energy — or desire — to prepare his own meals. Eating, like everything else, had become a series of motions, a matter of mechanics, a method of staying alive from day to day. Nothing more, nothing less.

He paused on the stoop outside his building. Two boys were playing catch nearby on the sidewalk. Peter watched them for a moment, then turned away and continued up the steps.

Wondering how to kill time until bed, he unlocked his apartment door and stepped inside. He threw his keys onto the table, and froze.

Gito was on the couch.

“What the... ! Gito! What are you doing here?”

The boy — still wearing his old red T-shirt and jeans — held up his apartment key. “I let myself in, man. Hope you don't mind.”

“I forgot you had a key,” Peter said. “I can't believe you're here!” He stepped toward the couch, waiting for Gito to say something more. But the boy just shrugged and looked away. “Why are you here? I mean, I'm glad to see you, of course — but I thought you were gone... for good.”

“I forgot my hat.”

“Your hat?”

“Yeah, man, my hat!” the boy said. “I came back to get my hat, 'cause I forgot it here. You know... my red one.”

“I know, I know.” He sat next to Gito. “The stocking cap is still in the bedroom, with your other clothes.”

“You kept my stuff, man?” the boy asked, grinning ever so slightly. “All of it?”

Peter laughed softly. “Yeah, all of it. You left your jacket, too.”

“Yeah, I know.” Gito's faint grin vanished. He seemed to hesitate, then stood up. “So I guess I'll take my hat and split. And I'll take my other stuff,

too, if I can.”

Peter went into the bedroom, brought out the clothes to Gito. The boy seemed to hesitate once more, then took them and turned to leave.

“You want a beer or something?” Peter asked. The boy stopped. “Maybe something to eat? A sandwich? You hungry?”

Gito shrugged and turned back, his clothes against his chest. “I guess a beer would be O.R. But then I gotta go, man.” He returned to the couch.

Peter brought back the beer, handed one to Gito and sat down. “So what’ve you been doing?”

The boy swallowed several times, then lowered the can from his lips. “Not much, man. Just the usual crap. Stayin’ with Pilon and some other guys. Smokin’ grass and gettin’ high...”

“You don’t sound very happy about it.”

“Oh, I’m O.R., man. Ain’t no problem.” He chugged the rest of his beer and held up the can. “You got any more?”

Peter brought him another.

After his fourth beer, the boy rolled his shoulders and let out a long sigh. “Hey, I heard about Chico the other day,” he said, looking at Peter.

“You did?”

“Yeah. He’s still in Mexico with his mama and daddy.” He shook his head, grinning. “Man, I never thought they’d stay together so long.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s O.K.,” Peter said, still wondering exactly why Gito had returned. “That’s good news.” He couldn’t quite believe the boy’s story about coming for his hat. “You want another beer?”

“I don’t know, man. I should probably get goin’.”

“You could have just one more,” Peter smiled.

“Yeah, maybe just one more is O.K.” Gito crossed his ankles and slumped a bit lower in his seat.

“The last one!” Peter announced, handing another beer to Gito. He sat down. “So where are you staying tonight?”

“Pilon’s, I guess.”

“You ever see your uncle anymore?”

“Naw, man, never.” The youngster took a long drink, then shook his head. “Those were bad days, man. I shouldn’t never have gotten messed up with that dude. Those were really bad days.”

“I’m glad you came here that first time, when you were hurt.”

“Really, man?”

“You still don’t realize how I feel about you, do you?”

Gito guzzled more beer, spilling a bit onto his T-shirt. “Yeah, I think maybe I do,” he said, resting the can on his leg. He started to say more, then reconsidered and finished his beer in two gulps. “I guess I should go, man.” He got up. “Shit, I’m really loaded.”

“It’s pretty late to be going all the way back to Pilon’s,” Peter said. “You want to sleep here on the couch?” He patted the cushion. “Just like old times.”

Stooping to collect his clothes, Gito straightened up. “Well, I don’t know, man. I should get goin’. I just came to get my hat is all.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s late. I think you should stay here — just for tonight.”

“Yeah, maybe that would be O.K.,” Gito nodded. “I’m feelin’ pretty loaded. Then I can go tomorrow.”

“If you want to,” Peter said, standing up beside Gito. “You’re welcome to stay, of course — as always. But it’s up to you.”

“I should go tomorrow.”

Peter shrugged. “Well, whatever you want...” He stood for a moment staring at the boy, then touched his shoulder. “It’s good to see you again. I missed you.”

“Yeah,” Gito murmured, shifting slowly from foot to foot.

Peter folded the boy in his arms, pressing his cheek against the soft black curls. “I’m sorry about Mexico,” he whispered. “And I’m sorry about Chico and about everything else I’ve screwed up. I missed you so damn much!”

“That’s O.K.,” Gito mumbled against Peter’s shoulder, his arms hanging awkwardly at his side. “It ain’t no big deal.”

“You little punk!” Peter laughed, giving the boy a quick kiss on the forehead. He released him and stepped back. “Well, good-night then. Sleep well.”

Still smiling, he headed for bed.

nineteen

Why had the boy come back?

Trying all night to make some sense of Gito's visit, Peter slept fitfully, rising well before his usual hour. The boy had insisted all along — with apparent justification — that he was not gay. So why had he returned? What did he want? He'd offered no resistance to Peter's embrace, nor to his quick, innocent kiss. But, of course, that meant nothing. Nothing at all. Peter was as baffled as ever.

In the living room Gito was still asleep, flat on his back, one arm flung across his face, the other dangling off the side of the couch. Peter knelt down and brushed a hand across Gito's smooth, downy cheek. With a soft moan the boy uncovered his face and blinked up at Peter. "What's goin' on?"

"It's morning."

The youngster stretched and yawned. "Yeah... I guess I should get goin'."

Peter continued stroking the boy's cheek. "Why don't you stay for a while. Maybe we could do something today."

"I don't know, man."

"It would mean a lot to me, Gito. Please stay for a while. At least for today."

"What would we do, man... if I stayed?"

"Whatever you want," Peter said, moving his finger gently across the boy's lips.

Gito lay very still. "Well, like what?"

"How about the beach? You liked that, remember?"

"Yeah, that was O.K."

"Then it's settled. We'll go there." Still running his finger back and forth over the boy's soft lips, Peter rested his other hand on Gito's stomach. "We'll leave after breakfast." He moved his hand in slow circles, waiting for the usual rebuff — but the boy didn't stir a muscle, didn't say a word.

"Please don't leave me again," Peter murmured.

Gito's breath quickened. He sat up, shaking his head and grinning. "That's enough, man." Gently, he pushed Peter's hand away. "Not now." Pie swung his feet to the floor. "We should get somethin' to eat, man."

"Yeah, right." Peter stood up, feeling more unsure than ever of the boy's intentions. "We'll get some breakfast, then hit the road."

Gito stood with a hand on his hip, surveying the crowded beach. "There's a lot more people here than before."

"That was in April," Peter replied, spreading the blanket. "This is July. There's a big difference."

"Yeah, I guess. But I don't dig lots of people."

"I know... I remember."

"Well..." The boy shrugged. He took off his shirt and shorts. Wearing his skimpy red trunks, he jogged into the water.

After only a brief frolic in the surf, he returned to the beach. Puffing, shaking water from his arms, he ran to the blanket and dropped to his knees beside Peter. "That's enough."

"You're done?"

"Yeah, man, I don't feel like doin' no more. At least not now."

"You tired?"

"No, man, not tired," Gito said, resting on his haunches and gazing out over the beach. "I just feel weird." Gnawing on his bottom lip, he glanced around at Peter with an odd, troubled expression.

"You want to say something?"

"No, I guess not..."

"Go on." Peter smiled, touching the boy's wet knee. "You've been quiet all day, thinking about something. What is it?"

Gito took a deep breath. "I don't know! That's just it, man. I feel so fuckin' weird, but I don't know what's wrong!" He looked away. "Or I guess maybe I do. I mean I been doin' lots of thinkin' since gettin' back from Mexico, 'cause I feel real bad about what happened — about everything. And I wanted to come back — to your place, I mean — but it was like I was scared or somethin'. It was like I couldn't."

He paused and shakily drew in breath, struggling against his emotion. "I wanted to come back to see you, but I couldn't, so I just stayed away and

kept smokin' grass and doin' shit like that all day. But I wanted to come back..."

"You shouldn't have been afraid, Gito."

The boy looked quickly around at Peter. "But I was, man, and I still am! I don't wanna be no dirty faggot! It ain't right!"

Trying to understand precisely what Gito had just said, Peter continued staring at the boy, then threw back his head and laughed. "I can't believe it! I just can't believe it!"

"What you think is so funny?" Gito watched Peter laughing, then wiped his eyes and grinned.

"You, dammit! You and your queers and faggots." Peter laughed again, then threw a handful of sand at Gito. "After all this time! You're such a goddamned hardheaded little punk — making me wait all these months... I should strangle you!"

"You makin' fun of me, man?" Gito muttered, trying unsuccessfully to suppress his grin.

"Of course I am!" Peter tossed more sand at the youngster. "How can I resist?"

"Stop it, chump!" Gito laughed, swatting the sand away.

Peter stood up. "Come on." He tugged the blanket from under the boy. "I know a better place than this."

Gito sprang to his feet. "What kinda better place, man?"

Peter tucked the blanket under his arm and started up the beach. "Just a little way from here." He quickened his pace. "Hey, let's get some ice cream. You want some?"

"Yeah, sure."

They bought their cones at a nearby stand, then headed for a hill behind the beach. Peter rushed up the pebbly slope and was first to the top. "Here we are!" he called out, turning to survey the view.

The boy climbed up beside him. "There ain't nobody here."

"There never is. It's too scrubby up here for most people, and too far from the water." Holding up his ice cream cone, he spread the blanket with his other hand and sat down.

"They're meltin'," Gito said, sitting down next to Peter and licking the stray dribbles of ice cream from his hand.

"You have to eat it faster."

Gito smiled as more ice cream melted onto his hand and dribbled down his wrist.

“Here, let me do it,” Peter laughed. He leaned over and licked the boy’s arm. “Now do mine.”

Gito started to shake his head.

“Come on!” Peter poked the boy’s chest. “Quit being a hardheaded punk.”

Gito hesitated, then, with a sheepish grin, bent down and licked the ice cream off Peter’s arm.

“I’m still hungry.” Peter held out his cone and let it drip onto the youngster’s stomach. He leaned down and licked the skin clean.

Needing no encouragement, Gito returned the favor, then dropped his cone to the ground and leaned back against his elbows as Peter drizzled ice cream onto his thighs. “I don’t know, man...” he murmured, his breath quick and shallow. “Maybe you shouldn’t.”

Peter licked the bare thighs, tasting slight saltiness mingled with the sweetness of the ice cream. “You want me to stop?” He paused for just an instant. There was no answer. “I’ll stop if you want.”

“I don’t know...” was all Gito said, leaning back on his elbows, breathing more rapidly.

Peter lowered his head and resumed lapping the smooth, lean flesh of Gito’s thighs, sliding his tongue higher and higher toward the crotch. He could smell the boy’s pungent, sweaty odor as he licked along the soft crease of the groin — first across one leg, then the other, back and forth, letting his tongue roam up onto the cool, slippery elastic.

“That’s enough, man,” Gito mumbled, his voice dry, hoarse.

Peter sat up. “I’ve heard that before, but I don’t believe it. Not anymore.” He stretched out and took the boy in his arms. “You feeling better?”

“Feelin’ weird, man,” Gito said with a chuckle. “It just ain’t right to screw around with another guy.”

“Says who?”

“Says everybody, man.”

“Well, then, to hell with everybody!” Peter said, tracing circles with his finger around one of the boy’s small brown nipples. “Quit trying to please everybody else. You’ll never be happy that way, believe me.”

“I don’t know, man, maybe you’re wrong. Maybe I shoulda stayed at Pilon’s. Maybe I should go back.”

“If you say ‘should’ once more I’ll choke you,” Peter said. He rolled on top of the boy, pinning his shoulders. “Now tell me you won’t leave again! Come on!”

Laughing, Gito thrashed beneath Peter’s weight. “Aw, man, gimme a break!”

“Come on, Gito, promise me you won’t leave again,” Peter said, his smile fading. “I can’t stand it when you’re gone.”

The youngster stopped thrashing and stared up into Peter’s face. “Did you really miss me, man?”

“Yeah, I really did.”

“I guess I kinda missed you, too.”

“No kiddin’.” Peter touched his lips to Gito’s. “I love you so damned much...”

A child’s voice called out suddenly from beneath the hill.

“Somebody’s cornin’, man,” Gito said softly.

Peter rolled off him. “I guess we should go.” Short of breath, he looked at Gito. They exchanged a smile. “You ready?”

The boy sat up and nodded. “Yeah, I guess.” Giggling, he looked down between his legs. “I think I got a hard-on.”

“I think that’s a safe bet.” Peter stood, pulling the boy up with him. “Come on, let’s go.”

Gito pulled on his shirt and shorts, then followed Peter to the car. Riding home, his old doubts resurfaced; he became increasingly agitated. “This whole thing is too fuckin’ weird, man.”

“Relax.”

“I can’t relax, man! I know you’re gonna start hasslin’ me about school and all that other crap soon as I move back in... if I move back in.”

“We’ll worry about that later,” Peter said, every bit as unsure of the future as Gito, but determined to make a go of it. He glanced around at the boy. “Besides, school’s not so bad, really. I mean, you like history, right? And you could even take one of my music classes next year.”

“Really? I could be in your class, man?”

“Sure, I think so. Anyway, we’ll work it out. But the important thing is being together, right?”

“I guess so.” Gito looked back out the window. “It’s just that I feel so weird, man, and so mixed up. Everything’s cornin’ down so fast.”

“Don’t worry, pal, we’ll take it slow. There’s no rush...”

Peter threw his keys on the table near the door. “What do you want for supper?”

“Anything’s O.K.,” the boy said, crossing swiftly to the bedroom to change his clothes.

“It should be something special,” Peter remarked, more to himself than to Gito... then shouted into the other room. “I’ll make your favorite spaghetti, with my special dago chicken.” Smiling, he hurried into the kitchen to start dinner.

When he returned to the living room, Gito was already on the couch, wearing his jeans and T-shirt and smoking a joint. “Everything will be ready in about an hour.” Peter sat down next to the boy. “I wish you wouldn’t smoke so much.”

“Don’t start, man.”

“O.K., O.K.,” holding up his hand. “I know you don’t like being hassled, but that’s how I feel. You’re too young to be getting high every day.” He watched the boy for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, maybe you won’t need it when you’re living here.”

“Who says I’m stayin’?” Gito asked, smoke puffing out of his lips as he spoke.

“Oh right, I forgot, you just came back for your hat.”

“Don’t make fun of me, man!”

“Sorry... but really, Gito, you do want to stay, don’t you?”

“I don’t know, man! Sometimes I guess I do, but then I think about all the welfare shit and about school, and then I just don’t know anymore.”

“You’re making too much of all that...”

“But I like bein’ here,” Gito continued, not hearing Peter. He threw the roach into the ashtray. “When I’m at Pilon’s, all I think about is bein’ here with you. I mean I even have dreams at night, like all the time, about bein’ here, and about the time we went fishin’, and about other stuff we did together.” He looked around at Peter. “It’s so different here than anywhere

else I been. I don't know why, man, but it is. I just really like it. And I like bein' with you."

Peter put his arm around Gito's shoulders and pulled him close. "Then you don't want to leave."

"No, man, I don't wanna leave, but it's like maybe I should."

Peter grabbed the boy's head in the crook of his arm and pinned it against his chest "I warned you about saying 'should' again!" he yelled, tickling the boy beneath the arms. "Now you're in trouble!"

Writhing with laughter, Gito managed to pull his head free, then fell back against the arm of the couch. Peter moved against him. "Kiss me," he whispered, brushing Gito's lips with his own. "Please." He felt between the boy's legs, coaxing a hard bulge to swell beneath the denim, all the while pressing his lips against the warm young mouth. "I want to make love to you," he murmured, almost panting, rubbing vigorously across the front of Gito's pants. "Now... I want to see you naked... now."

Gito squirmed, "I don't know."

"You want me to make love to you?" Peter asked, kissing the boy's neck.

"I don't know," Gito moaned. "Maybe..." He reached up slowly and touched Peter's shoulder. "Maybe," sliding his hand across Peter's back.

"I won't force you," Peter murmured, kissing the boy's cheek. "I promise." He slid his lips down the jaw, felt a rumbling in Gito's throat like the purring of a kitten... nibbled at the soft flesh beneath the chin, licked up against the cheek, onto the mouth. The boy's lips — moist, faintly sweet, like the juicy pulp of a fruit — began sliding against his own in an eager kiss. He pushed his tongue into Gito's mouth, licked the slick teeth, tasting warm saliva. The boy purred louder as their tongues touched and swirled, their lips sliding together in wet, hungry chews.

"Tell me, Gito... tell me what you want."

"I want you to do it," the boy said, fighting for breath. "I want you to do it."

Peter stood up, lifted the youngster in his arms and carried him to the bedroom. Holding onto Peter's neck, Gito let out a startled, husky giggle.

Peter set the boy gently on the bed. "I won't hurt you," he said, brushing his fingers across the boy's soft cheek. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Still trying to catch his breath, Gito nodded. "I guess so... yeah, I do... I'm sure I do."

Peter reached down and untied Gito's shoes, pulled them off and set them on the floor. He peeled off one sock, then the other, and tossed both next to the shoes.

"I've wanted to see you for so long," he said, taking hold of the bottom of Gito's T-shirt and sliding it up over his chest, his shoulders, his outstretched arms.

"The food's gonna burn, man," Gito said with a tense, breathless laugh.

"Let it," Peter grinned. He unfastened the button on the boy's jeans, slid down the zipper. "You O.K.?"

Gito clutched at the pillow behind his head and nodded.

Peter tugged off the boy's jeans. Gito's underpants were sticking straight up at the crotch. "I got a real boner, man," he giggled, gazing down at himself.

"A real beauty." Peter hooked his fingers beneath the elastic of the boy's underpants and slid them off. Freed from the tight shorts, Gito's penis sprang out stiff, red, twitching.

Squirming lean and naked on the bed, the boy raised his knees higher and spread his legs. "Go ahead," he groaned, "do more. Hurry up and do more!"

Working slowly, Peter slid his tongue up and down the underside of the boy's erection, then took it in his mouth, feeling it slide warm and hard between his lips. Gripping Gito's bucking hips, he swirled his tongue around, savoring the boy's slightly tart, slightly salty taste, then sucked more vigorously as Gito's hips began pumping, drawing the slippery penis back and forth in his mouth.

"Here... I'm gonna come!" the boy whined, thrusting his hips faster and faster.

Letting the saliva-slick penis slip from his lips, Peter watched as Gito stiffened his back and squeezed out spurt after spurt of pearly semen onto his flat brown belly. He quickly took the penis back into his mouth, catching a final squirt of warm sperm — citrus mixed with cream — against the back of his throat. Licking and swallowing, Peter kept the erection in his mouth until Gito had milked himself dry; then he raised his head and began lapping up the thick dribbles of semen oozing along the boy's stomach.

"You don't gotta do that, man," Gito giggled.

Peter looked up and grinned, the boy's nutty flavor still sharp on his tongue. "I want every drop of you."

Gito swung himself out from beneath Peter. "I'm gonna get cleaned up," he said, scuttling to the bathroom. He returned quickly, wiping his belly with a towel. His penis was soft now, nestled no larger than a child's thumb beneath its small bush of glossy black pubic hair. Still glistening with its own juice, it waggled as he walked. Tossing the towel to the floor, the boy crawled back into bed and snuggled against Peter. "That was pretty great. I came really fast."

"You liked it?"

"Yeah, man, I guess I did — a whole lot."

"I'm glad." Peter smiled, sliding his hand in slow circles around the boy's smooth buttocks.

"I like it when you play with my ass. I always did even the first time."

"I know. I remember."

"You want me to do you know? I will if you want."

"We have plenty of time for that." Peter pressed his lips against the boy's cheek. "Promise me you won't leave again."

"I guess so, man."

"We'll work things out," Peter whispered, nibbling at the boy's ear.

"We'll be fine."

"I just don't know." The boy laughed softly. "It's kinda crazy."

"Yeah, it is." Peter said, brushing his lips across Gito's in a gentle kiss.

The boy nuzzled closer. "We must be nuts, man."

"Yeah," Peter smiled, "we must be."