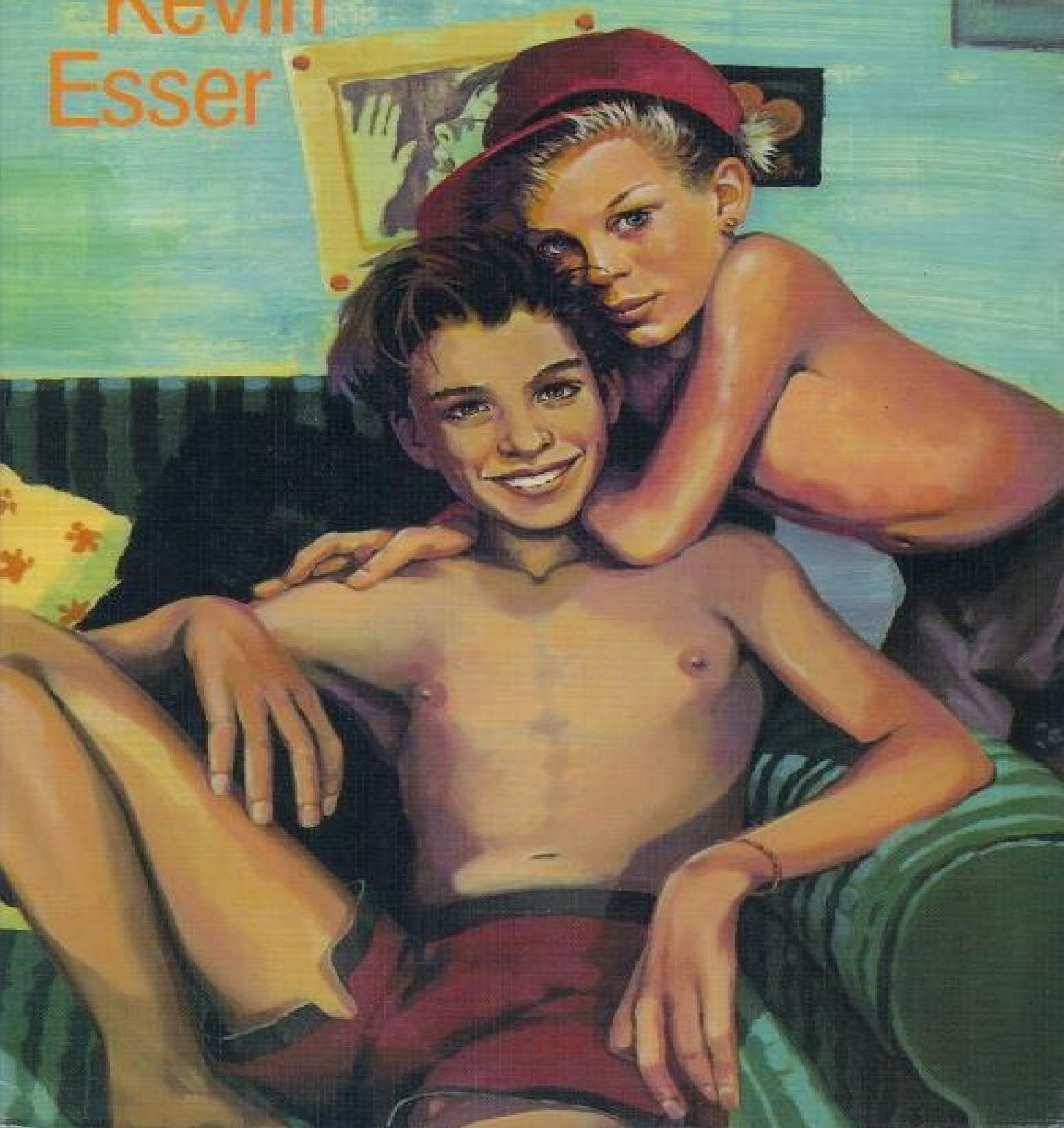


SOMETHING LIKE HAPPINESS

Kevin
Esser



Something Like Happiness

Kevin Esser

eBook by the Ghost

© 1993 by The Acolyte Press
Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel
First Edition published May, 1993

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Cover design and painting by Huibert Krolis

The Acolyte Press
P. O. Box 12731
1100 AS Amsterdam
The Netherlands

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLUKE BIBLIOTHEEK,
DEN HAAG

Esser, Kevin

Something Like Happiness / Kevin Esser. -
Amsterdam: The Acolyte Press
ISBN 90-6971-046-3
Trefw.: romans ; oorspronkelijk – Engels.

For
Luis Miguel Fuentes,
my angel of inspiration,
with love and devotion,
forever

1

Andy had the two things he needed: a razor blade and a notebook. The whole thing was making him feel nervous, and even a little guilty, but he had to do it. He needed the picture, and there was no other way to get it.

It was a great picture, the best one he'd ever found in the library. That was his new pastime, his new way of killing some of the empty hours of summer vacation: hunting through the university library for pictures of boys. Old issues of *National Geographic* were good, as were photography journals and anthropology books; but art books were the best, especially the big oversized ones with plenty of color plates; and whenever Andy found a really spectacular picture, he just had to have it. He didn't like razoring the pages; he had a lot of respect for books, and he didn't like damaging them; but there was no other choice. Andy was just a high school kid, only fourteen years old, which meant that he didn't have any borrowing privileges at the library; if he wanted something, he had to take it for himself.

The library was cool, and it was very quiet, especially now, in mid-August, when all the college kids were away for the summer. The woman at the circulation desk smiled at Andy as he passed her on his way to the stairs; he came in nearly every day, so he was a familiar visitor by now. Besides that, the woman probably thought he was cute, a nice young boy who liked books and who stayed out of trouble. It seemed, to Andy, that he had always been able to charm adults, especially women, just by smiling and looking innocent. They could never imagine what was happening inside his head.

He went upstairs to the shelves of oversized art books and quickly pulled down the big green volume that had *Caravaggio* printed on the spine in fancy gold letters. He took it to one of the private study carrels, feeling less nervous than before. There was only one other patron upstairs with him, just some old guy reading the *Wall Street Journal*. No problem, no threat. Andy settled himself into his carrel and opened the book. He flipped to the picture he wanted. It was called "Victorious Amor," and it showed a winged, naked boy looking back at him with a big flirty grin. Andy knew that the boy was Cupid, of course. He had seen dozens of paintings of the same god in other books – but never one like this, not even close. This was an actual boy, just like himself, as realistic and sexy as a photograph. It was almost like kiddie porn, Andy thought to himself with a dark, secret thrill; he wondered if Caravaggio had gotten into trouble with the cops for painting it, and he wondered why the library was allowed to own a copy of it. More than ever, Andy knew that he had to have it.

He took the razor blade from the pocket of his khaki shirt, slipped it out of its plastic sheath and went to work. There was something oddly satisfying about the blade slicing through the heavy paper, nice and neat and clean. A few seconds, and then the job was done. Andy took a moment to savor the picture in his hand. He liked Cupid's dick most of all. It was the uncut kind, different from his own, the kind of dick that Andy had seen on Mexican kids in gym class. In fact, Cupid actually looked like a Mexican kid, which was an extra turn-on for Andy. Something about their dark skin and hair and eyes was especially exciting to him. Sometimes he went to the park across town just to watch them play soccer. He usually recognized two or three of them from his own class at school. Manny Fuentes was one of them – a cute,

curly-haired boy whom Andy often fantasized about while masturbating. Just thinking about him now was enough to make Andy a little bit hard.

The boy decided to leave. He slipped the picture of Cupid carefully into his notebook and returned the razor blade to his pocket, then took the big book back to its shelf. Was the old man watching him from behind his *Wall Street Journal*? Suddenly, Andy thought so. He put the book away quickly and headed for the stairs. He could feel the man watching him; he was sure of it now. People were always watching him.

He stopped at the top of the stairs and glanced back. The old man was folding his newspaper, apparently ready to leave. Andy stayed where he was and waited, a risky new idea suddenly occurring to him. He was getting hard again inside his camouflage pants. He was, basically, a danger junkie. Shoplifting, razoring pages from library books – little things like that turned him on, gave him a nice adrenaline rush - like now, waiting at the stairs for the old man to approach him and say something. At the park, when Andy was watching the Mexican boys, men sometimes came over to him and tried to strike up awkward, uneasy conversations. Andy knew, without having to be told, what they wanted from him. He never went with any of them, but it was a kick anyway, having that kind of power over a bunch of grown men.

But this time was different. The old man obviously wasn't interested in playing any of Andy's games. In fact, he seemed genuinely nervous as he approached, concerned that this boy in his path might be looking for some type of trouble. Andy stepped aside and let him go, feeling suddenly foolish. Maybe he wasn't such a hot item after all.

Downstairs, he gave the woman behind the desk one of his innocent choirboy smiles. He was clutching the notebook tightly in his left hand. As he exited through the security gate, he half-expected to hear an alarm go off behind him. But nothing happened; no sound broke the silence of the library. It was a fact, and Andy had learned the truth of it by now, that you could get away with just about anything if you were clever enough and determined enough. Parents and teachers wanted you to believe otherwise – that bad deeds were always discovered and punished – but it just wasn't true, it was a lie.

The hot August air hit the boy as he stepped outside. He wished now that he had worn shorts instead of long pants. Maybe later he would go to Lake Swanson and hang out at the beach. Or he might just stay home and watch the baseball game on TV. The Cubs were playing the Mets, so it might be a game worth watching – as long as his little sisters weren't around to bother him.

But first, Andy decided to stop at Red Dog Comix for the latest issue of *Dreadstar*. On his bike, it took him only a couple of minutes to get there. Sandburg was a good-sized Midwestern city, but still small enough to negotiate quickly and easily by bicycle, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes from one edge of town to the other. Andy had barely broken a sweat when he got to the shop. Still carrying his notebook with him, he went inside and started inspecting the shelves. "It's not in yet," the manager yelled to him. There were no other customers in the shop, and the man behind the counter looked and sounded vaguely bored. "*Dreadstar*, right?"

"Yeah, number forty-three."

"It's not in yet, it's late."

"I know," Andy said, "I've been looking all week."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"I guess I'll come back."

"Try in the afternoon, you might get lucky."

Andy nodded, and then felt the Cupid picture slipping from his notebook. He grabbed for it, but it fell free before he could catch it. The manager leaned forward over his counter to get a look at it. He was a

big man with an unruly bush of red hair, a droopy red mustache and alert blue eyes. He grinned when he saw the picture. "Eros," he said, nodding. "Right?"

Andy mumbled, "No, it's Cupid," as he snatched it up. His face was burning.

"Same thing. Eros, Cupid, whatever. Like Jupiter and Zeus, you know? Same thing."

"I didn't know that."

"You learn something every day," the manager said. He had a loud, intense voice – not unpleasant, just big, like the rest of him. "It's a nice picture, anyway. The god of love. Very artistic."

Andy put it back into his notebook. "It's just a picture... from my school."

"Summer school?"

"Yeah, it's like an art class."

"That's interesting, man."

Andy was wondering whether or not he should continue embellishing his lie when the door opened abruptly behind him. Two younger boys hurried into the shop and greeted the manager with excited, out-of-breath shouts. "We need the bathroom, Red," they both informed him, calling him by name. There was an apartment above the shop where Red lived, and it was common knowledge among neighborhood kids that the bath-room was always available for use. The kitchen was also available – for water, for soda, for snacks – which made Red just about the most popular guy on the block. Andy, not being from the neighborhood, was still learning about the many attractions of Red Dog Comix.

Outside, back in the midday heat, Andy felt sorry all over again that he hadn't worn shorts. As he climbed onto his bike, he took a parting glance back through the front window of the shop. Red was saying something to the two boys. They all laughed, and then the boys ran upstairs to Red's apartment.

Andy swung his bike around and started towards home.

2

Safe in his bedroom, Andy took the Cupid picture from his notebook and added it to his collection, which he kept in a cardboard box beneath his bed. It was nearly full by now with pictures of Menudo and River Phoenix and Wil Wheaton; with naked *National Geographic* boys from Africa and Brazil and New Guinea; with nudes by photographers like Eakins and Weston and artists like Michelangelo and, now, Caravaggio. It was a good collection; it was Andy's treasure. Once, a few months ago, his mother had found it and confronted him with it, barely able to control her usual hysteria. Where had it all come from, she wanted to know? Where had he gotten so many pictures? And why were they all of boys? What did *that* mean? He *did* like girls, didn't he? Andy had stammered something about an art class (always a convenient answer), insisting that he wanted to be an artist and that he needed pictures to use as models and guides. And then he had gotten angry and yelled a few indignant words about his right to privacy. His mother, grudgingly, had backed off. His father, watching the lotto results on TV, hadn't said a word. As always, he seemed to handle things better than his wife. If Andy didn't like girls... well, that was that, and you just had to accept it. He never actually came out and said so, not in those words, but that was his normal attitude toward any problem: relax, don't fight it, just shrug it off and go on with your life.

Andy had never heard any more about the matter from either of his parents: not about the pictures, and not about his suspicious lack of interest in girls. It was a dead issue, at least for now, too awkward and precarious for any of them to explore more fully. That was just fine with Andy. There was no way he could have explained himself, or his feelings, to his parents. No way. The things inside his head were too crazy and complicated even for Andy himself to understand. Anyway, he wasn't really *gay*, not like

the sissy queer guys you saw on TV and in the movies. He just liked to look at naked boys, that was all.

With Cupid securely stashed away, Andy went out to the living room to watch the baseball game on television. It was still only three o'clock, too early for his father to be home from his job at the post office. His mother was in her bedroom, probably reading the latest Danielle Steele or Harold Robbins, hiding until dinnertime. She was spending more and more time lately in her room, less and less time with her family and friends – afraid, sometimes, to even leave the house. Andy felt sorry for her. She seemed so unhappy. “It's just some kind of female thing,” Andy's father always shrugged. “Don't bother her, she'll be all right.” Andy wasn't so sure. She seemed disturbed in some seriously unhealthy way. The whole house felt gloomy because of her. Andy was always glad to get out and get away.

Across the room, his two little sisters, Jenny and Rachel, were playing with their Barbie Dream House. After a moment, Andy yelled at them to shut up or get out. They yelled back at him that he definitely was not *their* boss; Andy yelled even louder for them to shut up or get out; at which point the girls gave up and left, taking their doll house with them and sticking their tongues out at their brother as they stomped away. Andy, in all honesty, couldn't blame them for being pissed off. He probably shouldn't have yelled at them. But lots of times lately he seemed to lose his temper for no good reason, especially with his sisters. They drove him insane. Often, like now, he just wanted to be left alone.

He was lying on the couch, trying to concentrate on the baseball game in front of him. The Cubs were losing to the Mets, but Andy wasn't even sure of the score. His mind kept wandering to other things – to things like the start of school in two weeks, and what he was going to wear, and who might be in his gym class. Maybe he would be with Manny Fuentes this year, for the first time. Or maybe with Timmy Jenco, who was a hot-shot stud on the track team, probably the most popular boy in Andy's class. Every girl at Sandburg High loved his cinnamon red hair and his freckles and his naughty green eyes. And so did Andy. He had flirted once with the idea of joining the track team just to get a glimpse of Timmy in the locker room. With any luck, he might finally get that glimpse (and a lot more) in another two weeks.

Manny Fuentes and Timmy Jenco in the same gym class, in the same locker room – that would be Andy's idea of heaven. He had his eyes shut, picturing it. All of them together in the shower. Andy let his imagination play with the possibilities. He rolled onto his stomach and pressed himself against the cushions. It seemed that he spent nearly all of his time anymore with a boner inside his pants. Jerking off helped for a while, but then it was back, harder than ever. Like now. Andy looked around, toying with the notion of doing it right there, right on the couch, but then quickly decided against it. If his mother had walked in and seen him, she would have dropped dead, absolutely stone-cold dead. Better to play it safe and take care of business upstairs, in the safety of his own room.

He didn't even slow down to turn off the television on his way out.

Andy's radio suddenly woke him up. It was a song by Kris Kross, and the words “jump, jump” were pounding in his head. He was on his bed, in his underwear, with the late afternoon sun slanted across his bare legs. It took him a few groggy moments to orient himself, to remember coming up to his room to masturbate and take a nap. He roused himself a little further with a yawn and a stretch, aware now also of the aroma of spaghetti and meatballs coming from the kitchen downstairs. It was after five o'clock, time for dinner.

Lazily, the boy crawled off his bed and found a pair of red gym shorts. He pulled them on while crossing the hallway to the bathroom, hopping a few steps before managing to get his left foot cleanly through. After using the toilet, he paused in front of the mirror to check a tiny pimple on his chin. Anyone peeking over his shoulder would have seen a boy with shaggy brown hair and a round bobcat face: slanty, feline eyes; a small, upturned nose; a wide mouth with a highly arched top lip – all giving him the

look of some exotic young cat-boy. His body also had a certain kittenish quality to it, so slender and nimble that it appeared almost fragile when stripped of its clothing. All in all, Andrew Wilde Damon was more pretty than handsome, more pixie than stud, the kind of cute, frisky boy that girls liked to flirt with, that women liked to fuss over, that men liked to swat playfully on the butt.

Later, at the dinner table, Andy asked his parents about money for new school clothes. “You have too many clothes already,” his father said. “You kids should all have uniforms. Think of how much money we'd save.”

“Come on, Dad.”

“We'll see.”

“You'll get some new clothes, don't worry,” Andy's mother said. She was smiling for a change. “Your father is an old cheapskate.”

“No kidding.”

“You have to look nice for the girls,” she added, daring to probe a sensitive area. “Isn't that right?”

Andy said, “Sure, whatever,” glad for any support, however misguided. In truth, he did enjoy the attention he received from girls at school; it made him feel like somebody cool, like somebody important. He wondered, now and then, if sex with a girl might not be so bad, but he never felt strongly enough to pursue it. Their flattery was enough. His real interest was in other boys.

He spent the rest of that evening going through the clothes in his drawers and in his closet, determining what he had and what he needed. Most of all, what he needed (and wanted) were some new shorts and a new pair of Air Jordan gym shoes. He liked wearing shorts to school. He had cute legs, very slim and nearly hairless, and he liked to show them off.

Finished with his wardrobe, he then spent another hour in front of the mirror in his bedroom playing with his hair and examining his face. His hair was getting long, almost covering his ears, almost hiding the little gold stud in his left earlobe. His parents wanted him to get a haircut, but Andy preferred it long. He liked the hippie look of the 'Sixties that he saw in books and films – things like tie-dyed shirts and bandannas and, most of all, long hair. He decided to let it keep growing, at least for another few weeks.

He finished by inspecting his skin one more time, wondering, for the thousandth time, if he needed to start shaving. There was a visible growth of fuzz above his top lip, a shadowy pubescent mustache darkest at each corner of his mouth. But the rest of his face was still smooth, so there was no need to go hunting for a razor. And just as well. Andy didn't like whiskers or body hair, and was glad not to be bothered with either of them. He had some hair under his arms now, and he seemed to be getting more pubic hair every time he checked, but otherwise his body was still as clean and smooth as his face. Adolescence, so far, had treated him gently.

Before going to bed that night, Andy took a few moments to enjoy his Cupid picture one more time. He decided that the boy looked more like an angel than a god. “Eros,” he whispered to himself. “The angel of love.” It surprised him that Red had known about something like that; the guy must have been pretty smart. Maybe he knew about other stuff, too, other good stuff about gods and angels and things. Suddenly, Andy was looking forward to seeing him again. He was definitely looking forward to the next day, when he'd be going back to see the man at Red Dog Comix.

preparing lunch. She enjoyed cooking, especially for her children. It was the one activity in her life that still gave her pleasure, that still made her feel useful and needed. Today she was making homemade onion rings, which were currently bubbling in the deep fryer on the stove, and hamburgers, which were sizzling next to them on an electric griddle.

Andy's stomach was growling hungrily when he finally made his way down to the kitchen. His mother, as always, accused him of sleeping his life away, and Andy, as always, grumbled that he was old enough to take care of his own schedule. When the food was ready, Andy fixed himself a full plate and went into the living room to get away from his sisters, who stayed in the kitchen. He sat in front of the television and used the remote control to zap from channel to channel, searching for something good, something with boys in it. At times, it occurred to Andy that his interest in other boys might be slightly obsessive; but the thought never lasted for long, and it never really disturbed him. If other people didn't approve, they could just fuck off.

He finally settled on a rerun of "The Rifleman." It was old, and in black-and-white, but Andy always enjoyed watching Johnny Crawford, who played the Rifleman's son. He had a nice body and nice hair, and his voice had a cute Western twang to it. In one or two episodes, he even appeared without a shirt, which was a nice bonus.

As he was eating and watching, Andy thought how much easier and better it would be to have a video of nothing but boys, a video that he could pop into the VCR and watch whenever he had the urge. Like now. Better still if the boys were all naked. Best if they were actually having sex. Such things existed, if newspapers and television could be believed. Kiddie porn. Like the Cupid picture – only with real kids, and a lot dirtier.

Andy forced himself to end his fantasy, because it was getting him too worked up and he didn't feel like interrupting his lunch to go beat off. For the next fifteen minutes, while he ate his hamburgers and onion rings, he contented himself with a fully clothed Johnny Crawford.

Afterwards, he returned to his bedroom to change clothes. He put on a purple Nike T-shirt and white shorts, plus a purple zebra-striped bandanna worn pirate-style over the top of his head. With a quickly shouted goodbye to his mother, he bolted from the back door and jumped on his bike. He lived on Lombard Street, which was an easy ten-minute ride to downtown Sandburg – and to Red Dog Comix. The heat, as he pedaled his bike, felt even worse than the day before. Briefly, he considered going back to the university library just to take advantage of the air-conditioning. But he decided against it. Somehow, he knew that his afternoons at the library were finished.

He parked his bike against the side of the shop and went inside. There was a large fan near the open doorway, but it was doing almost no good. "It just blows the hot air around," Red said from behind the counter, as if reading Andy's mind. "This summer has been a killer."

Andy responded with a nod as he wandered toward the racks of comic books and magazines. There was one other boy in the shop; he was standing quietly in the corner, perusing an issue of *Batman*. Red was looking bored, as usual. "You're too early," he finally said to Andy. "The UPS guy hasn't gotten here yet."

"Shoot," Andy muttered, only vaguely disappointed. "How much longer do you think he'll be?"

"About an hour, if he's on time."

"Shoot," Andy muttered again. He walked slowly to the counter. "That's a long time to wait."

"You should've called first."

"I never thought of it."

"Call first next time," Red suggested. "It'll save you a trip."

"That's OK, I don't live very far away."

“Whatever, man, it's up to you.”

The boy in the corner finished looking at the issue of *Batman* and wandered out of the shop. Andy watched him leave, then looked back at Red. “So I guess I'll come back later.”

“Sounds logical to me.”

A radio on the shelf behind Red was playing the Kris Kross “Jump” song. It made Andy smile. “I like that song,” he said, pointing to the radio. “It's my favorite one right now.”

Red listened for a moment, as if he hadn't heard it before.

“Don't care for rap,” he decided. “It bores the hell out of me.”

“You don't even like *this* song?”

“Not especially.”

“What kind of stuff *do* you like, then?”

Red took a moment to hitch up his pants. He had a big belly, but it appeared to be more muscle than fat, like a weight-lifter's powerful gut. “Well, I'll tell you,” he finally decided, “I have very simple tastes. I still like Neil Young and John Prine and... let's see, maybe Tom Petty, maybe Springsteen, things like that.”

“Yeah, I like Tom Petty and Springsteen, too.”

“There you go, we have something in common.”

Andy smiled again. “And we both like mythology stuff.”

Red narrowed his eyes, apparently confused. “How's that?”

“You know all about Greek gods and stuff like that,” Andy said, shifting a bit nervously from foot to foot. “Like yesterday ... with Cupid, or Eros, or whatever.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Eros. I do a lot of reading, that's true enough.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“It's a good way to pass the time.”

“Yeah,” Andy nodded, suddenly out of things to say. He started backing away. “So... I guess I'll see you later.”

Red, who had appeared barely attentive until now, finally displayed a spark of interest. “You seem like a nice kid,” he said to Andy, giving his pants another hitch. “You can wait here if you feel like it.”

“Here?”

“Upstairs, in my apartment. You can wait in the living room.”

“Me?”

Andy's question made Red laugh out loud. “It ain't that big an honor, kid. Don't sound so surprised.”

“You don't even know me.”

“OK, then, who are you?”

Andy took a step back towards the counter and said, “I'm Andrew Damon,” reaching out cautiously to shake Red's hand.

“OK, Andrew, now I know you, so you can go upstairs.”

“To the living room?”

“To the living room, that's right. You can watch TV. I'll call you when the UPS guy gets here.”

Andy headed quickly for the stairs, remembering halfway to stop and give Red a proper thank-you. “It's really nice of you” he said. “I guess I owe you a favor.”

The man waved him off. “There's nothing you can do for me, kid. Forget it. Just keep your hands off my stuff... or I'll kick your ass around the block.”

Andy thought, at first, that Red was joking with him, but then decided otherwise. There was no humor in the man's voice.

Upstairs, the boy confined himself obediently to the living room and, after turning on the television, sat there without moving from the couch. Red's apartment smelled strongly of unwashed clothing and cigarettes and a sweet odor that Andy recognized as marijuana. There was a set of barbells against one wall, which wasn't surprising, given Red's size and obvious strength. The rest of the room appeared ordinary enough, furnished with old chairs and lamps, several book shelves, a color television with a VCR, a small stereo, a few undistinguished pictures and posters (mostly, for whatever reason, of birds and animals). To Andy's right, there was a small kitchen and a bathroom; to his left, there was a closed door which must have been the bedroom. The longer Andy sat there on the couch, the more he wanted to sneak over and open that door. Why, he wondered, did Red keep it shut? Probably for no sinister reason – but the hint of mystery was enough to give Andy that pleasant adrenaline rush, maybe the best adrenaline rush ever, certainly better than anything he'd ever gotten from shoplifting or razoring pages at the library. Here, in this apartment, there were potential lures and dangers that Andy could only begin to imagine.

Footsteps on the stairs snapped him from his daydream. Two boys came bounding into the apartment. They were young black kids, the Spinks twins, one called Snickers and the other Deacon. Andy knew them slightly from school, where they were always a year behind him. This year, they'd both be starting as freshmen at Sandburg High.

They didn't seem surprised to see Andy, probably because Red had already told them that another boy was upstairs. They were there, like most kids, to use the toilet, and they barely acknowledged Andy on their way past. Andy, from his seat on the couch, could see into the bathroom where Snickers and Deacon were standing and peeing, one on either side of the toilet. One of them glanced back through the open doorway at the boy watching them. “Yo, man, is you queer or somethin’?”

“No, asshole, I'm not queer,” Andy snapped back. – “I thought you was lookin' at my dick, man.”

“I'm not looking at your stupid dick.”

“I thought you was,” the boy said again, dribbling some last drops of urine. His brother was listening and laughing. Both boys then finished and came out of the bathroom. The one who was laughing still had his penis out over the top of his shorts. “We thought you was lookin' at this,” he said, wiggling it at Andy before finally putting it away.

“You were wrong, asshole.”

“So what are you, man? Red's friend or what?”

Andy, by now, was in no mood for further questions. “None of your fuckin' business, Spinks.”

“Shit, Damon, you really bad,” one of the twins said sarcastically. “What a fuckin' punk.” He and his brother both had their hair shaved in stripes along the sides, with the hair on top sculpted into high, square wedges. They were very dark-skinned, and definitely handsome, with full lips and broad noses, like two young Ashanti warriors. “You ain't never even been here before, I bet.”

“He ain't never even been here,” his brother agreed, shaking his head. “He don't know shit.” They both laughed again and headed for the door. The last one out turned briefly to grab his crotch with both hands, then gave Andy the finger and disappeared.

No more than a minute later, Andy heard his name being called from downstairs. He thought, at first, that he might be in some kind of trouble with Red, maybe for something that Snickers and Deacon had reported. But there was no trouble. Red wanted Andy only because the UPS man had arrived; the box of new comic books was sitting open on the counter. “Bad news, Andrew, no *Dreadstar*. It's later than usual this month. Sorry.”

“That's OK, I don't mind.”

Red stopped rummaging through the box and looked at the boy. “Did the twins give you a rough time?”

“Not really.”

“They like to stir up trouble, but they're all right.”

“I know,” Andy said, proud to be taken into Red's confidence this way. “That stuff doesn't bother me.”

Red nodded, apparently satisfied. “Anyway, man, I'm sorry about the damned comic. You'll just have to try again later.”

“I'll come back tomorrow.”

“We're closed tomorrow. It's Sunday.”

“Then Monday, I guess.”

“I'll be here,” Red nodded once more, returning his attention to the box. Quickly, he remembered something and looked up. “I brought your bike in,” he said to the boy. “It's over there against the wall.”

“Thanks.”

“I didn't want somebody to swipe it.”

“Thanks,” Andy said again, grabbing the bike and rolling it to the door. “And thanks again for letting me wait upstairs.”

“Anytime, kid.”

Andy waved, then pushed his bike out the door and hopped on. Farther up the block, Snickers and Deacon were waiting for him. They stopped him on the sidewalk in front of the Steak 'n' Shake restaurant. Andy, assuming they were looking for a fight, started to raise his fists. “Yo, man, chill,” one of the twins smiled. “We ain't lookin' to mess with you.”

“We're cool,” his brother agreed. “Don't be so fuckin' unfriendly.”

They stepped closer to Andy, leaning on the handlebars of his bike. “What did Red give you back there?”

“Nothing,” Andy said. “He didn't give me anything.”

“Are you serious?”

“Fuck, yes, I'm serious!”

“He didn't give you no weed?”

Andy almost laughed, then said, “No, no way! Why would he do that?”

“Forget it, Damon,” one of the twins mumbled, stepping away from the bike. “Come on, Snix,” he waved to the other boy, “this fucker here ain't got no shit.”

But Snickers wasn't quite ready to give up. “You got any stuff at home, at least?”

“No,” Andy shrugged, finally convinced that these two boys meant him no harm. They were just trying to score some grass, nothing more. “I don't keep stuff like that around the house.”

“I bet you never even smoked none, man.”

“Yeah, I have. It was Mexican, really strong.”

“Who had it?”

“Some guy at a party... last month at Cheryl Turner's house.”

“Come on, Snix,” Deacon called again. He was slightly thinner than his brother, and he had a pink scar above his left eyebrow. “Move your ass!”

Snickers finally gave in and joined his brother. “Later,” he yelled back to Andy, actually offering a friendly grin as he jogged away. Andy stood there straddling his bicycle, watching the twins as they ran together up the sidewalk – back to Red Dog Comix. A group of three little boys, maybe seven or eight years old, went in right behind them. Andy kept watching from a distance, feeling strangely jealous, lonely, left out of the fun. He had to wait until Monday to come back to the shop – and Monday, to Andy, suddenly seemed like a million years away.

Sunday breakfast was finished, and Andy was outside picking up the broken twigs and branches left in the yard by an overnight thunderstorm. He was wearing his red gym shorts and nothing else, enjoying the rain-cooled breeze on his skin and the wet grass beneath his bare feet. Taking his time, he finally gathered a full load of debris in his arms and trudged with it to the compost heap behind the garage. Back in the front yard for another load, he saw Matthew McCann approaching up the sidewalk with his bagful of *Sandburg Herald* newspapers. Matthew was just twelve years old, and to Andy he seemed little more than a pesky neighborhood puppy – although, in recent months, he had started to look and act a little more mature, less like a child and more like an actual, interesting boy.

Now, as ever when he saw Andy, Matthew waved excitedly and came racing into the yard, his newspaper bag bouncing nearly empty against his hip. “Did you hear the storm last night? I thought it was a fuckin' tornado for sure!”

“It's a pain in the ass to clean up,” Andy said, going about his job.

“A tree blew down next door to us,” Matthew reported eagerly. He pointed in the direction of his own house, one block away. “You ought to see it, Andy, it's pretty awesome.”

“A whole tree?”

“The whole fuckin' thing, man, I swear to God.”

“Maybe I'll come look at it later.”

“You gotta see it, Andy, no lie,” Matthew insisted once more.

He was wearing his usual outfit of spandex bicycle shorts with a baggy T-shirt and floppy, untied high-tops. His legs were spotty with mosquito bites. “Come over now, I'm just about done with my route.”

“I need to finish here first.”

Matthew was undeterred. “I'll do this street and come back for you,” he said, already moving off toward the next house.

His blond hair was spiked up in a high, brushy crew-cut that gave his face, along with its big eyes and its perpetual grin, a look of gleefully manic energy.

Andy turned quickly and shouted, “Hey, idiot, you forgot to give us our paper!”

Matthew, laughing at his own mistake, ran back far enough to toss a rolled-up newspaper onto the Damons' front porch, then hurried off once again in the other direction. Andy paused to watch him. He was still just a little kid, with more baby fat than muscle, but he was starting to look pretty good; Andy decided. Sort of cute. Being his friend – a real friend, and not just a neighborhood acquaintance – might not be a bad idea.

Within a couple of minutes, Matthew was back from finishing his route, and more impatient than ever for Andy's company. “Aren't you done yet? Come on!”

“Jesus, Matt, you're a real pain.”

“Yep, that's me,” Matthew cheerfully agreed. He surveyed the yard where Andy was working. “It looks clean to me. Really, I think it's good enough.”

Andy picked up a final branch and carried his load back to the compost heap. Matthew tagged along behind, first to the compost heap and then back across the yard to the house. “I have to get my shoes,” Andy told him. The two boys were on the porch outside the back door. “I guess you can come in.”

“Great,” Matthew said, following Andy inside. He looked around, on his way through the kitchen and

the living room, like someone touring a museum. “Man, you've got a really cool house, Andy.”

“It's OK.”

“Man, it's way cool,” Matthew insisted. “Your parents must be rich.”

“No way, not even close.”

“Isn't anybody here? Where are they?”

“At church,” Andy said, leading the younger boy up the stairs.

“They still go all the time, but I don't.”

“I never go to church.”

“It's boring, man.”

“Way boring,” Matthew agreed. He followed Andy down the hallway, into the bedroom. “God, this is great. I wish I had a poster like that,” he said, pointing to Michael Jordan dunking dramatically in mid-flight. “Your room is the best, no doubt.”

Andy smiled and muttered, “Shut up, Matt,” amused by the other boy's high spirits. He sat on the edge of his bed and pulled on his socks and his gym shoes, then grabbed a yellow T-shirt from the floor and punched Matthew on the shoulder. “OK, let's go, moron.”

Matthew followed Andy obediently back downstairs and out the front door. Still carrying the empty newspaper bag over his shoulder, he half-ran and half-hopped slightly ahead of Andy along the sidewalk, now and then singing a few words of Queen's “Bohemian Rhapsody” in his chirpy, energetic voice. His house was around the corner on Pine Street. It was a shabby one-story place with a weedy yard and sheets of plastic, instead of glass, in most of the windows. Next door, a large elm tree lay uprooted like a dead giant on the ground. “There it is,” Matthew announced proudly. “I told you!”

“Damn, it's fuckin' huge.”

“Do you like it?”

“Sure I do,” Andy said. There were two men with chain saws already working at the job of cutting the tree into manageable logs. The boys ventured closer to get a better look. They watched for several minutes, lingering until the novelty began to wear off, then wandered back to Matthew's yard. The younger boy took Andy's arm and pulled him toward his house. “Come inside, I'll show you my fish.”

“I have to get back home.”

“Just for a minute... just to see my fish.”

“What kind of fish?”

“A whole bunch,” Matthew said. He finally took off his newspaper bag and tossed it to the ground. “I've got a totally excellent aquarium, I really do.”

“OK,” Andy relented, “but just for a minute.” He followed an elated Matthew into the house, into the kitchen, where Matthew's mother was sitting with a Pepsi and a cigarette, watching professional wrestling on a small black-and-white television. Matthew hugged her and kissed her on the cheek, then introduced her to Andy with a great deal of excited fanfare. Her response, to Matthew's humiliation, was an indifferent mumble. “She's tired,” Matthew explained contritely a few moments later. “She's nice, really, but she just gets tired all the time.”

“It's OK,” Andy said, “my mom gets weird sometimes, too.”

The boys went to Matthew's bedroom, which was as cramped and hot and messy as the rest of the house – and, also like the rest of the house, smelled strongly of mildew and dirty cat litter. Near the window, there was a ten-gallon tank filled with brightly colored tropical fish and plants. “See how cool my fish are,” Matthew said, tugging the other boy across the room. “Do you like them?”

“Yeah, I do, no lie.”

“Which ones do you like the best?”

Andy knelt in front of the tank and peered through the glass. “These are cool,” he decided. “These big ones here,”

“Those are my gouramis,” Matthew nodded happily, obviously pleased by his friend's selection. “I've got the blue kind and the gold kind. And these here are cardinal tetras, and these on top are hatchet fish...”

“Those are definitely cool.”

“... and these are my loaches here on the bottom, under the plant there. See them?”

“Yeah, they're like little snakes.”

Matthew was leaning against Andy's shoulder, rocking gently with excitement. “They're scavengers, and they eat all the old food and stuff.”

“What's this thing with the sucker mouth?”

“That's another kind of scavenger, and it keeps the glass clean. Do you like it?”

“It's weird, yeah.”

There was a pause, and then Matthew said, “The gouramis are my favorites, too,” still delighted by Andy's earlier response, savoring it as a new and positive bond between them. “I knew you'd like them the best.”

“No doubt, Matt, it's a bitchin' aquarium,” Andy said. He slapped Matthew on the ass as he got to his feet. “I have to go home before my parents get back”

“That's fucked up,” Matthew grumbled. “Why don't you come back later?”

“I can't, not today. We're going to visit my grandparents this afternoon.”

“That's fucked up,” Matthew grumbled once more. “Do you want to go to the pet store tomorrow? I need to buy some fish food.”

“Sure, I guess so. Where is it?”

“On Prairie Avenue.”

“Around the corner from Red Dog Comix?”

“Yeah, that's it.”

“That might be OK,” Andy said. “I have to go over there, anyway.”

“So you'll go with me?”

“Yeah, moron, that's what I just told you.”

“Excellent,” Matthew grinned, clenching his fist triumphantly.

“We'll go tomorrow morning.”

Andy told him no, it had to be in the afternoon, but Matthew didn't care. Anytime was fine with him. Happily, he followed Andy back outside to retrieve his newspaper bag, then stopped in the driveway to watch a few more minutes of the tree-cutting going on next door. Andy headed for home. He loped slowly along the wet sidewalk and smiled to himself, thinking about Matthew. It was weird, having known each other for so long without ever becoming friends – until now, for no special reason, on an ordinary day like any other. Very weird, becoming friends with Matthew McCann, the neighborhood puppy dog.

A few minutes after twelve o'clock, Monday afternoon, Matthew showed up at the Damons' front door, ready to head downtown. Andy's mother let him in and sent him upstairs to Andy's room. "But he's probably still in bed," she warned him beforehand. "I swear he's going to sleep his life away."

Matthew ran up the stairs and down the hallway to Andy's door, which was still shut. He paused just long enough to give it a couple of quick knocks with his fist, then let himself in. Andy, in bed as predicted, took one glance at the boy barging into his room and yanked the sheet over his head. "Jesus, man, who let you in here?"

"Your mom. She said I could come up."

"Great," Andy muttered from beneath his shroud. "What time is it?"

"It's late... like twelve thirty or one o'clock or something."

"Shit."

"Don't you want to go downtown anymore?"

Andy pulled the sheet down far enough to peek out sleepily from beneath. "Yeah, right, downtown," he said, pausing to clear his throat. "What's the big rush?"

"There's no rush, I guess," Matthew shrugged. He was inspecting a collection of rocks and crystals on Andy's dresser. "I didn't want you to leave without me, that's all."

"What a dummy," Andy said, yawning and chuckling at the same time. He was about to throw off the sheet when he suddenly became aware of an uncomfortable, and inconvenient, erection inside his underpants. He looked on the floor for his shorts, but they were near the door, out of reach. Matthew glanced at him from across the room. "Are you going to get up or not?"

"Yeah, in a second."

Matthew took a step closer to the bed. "Do you sleep naked?"

Andy shook his head. "No, not all the way."

"I do... when it's hot," Matthew said. "And sometimes I still wet the bed, so it's easier." He laughed nervously. "That's pretty stupid, right? Only babies wet the bed."

"I used to wet the bed sometimes, too, when I was a kid. It's OK."

"But you don't do it no more, right?"

"No, not really."

"See, that's the problem," Matthew said. He was standing a few feet from the bed. "My mom says I must be retarded or something."

"That's stupid, man. You're not retarded," Andy scoffed. He was still waiting for his dick to go down, but it wasn't cooperating. Finally, he gave up and tossed aside the sheet and sat up on the edge of his bed. "Get my shorts for me," he told Matthew. "The white ones... over there on the floor." He glanced down at himself while the other boy's back was turned. The erection in his underpants was clearly visible, impossible not to notice – and Matthew did notice it as soon as he came back with the shorts. But it didn't seem to surprise him or fluster him in any way. He stared at it frankly while handing the shorts to Andy, then, without being asked, went back across the room to fetch Andy's yellow T-shirt.

"Is this one OK?"

"Yeah, it's all right," Andy said. He already had his shorts on, but he left them unzipped in order to use the bathroom. He grabbed the yellow T-shirt from Matthew on his way past. At the toilet, it took him several seconds to coax so much as a trickle from his penis, which was still stubbornly erect. About halfway through, he finally became soft enough to produce a strong, satisfying stream. Behind him, he heard a floorboard creak. It was Matthew, watching him from the doorway. "What the fuck," Andy

mumbled, sending a careless splash onto the rim of the bowl. "You want something or what?"

"I need to pee," the younger boy said. He cupped his crotch in order to illustrate his distress. "Can I go?"

Andy zipped up and backed away from the toilet. "No, Einstein, piss in your pants," he teased. Matthew stepped up to take Andy's place. He pulled his black bicycle shorts down practically to his knees, and lifted his T-shirt with both hands, peeing more like a toddler than a twelve-year-old. His bare ass was pale and chubby; his dick was hidden from view, but its childish tinkle of urine was a clue to its size. Andy was watching in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. Matthew kept standing at the toilet even after he was done, spending a few extra moments to casually inspect his own genitals. "I don't get many boners," he finally remarked. "Just sometimes, but not a lot." He pulled up his pants and flushed the toilet. "I measured it once and it's four and a half inches long."

"Oh, yeah?"

"When it's a boner," Matthew nodded, standing beside Andy at the sink. "It's four and a half inches exactly."

"That's about right, I guess."

"Is it?"

"I guess so," Andy shrugged. In truth, he really didn't know. He had never actually seen another boy's erection. "It's probably about normal." He finished with his teeth and put the brush into its holder on the wall. Matthew touched the brush gently with one finger, as if probing something precious. "Is yours bigger than that?"

"What?"

"Your boner."

"What about it?"

"Is it bigger than four and a half inches?"

"Fuck, man, I don't know," Andy said. He hit Matthew on the shoulder and went back to his room. Matthew, right behind him, still wasn't satisfied. "You mean you never measured it?"

"No, moron."

"You ought to measure it."

"Why?"

"Because," Matthew said, watching as Andy put on his shoes, "maybe it's real big and you don't even know it."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Andy laughed. He got up and grabbed a Chicago Bulls cap. "Come on."

"Measure it sometime," Matthew insisted once more.

Andy hit him again. "Sure, asshole, you can measure it for me, all right?"

"I will, seriously."

"Not now," Andy said, still laughing as he and Matthew headed downstairs. He assumed that Matthew was joking. But he wasn't sure.

Matthew's bike was old and banged-up, and its chain kept slipping when he went too fast, so the usual ten-minute ride downtown ended up taking almost thirty. Once there, the boys decided to visit the pet store first. Matthew needed to buy food for his fish, which took only a couple of minutes, but there were plenty of other things to look at and explore: macaws, ferrets, lizards, snakes, puppies, fish. Matthew saved his tour of the fish area for last, showing Andy all the odd, expensive varieties that he someday hoped to buy. "Especially these," he finally said, in front of the salt-water tanks. "Look how excellent they are!"

"No doubt," Andy agreed. "These are tripped out." "The colors are like neon or something."

“Yeah, wild.”

Afterwards, they rode their bikes around the corner to Red Dog Comix. The shop was empty when they arrived, except for Red at his customary post behind the counter. He responded with a slow shake of his head as soon as he saw Andy. “Nothing here yet, Andrew. You're early again.”

“I know, but I figured...”

“You figured what?”

“I figured, you know, that I could wait... like the last time.”

“It's not always a good idea to assume things like that.” Andy felt himself blushing. “Oh, well, it's OK, I mean, I didn't...”

“Take it easy,” Red smiled. He took a swig from the can of Seven-Up in his hand. “It's all right this time, but I can't always guarantee it. Understand?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Red took another swig, then nodded toward Matthew. “Who's this with you today?”

Andy introduced the other boy, who seemed vaguely astonished that his friend was on such intimate terms with the actual owner of Red Dog Comix. “He won't bother anything upstairs,” Andy promised. “We'll be real good, don't worry.”

“I can trust both of you, right?”

“Yeah, I swear.”

“I believe you, Andrew. You're a good kid.”

Andy responded with a proud grin, then grabbed Matthew by the arm and practically dragged him up the stairs to Red's apartment. Matthew still seemed bewildered by what was happening. “Why are we waiting up here? What's wrong?”

“He lets me wait here until the UPS man shows up.”

“Why?”

“Because he's a cool guy,” Andy said. He put Matthew on the couch and ordered him to stay put. “Red doesn't like anybody fucking with his stuff.”

“I bet he's a drug dealer or something like that.”

“You're an idiot.”

Matthew was sniffing at the air. “I can smell pot... like my mom's boyfriend always smokes.”

“So what?”

“I bet he's a drug dealer or a pervert,” Matthew said again.

“He probably sells crack and shit like that.”

“Shut up, Matt,” Andy muttered. He took off his Bulls cap and swatted it across the other boy's face. Matthew let out a giggle and grabbed the cap away from Andy. “Let me keep this,” he said. “I love the Bulls, man. Michael Jordan is my all-time hero.” He put the cap on over his blond crew-cut, then took it off again to adjust the strap in back. “Fuck, Andy, you've got a giant head.”

“You can't keep that, asshole.”

“Just let me wear it today, at least.”

“OK... but just today, that's all.”

Matthew put it back on his head. “I bet I look cool,” he said, jumping from the couch in sudden pursuit of a mirror. He rushed straight to the bathroom to inspect his reflection. The half-closed door kept him hidden from Andy, who stayed waiting for him on the couch. But not for long; Andy's patience quickly ran out. After only a couple of minutes, when Matthew still hadn't come back, Andy went after him.

In the bathroom, he found Matthew eagerly going through Red's medicine cabinet. “You stupid fucker,

McCann, what're you doing?"

Matthew glanced over his shoulder with a mischievous smirk.

"You should see all the good shit in here. Look at this," he said, holding up a box of Trojan condoms.

"This guy has millions of rubbers."

"Big deal."

"He must have sex like crazy."

"Put them away."

"And look at all these pills," Matthew continued. He chose a bottle at random. "This one here is Valium. It's really strong, I bet."

"Put it away," Andy ordered again. He forced Matthew to return the bottle, then hauled him angrily back to the living room. "We promised Red not to fuck around up here. Quit being a jerk."

"I didn't hurt anything."

"Just spaz down, man, or you'll get us both into trouble."

"Let's look in his bedroom," Matthew suddenly proposed, then, when he saw the expression on Andy's face, quickly added, "No, I'm just kidding. I'll be good."

They spent the next twenty or thirty minutes watching TV, not straying again from the couch until Red called them back down to the shop. Andy's issue of *Dreadstar* had finally arrived. "Your persistence has been rewarded," Red told him. "Issue number forty-three. Here you go."

Andy dug a five-dollar bill from the pocket of his shorts and handed it across the counter. As he waited for his change, he heard the familiar voices of the Spinks twins come through the door behind him. They were with an older boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, and each of them had a brown paper sack hugged tightly to his chest. Deacon Spinks laughed when he saw Andy. "Man, we be spyin' your white ass in here every day! You must be a comic book fiend, Andy-Candy."

"Eat me, Spinks."

"Wow, big fuckin' man!"

Red tossed a wad of crumpled paper at Deacon's head. "Pipe down, tough guy," he commanded gently, obviously amused. "You don't own this place, so watch your manners."

Snickers, to emphasize Red's point, gave his brother a hard kick in the behind. "Listen to the man," he said. "Don't be a chump." He whispered something else into Deacon's ear, then looked across the shop at Red. "We'll take your groceries upstairs now."

"That's the smartest thing you've said all day," Red told him. "Go ahead, get moving." As soon as the three boys had gone, he returned his attention to Andy. "Sorry about that," he said, handing over the boy's change. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Andy shook his head, then asked, "Do they always buy your groceries like that?"

Red looked carefully at Andy's face. "The twins? Most weeks they do, yeah. They like to help out."

"Do you need any other helpers?"

"Why? Are you interested in a job?"

"Maybe."

"It wouldn't pay much."

"I know," Andy said. "I'm not worried about that. Really."

"Well, I appreciate the offer, buddy. Maybe we can work something out." Red found a pencil and a piece of paper and gave them to Andy. "Leave me your address and your phone number. Then we'll see what happens."

Andy filled out the paper and handed it back to Red. The man looked at it, nodded, and then shook Andy's hand. "We'll see what happens," he said again. "I'll definitely keep you in mind." He cocked his

head toward Matthew, who was standing and listening nearby. “What about your friend here? Is he interested, too?”

Matthew took a timid step forward. “I’ll do whatever Andy does.”

“Good enough,” Red smiled. “I’ll remember that.”

The boys thanked him and retrieved their bikes from beside the door, where Red had once again put them for safekeeping. Outside, Matthew immediately resumed his earlier comments. “I bet you a million dollars he’s a drug dealer. Don’t you think so?”

“Sure, he’s a drug dealer,” Andy agreed sarcastically, mounting his bike with a running jump. “Whatever you say, jag-off.” In fact, Andy wasn’t entirely certain that Matthew was wrong. There did seem to be something unusual going on at Red Dog, possibly involving drugs, possibly marijuana. People were getting busted all the time in Sandburg for growing and selling pot; it wasn’t so farfetched that Red might be a dealer. But Andy didn’t care. If anything, the possibility only excited his interest; he liked the idea of being associated with something illicit, something dark and risky. If Matthew was right about Red – about him being a dealer, or a pervert, or whatever – then Andy was ready to find out, and eager to learn more.

6

On Tuesday, Andy and his mother (in a rare excursion for her outside the house) went to the mall to shop for school clothes. It embarrassed Andy to be seen in public with his mother; it made him feel like a geek, like a little sissy; but she had the money and the credit cards, and she had the car that Andy needed for all of his shopping bags, so he had no choice. He was stuck with his mother as they worked their way through Marshall Field’s and Nieman-Marcus, and then through Chess King and The Gap and Foot Locker. They ended up at Sears and J.C. Penny buying the socks and the underwear that Andy’s mother insisted were necessary because “the things you have now are nothing but holes.” She bought the usual white athletic socks and white Jockey briefs that Andy had worn all his life, plus a few pairs of Hanes bikini briefs – in bright hues of red and yellow and blue – that satisfied Andy and his more exotic tastes.

Back home, alone in his room, Andy spread his new pants and shorts and shirts across his bed in order to enjoy them in their full splendor. He also put on his new pair of Air Jordans, black ones with turquoise and orange accents, and took a stroll from his bed to his window and back again, wishing he had somewhere to go to show them off. He let himself daydream about all the compliments he’d be getting from the girls at school, and about all the unspoken envy and admiration from the other boys. Even his new underpants were cool; he’d be getting his chance to show them off in the locker room before long, maybe at a locker next to Manny Fuentes, or next to Timmy Jenco.

Andy decided, in his excitement, to try on a couple of new pairs right then and there, eager to see how he looked in something so skimpy and provocative. Quickly, he took off all his clothes and chose a pair of lemon-yellow bikinis to model for himself. He stepped into them and pulled them up snugly into place, took a moment to reach inside and adjust his penis, then posed for himself in front of the long wardrobe mirror on the back of his bedroom door – first from the front, then from side to side, then from the rear, looking back over his shoulder to appraise his own butt. He was impressed by what he saw in the mirror, turned on by the young boy with the shaggy hair and the cute bobcat face and the supple little bod. Nice butt, he decided. Nice legs. And a nice bulge in front, too. He stepped up to the mirror and pressed himself against it, real bulge against reflected bulge, making out with his own reflection, coaxing his dick

into an erection as he stared down at it.

He knew by now that he would have to jack off, no turning back. The door was already locked, but he jiggled the handle just to make sure. Still in front of the mirror, he pushed down his yellow bikinis and let them fall around his ankles, leaving his bare boner and balls pressed up against the glass. His boner looked good in the mirror, definitely good enough to suck on, with a swollen red knob that was beginning to leak against the glass, just enough to leave a goeey smear each time Andy moved his hips. He wondered how big it was, how many inches it was, curious about it largely because of Matthew's interrogation from the day before – curious enough to hurry across the room and dig a ruler out of his desk drawer to do some measuring. He placed it next to his erection and carefully checked the result: a little over six inches. Maybe six and a quarter. Maybe even six and a half – if he put the ruler along the side of his dick instead of along the top. That was his official conclusion: six and a half inches, which he figured was probably a pretty decent boner for a kid his age. At least he hoped so.

Satisfied, he put away the ruler and returned to the mirror, stroking himself lazily en route. He wanted to finish the same way he'd started – by watching himself. It wouldn't take long, not once he started stroking for real. He hadn't masturbated since Sunday night, so there would be a big load inside waiting to be pumped out, no doubt. Andy knew, from experience, that he'd be getting at least two really excellent spurts, maybe even three. And when he busted, he wanted to see the full blast-off, in living color, all over the mirror in front of him.

After supper, Andy decided to take a cruise on his bicycle around the neighborhood. He wasn't going far, so he didn't even bother with a shirt, just his red gym shorts and his old Reeboks. (His new Air Jordans were back in their box, off limits until the beginning of school.) Coming down Pine Street, he spotted Matthew on the sidewalk with a slingshot dangling from his hand, apparently on the prowl for something interesting to shoot. Andy pedaled faster and then skidded to a stop only a few inches behind the other boy, deliberately provoking a startled yelp of fear. Matthew wheeled angrily, ready for a fight, but then broke into a delighted grin of surprise when he saw Andy. “God, man, I thought you was some asshole tryin' to kill me!”

“What a wimp.”

“I should shoot you,” Matthew said, grinning wider as he brought up his slingshot and aimed it at Andy's head. “Fucker!”

“You probably can't even hit anything.”

“I'm pretty good.”

“Yeah, I'm sure you are.”

“I killed a blackbird before,” Matthew claimed defiantly. “I hit it off the tree over there... by the corner.”

“Where is it? Show me.”

“It flew away.”

Andy started laughing, and said, “How the fuck did it fly away if you killed it?”

“I guess I more like wounded it,” Matthew conceded. He was still wearing the Chicago Bulls cap borrowed from Andy the day before. “But it's probably dead by now.” He waited as Andy laughed again, and then he lowered his slingshot and gently kicked the tire of Andy's bike. “Where were you today? I came over but you weren't home. Where did you go?”

“I went shopping,” Andy told him. “I got a bunch of clothes for school.”

“Really? That's excellent.”

“Yeah, no doubt, I got some tripped-out stuff. Look,” Andy said, “I even got some cool underwear.”

He stretched down the waistband of his gym shorts to show the yellow bikinis underneath. Matthew reached out and gave the yellow fabric a delicate pluck.

"These are excellent, Andy. You're lucky."

"I got some new Air Jordans, too. You should see them. They're the black ones."

"Really? Why don't you wear them?"

"I'm saving them for school."

"Can I see them?"

"You can come over tomorrow... if you want."

"Cool," Matthew smiled. He gave the tire of Andy's bike another kick. "Fuck, man, I thought maybe you had a job today and that's why you was gone."

"No, idiot."

"I thought you was workin' for Red."

"No, not yet."

"I thought maybe you was," Matthew said again. He raised his slingshot and aimed it at a lightning bug. The sun had almost set by now, and the lightning bugs were coming out to greet the twilight, drifting like yellow sparks in the warm evening air. Matthew released his shot, which sailed harmlessly across the road. "I almost got him!"

"You missed by a mile," Andy laughed. He got off his bike and looked at all the bugs winking brightly around him. "I bet I can catch more than you."

"No way."

"Go ahead, spaz, see how many you can catch."

Matthew cheerfully accepted the challenge. He and Andy spent the next hour chasing the bugs around Matthew's yard, catching them and releasing them and then catching some more. Matthew enjoyed bullying his captives by shaking them in his hand, convinced that he could tame the bugs by making them dizzy and disoriented. Andy was more ruthless with his victims, sacrificing several of them to examine their bio-luminescence, squeezing out the mysterious green-gold substance within them to smell it and feel it and watch it glow like melted emeralds on his fingertips.

In the end, Andy declared himself the champion bug-catcher and prepared to head back home. Matthew reminded him of their date for the following day. "You said I could come over and see your Air Jordans, don't forget."

"I won't forget," Andy said, climbing onto his bike. "You can come over whenever you want, man. Any time."

"I'll bring my slingshot."

"What for?"

"So we can go hunting."

Andy pondered for a moment, then nodded and said, "I've got two BB guns. We can use those, too."

"BB guns? Awesome!"

"Yeah, a Daisy rifle and a pistol. We can go out to the old Harshbarger farm... if your bike is OK."

"No problem!"

"We'll do it, then," Andy said, pedaling away up the street. "Later, spaz!" As he gained speed and turned the corner, he could hear Matthew singing happily in the darkness behind him.

Matthew showed up Wednesday morning while Andy was still in the middle of a dream about Manny Fuentes. He and Manny were playing soccer, kicking the ball around a dusty field somewhere on the west side of Sandburg – only suddenly they were both naked, and there were dozens of other people on the field watching them, and Manny was standing right in front of Andy rubbing their boners together. Andy knew he was going to bust a nut right there in front of the whole crowd, but there was nothing he could do about it, nothing he could do to stop it – and then sure enough it started coming out, and as soon as it did, Andy jerked awake and found himself staring blearily at Matthew across the room. “Jesus, not again,” he mumbled in a dry, croaky voice, referring to Matthew at first, but then, in the next moment, to the warm squishiness left over from his wet dream. With a disgusted moan, he rolled onto his back and reached beneath the sheet to assess the damage. Sometimes it wasn't so bad, just a few drops; but this time, as he quickly discovered, it was a god-awful mess, a real gusher. Both his underpants and the sheet beneath him had been thoroughly jizzed.

Matthew seemed puzzled by his friend's behavior. “What's wrong, are you OK?”

“Fuck off, man.”

“Did you pee the bed?”

Andy finished exploring beneath the sheet, then let out another moan. “Fuck it, I hate when this shit happens!” He looked back at Matthew. “Go to the bathroom and bring me a towel,” he instructed, more as a request than a command. Matthew obeyed without question, returning after only a few seconds with a big white towel that he quickly gave to Andy. “It's OK,” he consoled the older boy, “I wet the bed a lot, don't worry.”

“It's not pee,” Andy finally explained. He was, by this time, too deeply involved in the mess to continue feeling embarrassed. “Don't you know what a wet dream is?”

“I guess so, kind of.”

Andy threw aside the sheet and sat up. “It's when you're dreaming about, like, sex stuff and all of a sudden you bust a nut.”

“Oh, yeah,” Matthew said softly, enthralled by what he was hearing. “I remember that from health class... last year.”

“It's a fucking mess,” Andy grumbled. He pointed across the room. “Go shut the door. Hurry up.” He waited for Matthew to do it, then yanked his underpants off and started wiping between his legs, first cleaning his penis, then his pubic hair. Matthew stood in front of him, staring. “Is there sperm on you?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“I can't see any of it,” Matthew said, clearly disappointed. “Where is it?”

“It's gone.”

“You wiped it all off?”

“Yeah, fuck, I didn't know you wanted to see it.”

“I never saw real sperm before.”

“Don't talk so loud,” Andy warned him. “My mom hears everything.” He wrapped the towel around his waist and tucked it securely. “Don't you bust nuts yet?”

“Not a lot,” Matthew said. He didn't seem to be sure of the question, much less his answer. “Is there supposed to be a lot of stuff?”

“Most times.”

“And it happens when you jack off?”

“Yeah, of course,” Andy said. He found himself a fresh pair of underwear and stepped into them,

letting the towel drop at the same time. "And sometimes it happens at night." He put on a pair of long pants, his camouflage ones, to protect his legs later on from the thorns and the brambles and the poison oak at Harshbarger's farm. "Did you bring your slingshot?"

"Yep," Matthew said, producing it from his back pocket.

Today, instead of his usual bicycle shorts, he was wearing denim overalls with no shirt underneath. He was also wearing Andy's Chicago Bulls cap, which seemed, in some unspoken way, to have passed into his possession. He returned the slingshot to his pocket and followed Andy down the hallway to the bathroom. Without asking, he took his place alongside Andy at the toilet and stood there peeing with his friend. He kept glancing back and forth between his own penis and Andy's, still obviously fascinated by the mysteries of adolescence. "Does it happen every day?"

"What?"

"Sperming, like you did before. Does it always happen?"

"Not all the time," Andy said. He was looking at the other boy's dick, which was about the same size as the thumb holding it. Having Matthew next to him like this was nice, but Andy knew he'd be springing another boner soon if he didn't hurry and finish.

Matthew was still asking questions. "Do you need to jack off every day?"

Andy almost laughed, then said, "No, you don't need to, but..."

"Do *you* do it every day?"

"Sure, Matt, every fucking day."

Matthew, with a sudden playful smile, pointed at Andy's penis. "I bet you didn't measure it yet."

This time, Andy started laughing for real. "Fuck off, man, you're an idiot." He finished at the toilet and stepped away, fastening his pants. "I'm going to let *you* measure it, remember?"

"Yep, I remember," Matthew said, zipping his overalls, and still smiling. He went with Andy back to the bedroom. They spent a few moments there admiring Andy's new Air Jordans, then collected the BB guns for their expedition. Before they left, Andy stopped in the kitchen to see his mother and have a bowl of cereal. Matthew, of course, was happy to join him at the table for something to eat, having gone all morning with nothing but a Hostess cupcake and a can of Pepsi. Afterwards, with BB guns in hand, they mounted their bikes and headed for the country.

The old Harshbarger farm was about a thirty-minute ride outside the city limits, known by every kid in Sandburg as a good place to shoot targets and to set off fireworks – and to do just about anything else not quite legal enough or safe enough to do in town. By the time Andy and Matthew got there, it was nearly noon and the day was turning hot, with a bright blue sky burned absolutely clean of clouds. The boys walked their bikes down the weedy path that led from the road to the old barn, which was little more than a pile of charcoal now after being burned repeatedly by vandals and errant fireworks. There, amidst the sunflowers and the wild rhubarb, they rested their bikes on the ground and readied their weapons.

Matthew went right to work with his slingshot, using any convenient stone as ammunition in his hunt for blackbirds and blue jays and robins. He came close with several shots, but never managed a direct hit.

Andy, meanwhile, tried out his Daisy rifle on a variety of targets, including some of the birds that Matthew had already missed. His luck wasn't much better; he clipped a few feathers, nothing more.

After it while, Matthew abandoned his slingshot in favor of Andy's Daisy pistol. On his first try, he hit a sparrow cleanly enough to knock it fluttering from an old fence post. Matthew let out a startled laugh, amazed by his own accuracy. "Did you see that? I nailed that fucker first time!"

"Lucky shot, man," Andy yelled back, stalking several feet away with his rifle. Along with his camouflage pants, he was wearing his purple Nike T-shirt and pirate bandanna. "Did you kill it?"

Matthew ran up closer to get a good look at his fallen victim. He was nearly on top of the sparrow

when it fluttered out of the weeds and flew away, apparently more stunned by the BB than injured. Matthew fired after it, but never came close to a second hit. He shook his head in frustration, then started looking around for other targets. Baked by the afternoon sun, and seeking some relief, he slipped the straps of his overalls off his shoulders and let the bib hang down loosely in front, leaving himself bare above the waist. The overalls seemed in danger of falling off, but Matthew's hips and butt were husky enough to keep them up. After a moment, he spotted a red-wing blackbird atop a nearby sunflower. He aimed and fired, missing the bird but somehow hitting the stem of the flower, severing it cleanly in half. Both boys broke out laughing at the same moment, equally astonished by Matthew's fluke display of marksmanship. "The luckiest shot in history," Andy yelled out.

"No way, man, it's all talent," Matthew yelled back, brandishing the pistol above his head. "I'm the best in the world!" He came tramping through the weeds to join Andy, but got only a few feet before stepping on something that made him howl in pain. Andy came rushing to help him, assuming at first that he had been bitten by a snake. "Don't move, Matt, I'll kill it for you!"

"It's just a fucking nail," Matthew said, his voice tight with pain. He grabbed an old board off the ground and held it up. There were several long nails sticking out from it. "I stepped on this fucking thing here!" He threw it back down and found a clear place in the weeds where he could sit and inspect his injured foot. He was half-cursing and half-crying as he removed his left gym shoe and then his sock, which was stained on the bottom with a red circle of blood. "Look at this! What am I going to do?"

"Spaz down, man, take it easy," Andy told him, kneeling beside him. "It'll be all right."

"It hurts terrible."

Andy patted Matthew's bare shoulder. "We'll go back home and take care of it, OK?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Matthew said, still trying not to cry.

"Stupid fucking nail!"

"Did you ever get a tetanus shot?"

"Last year," Matthew nodded. "Why? Can I die or something?"

Andy smiled and said, "No, idiot, just shut up." He took the bandanna off his head to use as a wrapping for Matthew's foot. "Maybe this'll help a little."

"It'll get all bloody."

"Don't worry about it," Andy said. He took hold of the other boy's foot and wrapped it carefully with the purple bandanna, then slipped the bloody sock and the shoe back on over the top. "Does that feel all right?"

"Yeah, it's better."

"Not too tight?"

"No, it's real good," Matthew said, considerably soothed by the older boy's attention. "But it still hurts a lot."

"What a pussy," Andy growled, smiling again. He grabbed at Matthew with both hands and started tickling him around the ribs and the belly. Matthew collapsed backwards in a convulsion of laughter, with Andy still after him, still pressing the attack, grabbing and tickling him wherever he could find an opening – under the arms, around the belly, finally even between the legs, which sent Matthew into a nearly lunatic fit of thrashing and screaming.

Andy had him helplessly out of control, and took advantage by reaching directly into his overalls and tickling him there, all over, front and rear, pulling and snatching at his underwear, and then pulling at the overalls themselves, pulling them down, or at least trying to pull them down, but not getting very far as Matthew started to fight back. Both boys were laughing and hollering and struggling for position, suddenly engaged in a sweaty contest over Matthew's pants – Andy trying to get them down, Matthew

fighting to keep them up. It was Andy who finally won, or maybe Matthew who finally let him win, with the overalls getting yanked loose and dragged down to Matthew's knees while he floundered, still laughing, on his back.

Andy paused to regain his breath. "What a pussy," he said again, then launched into a fresh attack, this time pinching and tickling at the other boy's exposed thighs. Matthew, giggling more wildly than ever, twisted away to first one side, then to the other, leaving his butt an easy target for pinching and grabbing.

Andy went after it mercilessly, noticing, in some calmer part of his brain, that Matthew was wearing Fruit of the Loom underpants, and that they had two small blue stripes around the elastic waistband. Andy was snapping at the elastic with one hand and tickling with the other, keeping Matthew in a state of constantly thrashing hysteria. And then both hands were pawing at the white Fruit of the Loom briefs, pulling at them now more than snapping them, pulling at them until they had somehow slipped all the way down Matthew's hips – an awkward realization that caused both boys to stop abruptly and draw apart, because one of them was actually and suddenly undressed, sprawled there rudely on the ground with his pants and his underwear down and his dick out for both of them to see. Not sure what else to do, Andy threw himself on top of the other boy in a roughhouse wrestling pin. "I win, asshole," he declared quickly, holding Matthew's shoulders. "Do you give up?"

"Yeah, that's enough," Matthew said breathlessly. His face was red and streaming with sweat, and he could hardly talk without choking. "I'm dead."

"Me too, no lie," Andy said. He let himself collapse forward on top of Matthew. He could feel that his own dick was hard, and he figured that Matthew could probably feel it, too. They stayed there like that for several moments, resting against each other in the heat and the sun and the buzzing of the flies.

Matthew finally broke them up when he pushed gently against Andy and rolled out from under him. "I have to get home," he said, "for my paper route."

Andy mumbled, "That's right, I forgot." He started brushing the dirt and the weedy leaves from his clothes. "How's your foot?"

"It hurts," Matthew said. He found his Bulls cap in the weeds and put it back on. "Fuck, I'm thirsty."

"No lie," Andy agreed, on his feet now and watching as Matthew pulled up his underwear and his pants. "We should've brought a canteen or something."

"Next time we will... and maybe some candy bars and shit like that."

"Definitely."

Together, they collected the BB guns and returned to their bikes, then commenced the long ride back home. By the time they got back to Sandburg, and finally to Pine Street, Matthew was whimpering from the pain in his foot. Andy went with him into the house. Matthew's mother was gone; the house was empty. "She's probably at her boyfriend's apartment," Matthew speculated, hobbling to the bathroom. "Sometimes she goes away for two or three days."

"No shit?"

"She says I can take care of myself."

"Man, my parents would never leave me alone like that," Andy said enviously. "It must be cool to have the whole house to yourself."

Matthew shrugged indifferently. "I guess it's OK. Sometimes it's kind of lonely." In the bathroom, he took off his shoes and his socks and Andy's bloody bandanna, and then washed his injured foot in the bathtub. There was an ugly puncture wound on the bottom of it, right in the middle, still oozing blood and already purplish around the edges. After washing it, Matthew painted it with iodine and covered it with an adhesive patch. He seemed remarkably adept at taking care of his own problems. But his paper route was suddenly the biggest problem of all:

There was no way he could walk the entire route on his sore foot. Andy suggested that he use his bike. But Matthew glumly shook his head. "I can't," he confessed. "The bag's too heavy. I can't carry it and ride at the same time."

"Maybe I can carry the bag," Andy said. "You can just ride along and show me where to go."

"Really?"

"Yeah, fuck, it's no big deal."

Matthew broke into his old smile and clapped Andy's shoulders in a clumsily boyish hug. After using the toilet and getting a drink, the two of them went outside to fold and bag the newspapers on the front porch. Andy had the bloody bandanna dangling from the back pocket of his pants. "You got about a million papers here, man."

"I told you," Matthew said. "It's too heavy for my bike." They finished the bagging and started down Pine Street, Andy with the sack over his shoulder, Matthew cruising lazily alongside on his bicycle. At his own house, Andy stopped briefly to say hello to his mother and sisters; he felt sort of cool with the newspaper bag over his shoulder; it made him feel like a guy with a real job, like his own father most of all, carrying the mail for the post office. He actually enjoyed it, which surprised him, and he was sorry when they came to the end of Lombard Street, and to the end of the route.

By the time they got back to Matthew's house, it was almost dinnertime, and Matthew's mother had returned from her afternoon date. Andy stuck around long enough to watch Matthew feed his fish, then prepared to leave. "I guess you won't be lonely tonight," he said. "I mean, your mom is here and everything."

"She'll be gone again, probably Friday or Saturday. That's when she goes out to bars with Steve."

"Who's Steve?"

"Her boyfriend," Matthew said. He was still standing next to his aquarium, watching his fish nibble and nibble at their tiny flakes of food. "They go to bars a lot." He looked suddenly at Andy. "Maybe you could come over some night when she's gone. Do you want to?"

"Sure, that would be cool."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, no doubt," Andy said, genuinely excited by the prospect of a night with no parents, no adults, no supervisors of any kind.

"Way cool," Matthew smiled. "We could have a blast here, I swear to God."

The boys agreed once more to spending a night together as soon as possible, and then Andy went home to have dinner and take a shower. In his room, undressing, he thought back to his afternoon in the country with Matthew, wrestling and grappling with him in the weeds. He couldn't stop remembering how Matthew's underpants had come down, and how it had seemed, for just an instant, that something seriously hot was about to happen, something that Andy had never thought would happen with Matthew, not with Matthew McCann, the neighborhood puppy dog. But it almost had, out there at Harshbarger's farm, with Matthew's dick suddenly uncovered and nobody else around to see them or stop them. Andy kept wondering now, over and over, what might have happened if he had been just a little bolder, a little braver; if he had taken charge at just that right moment; if he had taken off his own clothes before getting on top of Matthew there in the sun and the heat and the silence. What might have happened? How far would the other boy have gone? Andy knew from seeing it that Matthew's dick had a few strands of pubic hair around it, which meant that Matthew was almost certainly able to jizz, at least a little, and that he probably got horny just like any other kid – which also meant that he probably would have fucked around if given the chance: like maybe some night at his own house, some night when his mother was gone and he was alone with Andy. Some night like Friday, or Saturday.

Andy let himself think about that, about spending the night at Matthew's. He was on the edge of his bed, naked, with his box of secret pictures beside him. He picked out one of River Phoenix, an old one from "Stand by Me" that made Andy smile because it looked so much like Matthew, right down to the same blond crew-cut and the same baby face. Andy started touching himself while he stared at it. He didn't bother with tissues or a towel; it wouldn't be necessary; the sheet was already crusty from that morning's wet dream. A little more wouldn't make any difference.

8

Andy and Matthew continued to see each other every day around the neighborhood; Andy even delivered Matthew's newspapers for him one more time, on Thursday afternoon; but their anticipated sleep-over never happened, not that first weekend. For whatever reason, Matthew's mother decided to stay home on Friday and Saturday, leaving both boys frustrated and disappointed. Andy, especially, found himself feeling unusually restless, unusually bored by the slow passage of uneventful days and nights. His thoughts, more and more, turned forward to the following week, when the beginning of school would finally bring an end to the summer boredom.

It was on the last Thursday before the beginning of classes when something more exciting than school suddenly came strolling into Andy's yard: the Spinks twins, both of them pushing flashy ten-speed bicycles as they approached. Andy, outside trimming the hedges, turned off the clippers and took a wary step toward his two visitors. "What are you guys doing here? How'd you know where I live?"

"Use your brilliant brain and figure it out," one of the twins yelled, still several feet away. "Don't be dumb."

"Did Red tell you?"

"Maybe," the boy said, close enough now to be identified, by the pink scar above his left eyebrow, as Deacon. "I ain't sayin' for sure." He and his brother stopped in front of Andy and looked around the yard. "This here is a big place, man. Are you the fuckin' gardener?"

"Eat me."

"Don't be a prick," Snickers said, maybe to Andy, maybe to his own brother. "Why you guys always be dissin' each other so bad?"

Andy said, "Because he's a jerk," pointing at Deacon. "Anyway, why are you guys here?"

"To see you, man."

"For what?"

"Maybe Red sent us to see you," Snickers said. He and his brother were both wearing silver-and-black White Sox caps and shorts and jerseys, with the caps turned backwards. "Maybe he wants you to work for him."

"Doing what?"

"He needs hisself a new guy to carry his groceries," Deacon said with a smart-ass grin. "One of his old boys moved away real quick." He straddled his bike and waved to Andy. "Yo, man, come with us."

"Where to?"

"It ain't no big deal. We just goin' to tell you about the job, is all."

"Maybe we can go to the lake," Snickers proposed. "It's hype there, man. We can smoke some weed."

Andy hesitated, suddenly confronted with a genuine adventure – not just a fantasy, or one of his usual

daydreams – but a real, living adventure full of intrigue and danger. He knew that going with the twins could be the start of a dark, strange journey for him, and it frightened him to take that first step. But his adrenaline rush was stronger than any fear; wherever the twins were about to take him, he wanted to go. “I have to put these clippers away first,” he finally told them. “And I have to get my bike.”

“And don't forget to tell your mama,” Deacon called after him.

“Eat me,” Andy hollered back, but he was smiling when he said it.

Together, the three boys rode their bikes out to Lake Swanson, an easy fifteen-minute trip from Andy's house. When they arrived, the twins knew exactly where to go: past the water slide and the paddle boats and the public beach (where they left their bikes locked outside the bath house) to a narrow path that led through the woods, then down a hill to a secluded clearing near the water. “This is a cool place,” Andy said, looking around at the pine trees and the boulders and the wild tangles of ivy.

“No shit,” Deacon nodded. “This here is the dopest fuckin' place you'll ever see, Damon.” He had already taken a bag of marijuana from the pocket of his shorts and was waiting for Snickers to hand him the pipe. All three boys were sitting on a ledge of rock that cropped out from the hill behind them. They were near enough to the water to touch it with their toes. “You like to smoke weed, right?”

“Sure,” Andy said, “it's OK.”

“You'll like this shit here just fine,” Deacon guaranteed him.

“This here is stupid strong, man, just wait.” He lit it up and started passing it around. “So you want a job or what?”

“Yeah, I already told Red I did.”

“Doin' what, man?”

“Anything he needs,” Andy said, trying to hold the smoke in his lungs. “It doesn't matter.”

Snickers took the pipe from him and tapped the little brass bowl with his fingertip, tamping down the weed inside. “What about makin' deliveries and shit like that?”

“No problem.”

“What if he wanted you to deliver some weed like this here... maybe like to a friend of his?”

Andy almost smiled, because Matthew had been right all along: Red really was a dealer, and all the craziness and all the danger of it was suddenly staring Andy straight in the face. “That would be OK, I guess.”

Snickers finished taking a hit, then shook his head. “That ain't good enough, man. You can't guess about shit like this, you know what I'm sayin'?”

“Who would I deliver it to?”

“Just some guys around town. It's easy, man. And you can make some decent cash.”

“That ain't no lie,” Deacon said. He passed the pipe along one more time. “Check out our bikes,” he added, pointing back through the woods. “Red got us those for our birthday, man.”

“Seriously?”

“Fuck yes, man, Red is stupid nice!”

“He must be,” Andy conceded. He took another hit from the pipe. His head was starting to feel light and woozy. He had smoked pot once before, at Cheryl Turner's party, but it hadn't hit him like this, not that first time. Suddenly, the sunlight on the water looked brighter, the birds in the forest sounded noisier, the blood in his veins felt hotter. “This is totally excellent shit,” he finally mumbled, still holding the pipe without realizing it. “Totally excellent.”

Both of the twins looked at him and laughed. “This boy is stoned,” one of them said. “You like it, right?”

“Yeah, big time.”

“Didn't I tell you it was good shit?”

Andy nodded while taking another hit, then started laughing with the other boys. One of them took the pipe from him and said, “You can have shit like this all the time, Andy man... once you be workin' for Red.”

“Sounds fuckin' awesome to me.”

“I thought so,” Snickers said, or maybe Deacon. “You ain't such a pure little white boy, are you?”

“Pure little white boy,” Andy repeated, giggling again. The pipe had been refilled and was being passed once more. It went around two times, three times, whatever, Andy couldn't keep track. He was reclining against the rocky hillside behind him, one hand behind his head, blinking at the bright dazzle of sky and sunlight and water. He was wearing his gym shorts, and he could feel the sun's pleasant warmth against his bare legs. “Fuckin' awesome,” he murmured after a while. The pipe was suddenly in his hand again. “When do I start delivering shit?”

“Groceries, man.”

“What?”

“Groceries,” one of the twins repeated. “You always gotta say groceries, man... like, you know, like delivering groceries.”

“Right,” Andy agreed fuzzily. “Delivering groceries. So when do I get to start?”

“Come to the shop tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, man, tomorrow.”

Andy noticed that he still had the pipe in his hand. He paused for another hit. “What time?”

“What time what?”

“What time what,” Andy echoed groggily, then broke out laughing once more. He could hear the twins laughing along with him, and one of them saying, “This boy is stupid high.” And then the other one saying, “Fuckin' right, man, he likes to get fucked up. Ain't that right, Andy?”

“Yeah, I like to get fucked up.”

“You like it here, don't you, man?”

“Yeah, fuck, of course,” Andy mumbled. Somewhere in the forest behind him, a woodpecker was drilling against a tree, drilling like a machine gun. Andy glanced at the pipe in his hand. “It's out,” he remarked vaguely to himself, to the twins, to no one in particular. It was getting hotter there along the lake as the sun moved a bit higher, hitting the boys more directly, and Andy wondered about taking off his shirt.

“The pipe is out,” he said again. “See?”

“Give it here,” one of the twins told him, taking it away.

“We got time for a little more.”

“Yo, Snix,” the other twin said, “let's show Damon how to get comfortable.”

“Word up,” Snickers agreed. “It's time to get comfortable, man.”

Andy sat forward. “Yeah, no shit, it's too hot,” he said, gladly removing his T-shirt. He looked beside him at the twins. They were also taking off their caps and their shirts, both of them looking back at Andy and grinning. “We get more comfortable than that,” Deacon said. “You know what I'm sayin'?” He got to his feet and pulled down his shorts and his underwear in one quick motion, then stepped out of them and started waving them above his head. “This is gettin' comfortable, man, like this here.”

Snickers went next, pulling off his shorts and his underwear without bothering to stand up, just lifting his butt high enough to get them free down his legs. “This here is the way to do it,” he smiled, putting his cap back on. “Layin' out in the sun, man, nothin' like it.” Both of them were naked now except for their backwards White Sox caps and their gym shoes. Deacon, still on his feet, was lighting up another pipe of

weed. He and Snickers were a year younger than Andy, but their dicks were at least as big, firm meaty ones with cleanly circumcised knobs, and they had some definite pubic hair, kinky black curlicues of it all beneath their smooth brown tummies. Andy was still sitting there next to them, still with his shorts on, staring dumbly. He felt like he was in one of his own wet dreams. But this was no dream. The boys beside him were real, absolutely real, and all things dark and dirty and thrilling suddenly seemed possible.

Deacon stepped forward and crouched beside him. "What's wrong, Andy boy?"

"Nothing," Andy said softly. He took the pipe from Deacon, paused for a hit, then passed it to Snickers. Deacon swatted him on the arm. "Come on, man, get comfortable. What you waitin' for?"

"Get comfortable," Snickers nodded. He stretched out with an exaggerated sigh of contentment and spread his legs. "Like this, man. See how good it feels? Nothin' better in the whole fuckin' world." He reached out and plucked at Andy's shorts. "Come on, try it."

"Yo, man, don't be a pussy," Deacon said. "Just do it!"

"I'm not a pussy."

"Then do it, man!"

"OK, OK," Andy muttered. He hesitated another moment, then lifted his butt as Snickers had done and pulled his red gym shorts and his underpants down to his knees. He glanced back smiling at the twins. "Are you fuckers happy now?"

"Come_ on, all the way," Deacon insisted. He pulled at the red shorts until Andy cooperated and raised his feet, then quickly finished the job himself, tugging Andy's shorts and underpants all the way off. "Now that's better, man, admit it."

"You're right," Andy said, left in nothing but his socks and his gym shoes. He had never been naked outside before, and the hot sunlight felt strange and wonderful against his bare penis and scrotum. "It's pretty radical, no doubt."

Deacon tossed Andy's gym shorts to his brother. He kept the white Jockey underpants for himself and started twirling them slowly in the air, flaunting them like a little victory flag. "We got us a new nature boy," he chuckled. "Look here, Snix, he likes it this way."

"Fuckin' right he likes it," Snickers said. He and his brother kept glancing at Andy's body, especially at his dick, checking it out. "How's it feel, Andy?"

"Great, man, really."

Snickers passed him the pipe once more. "Go ahead, nature boy, finish it." He was using Andy's red shorts to fan lazily at the flies and the mosquitoes. "Lay back, man, relax."

"Yeah, man," Deacon grinned, "relax and enjoy yourself. We ain't go in' nowhere for a while, right?"

"Right," Andy said, so dry-mouthed that he could hardly get the word out. He leaned back against the hillside, beside Snickers. Deacon was still twirling the underpants in slow circles, then started flicking them playfully at Andy. "You feelin' stoned, man?"

"Definitely," Andy murmured, letting the sun and the heat wash over him. "I don't need any more weed, I don't think."

"You had enough?"

"Yeah, no doubt."

Deacon was flicking the underpants at Andy's chest, then down a little, at his belly. "Check out this nature boy, man, he's in outer space."

"Don't fall asleep," Snickers laughed, poking at Andy's hip. Deacon also laughed, and then flicked the underpants lower, letting them brush against Andy's dick. Andy had already set aside the pipe, and was reclining with both hands behind his head. He started giggling as the underpants brushed against him.

And then all three of them were laughing as Deacon started flicking the underpants more aggressively between Andy's legs, doing it deliberately now to hit Andy's dick, playing at it like some kind of party game. Snickers started doing the same thing to himself with Andy's shorts, trying to catch his dick in the elastic and make it jump. Andy saw him doing it and giggled louder. He could feel his own dick still being flipped back and forth by Deacon, then looked down and realized that Deacon was using his hand to do it now, not the underpants. Deacon looked at him and laughed again. "Yo, nature boy, you all right?"

"Totally all right," Andy said, feeling himself ready to spring a boner, a definite boner.

Deacon glanced at his brother and said, "Check out this nasty little white boy, Snix."

Snickers was about to respond when the sound of a motorized cart came faintly through the trees behind them. It was the park service, doing one of their routine sweeps around the lake to look for drugs and alcohol and vagrants. The twins knew immediately what was happening, and jumped for their clothes without saying a word. It took Andy a few seconds longer to gather his wits, and then his clothing. A minute or so later, the three boys were up the hill and back on the path through the woods. As the cart passed them, the two park wardens inside acknowledged them with a businesslike nod, then kept going.

At the bath house, as Andy was unlocking his bicycle, Deacon smiled and poked him in the arm. "You almost got your bare ass busted back there, man."

"No shit," Andy said, smiling back. He still felt stoned enough to float off the ground. "That was a fuckin' blast."

"You liked it, right?"

"No, man, I hated it," Andy laughed. "I never had such a terrible, shitty time."

Snickers patted him on the back, and then once on the ass, and said, "This nature boy here is all right." Deacon agreed, and then paused, obviously distracted, as two other young boys walked past them towards the bath house, towards the changing rooms. The twins glanced at each other in some sort of silent signal.

They told Andy to go ahead without them, that they would see him later, that they needed to do some business. Andy reluctantly agreed. Deacon and Snickers both gave him a friendly pinch to the nuts, then rushed off towards the bath house.

Andy rode home alone.

9

For Andy, waking up on Friday was like surfacing from a marathon dream, from a dream that had somehow stolen an entire day from his life. He could remember getting up on Thursday, trimming the hedges, riding out to the lake with Snickers and Deacon – and then his memories became distorted and surreal, like something from a weird movie. Had he really gotten stoned with the twins? Had he really taken off his clothes with them out there at the lake? Had Deacon really started to play with Andy's dick before the grown-up world had suddenly come along and broken up the party? It all seemed impossible – but Andy knew it had happened, no question about it – and he had the sunburn to prove it.

He threw back the sheet and touched gingerly at his belly and his thighs, tender areas of his body that had never been exposed to the sun before the previous afternoon. Still lying there in bed, he stretched down the front of his underpants to take a peek inside. Even his penis was reddened and sore from the sun. There was no denying it: he had definitely been out at the lake, butt-naked, smoking pot and roasting his wiener.

Carefully, Andy crawled out of bed and went about his morning business, finally making it downstairs

by a few minutes before noon. His mother was cooking vegetable soup in the kitchen. She looked at him with a concerned expression when he came into the room. "You look better today," she decided, studying his face. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," Andy said. "I just needed some rest, that's all." The day before, he had come home far too stoned to deal with his parents or his sisters; having dinner with them and talking to them had seemed unthinkable, and Andy had solved the problem by claiming a sudden illness and spending the whole night in his room. Now, of course, the mysterious illness had passed, and to his mother, at least, everything appeared normal.

He ate his lunch in pensive silence, not even bothering to watch TV, then went back to his room and put on his shoes. He needed to go out; he wasn't sure of the details, but he knew that he was supposed to see Red about a job. "Delivering groceries," he whispered to himself, smiling as he recalled Snickers' secret code. The prospect of doing something illegal, really illegal, made Andy's stomach tighten with anxiety, but also with excitement, with hungry anticipation – especially after his taste of sin the day before, stretched out naked in paradise with the twins. Nothing could stop him now from returning for more.

He rode his bike to Red Dog Comix and hurried inside. Red was busy putting out new titles on the shelves. He grinned slightly when he saw Andy, like someone who had just won a bet. "So you showed up," he said. "That's good. You're prompt and dependable. That's very good."

"I was talking to the twins yesterday...."

"Oh, I know, I know, believe me. I saw them last night."

"Did they tell you about, like, you know, about us being at the lake and stuff?"

Red nodded and smiled, and said, "I think they told me just about everything. It sounded like you had a good time."

"Yeah," Andy admitted with a bashful grin, "a total blast."

"Well, in that case, I'd say we have some discussing to do, you and me. Isn't that right?"

"Sure, whatever you say."

Red nodded to himself, satisfied, and walked to the door. He brought Andy's bike inside, then shut the door and locked it. "We'll just close up shop for a few minutes," he explained, putting a "Back Soon" sign in the window. He took Andy upstairs and sat with him on the couch. "You want a soda or something?"

"No, that's OK, thanks."

"OK, then, let's take care of business," the man said. "First of all, you might as well start leaving your bike out back, in the alley, like the twins and the other kids do. It'll be safe back there, don't worry."

"OK, no problem."

Red paused, watching the boy carefully. "Now, Andrew, exactly what kind of a job are you looking for? I mean, that's why you're here, right? For a job?"

"Yeah, definitely," Andy said. "That's what me and the twins were talking about yesterday."

"Among other things," Red teased the boy gently. "And what did you and the twins figure out, exactly?"

"Well, they said something about delivering stuff... like delivering groceries."

Red smiled, obviously pleased by Andy's discretion. "Groceries, that's right. And is that the job you want?"

"Sure, that would be cool."

"You're a decent kid," Red laughed softly, tousling the boy's feathery brown hair. "I think you're going to do a terrific job around here. But what about your parents? Are they going to be a problem?"

“No way.”

“You're pretty independent, right?”

“Pretty much,” Andy nodded. “I don't stay in the house very much. I like to get out and, you know, mess around and do stuff.”

Red took out a Marlboro and lit it with an old silver Scripto.

He never removed his eyes from the boy. “What about girls?”

“What about them?”

“Girls can be a distraction,” the man shrugged. “Having girlfriends, going out on dates, all those things.”

“That's no problem for me.”

“No girlfriends?”

Andy glanced at Red, then smiled and shook his head. “Nope,” he said, “I don't have any girlfriends.”

“Why not?”

“It's just a waste of time, that's all.”

“Good enough, Andrew. I don't think we'll have any problems, do you?”

“No, sir, none at all.”

Red paused for a drag on his cigarette. “You said something once about taking an art class,” he suddenly mentioned. “Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“What was that all about?”

Andy considered sticking with his earlier lie, but then decided against it. “I just sort of made it up,” he confessed shyly, staring down at his hands. “It was just something stupid.”

“So where was that picture from?”

“I got it from the library.”

“You cut it out of a book, right?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

Red was nodding as he blew out a lazy plume of smoke. “Because you like mythology, was that it? Cupid and all those dudes?”

Andy looked up smiling. “I do, seriously. Those stories are cool.. like about the Cyclops and the Titans and stuff like that.”

“Do you know about Zeus?”

“What about him?”

“He was a horny old guy. Lots of good stories about him.”

Red smiled. He took a final drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. “He was always after some good-looking girl or boy, whatever, taking them up to Mount Olympus to screw around.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah, absolutely.”

“Girls and boys both?”

“That's what they say. Ganymede was one of them. Ever heard of him?”

“I think so,” Andy said, vaguely recalling a painting of him from the library. “Did an eagle carry him away?”

“That's right. Old Zeus turned himself into an eagle and carried Ganymede off to Olympus for some fun and games.”

“How old was he?”

“Which one?”

“That kid... that Ganymede kid. How old was he?”

“I don't know,” Red chuckled, scratching slowly at his belly. “Thirteen, fourteen, maybe fifteen.”

Andy had more questions, sincerely curious about the details. “And why did Zeus pick him out special?”

“Well, I guess Ganymede must've been a hot little number. They say that Zeus could never resist a beautiful girl or boy. He was a horny old dude, like I said before.”

“Do you know any other stories?”

Red tousled Andy's hair once more, then got off the couch and pulled the boy with him. “No time for stories, kid. I have to get back to work. But first,” he said, heading quickly by himself across the room, “I need to give you something.” He went into the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him. Andy, from where he was standing, could see the bed, a stack of cardboard boxes, a cluttered bookshelf, and some kind of metal tripod – maybe for a telescope, or maybe for a camera. A moment later, Red was back with a brown paper sack. He gave it to Andy, then placed his hand firmly on the boy's shoulder. “I need you to deliver this for me. Can you do it?”

Andy nodded eagerly. “Of course, no problem. Just tell me where.”

“Nine eighteen Lombard Street,” Red said slowly and carefully. “Can you remember that?”

“Sure.”

“Say it back.”

“Nine eighteen Lombard,” Andy recited. “That's easy. It's on the same street as my house.”

“Convenient, isn't it,” Red smiled, obviously aware of the connection. He gave Andy's shoulder an extra squeeze. “Run it over there, collect the money from Badger, and then run the money back here. Got it?”

“His name is Badger?”

“That's right.”

Andy nodded again, his mouth actually hanging open from excitement, then went downstairs with Red and got on his bike and pedaled away furiously up the street. He held the sack against the handlebars as he rode, holding it like something alive, like something that might escape if he loosened his grip. He made sure to take a street parallel to Lombard in order to avoid his own house, not cutting across until he came to the nine-hundred block where Badger lived. He slowed down at that point, finally stopping in front of an ordinary two-story brick house with 918 on the front door. He left his bike in the yard and rang the door bell. It was at least a full minute, long enough to start Andy worrying, before a teenaged black boy opened the door and peered out. “Hey, man, what's up?”

“I'm looking for Badger,” Andy said, clutching the bag against his chest. He recognized the other boy from the week before, from Red Dog, as the older teenager delivering “groceries” with the twins. “I'm Andy Damon.”

“Yo, man, I been expectin' you, hold on,” Badger said, disappearing briefly before returning with a white business envelope stuffed with money. He gave the envelope to Andy and took the bag. “Get them greens back to the shop, little man.”

“Is that all?”

“What else you lookin' for, punk, a goodbye kiss?”

“No, fuck, I just...”

“Later, shrimp,” Badger said to cut him off, then slammed the door in his face. Andy was too nervous and excited to be upset. Still moving at top speed, he got back on his bike and returned to the shop. So far, everything seemed ridiculously easy; Andy wasn't even delivering to customers, just to other teenaged runners like himself; it was obvious that he was simply a tiny part of an elaborate system designed to keep Red as far removed from the customers as possible.

At the shop, Red was just finishing a sale of Bart Simpson posters to three little boys who nearly ran over Andy on their way out. “Hey, it's my favorite new errand boy,” the man smiled as he saw Andy. “Any problems?”

“Nope, none at all.”

“Do you have something for me?”

Andy, in front of the counter, cautiously touched the pocket of his blue jeans. "Is it safe?"

"I admire your good sense, Andrew... but it's OK, we're alone, don't worry."

Andy dug the envelope from his pocket and passed it to Red.

"Now what happens?"

The man didn't answer right away; he checked the money first, taking his time to get an exact count, then looked up at Andy. "What happens now, my friend, is your first official payday." He peeled two ten-dollar bills from the envelope and handed them to the boy. "Not bad for a quick trip across town, is it?"

Andy stared at the money in his hand, then let out a delighted whoop of laughter. "This is wild," he said. "I can't believe it!"

"No complaints?"

"No, sir, no complaints at all."

"Good, I like to make my kids happy."

Andy stuffed the money into his pocket. "When can I make another trip?"

"Come back next Friday... after school. I'll have something else for you by then."

"Great!"

"I like your earring, by the way," Red made a point of mentioning. He reached across the counter and brushed the hair away from Andy's left ear. "It's a good look for you, buddy." He touched the little gold stud with his fingertip, "Definitely a good look."

"Thanks," Andy said softly. "I've got a silver one, too, and a ruby one shaped like a heart."

"I'd like to see them sometime."

"I'll wear one next week."

Red patted him on the side of the head. "I can't wait, man. Now take off, go home and relax."

Andy backed away, oddly reluctant to leave, then rushed from the shop and ran around back to retrieve his bike from the alley. He was nearly trembling with exhilaration as he rode home. Turning onto Lombard Street, he practically ran into Matthew, who was coming the other way with his bag of newspapers. "God, man, slow down," Matthew said. "You almost killed me!"

"Matt, you little fucker, what's up?"

"Why are you so happy?"

"I got myself a job, man!"

"No kidding? With Red?"

"You know it, man! Look at this here," Andy smiled, pulling the money from his pocket. "I made this just today, just from one little job!"

"Shit, Andy, you're a lucky dog."

"No lie."

"What kind of a job is it?"

Andy shrugged vaguely. "Just delivering stuff, you know, for Red. It's easy."

"Is it drugs and shit?"

"Shut up, Matt, you moron!"

Matthew stepped closer. "Is it? Am I right?"

"I don't know," Andy said, which was more or less true. "I just deliver bags of stuff. I don't know what's inside."

Matthew leaned against the handlebars of Andy's bike. "Do you think: maybe I could get a job, too?"

"Maybe, I don't know."

"Could you ask Red?"

"Sure," Andy said, "I guess so. But what about your paper route?"

"I'll do both," Matthew said. "I really need the money... to help my mom." Andy stared at the other boy without replying, then handed him one of the ten-dollar bills. "Here, spaz, take this."

"What for?"

"Just because I feel like it," Andy mumbled, embarrassed by his own generosity. "I don't really need it for anything special."

Matthew turned the ten-dollar bill in his hands, gazing at it incredulously. "Fuck, Andy, thanks a lot!"

"Shut up," Andy said, poking Matthew in the chest. "It's no big deal."

Matthew exclaimed, "Fuck, man, thanks," one more time, then stashed the money gleefully into his newspaper sack.

Together, the boys started walking up the street, Matthew pausing every few steps to pitch one of his papers onto someone's front porch. Andy started wondering about the coming night. He asked Matthew about his mother. "Is she going out later?"

"No, fuck it," Matthew responded with a disgusted scowl. "Her and her boyfriend is fighting. She's home again all weekend."

"That sucks, man."

"Maybe next weekend you can stay over... if she's gone."

"I hope so."

"It would be radical if you could," Matthew called over his shoulder, running a few steps up someone's driveway to get a clear aim at the front door. He came running back with one of his cheerfully lunatic smiles. "That's it, I'm done," he yelled. "Come home with me and we'll feed the fish!"

"Oh, thrilling," Andy said, teasing him. "I can't wait."

"Come on, fucker, let's go," Matthew laughed. He grabbed Andy by the arm. "I got a new tetra yesterday. It's cool, you'll like it."

"You and your stupid fish!"

"You love my fish, admit it."

"With tartar sauce," Andy snarled, playfully slapping at Matthew's face. "I'll eat the little pricks for dinner!"

Both boys started laughing as they walked side by side up the shady street.

10

Monday finally came, and with it, the first day of school. Andy, instead of sleeping until noon, had to drag himself out of bed by seven o'clock. But he really didn't mind; he was looking forward to seeing his old friends and to starting a new routine. For this special occasion, he wore an outfit of new black shorts and a new yellow-and-red striped rugby shirt to go along with his black Air Jordans. He was still primping with his hair and his clothes in front of the mirror when the school bus came honking its horn down Lombard Street. Andy barely got outside in time to catch it. The driver, an old man who owned a hardware store downtown, warned him about being more prompt in the future. Andy quickly agreed, and then found an empty seat near the back.

He was already settled in before he noticed Manny Fuentes sitting two seats ahead of him on the opposite side of the bus. Manny's curly black hair was longer than Andy remembered it, and he was wearing an earring now, a dangly silver crucifix, which was also new. But otherwise he looked pretty much the same: a very slender boy with thin arms and bony shoulders beneath his white Guns N' Roses T-

shirt. His face, which Andy could see as Manny glanced nonchalantly from side to side, also looked the same: not handsome, or even pretty, but definitely cute in a funny sort of way, with round chipmunk cheeks and a mouth that seemed too large for the rest of him, with big full lips and big teeth, a mouth that could break into the hugest, toothiest smile Andy had ever seen.

As the bus made its way across town, Andy stayed where he was and watched the other boy. Manny was sharing his seat with another Mexican kid, but they didn't seem particularly friendly, spending most of their time staring silently out the windows. Once, Manny took a glance behind him and spotted Andy. They knew each other well enough to exchange a brief wave of greeting, which they did, and then Manny looked away. Andy kept watching him, wondering if he would turn again, but he never did – at least not until the bus pulled to a stop in front of the school, when Manny glanced back once more, as if checking on Andy, checking to see if he was still there. All the kids got up and started filing out, but Manny seemed to linger a moment, just long enough to end up directly in front of Andy as they shuffled up the aisle. They were almost exactly the same height, and Andy found himself staring right at the back of Manny's curly head – close enough to count three freckles on the back of his neck, to see a piece of blue lint on the shoulder of his T-shirt, to smell the tart, citrusy body odor from beneath his arms. (Apparently, he hadn't washed in a couple of days.) Coming down the steps of the bus, the line stopped momentarily and Manny had to back up in mid-step, butting against Andy behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and mumbled an apology.

“No problem,” Andy said, speaking practically into the other boy's ear. Manny's right shoulder was pressed against Andy's chest, and they stayed that way for several seconds until the line started moving again. Inside the school, they looked at each other once more with a silent parting glance, then went their separate ways.

Andy's first stop on this hectic orientation half-day was his new home room, which turned out to be English. After that, everyone convened in the gymnasium for an hour-long assembly, then broke up once again for abbreviated sessions of their other classes. Andy went from room to room for Spanish, then history, then math and biology and social science, finally ending up back in the gym for physical education. There was no dressing or undressing that first day, just a talk from the coach and a quick assignment of lockers. Andy noticed immediately that Manny Fuentes was not in the same class with him, which was a major letdown, but he also noticed that Timmy Jenco was – and, better yet, that their lockers were in the same row, only ten or twelve feet apart. Timmy was wearing sunglasses that day, with red lenses to match his hair. Andy assumed that they were prescription glasses, like the ones he usually wore in class to see the blackboard. All in all, Timmy looked terrific, just as hot as ever, with that great cinnamon soft hair of his and that husky sprinter's body: He was no more than an inch taller than Andy, but he probably had an extra twenty pounds of muscle, especially in his strong shoulders and butt.

During the coach's talk, he and Andy sat next to each other on the bleachers in the gym. For some reason, although they weren't exactly friends, Timmy had always seemed to like Andy, perhaps because Andy was also considered “cool” within their social sphere – one of them for being a champion jock, the other for being a radical punk, both of them for being extremely popular with the girls. Throughout the talk, they kept up a running commentary of whispered jokes and obscenities, all directed at the coach. The boys nearby could hear them, and a ripple effect of laughter soon made its way through the group. Coach Zimmerman, the teacher, lost his temper at that point and yelled for everyone to shut up or get on the floor for push-ups. The group promptly quieted down. Afterwards, Andy and Timmy high-fived each other for so successfully disrupting the session.

The day ended with lunch in the cafeteria, where Andy shared a table with two other boys, plus Cheryl Turner and several of her girlfriends. As usual, Andy was the center of attention among the girls,

who couldn't stop giggling and fussing about his cute hair and his new clothes and his nice suntan. He soaked it up eagerly, flirting with them and teasing them and making them all giggle louder with his naughty jokes and his dimply, squinty-eyed bobcat grin.

At the end of lunch, Snickers and Deacon suddenly came past Andy's table carrying their empty trays. They were with a group of freshmen friends, and only slowed down long enough to give Andy's chair a friendly kick and to tease him about all of his girlfriends. Andy smiled at them and gave them the finger, feigning amused indifference. But, in reality, he would gladly have traded every girl at the table for one more afternoon with the twins, one more afternoon screwing around with them at the lake.

By twelve o'clock, the abbreviated school day was over, and it was time to head back home on the bus. Andy, true to form, was one of the last students to board, and had to settle for an aisle seat near the front. Manny Fuentes was a few rows behind him, once again sharing a seat with the other Mexican boy. The bus, quickly on its way, made a reverse run of its morning route: first passengers on were now first off. Manny's stop was one of the earliest, at a block of low-income apartment houses known as "the projects." As he and his companion and three other kids filed down the aisle to get off, his hip brushed against Andy's shoulder. He kept going without a pause or a word, glancing back only when he came to the steps and turned to climb down – but even then only briefly, fleetingly, with no smile or expression of any kind. Andy was wondering whether or not he should wave when Manny hopped down the last step and disappeared out the door.

Andy spent the rest of his afternoon hanging out with Matthew, who was also fresh from his first day at school, as a new eighth-grader at George Washington Junior High. Well-known at school as a troublemaker, Matthew had already earned a demerit slip for fighting, which he reported proudly to Andy. "I busted up that other kid," he said. "It was fun, man, I swear to God."

"You're a retard," Andy told him. They were sitting on Matthew's front porch, waiting for the newspapers to arrive. "Why do you always fight so much?"

"It's fun! And then I called Mister Dawson an asshole, and he really freaked!"

"You're such a retard," Andy concluded once more. "You're going to get kicked out of there some day."

"I don't care," Matthew shrugged. His crew-cut had been moussed specially for school, and it was spiked up at least three inches, like someone who's been hit by lightning in a cartoon, "They sent my cousin Jason to the Davis Home last month... so I'll just go there with him, fuck it."

The Davis Home was a juvenile detention center on the outskirts of town, and was used as a threat by every exasperated parent and teacher in Sandburg. "You wouldn't like it so much if you went there," Andy said. "It's like a prison, man, it's the worst."

"Have you ever been there?"

"No, but... so what? Everybody knows how shitty it is." Matthew shrugged again, as oblivious as ever to logic or common sense. When the newspapers came, Andy helped to fold and deliver them, then went home to eat dinner, watch a baseball game on television, and get ready for bed. He was exhausted from his long day. By nine o'clock, he could barely keep his eyes open. Before going to sleep, he took a moment to pick out his clothes for the next day, finally deciding on white shorts and a baggy Wayne's World T-shirt. He also double-checked his gym uniform, which had already been packed into the knapsack that he used for his books. He took out the green shirt (with SANDBURG HIGH SCHOOL on the front in white letters), the green shorts, his white athletic socks and a new pair of British Knights, and finally his jockstrap. He flirted with the idea of trying on the jockstrap, just by itself, because he liked the way it made him look in back, with his butt all squeezed up tight by the elastic. But he was too tired to bother. He put everything back into the knapsack and crawled into bed, not even taking the time to

masturbate before he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

11

Next morning on the bus, Andy managed to find a seat directly behind Manny Fuentes. He waved to Manny on his way past, and Manny even smiled slightly as he waved back, but they didn't speak. Andy sat there watching him from behind for the whole trip. Every few minutes, when Manny turned his head to look out the window, he would glance swiftly at Andy, and then away again, never making eye contact. Andy wanted to say something to him, and Manny seemed to feel the same, but neither of them could find the proper words to start.

As the bus stopped in front of the school, and as everyone filed off, Manny let Andy pass before getting up and getting in line behind him. Suddenly, Andy stopped and turned and pointed back to his seat. "I forgot my fucking bag," he said, trapped in line and unable to get back.

Manny mumbled something like "don't sweat it," then reached back and grabbed the bag off the seat and handed it to Andy. "Here it is," he said simply. His voice had a definite accent, and he never seemed to raise it above a shy, mumbly monotone.

"Thanks," Andy said to him, smiling. "I got all my shit in here, even my gym clothes."

Manny nodded, but he didn't reply. Andy was shuffling sideways up the aisle of the bus, still looking back at the other boy. "Where's your bag? Don't you have your gym clothes and stuff?"

Manny responded with a shrug, and with one of his huge, toothy smiles. "I don't got no stuff yet," he said, as if apologizing to Andy. He touched the front of his brown corduroy pants. "I got shorts under here for gym."

"No uniform?"

"None yet."

"You'll have to buy one pretty soon," Andy said. He climbed down the steps and waited for Manny to join him on the sidewalk. "Everybody needs a uniform."

Manny was still smiling helplessly. "Maybe pretty soon, I don't know."

The two boys walked into school together, both of them suddenly aware of being side by side like two actual friends, carefully matching each other's stride, keeping in step. In the hallway, when it was time to go their different ways, they looked at each other and paused awkwardly. Andy finally said, "I'll see you later... after school," and poked Manny lightly in the arm. Manny, gnawing at his bottom lip, nodded quickly and hurried off in the other direction. Andy watched him go, then smiled to himself and headed for his first class.

The morning flew by rapidly, with two of Andy's favorite classes, Spanish and history, filling most of the time. At lunch, he sat with his usual group of friends and once again saw Snickers and Deacon as they passed his table. This time, Deacon actually stopped and grabbed him from behind in a playful half nelson, which Andy countered with an elbow to Deacon's nuts. Deacon retreated, laughing, then ran off with his brother and their friends.

After lunch, Andy grudgingly sat through math and biology and social science before finally getting his reward, when the bell for seventh period sent him on his way to gym class. This was Andy's little heaven, being in the locker room with three dozen other naked boys. Most of them had already changed by the time Andy strolled in (just under the deadline, as usual), and he was forced to hustle in order to catch up. Timmy Jenco, standing a few feet away, was just taking off his underwear, giving Andy a

perfect chance, right at the start, to get a good look at him. Timmy's body was all muscular white meat, with strong shoulders and big thighs and even bigger, fleshier buttocks. As he turned slightly and reached for his jockstrap, Andy got a clear view of him from the front, cleanly and starkly naked, with fat balls and a thick, stubby cock right in the middle. Everything about him seemed husky and meaty and white, including his genitals.

Later, during opening calisthenics, Andy and Timmy chose each other as partners for sit-ups. Andy went first, doing his requisite thirty while Timmy held his ankles, and then they switched. Timmy got down on the floor and Andy knelt at his feet, gripping him by the ankles and counting off – nine, ten, eleven, twelve – as he stared up Timmy's shorts, able to glimpse the white cup of Timmy's jock each time he went up and down. Then came jumping jacks, and rope-climbing, and military push-ups, and finally a frantic game of soccer outside on the playing field. By the end of the hour, Andy was completely sweat-soaked and out of breath, happy to strip down and get under the showers.

He quickly claimed the nozzle right next to Timmy, who was in the process of soaping his butt. Andy kept turning himself from side to side beneath the water, eyeing the other boys around him as he rotated. There were plenty of good things to see: a scrawny but cute little blond kid named Neil Marion, a lanky hillbilly boy named Rich Bosey with a huge dangly pecker, a slim, dark-haired boy named Eric Herath who definitely had the firmest, finest buns of anyone in the shower. But Andy was still most interested in Timmy; there was something sexy and devilish about him that made him more exciting than the other boys, regardless of looks or dick size. He was half-turned towards Andy, with his face up and his eyes closed against the spray, just letting the water rinse over him. His penis was drawn up even stubbier than before, with only its big mushroom head sticking out from its red bush of pubic hair – the same soft cinnamon red as the hair on his head. He was smooth as cool marble everywhere else, with freckles all over his arms and shoulders and even on his legs.

Andy waited for Timmy to finish, then followed him out of the showers to where Coach Zimmerman was waiting with the towels. All the boys had to stand in an area between the showers and the locker room until they had properly and totally dried themselves – hair and body and feet – the whole process being performed under the coach's watchful eye. When Andy and Timmy were done, they each draped their towels around their necks and padded barefoot together back to their lockers. Once there, Timmy started laughing about the coach. “He's such a homo,” the boy said, pointing back over his shoulder. “Did you see him looking at us? What a fag!”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

“He was looking at your skinny ass,” Timmy laughed, using his towel to snap at Andy's rear end. “I saw him doing it, man!”

Andy retaliated with his own towel, dancing around on tiptoe to get in a good snap. “He was looking at your fat ass, Jenco, not mine!” The other boys around them were all laughing now, and then there were a dozen naked teenagers engaged in an impromptu towel fight, everyone dancing and jostling for position and snapping at any ass or dick that came within range. Coach Zimmerman himself finally broke them up with a shrill blow on his whistle, like a referee calling time-out to a football scrimmage.

Afterwards, back in their clothes and ready to go, Andy and Timmy clasped hands in a quick goodbye shake, just like a couple of old buddies. They seemed genuinely fond of each other's company, sharing a certain air of playful, cocky mischief which made them natural companions. Without even trying, Andy had somehow gained Timmy Jenco as a new friend.

Back on the bus a few minutes later, Andy went straight to the seat in front of Manny Fuentes and flopped himself down. He sat sideways with his arm over the back of the seat and glanced smiling at the other boy. “Hey, Manny, what's up?”

“Not much.”

“My hair is still wet,” Andy remarked for no particular reason.

He pushed a strand off his forehead. “I just got done with gym.”

Manny was nodding politely, but didn't seem to have any response. Andy glanced toward the front of the bus as they started moving, then looked back at the other boy. “Was your gym coach pissed off about your uniform?”

“Not really pissed off,” Manny said, smiling in his familiar self-conscious way. His big lips seemed to stretch back nearly to his ears. “He says I need to buy one, that's all.”

“You already got shoes, right?”

“Sure, I got them.”

“And a jock?”

“Yeah,” Manny laughed softly, “I got one.”

“So you just need to get the shirt and the shorts,” Andy said, acting like the other boy's financial counselor. “That's not so bad. It's only about thirty bucks all together.”

Manny nodded again, always timidly agreeable. He had a habit, like now, of chewing on his bottom lip in order to control his nervous smile. Andy was still staring at him, waiting for him to say something, then gave up and looked away out the window. He started thinking about Friday, when he would be doing another job for Red, and making another chunk of cash – and that brought him right back to Manny, and Manny's problems with money. It might not be so ridiculous, Andy thought, to get a job for Manny, or at least to help him out with a few bucks every now and then. Andy looked at him once more over the back of the seat. “Maybe I can help you get a job somewhere,” he suddenly proposed. “You could make some cash, no lie.”

“That would be OK.”

“I mean, I don't know anything for sure,” Andy said, “but I could find out.”

“That would be OK,” Manny repeated. He seemed genuinely interested. “I can use more money for sure, all the time.”

“I'll find out,” Andy assured him again. He held out his hand to seal the bargain, and Manny slapped it happily, smiling wider than ever.

They hand-slapped again just a couple of minutes later when Manny got off the bus. He glanced back at Andy from outside, and then even raised his hand in another see-you-later gesture, as if savoring his new contact with this other boy, reluctant to let it go. Andy waved back and smiled. It had been a profitable day for him: first Timmy, and now Manny, both acquired effortlessly as new friends, with no trickery or cheating on Andy's part, which frankly surprised him. It was strange how things worked out sometimes, almost as if somebody had planned them and helped them to happen. Silently, in his own head, Andy said, “Eros, the angel of love,” reciting it like a prayer of thanksgiving.

12

The rest of the week followed a comfortable pattern: Each morning, and again each afternoon, Andy started sharing his seat on the bus with Manny – or perhaps it was the other way around, since Manny was always the first one on board. They never had much to say to each other, but it somehow seemed proper to both of them that they should sit together now, that not sitting together would have been a clumsy impossibility. Whatever the reasons or the motives, both boys seemed happy with the new arrangement.

In gym class, meanwhile, Andy and Timmy continued to get along like old pals, invariably choosing each other as partners for calisthenics, showering together, dressing and undressing together – doing so much together, in fact, that the other boys in the class started referring to them as “brothers,” as in, “Pass the ball to Jenco's brother,” or, “Let Damon's brother go first.” Needless to say, Andy was delighted by the attention, and by the flattering association with the most popular sophomore at Sandburg High.

But by Friday, Andy could think of nothing else but his appointment with Red. He rushed straight home after school to drop off his books and to check in with his mother, then jumped on his bike and raced back downtown to Red Dog. He left his bike in back of the shop, as instructed, before hurrying inside to get started. Red smiled as soon as he saw him. “You're the promptest little sucker I've ever known,” he said to the boy. “Right on time, as always.”

“I came as fast as I could.”

“You're ready for another delivery?”

“Absolutely,” Andy said, drumming his hands excitedly on the counter. “I'm ready right now.”

Behind him, three younger boys came into the shop on their way home from school, still carrying their book bags. Red lowered his voice slightly as he pointed to the stairs. “Up in my bedroom... there's a bag on the bed. Go get it.”

Andy obeyed at once. He pounded up the stairs to Red's apartment, entering almost reverently into the sanctum sanctorum of Red's bedroom. The bag was sitting there on the bed, ready to go. But first Andy took a moment to glance around the room. There was nothing especially unusual about it, just a lot of books and tapes and boxes, dirty clothes strewn about, a little bedside table cluttered with bottles of pills, Vaseline, mineral oil, foil-wrapped condoms, Kleenex tissues – things that Andy assumed were normal for grown-up guys like Red. There were also some collapsed tripods, like the one Andy had seen the week before, resting against the wall near the closet. Andy wondered about them, finding them slightly odd, but then dismissed the thought and grabbed the bag and took it back downstairs.

The shop had become fairly busy in the last couple of minutes. Red took Andy aside for some last-moment instructions, telling him to deliver the bag to Badger, same as before. Andy nodded quickly and left the shop. He hopped onto his bicycle and raced back across town as fast as he could pedal. There were two other bicycles in Badger's yard when he arrived. Andy recognized the two bikes immediately, and therefore wasn't surprised to see Snickers and Deacon in the living room when Badger opened the door. Both of the twins were preoccupied at first with rolling a joint and didn't even notice Andy in the doorway, but then spotted him and yelled at Badger to let him in. “Yo, Andy man, what's up, bro?”

Andy wandered into the room and smiled at the other boys sitting on the couch. “I figured you guys would be gettin' wasted,” he said. He had already given the bag to Badger, and was now waiting for Red's money. Both Snickers and Deacon had their shirts and their shoes off, obviously very much at home. Andy stepped closer. “Do you guys live here?”

“Fuck no,” Snickers laughed. “This here is Badger's crib, man, we just be hangin' out.”

“Badger lives here by himself?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“He seems... or I thought maybe he was too young.”

“He's eighteen,” Deacon said, lighting the joint. “This here was his mama's house, but she died, so now his sisters live with their Aunt Marlene.”

Andy looked around the living room. “That's cool, man. All by himself. I bet he has some awesome parties.”

Both twins glanced at each other and laughed. “Fuckin' right, he does! Stupid crazy parties! He's havin' one tomorrow night, man.”

“I wish 1 could come.”

“Then do it,” Deacon said. He was holding the joint out to Andy. “Here, man, take a hit.”

“No, I can't,” Andy said. “Not tonight.”

“What's wrong, you got homework or some shit?”

“I just can't, that's all.”

“That's wack,” Deacon sneered. “You be missin' out on some crazy fun shit, Damon, 1 ain't lyin' to you.”

“Maybe next time, but....”

“Leave the fucker be,” Badger said, returning to the room with Red's money. He gave the envelope to Andy. “You assholes all be talkin' too much.”

Snickers, for the last couple of minutes, had been busy rolling a second joint. He offered it now to Andy. “Yo, man, take this here at least.”

“Thanks, Snix,” Andy said, using the boy's abbreviated nickname without even thinking about it. “That's cool.”

Deacon was still smoking the first joint. “That's for when you be bonin' one of your bitches,” he drawled lecherously, then began rubbing his crotch. “Oh, Andy Andy Andy, fuck me, fuck me!”

“Shut up, Deacon,” Andy said. He and the other boys were all laughing. “They aren't my fuckin' bitches, anyway.”

“Sure, man, whatever,” Snickers said, and then Deacon started rubbing himself with both hands and rolling his head, moaning, “Oh, Andy, fuck my hot wet pussy, fuck my pussy!”

Andy told him to shut up once more, then reached down and punched him in the nuts, hard enough to get his attention. Deacon grabbed back at him, but Andy danced away in time to avoid the counterattack. Badger finally stepped between them and nudged Andy's shoulder. “Yo, shrimp, you got a delivery to make, remember?”

“Yeah, that's right, sorry.”

“I'll sorry your white ass,” Deacon said, trying to sound pissed off. “Just wait, Damon, I'll dress you up bad, you sorry motherfucker.”

“I'm shakin' all over,” Andy smiled back, playfully giving Deacon the finger. Deacon, pretending to be enraged, made his brother hold him back, to keep him from attacking Andy right then and there. Badger, who was still watching, finally shook his head and muttered, “You fuckers are pitiful, man, couple of homos.”

“We ain't no gump motherfuckers,” Deacon laughed, still half-leaning against his brother. Snickers was also laughing, and then started making big pantomime kisses next to Deacon's cheek, which caused Deacon to make a disgusted sour-lemon face and grind his fist into Snickers' crotch. And then both of them were laughing and cussing as they started wrestling for real on the couch. Badger shook his head again and muttered, “Gump motherfuckers, man, pitiful.” This time, he actually took Andy by the arm and guided him outside, and then slammed the door behind him.

Andy returned with the money to the shop, which was empty by the time he got back. Red was getting ready to close for the day. “You took a little longer this trip,” he said to the boy. “What happened?”

“Snickers and Deacon were there,” Andy shrugged, as if that was enough explanation in itself. And, apparently, it was. Red smiled immediately and said, “I guess those two guys could slow anybody down.”

“No doubt.”

“You like the twins, don't you?”

“Yeah, I do, big time.”

“They like you, too,” Red confided. “They talk about you all the time.”

“Seriously?”

“Every day after school,” Red nodded, counting the money from Badger at the same time. “They tell me about all your girlfriends in the cafeteria, and about how popular you are.”

Andy looked down at his hands; he could feel himself blushing. “That's not really true, exactly, I mean I'm not...”

“You shouldn't be embarrassed about it,” Red told him. “You're a popular kid. Everybody likes you.”

He finished counting the money and peeled off the usual twenty. “And here's a little something for being such a good worker, while we're at it.” He gave the money to Andy, then reached out and touched him on the left ear. “So you wore your ruby heart, I see. Very sharp.”

“Yeah,” Andy smiled, turning his head to give Red a better look. “That's my favorite one, probably.”

Red pushed the boy's hair back and scratched him gently behind the ear. “Very sharp,” he said again. “You're a real killer, man.”

“Thanks,” Andy mumbled, more embarrassed than ever. Red gave him a final pat on the side of the head. “Time to go, right?”

“I guess so,” Andy said. “When do I come back?”

Red was fiddling with his keys, eager to lock up. “Well, how about next Friday, same time?”

“That's great.”

“And then, after that, maybe there might be some other jobs you can do.”

“Other jobs?”

“It's possible,” Red nodded slowly. “We'll see what happens. But it's definitely possible.”

Andy was at the door, about to leave, when he remembered to ask about Matthew and Manny. “I have a couple of friends,” he mentioned shyly. “They'd like to help out... if you can use them.”

“Are you talking about Matthew? The little guy with the crew-cut?”

“He's one of them, yeah. The other one is a kid from school.”

“Same age as you?”

“Yeah, he's fourteen like me.”

Red was tossing his keys lightly from hand to hand. “Well, there might be some work for them,” he finally decided. “But not this week.”

“That's OK.”

“I'll let you know later.”

“That's OK,” Andy said again. He accepted Red's answer as final, for now, then said goodbye once more and rushed from the shop.

When Andy got home, he found Matthew waiting for him on the front porch. Matthew jumped up immediately and ran over to greet him. “I been waitin' here for you,” he shouted. “You took forever, man!”

“Are you done with your route already?”

“Not quite,” Matthew said, holding open his bag to show the remaining papers inside. “But I wanted to catch you first.”

“Well, jag-off, here I am.”

“Was you workin' again?”

“Yep, same as last week,” Andy grinned. He patted the pocket of his shorts. “Twenty more bucks, nothin' to it.”

“Did you ask Red about me?”

“Yeah, I asked him... and he said maybe, but he doesn't know yet for sure.”

Matthew shrugged, obviously resigned to life's little misfortunes and uncertainties. He was turning to leave when he remembered his original purpose. "Fuck, I almost forgot," he smiled. "It's about tomorrow night."

"What about it?"

"My mom is goin' out with Steve again... so you could come over if you want."

"Hell yes," Andy quickly accepted. "It's about time, man!" Matthew ran off happily after that, singing a Michael Jackson song at the top of his lungs. Andy, alone again, put his bike away in the garage and went into the house. A little later, when he was emptying his pockets, he found the joint from Snickers. It had bent nearly in half, but luckily hadn't broken. Andy wondered what he should do with it, even considered throwing it away, but then recalled his date with Matthew for the following night. It seemed a perfect idea, smoking it with Matthew, absolutely perfect. Just thinking about it gave Andy a pleasant, wicked thrill.

13

Andy and Matthew spent most of Saturday together roaming the neighborhood in search of amusement, any kind of amusement. Both of them were clearly impatient for nightfall, when their long-awaited adventure together would finally begin. Earlier that morning, Andy had already gotten permission from his mother and father for the overnight visit, neglecting to mention, of course, that he and Matthew would be alone in the house. It never occurred to his parents, obviously, that a boy of Matthew's age would be left by himself for an entire night – and Andy knew enough to keep his mouth discreetly shut.

Around eight o'clock, when the sun had finally set, Andy made a last stop at his own house to collect his Sony boom box and a carton of tapes. He thought about changing his clothes while he was there, but then decided not to bother. His white shorts and his black Wayne's World T-shirt, which he'd been wearing since yesterday, were good enough. As a final touch, he took the joint of marijuana from his desk drawer and put it in with his tapes, then said good night to his parents and rejoined Matthew outside.

It had been an exceptionally hot day for the first week in September, and was still nearly as hot now, even after sunset. Matthew, when Andy rejoined him, was hunting for crickets in his own front yard, crawling on his hands and knees across the weedy lawn. He had been shirtless and barefoot most of the day because of the heat, wearing nothing but his black bicycle shorts and his Bulls cap. His shorts were so old and tight and worn that they were starting to rip in back, and Andy, approaching from behind, could see the white of Matthew's underpants through the ragged seam. He stepped closer and kicked Matthew lightly in the ass. "Your pants are coming apart, idiot."

"Yep, I know," Matthew readily admitted, "they're too old." He shook his behind at Andy like a dog wagging its tail. Andy kicked him again to make him stand up, and then both of them headed into the house. Matthew's mother had already been gone for almost an hour, and it was an oddly exciting sensation for Andy to know that the whole house was empty and free for the rest of the night. No need for whispering, for sneaking around, for locking doors – no need for any of the tactics normally employed by kids to have fun and to hide it from their parents. As soon as they were safely inside, Andy put in a Metallica tape and turned it up, way up, delighting in the excessive volume. The television was also turned on at the same time, just for the hell of it, and a pizza was ordered shortly after that (sausage, pepperoni, onions and mushrooms, paid for with Andy's earnings from the day before). That was how the first couple of hours were spent: listening to music, watching the Notre Dame football game on TV, and

eating pizza. Matthew, for one, seemed nearly overwhelmed by the experience, especially by the food. "This pizza is totally grubbish," he smiled after his third piece, ready to start his fourth. "I ain't had pizza in about a million years, I swear to God."

"It's pretty excellent," Andy agreed, talking with his mouth full. He also had taken off his shirt and shoes and socks by this time, and was resting comfortably on the floor with his back against the couch. He had his boom box beside him, close enough to reach conveniently whenever a tape needed changing. He and Matthew were like two young princes in their castle, reveling in a wealth of junk food and television and loud music.

Around ten o'clock, with no more pizza to keep him occupied, Matthew decided that a bath would be the best way to amuse himself and to cool off all at the same time. He announced his idea while standing next to the couch and wriggling out of his tight shorts. "Come on, Andy, come with me," he said. "We can go swimming!"

Andy stirred lazily from the floor and got to his feet.

"Swimming? You're really mental," he laughed. "Where's the pool?"

"You know what I mean," Matthew said, finally managing to shimmy out of his shorts. Still in his underwear, he headed for the bathroom. "It seems like swimming to me, pretty much. At least it's nice and cool."

Andy followed him in, and then stood there watching as the tub filled with water. It was one of those old freestanding tubs with metal feet that looked like animal paws; its only modern accessory was a nozzled rubber hose attached to the spigot. "We don't got a real shower," Matthew explained. "But I like baths better, anyway."

"Because it's like swimming," Andy nodded, finishing the other boy's thought. "You're like one of your stupid fish, man."

Matthew said, "That's right, I'm Aqua Man," and threw his arms above his head in a brash superhero pose. "I'm the greatest of them all!"

Andy couldn't help laughing at him. "You're the craziest little fucker of them all, that's for sure."

"Thanks," Matthew said with a goofy, giant smile. He leaned over the tub to check the water, making sure it was cool enough, then stripped off his underpants and looked back at Andy. Being naked in front of the other boy seemed to make him slightly self-conscious. He rubbed briskly at his own butt with both hands and then started spanking gently at the chubby white cheeks. "Now I'm raw," he said in a silly, high-pitched voice. "Raw, raw, raw!" He stepped carefully into the tub, still spanking at his own ass, and lowered himself into the cool water. "Awesome," he decided happily. "Come on, Andy, get in!"

"There's not enough room."

"Sure there is," Matthew said. He scooted back against one end of the tub and splashed at the water in front of him. "See, there's lots of room."

"We'll be squashed together, man."

"That's all right."

"OK," Andy shrugged, unzipping his white shorts, "but we're going to be squashed, I know it." He took off the shorts, and then his underpants, also feeling suddenly self-conscious now about being naked with this other boy in such a private, intimate way. This was nothing at all like being in gym class, in the locker room with thirty or forty other guys; this was different because he and Matthew were totally naked but also totally alone, just the two of them together in the little bathroom, and now practically on top of each other as Andy settled himself into the tub. In order to fit, both boys had to sit facing each other with their knees up and their feet touching each other's butts beneath the water. "You see," Andy said, "we're completely squashed, man, I told you."

“It's more fun like this,” Matthew laughed, slapping lightly at the water with both hands. Now that Andy was naked with him, he seemed perfectly comfortable and uninhibited, even exhilarated. “Doesn't it feel good?”

“It's nice and cool,” Andy admitted. As the one closest to the faucets, he took charge of the nozzled hose and started spraying both himself and Matthew on the chest and shoulders and back, and then on the head, first his own and then Matthew's, doing the whole process over and over, slowly and deliberately, until they were both thoroughly drenched and thoroughly refreshed. Matthew, who was hunched forward to let Andy spray him more easily on the head and back and shoulders, was staring directly at his own penis, watching it float in the water. “It looks like my loach,” he suddenly remarked, stirring the water around it to make it move. “See, it's swimming... like my snake fish.”

“What is?”

“My dick,” Matthew said, glancing up with a delighted grin. “See, it's like my loach in the aquarium.”

“It's about the same size, too,” Andy joked. He aimed at it with the hose. “Die, loach, die!”

“Don't kill him!”

“You're a stupid loach-dick, no doubt,” Andy laughed, giving Matthew a squirt in the face.

Matthew was also laughing at his own silliness. He looked back down at himself and touched the very bottom of his belly, right above the penis. “Look, he's even got some hair,” he said, then started counting each strand of it one by one while Andy watched, finally getting up to a paltry total of thirteen. “The fucker's almost bald,” he concluded, making himself and Andy laugh even harder. He then pointed between Andy's legs. “Yours is the big daddy loach fish right there.”

“Bigger than yours, pee-wee.”

“The fucker is hairy, man!”

“There's not all that much.”

“Let me see under your arms,” Matthew demanded, still as fascinated as ever by his friend's older, more mature body. When Andy complied and showed his armpits, Matthew splashed at him as if to ward him off. “Man, you're like an ape,” he shouted. “Way gross!”

“You're fucked up,” Andy chuckled, splashing him back. “Every guy has hair under his arms.”

“Not me.”

“That's because you're a mutant spaz.”

“That's what I am, I am, I am,” Matthew sang, “just a little mutant spaz baby!”

“I've even got hair under my balls,” Andy confessed. “I'm not kidding.”

Matthew flailed harder at the water in mock hysteria. “That's gross, man, I can't believe it!”

“It's true.”

“And you've got a fuckin' mustache, even!”

“It's not a mustache,” Andy said, touching the fuzz above his top lip. “I don't even shave it yet.”

Matthew stopped flailing and splashing and backtracked to Andy's earlier comment. “Do you really got hair under your balls?”

“Yeah, a little bit.”

“Can I see it?”

“That's stupid, man.”

“Come on, just show me!”

With an embarrassed grin, Andy lifted his hips completely above the water and pulled back his testicles with one hand, letting the other boy see underneath. Matthew threw back his head and giggled deliriously at what he saw. “You got hair in your butt,” he cackled, pointing at it. “It's right in your hole,

Andy, I swear to God!"

"Shut up, psycho."

"It's funny, I can't help it!"

"Eat me," Andy mumbled, back down in the water again. Handling his genitals and having Matthew look at them had made his dick stiffen slightly with excitement – not very much, but enough to make him feel restless and agitated. He picked up the hose and gave Matthew a final squirt in the face. "Are you ready to go?"

"I guess so," Matthew said. "Are you?"

"Yeah, I've had enough."

"I guess we're done swimming for tonight," Matthew shrugged sadly. He and Andy both climbed glistening and dripping from the tub and spent the next several moments drying themselves from head to foot, pausing after that to share a long piss at the toilet. Andy's penis was still a little bit stiff, something which Matthew noticed with his usual eager curiosity. "You got part of a boner," he pointed out. "It's bigger than normal."

"I know," Andy said quietly. He jiggled it to get out the last few dribbles of pee, which made it stiffen even more. Matthew was still staring at it. "Will it get bigger than that?"

"Hell yes."

"A lot bigger?"

"Of course," Andy said, bragging just a bit. He stepped away from the toilet and retrieved his underpants from the floor. He was impatient, all of a sudden, to smoke the joint which he had stashed in his carton of tapes. The time seemed right for it, now that it was late and Andy was feeling hyper and horny. As a small concession to modesty, both boys put their underpants back on while still in the bathroom, then spent a few extra minutes to brush their hair in front of the mirror, like two buddies preparing for a date. Andy did little but brush his hair back straight behind his ears, but Matthew took great pains to get his crew-cut spiked up just right, using a comb and two kinds of brushes to do the job properly.

Back in the living room, the boys settled onto the couch to relax and listen to music and watch a rerun of "Saturday Night Live" with Tom Hanks and Bruce Springsteen. After telling Matthew that he had a surprise, Andy reached into his tape box and pulled out the joint. "I got this yesterday from Snickers," he confided. "I saved it for tonight."

"Is that pot?"

"Yeah, and it's totally excellent, no lie."

"You smoked some already?"

"A while ago," Andy nodded, "with the twins. It was great!"

A slow smile crossed Matthew's face as his surprise turned into delight. "Are we goin' to smoke it now?"

"You bet your ass," Andy said, but then realized that he had no matches or lighter. Matthew solved that problem easily enough with a fast trip to the kitchen, returning almost instantly with a little box of wooden matches. Andy did the honors and lit the joint, took a deep hit to demonstrate the correct technique, then passed it to Matthew. The boys were sitting cross-legged on the couch, one on each end, facing each other as they had in the bathtub. Matthew choked on his first hit, then tried another and managed to keep down most of the smoke before finally coughing it back out. "It fuckin' burns like crazy," he complained, wiping tears from his eyes. "I don't like it."

"You'll get used to it," Andy assured him. "It's not so bad after a while." He took back the joint and demonstrated one more time, holding the smoke in for several seconds before releasing it slowly through

his nose. Already he was starting to feel the pleasant fuzziness in his head. “This stuff will get you totally wasted, man.”

“I don't feel anything yet.”

Andy took another hit, then passed it back. “Just wait a minute,” he grinned, “give it a chance.” He was watching the other boy and feeling more and more giggly, more and more horny. Matthew looked cute sitting there in his skimpy white briefs, cute all over with his baby-smooth skin and his fleshy little “outie” belly button that Andy suddenly wanted to touch, or even kiss. Yeah, that would be excellent, Andy decided: kissing Matthew on the belly. He actually giggled out loud thinking about it, which started Matthew giggling along with him for no apparent reason. “You must be getting stoned,” Andy said. “Can you feel it now?”

“I feel weird,” Matthew nodded groggily. He stretched his legs out in front of him to rest more comfortably. Andy smiled and did the same, putting his legs on top of Matthew's so that his feet were in Matthew's lap. Matthew giggled again and started playing with Andy's toes. He still had the joint in his other hand; he paused for a hit, then gave it back to Andy. “It's almost out, I think.”

“Just about,” Andy agreed, putting the charred remnant to his lips for a final, noisy hit. Then, after making sure it was dead, he popped it into his mouth and swallowed it. “No more evidence,” he said with a dopey laugh. Matthew, still fiddling with Andy's toes, next started to play with the fuzz on Andy's legs, petting and pulling at it gently. “Hairy fucker,” he mumbled, back once again to his mischievous teasing. Andy didn't even bother defending himself this time (although, if anything, his legs were merely fuzzy, not hairy); he was enjoying the playful touch of Matthew's hands too much to argue; enjoying it so much, in fact, that he was getting an erection from it – a full, nasty erection that had his underpants sticking way up in front, so far up that Matthew, when he first looked over and saw it, honestly thought it was some kind of trick. “You put something in there,” he insisted, pointing at the tent pole between Andy's legs. “What is it?”

“It's my dick,” Andy laughed, more amused than embarrassed. “I got a boner, that's all.”

“You gross fucker,” Matthew said, wrinkling his nose in phony disgust. “You get like a million boners, man, all the time.”

“That means I'm a stud.”

“You're a sex pervert, I swear to God.”

“Eat me, spaz.”

Matthew sat up slightly, still holding Andy's feet in his lap.

“So... can I see it?”

“Maybe,” Andy smiled, “if you pay me about a thousand bucks.”

“Asshole,” Matthew grumbled, smiling back. “Show me or I'll pull out all your leg hair.” He yanked at one of them to dramatize his threat. Andy yelped in protest and pressed his heel into Matthew's crotch. “Try it, man, and I'll crush your nuts!”

“Come on, you fucker, let me see it!”

“OK,” Andy relented, trying to sound impatient, “but just to make you shut up.” He pulled his underpants down to mid-thigh, far enough to let his boner jump out free, almost straight up between his legs, a perfectly straight boner with no curve or bend to it at all. “There it is, jag-off, get a good look.”

“It's pretty big,” Matthew said, suddenly sobered by the actual sight of it. Then, in the next instant, he thought of something that made him sit up quickly and smile. “We need to measure it,” he announced excitedly. “Remember?”

“Yeah, that's right,” Andy said, not mentioning his own previous research. “Go ahead, do it if you want, I don't care.”

“All right,” Matthew exclaimed happily, already on his way to fetch a ruler. It didn't take him long. He came running back with it and then dropped to his knees next to the couch to do his measuring. He hesitated at that point, not sure how to proceed without actually touching the other boy's penis. Andy recognized his discomfort and gave him a swat on the shoulder. “Just go ahead and do it, don't worry.” Matthew nodded and leaned closer and put the ruler into place, taking hold of Andy's erection with his other hand to keep it steady. He had one end of the ruler wedged into Andy's pubic hair, doing his best to align everything carefully and precisely. “It's six inches,” he finally decided. “Almost exactly.”

“That's bullshit,” Andy said. “You're not doing it right.”

“How else should I do it?”

“Put it more along the side.”

“OK,” Matthew shrugged, “if you say so.” He moved the ruler down a bit and pressed it once more into place, keeping hold of Andy's boner by the tip, delicately, between his thumb and forefinger. “Maybe six and a quarter, I guess, just about.”

“It should be more than that.”

“How do you know?”

“I measured it a couple of weeks ago,” Andy was forced to confess. “It was six and a half.”

“Maybe it's not all the way hard yet.”

“You're just not doing it right.”

Matthew was still holding the head of Andy's erect penis when it suddenly started doing something that caught him by surprise, “Aw, gross,” he blurted out, not joking this time. “There's stuff coming out of your dick!” He pulled his hand away and looked at the slippery leakage on his thumb and finger.

“It does that every time.”

“What is it? Sperm?”

“No,” Andy said, “it's the stuff before the sperm,” not exactly sure of the details himself. Still not satisfied with Matthew's results, he grabbed the ruler and started taking his own measurement. “I'll show you,” he mumbled. He was rubbing at his dick to make it as hard and as big as possible before declaring anything official. Matthew reached in quickly while Andy was at it to touch the tip once more for another sample of the mysterious seepage. Andy finally stopped rubbing long enough to check the results. “Look,” he said urgently to the other boy, “it's almost six and a half. Can you see it?”

“I guess so,” Matthew said, more interested now, it seemed, in function than size. He started poking and probing at Andy's erection with his fingertips just to see how it felt and how it moved, fascinated by the hefty bounce of it each time he gave it a nudge. Andy set aside the ruler and started watching him, mesmerized by the feel of another boy's hand on his boner, getting a delicious, ticklish thrill from it like nothing else he'd ever known. Matthew had gotten bold enough by now to start petting it up and down, still with only his fingertips, like someone cautiously petting a snake. “It feels weird,” he grinned. “Are you going to do anything with it?”

“Like what?”

“Like jacking off maybe?”

Andy was stoned enough and excited enough to be not only agreeable, but eager. “Do you want me to do it for real?”

“Sure,” Matthew encouraged happily. He hadn't expected, most likely, that Andy would actually go along with his proposal. “This'll be awesome!”

“Are you going to watch me?”

“Fuck yes!”

Not wasting another moment, Andy pushed aside Matthew's hand and started masturbating with rapid,

greedy strokes, far beyond the point of any self-control. All he wanted now was the pure pleasure of finishing, the full reward of busting a nut in front of another boy. It never occurred to him, in his haste, to let Matthew help; right now, this first time, all he wanted was the sweet fulfillment of orgasm. And after just a few strokes, he got it. As both boys watched, Andy's penis started squirting, once and again and then again, three healthy gobs of cream right onto his bare stomach. His hips lifted off the couch as he squeezed out his load, and then he collapsed back against the cushions with a groan of total exhaustion.

Matthew had actually drawn back slightly when his friend began ejaculating, startled by the spastic suddenness of it, but then leaned forward with a gleeful laugh and dipped his finger into the funny gunk on Andy's tummy. "This is real sperm right here," he said, nodding with satisfaction. "God, look at all this stuff!" He put his finger to his nose to sniff the aroma. "This shit is rank, man, no kidding."

"Fuck you," Andy muttered, with just the trace of a grin. "It's not supposed to smell good, you idiot."

Ever curious, Matthew went the final step and bravely touched his finger to his tongue. "Tastes like shit," he determined immediately, already wiping his tongue with the back of his other hand. "It's fuckin' sour, man!"

"Idiot," Andy responded once more. He swung himself off the couch and headed for the bathroom, leaving his underpants down around his thighs until he had wiped himself clean with a towel. Now that his performance was over, he felt empty and a little foolish. Not that he regretted it. Not at all. Jacking off in front of an audience (even an audience of one) had been great; he would have done it again any time, any place, just to recapture the dirty thrill of it. The only thing bothering Andy at the moment was a nagging sense of missed opportunity, of having lost his one chance at screwing around with Matthew while both of them had been hot and ready. Jacking off in front of him had been good, but it could have been a whole lot better with Matthew himself taking part in the fun.

The two boys, after that, had little energy left for any further activities. Both of them were sleepy and stoned and did nothing more until midnight than stare at the television and struggle to keep awake.

Matthew stayed on the couch the whole time, barely able to keep his eyes open. Andy, meanwhile, was back on the floor in his old position, with just his head against the couch and the boom box near his side.

At some point after midnight he must have actually dozed off, because when he finally regained his senses with an abrupt snore and looked at the VCR clock, it was nearly two in the morning. Forgetting at first where he was, Andy sat up in a near panic and looked around the room, promptly relaxing when he saw Matthew on the couch behind him. The other boy was sound asleep by this time, on his back with one arm flung across his face. Andy gave himself another moment to clear his head, then got on his knees in front of the couch and stared at Matthew, suddenly and completely excited by the closeness of him, the helplessness of him, the total availability of him – all of him laid out on display as if placed there by some friendly angel, placed there for Andy as a lucky second chance.

Carefully, Andy reached out and put his hand on Matthew's stomach. He had never touched another boy like this before – not roughly, or angrily, or even playfully, but tenderly, the way boys were supposed to touch girls, and only girls. It was bright enough in the room, thanks to the television, for Andy, to see every bit of the other boy's body as he skimmed his hand over it, first up across the chest and the nipples, then down again eagerly to the legs, all over both legs, so nice and smooth, down one and up the other and then down and up once more, stopping this last time right at the bottom of Matthew's underpants. Andy kept his hand there as he leaned forward and finally fulfilled his wish of kissing Matthew on the belly button. He could feel the stomach muscles tighten beneath his lips, and didn't dare to hold the kiss for more than an instant.

Andy paused momentarily to work up his courage, then cautiously proceeded to move his hand up onto Matthew's underpants, up onto Matthew's dick. He waited again, just briefly, before sliding his hand in

slow circles over the underpants, pressing down more and more firmly as he felt the dick begin to stiffen inside. There was no stopping him after that. Almost frantic with curiosity, Andy stretched down the front of the underpants to get his first look at another boy's erection. And there it was, right in front of him – a real boner, Matthew's boner, much smaller than Andy's but fine anyway, incredibly fine, amazing to see another kid's penis like that, all red and hardened up for sex.

Andy touched it. He ran his finger from the tip to the balls in order to feel the whole hard thing, and then he started to stroke it, still holding the underpants down with his other hand. Matthew's breathing shifted, and his legs opened wider, but he never said anything and he never opened his eyes, just stayed there silently as the other boy masturbated him. Andy kept going at it tirelessly, minute after minute, maintaining a steady, gentle rhythm with his thumb and two fingers until he felt it happening, definitely happening, Matthew's dick getting tighter and tighter and then twitching out of control as it oozed something clear and warm and wonderfully slimy. Matthew whimpered in an agony of pleasure and grabbed Andy's hand to keep it firmly in place, then relaxed and rolled away onto his side with a faint, dreamy smile.

Andy, still with the other boy's stickiness on his fingers, shoved down his own underpants and started doing himself for a second time while he knelt there in front of the couch. His overnight visit with Matthew had come down to one thing, one natural and inevitable thing: getting at each other's bodies and sampling each other's dicks. All their earlier activities, from eating pizza to taking a bath, had been nothing but foreplay, nothing but diversions and time-killers before getting around to the instinctive, down-and-dirty business of sex. For Andy, it all felt like being high on the best drug ever, like being high and like craving more both at the same time, every new taste of pleasure merely increasing his appetite. Jacking off was OK; doing it to another boy was even better; but it wasn't enough. Andy knew there was more, a lot more, and he wanted all of it.

14

When the boys woke up Sunday morning, they went about the business of peeing and dressing and eating breakfast as if nothing unusual had happened the night before. Andy still wasn't even sure how much Matthew remembered. Had he even been awake at the end when Andy jerked him off? Matthew never said anything about it, and Andy never asked. It seemed better for now just to leave everything unspoken, to leave all the naked stuff and all the sex stuff to the safe, private hours of midnight. Both boys did agree, however, that their overnight visit had been a definite blast, and that they should do it again as soon as possible.

The next week, for Andy, sailed by quickly and routinely – seeing Manny each morning and afternoon on the bus, seeing Timmy in gym class, bumming around the neighborhood with Matthew every evening after school. By Friday, Andy was ready for another dose of excitement, looking forward to his next assignment for Red, which turned out to be yet another delivery to Badger's house. It went smoothly, as usual, and Andy got back to the shop with the money in record time. “I should call you Speedy Gonzales,” Red told him, already counting the cash. “You're amazing.”

“It's easy, really.”

“You're just about the best worker I've ever had.”

“Thanks.”

“I'm serious, Andrew, you're terrific.”

“Thanks,” the boy said again, grinning proudly. “I like working here, it's cool.” Red finished counting the money and looked up. “Are you ready for a promotion?”

“Sure, I guess so.”

“I know by now that I can trust you,” the man said. “I don't have to worry about you doing or saying anything stupid.”

“I'd never do that,” Andy assured him. “No matter what happens, ever.”

“I know, buddy, I believe you,” Red nodded. It was almost closing time, and the shop was empty. “You're part of the family now, and that's a fact.” He glanced suddenly at the door as it swung open. Andy also turned and looked, just in time to see the twins, nearly on top of each other, come scrambling into the shop with an armload of shopping bags – Snickers with two of them, Deacon with three. Red snapped at both of them for being late. “You should've been here ten minutes ago,” he said. “We don't have all night.”

Both twins mumbled an edgy apology, which Red ignored, and then they rushed the bags upstairs. Red looked back at Andy. “So, Andrew, are you ready for your new job?”

“Yeah, anything you say.”

“How long can you stick around?”

Andy glanced at the clock above the counter. “I've got about two hours, I guess.”

“That's plenty of time,” Red decided. “Come on, partner,” he said, first locking the door and then taking the boy by the arm, “I'll show you what to do.”

Upstairs, Snickers and Deacon had already started the job, which basically involved the cleaning, weighing, and bagging of marijuana – lots and lots of marijuana. There were several pounds of it stacked in bricks on the floor. “We need to break all of this up,” Red explained to Andy, “then clean out the seeds and the stems and put it all into baggies. OK? Any questions?”

“All the seeds and the stems?”

“Absolutely,” Red said. He was standing behind the boy, massaging his shoulders. “We give our clients a good clean product, Andrew. No fucking around. Understand?”

“Sure,” Andy said, slightly overwhelmed by it all. “Where do I start?”

“See how the twins are doing it? Just copy them, that's all.”

“OK, I'll try.”

Red kissed him on top of his head. “You'll do great, man, don't worry.”

Andy, a bit startled by the kiss, responded with a vague nod and went to work. Red stayed around long enough to make sure that everything was under control, then grabbed his car keys and disappeared.

“He'll be back,” Snickers said to Andy, “in case you be worried about gettin' paid or some shit like that.”

“I'm not worried,” Andy said, although the thought had crossed his mind. He and the twins were on the floor with several ounces of grass spread out on newspapers in front of them. Andy and Snickers were doing most of the cleaning, while Deacon was handling the weighing and the bagging. It was tedious work, and all three boys were ready for a short break after the first hour. They treated themselves to cans of soda from Red's refrigerator, and then the twins produced a naughty little surprise for Andy. “I bet you ain't never seen nothin' like this before,” Deacon smirked. He took a video from the cabinet beneath the television and popped it into the VCR. What suddenly appeared on the screen was enough to make Andy choke on his soda: four boys outside in a grassy pasture, all of them naked and having sex. That was it, the real thing, honest-to-god kiddie porn. “Jesus Christ,” Andy murmured, leaning forward in his chair, “I can't believe this stuff!”

“These fuckin' tapes are dope, man,” Deacon smiled. He and his brother were on the couch, sharing a

pipe of weed. "You ever seen shit like this before?"

"No, never."

"You like it?"

"Fuck, I guess so," Andy said, not sure how to reply. As he was watching, he suddenly recognized the pasture as part of Harshbarger's farm, right where he and Matthew had been not long before. "Who makes this stuff?"

"Who you think makes it?"

Andy shrugged at first, too flustered by the video to think straight. He was sitting in a rocking chair next to the couch, close enough to pass the pipe back and forth with the twins. "I guess probably Red," he finally answered. "But... fuck, I can't believe it."

"Yo, man, why you say that? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, it's just, I can't..."

"You ain't gonna turn chicken-shit on us, is you?"

"Shove it up your ass," Andy said. "I like it OK. It's cool." Snickers fast-forwarded the tape to the next segment. "You can sell these fuckin' things for some serious cash, man, that ain't no lie." On screen now, two boys were taking a shower together. "You can make fifty bucks easy for some shit like this here."

Andy nodded, only half-listening, as he stared at the screen. He waved off the pipe when it came around to him one more time. "I have enough of a buzz already," he said. "I need to get home pretty soon."

"So you like this tape for real?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Which stuff you like the best?"

"Probably the first part," Andy said. "It's pretty wild."

"You like them kids bonin' each other like that?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"Fuck, man, don't be shy about it," Snickers said. "You think it's like queer or somethin'?"

"No, I didn't say that."

Deacon was emptying the pipe into the ashtray. "Ain't nothin' queer about it, is there, nature boy?"

"No way," Andy mumbled, shaking his head. "It looks OK to me."

"Fuckin' right," Deacon grinned. He and Snickers seemed satisfied, ready to get back to work. "We ain't got time for no more shit right now," is all they would say as they put away the tape and resumed their cleaning and weighing and bagging. Andy, barely able to concentrate after what he'd just seen, went back to his job of picking out seeds and stems. None of the boys talked much after that; the twins, in fact, remained uncommonly quiet as they worked, apparently fighting against some sort of deadline.

Around five o'clock, just as Andy was about to leave, Red finally returned to the apartment. He surveyed the scene quickly, glancing at the pipe in the ashtray and at the opened cabinet of video tapes, and then he smiled at Andy. "So... how's your new job so far?"

"It's all right," Andy said softly, not sure how to behave towards Red since finding out about the videos. "But I have to get home."

"I know, I know... but don't leave without your money," the man said. He gave Andy three ten-dollar bills instead of the usual two. "Next Friday, same time, same place, right?"

"Right," Andy nodded, slipping the money into the little pocket of his T-shirt, "next Friday."

Red stepped closer and put his arm around the boy's shoulders. "In case you're interested, Andrew, there's a party at Badger's house every Saturday night – just for the boys and for some of our friends and

clients.” He was walking Andy toward the stairs as he talked. “Feel free to come by any Saturday. Just show up. You can even bring some friends if you want.”

“OK, thanks.”

“I think you'll enjoy yourself, man, I really do.”

“Any Saturday is OK?”

Red smiled and said, “Any Saturday at all, no problem.” He went downstairs with Andy to let him out the back exit, directly into the alley. “It's better to do it this way... after hours, at least.” Right at the last moment, he produced a small baggie of weed, maybe half an ounce, and held it out to the boy.

“Here,” he said, “this is for you and your buddies.”

“I can have it?”

“Of course, go ahead and take it.”

Andy started to accept it, but then looked at his pocketless shorts with a befuddled shrug. “I don't have anywhere to put it,” he said. “My shirt pocket is too small.”

“Well,” Red told him, “there's always one solution.” He pulled out the front of Andy's shorts and underpants and stuffed the plastic baggie inside, all the way inside, letting his fingers touch Andy's penis before bringing his hand back out. “You can't get any safer than that.”

“I guess not,” Andy grinned uneasily. “Thanks a lot.”

Red unlocked the door for him and held it open. “By the way, are your two friends still looking for a job?”

“I think so, probably.”

“There might be some delivery work over on the west side... if they're interested.”

“Around the projects?”

“Thereabouts,” Red nodded. “Is your friend Matthew from over there?”

“No,” Andy said, “but the other kid is.”

“Great. That's perfect. What's his name?”

“Manny... Manny Fuentes.”

“A Mexican kid, even better. Send him over here next week, we'll see what happens.”

Andy accepted the proposal, then grabbed his bicycle and took off. He could feel the little plastic bag inside his pants, cool against his skin. He didn't know how to deal with all the events of the past two hours; his head was swimming with dangerous new revelations about drugs and sex and wild parties. One part of him felt actually frightened, ready to run from everything back to his old, safe routine of home and school; but another, stronger part felt more exhilarated and reckless than ever, eager to take the adventure as far and as fast as possible.

By the time Andy got back to his house, he was already late for supper and in trouble with his father. “I was just hanging out with some friends,” Andy explained sheepishly. “I lost track of the time, sort of.”

“It's not fair to your mother,” his father said. “If she cooks a nice dinner for us, at least we can all be home in time to eat it.”

“I know, Dad, I'm sorry,” Andy mumbled. His mother (who was having an exceptionally bad day, even for her) was in her bedroom, crying. Andy and his sisters sat at the table with their father and ate their dinner in morose silence. Afterwards, when Andy was on his way out of the house to escape the gloom, his father stopped him briefly at the door. “I want you home before dark,” he warned. “And the same thing goes for tomorrow and Sunday. Got it?”

Andy muttered, “Yeah, yeah, I got it,” and stalked out the door. He went straight to Matthew's house, not even bothering with his bike, preferring instead to walk off his angry, nervous tension. He was

wearing his camouflage trousers now, and he had the little bag of marijuana in his front pocket. Matthew, who was watching a rerun of "Star Trek" in his living room, came running out of the house as soon as he saw his friend. "Hey, Andy, where you been, you fucker?"

"At the shop... same as usual."

"Are you going to be staying here tomorrow night?"

Andy sat on the top step and shook his head glumly. "No, fuck it, I can't," he said, pausing to spit over the railing to his left. "I'm sort of in trouble at home."

"That's bogus, man."

"Maybe next weekend."

"I ain't gonna be here," Matthew said. He was squatting next to Andy and bouncing lightly on his toes.

"Me and my mom has to go visit some stupid-ass cousins in Peoria next Saturday."

"That totally sucks, big time," Andy mumbled. He glanced to his right and noticed, for the first time, that Matthew had a black eye. "What the fuck happened to you?"

"I got in a fight at school."

"Not again."

"Yep," Matthew smiled, touching the purple bruise, "I went off on some kid bad, Andy, I'm not kiddin'. It was awesome!" As if provoked by the memory of it, he suddenly wrapped one arm around Andy's neck in a playful choke hold. "I'm the fuckin' Terminator, asshole!"

Andy retaliated with a choke hold of his own, leaving both boys helplessly smothered in each other's embrace until Andy finally broke the deadlock with a fist to Matthew's nuts. "There, fucker, now you're terminated," he laughed, giving Matthew another gentle punch for good measure.

"You fuckin' cheater," Matthew said, also laughing. "I bet you never even asked Red about my job yet!"

"You psycho, I told you I did... last week."

"Fuckin' liar."

"Here," Andy smiled, "look what I got." He started to pull the marijuana from his pocket, then thought better of it and jumped to his feet. "Let's go to your room," he said, kicking Matthew's behind. Together, they hurried through the house to Matthew's bedroom, where Andy finally produced the plastic baggie from his pocket for the other boy to see. "Pretty cool, right?"

"Who gave that to you?"

"It's from Red, stupid."

"He must really like you."

"Of course he likes me," Andy said. "I'm pretty much his best worker, man, I'm serious." He opened the baggie and pulled out a little packet of Zig Zag rolling papers. "See, he even gave me these papers here."

"Way excellent!"

For the next ten or fifteen minutes, the two boys labored painstakingly over the process of rolling their first joint. When that one was finished, Matthew went ahead and tried a second one on his own, and then Andy attempted a third. To the surprise of them both, Matthew's solo effort ended up being the best of the lot. "It's pretty good," Andy admitted, holding it up to inspect.

"I'm totally talented, man, deal with it."

"You're totally mental," Andy said. When it was time for him to leave, he gathered the three joints and offered them to Matthew. "You can keep these if you want," he said. "I've still got more shit left over."

Matthew happily accepted the joints and stashed them in the drawer of his aquarium table. "This'll be my secret drug place from now on," he announced. "I'll keep all my shit in here."

“Brilliant idea,” Andy said, laughing at his friend's usual goofiness. He had a powerful urge to grab Matthew and to kiss him and touch him, just like those boys had been doing to each other in the sex video; he wanted to get at Matthew again and do things to him, all kinds of dirty things, right there on the bed. But it was the wrong time and the wrong place, and there was nothing Andy could do now except give Matthew another kick in the butt and then race back home. He didn't waste any time getting there, and not just because of his curfew. More than anything, he needed to jack off, and he needed to jack off fast.

15

After lunch on Saturday, Andy hopped onto his bicycle and went across town to the west-side park where Manny usually played soccer. It was a warm mid-September day, and Andy figured he had a good chance of finding Manny outside with his friends. And he was right. On the playing field, there were two soccer games and one baseball game all going on at the same time, and it took Andy only a few seconds to spot Manny in one of the ragtag groups.

Andy walked his bike as close to the action as possible, then stood there watching the other boy, waiting to catch his attention. Manny was wearing a white Earth Day T-shirt and red sweatpants cut off at the knees, and he had a red paisley kerchief tied as a headband around his curly black hair. Andy noticed, after a moment or two, that there were some other people also watching the same game, three or four adult men each standing by himself on the fringes of the action. It wasn't long before all of them were sneaking glances at Andy himself, who seemed to be a potent attraction even in ordinary blue jeans and a simple rugby shirt. One of the men eventually wandered to Andy's side and smiled a cautious greeting. Andy responded with a lukewarm smile of his own. He was familiar with these clumsy advances from his earlier visits to the park; he knew what the men wanted, and it didn't bother him, but he couldn't imagine actually going with any of them. These guys seemed nothing but pitiful and sad to Andy, certainly not exciting or attractive in any way. Still, there was something fun about flirting with them and watching them drool.

The man standing next to Andy moved a step closer and pointed across the field. “You like to play soccer?”

“I like it OK,” Andy said, not even bothering to turn his head.

“It's a good game.”

“Yeah, it's OK.”

“Do you live around here?”

“No,” Andy said, “not really.” He could feel the breeze ruffling his hair. He gave the man a slow sidelong glance, then looked away.

“You must be here to watch your friends,” the man tried again. “Am I right?”

“Yep, that's right.”

“These Mexican boys play wonderfully, don't they?”

“They're pretty good, yeah.”

“Would you and your friends like to go somewhere after the game?”

“Like where?”

“Someplace to eat, maybe... or else we could all go back to my house.”

Andy looked at the man with one of his sly kitty-cat grins and said, “No, I don't think so, but thanks anyway.” He rolled his bike forward a few more feet and managed, finally, to snag Manny's attention,

getting a strange kick from it because of all the men watching him and envying him; he was a boy himself, after all, and had the power and the freedom to befriend any other boy on the field – without risk and without fear, mingling openly among them, talking dirty to them, grabbing them or goosing them or doing anything else with them that struck his fancy. Andy was a boy among other boys, and he could get away with anything – while the men could do nothing but watch, and suffer, and ache in silent frustration.

Manny, meanwhile, continued playing for another few minutes, then removed himself from the game and jogged across the field to join Andy. He took off his bandanna and used it to wipe his face. “That was a good game,” Andy called to him. “Were you guys winning?”

“It's tied,” Manny said, slightly winded as he ran the last few steps and stopped in front of the other boy. “It's eight up.” His skinny brown arms and legs were glistening with sweat. “What you doing here, Andy?”

“I came to see you.”

“What about?”

“Remember when I told you about maybe getting a job?”

“Yeah, I remember OK.”

Andy began to elaborate, then stopped and looked around and motioned for Manny to follow. “There's too many people around here,” he explained in a mumble. He started walking with his bicycle back towards the street. As a mischievous afterthought, he turned briefly and waved at the man who had tried to pick him up. The man, appearing almost sick with desire, responded with a sad, feeble smile as he watched his fantasy disappear.

At the sidewalk, Andy resumed his earlier explanation. “There might be a job for you over at Red Dog Comix,” he said. “It's a delivery job.”

Manny nodded, listening intently. “That would be OK, I guess. When do I do it?”

“You have to go see Red at his shop,” Andy told him, “like next week sometime.” He paused, then added, “He wants you to deliver stuff around here, around the projects.”

“What kind of stuff? Like just weed, or like other shit, too?” Andy laughed, surprised, because Manny was way ahead of him. “Just weed... but don't talk about it like that,” Andy cautioned him. “We just talk about delivering groceries, you know, so it's like safer.”

“Sure, whatever,” Manny shrugged, chewing eagerly on his bottom lip. “I'll go see him Monday.”

“Do you have a bike?”

“Sure, no problem, we got one at home.”

“OK, well, I guess that's about all,” Andy said, then smiled suddenly as he recalled another, vital part of his mission. He pulled three ten-dollar bills from his pocket and handed them to Manny. “That's for your gym uniform... if you still need it.”

Manny stared at the money in his hand as if it were a sack of gold. He looked at Andy, then back down at the money, then up at Andy once more. “You're not giving this to me,” he said, somewhere between a statement and a question. “All this money?”

“You can pay me back later,” Andy said, pleased by the other boy's reaction. “It's just like a loan or something, that's all.”

Manny stood there shaking his head, just shaking his head and smiling. Finally, perhaps as his way of saying thanks, he shyly invited Andy back to his home for something to drink. “I live right over there,” he said, pointing down the street to the first block of apartments. Andy accepted without hesitation and climbed onto his bike for the short trip, pedaling as slowly as possible in order to stay back with the other boy.

Manny's home was like no other place Andy had ever seen. It was only three or four ground-level

rooms, but there were eight people (mother, father, two sisters, three brothers, and Manny himself) all living there together in happy, noisy harmony. Because it was Saturday afternoon, and because every “one of them happened to be home at the same time, Andy was given a glimpse of family vitality and energy that hit him as a revelation, as something utterly different from the daily gloom and doom of his own family. As soon as he and Manny showed up, the younger kids were all over them, shouting and laughing and jumping at them like a bunch of excited puppies. It was obvious, very quickly, that Manny was the favorite boy of the house, loved and idolized by his little brothers and sisters. The children also took a special interest in Andy, especially the youngest brother, a five-year-old named Fernandito, who latched onto Andy right at the start and never let go. He held Andy's hand, he went with Andy to the bathroom, he even sat on Andy's lap when the boys were at the kitchen table drinking cans of Coke. Manny finally told him to stop being a monkey and to leave Andy alone. But Andy liked having the little boy as his pet. “It doesn't bother me,” he said, holding Fernandito against his chest. “He's a cool little dude.”

Fernandito snuggled closer. “Is you coming to live with us, Andy?”

“No, not quite,” Andy laughed. He put both arms around the little boy, whose breath smelled like warm chocolate. “I'm just Manny's friend, is all.”

“You can live here with us,” Fernandito proposed once again, doing his best to be persuasive. “You can even play with my stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“You can play with my G.I. Joe stuff.”

“Oh, man, awesome,” Andy said, teasing him. “Maybe I'll move in with you after all.”

“Honest?”

“Sure, man, I'll sleep in your bed, OK?”

“You can do that,” Fernandito nodded happily. “We can sleep there together!”

“He's just kidding you,” Manny finally interrupted, grinning at his little brother. “Don't be so stupid, chico.”

Fernandito stopped smiling and looked at Andy's face. “Is you just kidding me?”

“Sort of,” Andy confessed, feeling suddenly guilty. “I can't seriously live here for real, man, sorry.”

The little boy muttered in quiet disappointment and pinched Andy's arm, aiming for the nearest available bare skin. Andy laughed and pinched him back. Fernandito quickly forgot his anger in the excitement of this new game of pinch-and-tickle, which went on and on until one of his flailing arms knocked over Andy's can of Coke. Andy apologized and looked around for something to wipe up the mess. Manny had already fetched a rag from the sink. “It's OK,” he said, “this happens all the time.” He paused in his cleaning to give Fernandito an affectionate snap with the wet rag. “This monkey here always makes a big mess.”

Fernandito giggled and jumped off Andy's lap, keeping hold of Andy's hand to drag him from the chair. “Come on, Andy,” he yelled, “you can see our room!”

Andy allowed himself to be pulled through the apartment to the room where all four brothers slept together on two bunk beds. “That's mine there,” Fernandito grinned, pointing to one of the bottom bunks. “I don't never get to sleep on top.”

Manny, who had just come into the room behind them, said, “That's because monkeys don't get no choice.”

“Shut up,” his little brother hollered at him. “You're the big stupid monkey!”

“You're the little stupid baboon,” Manny responded, smiling as he peeled off his sweaty T-shirt and started using it to wipe his shoulders and his arms. Fernandito charged him at that point and grabbed him

around the legs, managing somehow to tackle him onto the floor. Manny laughed and started fighting back; Fernandito was much smaller, but suddenly ferocious in his anger, pounding at his older brother with lethal little fists. Andy, standing over them and watching, decided to enter the bout in order to keep it from escalating into a real fight. He threw himself onto the floor and grabbed Fernandito, who broke into a giggle as soon as he found himself in Andy's arms. "I'll kick both your asses," Andy said, tumbling with the little boy onto Manny. The three of them went at it for several minutes after that, from one end of the room to the other, rolling and grappling all across the floor. Fernandito stayed in the action throughout, but it was the two older boys who gradually paired off for most of the wrestling. Andy had taken off his shirt and his shoes by this time, and Manny was in nothing but his red cut-off sweatpants, and both of them seemed to be enjoying the heat and the sweat and the closeness of their struggle, grunting and writhing in each other's arms.

Eventually, though, even they had to give in to exhaustion and call an end to their match. They rolled apart and sprawled there side by side on the floor. It became evident, in that position, how much both of them had enjoyed the sweaty contact of their wrestling: Andy with a bulge in his blue jeans and Manny with one just as big in his sweatpants, and neither of them trying to hide it. Even Fernandito noticed. He crawled between the two bigger boys and gave both of them a simultaneous poke between the legs. Andy and Manny looked at each other and tried not to laugh. Encouraged by their reaction, Fernandito giggled and did it again, not just poking now but also squeezing at the hard bulges. There was nothing actually sexual about what he was doing; he was merely playing around with the other boys, no different in his mind from the tickling and the pinching of his earlier game. But Andy and Manny knew better, and finally had to burst out laughing at what was happening to them. Fernandito took this as an invitation to even more aggressive fondling, which made Manny laugh so hard that he had to roll away onto his belly to escape. Fernandito kept going after him and even pulled down the back of Manny's pants to get at him for a spanking.

Andy sat up and started cheering "get him, get him" to the little boy, then joined in with a few whacks of his own across Manny's skinny brown ass. Manny only submitted for a few moments before crawling away and pulling up his pants. "*Coño*, man, you guys is not fair," he said, out of breath from laughing so much. "Don't hit my *culo* no more."

Andy could see that the game was over. He got up and started putting on his shirt and his shoes. "I should probably go home," he said. "I can't be late for supper."

Fernandito hugged him around the waist. "You need to stay here, Andy!"

"I can't, man, sorry."

"Is you comin' back?"

"Sure, I guess so," Andy said, glancing at Manny. "If it's OK with your brother."

"You can always come back," Manny shrugged. He was still resting belly-down on the floor. "That's no problem."

"OK, cool," Andy smiled. He wasn't sure what to do with the little boy wrapped around his waist, then surprised himself by bending down and kissing him on the cheek. "Take it easy, little dude," he said. "I'll catch you later." Fernandito looked up quickly and puckered his lips for more. Andy laughed, not accustomed to this kind of open affection between boys, but then went along with it gladly enough and gave Fernandito another kiss on the cheek, and then one more on the mouth. Manny was watching them and smiling. "That monkey likes to kiss all the time," he said. "Do you got one for me, too?"

"You're the stupid baboon," Fernandito responded, still holding on to Andy. "I don't got no kisses for you!"

"*Ay, que maldito*," Manny said. He got up onto his knees and held out his hand. "Come on, chico,

give a kiss to me.”

This appeared, to Andy, to be a game that the brothers often played together. Fernandito was grinning as he stuck out his tongue and repeated, “You're the big stupid baboon!” Manny held out both hands and called the little boy to him one more time. Finally, Fernandito gave in and ran to his big brother's waiting embrace. They started kissing and tickling and making each other laugh. When Manny had gotten all the kisses he wanted, he climbed to his feet with Fernandito still in his arms. “Andy is waiting to go,” he said. “Tell him goodbye.”

“You kiss Andy,” the little boy demanded, clapping his hands together. “Kiss him goodbye.”

Manny shook his head. “Kisses is for little boys,” he smiled. “We can't do that.”

“Go ahead, big baboon!”

“Shut up, Fern.”

“Go ahead!”

Andy stepped next to them and said, “OK, man, look here,” putting one hand on Fernandito's back and the other on Manny's shoulder. “Let's have everybody kiss all together. Is that OK?”

“Yeah, everybody kissing,” Fernandito cheered. Manny looked at Andy to see if he was being serious, then grinned and nodded and waited for further instructions. Andy pulled the other boys closer and said, “All right, everybody together now... ready, set, go,” then put his face forward until he was kissing Manny and Fernandito both at the same time. The three boys kept their mouths together like that for two long breaths, staring at one another the whole time and trying not to giggle. On the third breath, Fernandito pulled away and wiped his mouth; but Andy and Manny continued for several more seconds, keeping their lips together and staring into each other's eyes until both of them finally broke up laughing. They punched at each other a few times to dispel their embarrassment, then laughed about it once more and went back outside.

As he was mounting his bike, Andy called back to Manny with a final reminder. “Don't forget about Monday,” he said. “About going to see Red, I mean.”

“I won't forget, don't worry,” Manny yelled back. Then he took a step forward and added, “Thanks for the money. I can buy my uniform now for sure!”

“No problem, man.”

“And I see you Monday anyway,” Manny suddenly remarked, referring to Andy's earlier reminder. “On the bus I see you.”

“That's right,” Andy smiled. “I must be stupid or something.”

He waved to Manny and to Fernandito, who was also outside with them, then started his trip back across town. He was feeling horny and frustrated down deep in his gut, even worse than usual now after all the wrestling and kissing with the other boys. He needed some kind of release, any kind of release, which was why he headed for Matthew's house as soon as he got home. Andy hoped, in some vague way, that Matthew might be there alone, that maybe something might happen between them, something like jerking off together. But his plan never had a chance, because Matthew wasn't even home. Andy ended up talking to Matthew's mother instead. She was outside raking leaves, but she didn't seem to know, or especially care, where her son might be. “He's probably over at his girlfriend's house,” she finally guessed, saying the word “girlfriend” with a sarcastic edge. The news came as a total surprise to Andy. “Matt's got a girlfriend? Who is she?”

Matthew's mother had to think for a moment, then said, “It's that girl who lives over on Mulberry Street. What's her name? Nancy something?”

“Nancy Claypool?”

“Yeah, that's her, I think.”

Andy was more surprised than ever. He knew Nancy Claypool as just another girl from the neighborhood, but he had never heard Matthew mention anything about her. That they could be seeing each other as girlfriend and boyfriend seemed impossible. "When does he go over there? I mean, does he go all the time or what?"

"I can't keep track of him," Matthew's mother shrugged, turning her back as she continued raking. Andy stood there for another few moments trying to make sense of the news. He couldn't imagine Matthew McCann with an actual girlfriend. No way. But, whatever the explanation, Matthew was definitely gone and Andy was definitely alone. And now, on top of everything else, it was almost time for dinner, and Andy had to go home and deal with his parents and his sisters.

More than ever, Andy felt trapped and isolated, desperate for the escape of other boys, of forbidden parties, of secret, sinful sex.

16

Next day, Andy made a point of finding out more about Matthew's so-called girlfriend. It was late morning, with the bells of nearby Holy Trinity church announcing eleven o'clock mass, when the two boys got together in Matthew's front yard. "My fuckin' chain came off again," Matthew grumbled to his friend. He had his bicycle upside down on the ground and was working at it diligently with a wrench. "I need a new bike real bad, I swear to God."

"I came by yesterday," Andy said, jumping right to the point. "I talked to your mom."

"Oh, yeah? She didn't say nothin' to me about it."

"She said you were at your girlfriend's house."

Matthew looked up with a sudden grin. "Yeah, that's right."

"Who was it?"

"You know who it was," Matthew said. He was wearing his denim overalls today with a yellow T-shirt underneath. "Nancy Claypool. She's been my girlfriend forever, man."

"How the fuck would I know about it?"

"I don't know," Matthew shrugged. He seemed genuinely baffled. "I thought you did, that's all. Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Andy mumbled. He put his hand on the tire of Matthew's bike. "How is she your girlfriend, anyway? What kind of stuff do you guys do together?"

"Not much, really."

"Well... like what?"

"Not much," Matthew said again. He finished with the chain and got to his feet. "I keep tryin' to fuck her, but she won't let me."

"Then how is she your stupid girlfriend?"

Matthew headed into the house to put away the wrench and to wash his hands. "Sometimes she lets me feel her tits," he explained en route. "And she lets me kiss her, too."

"Wow, big-time girlfriend," Andy scoffed, feeling a bit better now, a bit less jealous. "She's not a real girlfriend if you don't fuck her."

"Then you don't got no girlfriends, either."

"Yeah, I do... at school."

"You fuck them?"

“Of course,” Andy said. He followed Matthew from the bathroom into the bedroom. “I fucked Cheryl Turner lots of times. And Angela Gooden. And Lisa Hathaway.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, man, I just fucked Angela like two or three weeks ago at the lake.”

“Outside?”

Andy nodded, going on and on with his phony story for no apparent reason. He didn't need to keep lying, but he couldn't stop. “I know a special spot at the lake,” he said. “It's real secret, and it's good for fucking and stuff like that.”

“Awesome,” Matthew grinned. “It must be way cool to do real fucking.”

“It's the best, no doubt.”

“Do you use rubbers?”

“Yeah, sometimes. It depends if I'm, like, in a hurry or something.”

“That would be totally awesome,” Matthew concluded once more. He kicked off his shoes and then started to remove his other clothes. “Do you care if I do the laundry?”

“Right now?”

“My mom told me to do it before she gets home today... or else she'll kick my ass.”

“Is she still at her boyfriend's house?”

“Till this afternoon,” Matthew nodded. He tugged off the overalls he was wearing and threw them onto the floor. “I need to wash all the white stuff... like the underwear and the sheets and stuff.” He took off his socks and his underpants to add them to the laundry, leaving himself in nothing but his yellow T-shirt, which was long enough, just barely, to keep him modestly covered. He stripped the bed after that, then bundled everything in his arms and headed for the basement. Down there, the rest of the white laundry was already gathered in a large hamper next to the washing machine. Matthew set the machine and started it filling with water, then added a cup of detergent and began stuffing all the sheets and the underwear and the socks inside. Andy, with nothing better to do, helped him load. “Don't make it too full,” Matthew warned, obviously an expert.

Andy grabbed a handful of underpants and tossed them in. “Is that enough?”

“I think we can fit everything in,” Matthew decided, adding the last few items. He closed the lid just as the machine started churning through its first cycle. “That'll take about forty minutes to get done.”

“What happens till then?”

“I guess I could show you the caves we got down here.”

“You're really psycho,” Andy laughed. “What caves are down here?”

Matthew grabbed a flashlight from beside the washing machine and waved for Andy to follow. “Come on, I'll show you... over this way.” He scurried barefoot across the concrete floor to the other end of the basement, where the cinder block foundation was recessed in three separate places. “See, we got caves,” he said. “They go back a long ways.”

“Fuck, I guess you're right,” Andy had to admit. “Is there anything in them?”

“No, they're just empty. Do you want to see?”

“Yeah, let's go,” Andy said. He got behind Matthew and followed him into one of the passages. Both of the boys had to crouch slightly in order to fit inside. Andy put his hand on Matthew's back as the light faded to blackness. “I can't see a fucking thing,” he mumbled. “Turn on your stupid flashlight.”

“I like it when it's dark,” Matthew mumbled back. “It's like a real pirate cave or something.” Their voices sounded eerily resonant in the tight enclosure. “It still goes back a ways more.”

“Fine, man, so let's see it!”

Matthew laughed softly and turned on the flashlight. “See, it's deep, ain't it?”

“Yeah, it's pretty cool,” Andy said, leaning forward with both hands on Matthew's back to get a look ahead into the light.

He could smell Matthew's dirty T-shirt only a few inches beneath his face. Then they started moving again, shuffling forward the last few feet with Andy still keeping hold of the other boy as they advanced. “OK, that's it,” Matthew finally announced. “We're at the end.” He crouched lower to let his friend have a look over his shoulder. “See, you can put your initials here.” In front of them was a crude cement wall covered with letters and dates, the earliest from 1922. Matthew picked up a splinter of rock or cement from the floor and handed it back to Andy. “You can put yours on there, too.”

“Excellent,” Andy said, almost whispering. He squeezed himself forward beside Matthew and scratched “A.W.D.” onto the wall, then “Sept 1992” beneath it. Matthew went next, adding his own “M.M.M. RULES!” to the hodgepodge of graffiti. Andy touched it with his finger. “What's the middle initial stand for?”

“It's Matthew Mitchell McCann. What about yours?” “Andrew Wilde Damon,” Andy said. “Wilde was the name of my great-grandparents or something like that.” He was wedged against Matthew in the passage, half-facing him, with his left hand still on Matthew's back.

“We could hide in here if there's ever a tornado,” Matthew said, shining his light slowly around the darkness. “Or if there's a bomb... like a nuclear bomb.”

“Yeah, that's brilliant.”

“It is brilliant,” Matthew smiled. “I'm a genius, I can't help it.” He shined the flashlight directly at Andy. “God, man, your hair is fuckin' long.”

“So what?”

“It's like I never noticed it before.”

“You're definitely a genius,” Andy muttered, giving the back of Matthew's head a light swat.

“You should let it grow super long, like all the way down your back. That would be so radical!”

“Sorry, asshole, but I'm getting it cut next week.”

“No, man, that's bogus!”

“Just a little bit,” Andy said. He touched his hair in back where it was longest, down over the collar of his khaki shirt. “Just about an inch, that's all.”

“You fucker!”

“Shut up, Matt.”

“I need to get mine cut, too,” Matthew suddenly decided, running one hand over his bristly blond crew-cut. “It's gettin' too long to spike.”

Andy took the opportunity to feel the crew-cut for himself, using his free hand to skim over it back and forth, enough like petting it to make Matthew start barking and panting like a dog. “Good puppy,” Andy laughed, petting him more firmly. “That's a good puppy dog.”

Matthew barked again, yipping like a terrier, then turned his head quickly and gave Andy a few sloppy

licks on the arm. Andy briefly pretended to be disgusted, but he didn't move his arm and he didn't stop petting the other boy. "That's a good doggy," he murmured once more, not laughing this time.

"Come on," Matthew finally said, "I'll be your puppy and you can be my master."

"What the fuck?"

"Come on," Matthew insisted, "just for a little while, at least." Not waiting for an answer, he scooted past Andy and scrambled bent-over back through the passage and out again into the basement, where the washing machine was just beginning one of its spin cycles. Together, he and Andy went back upstairs to the kitchen for something to eat and drink, with Matthew continuing to scamper about on all fours while barking and panting and wagging his rear end. But he was clearly an exceptional dog, managing to talk occasionally and to stand upright and even to prepare a lunch of bologna sandwiches and potato chips for himself and for Andy. They took their food into the living room in order to watch TV as they ate. Andy sat on the couch, while Matthew stayed on the floor and begged doggy-style for bites of sandwich and chips, which Andy fed to him by hand. At first, Andy feigned impatience with the game, but soon he was openly and totally enjoying it, even making Matthew do tricks for the food, simple things like rolling over and sitting up and playing dead, which Andy always rewarded with a special rub on the tummy.

When they had finished eating, Matthew took time out to run downstairs and transfer the laundry from the washer to the dryer, then ran back up and jumped onto the couch with a wild howl. He landed with his bare bottom directly on top of Andy's hand. Both boys laughed at the jarring impact of the collision, but neither of them made any attempt to shift their positions. Matthew put both feet up on the couch and hugged his knees to his chest, then started rocking himself slightly from side to side like a hyper wolfboy.

Andy kept his hand there beneath him, palm-side up, with his fingertips actually pressed into the crack of Matthew's butt. The two boys stayed like that for several minutes as Andy worked his fingers up a little higher, not quite believing it when his middle finger finally found the hole itself, the actual hole of another boy's ass. It felt tight and it felt sweaty, and touching it made Matthew rock faster from side to side and squirm his butt downward against Andy's hand.

Going any further right then might not have been the wisest idea – not there on the couch, in the living room, in the middle of the day – but the boys were beyond the point of caution or good sense. Andy, by this time, had worked his middle finger up into the sweaty hole at least an inch, and Matthew finally surrendered to the pleasure of it by turning himself toward Andy so that he could lie back on the cushions with his knees up and his legs spread. In that position, Andy could see just about everything, from Matthew's reddened boner and balls to his own finger right underneath inside Matthew's hairless pink rectum.

But Andy still wasn't satisfied; he pushed Matthew's T-shirt up and out of the way to see as much more of the other boy as possible. Matthew cooperated and pulled the T-shirt up to his own armpits, happily showing himself and giving himself to his friend. Andy, with his free hand, started petting Matthew's bare belly. "Good puppy dog," he whispered, as if talking out loud might somehow have given them away. He moved his hand down onto the other boy's penis and began fondling it gently. Matthew waited patiently for a few moments, then grabbed hold of Andy's hand and used it to begin masturbating in earnest, keeping his own hand on top of Andy's to control the pressure and the tempo. He had his eyes open and was staring at Andy with a look of weird desperation. Andy, staring back, still had his finger up Matthew's butt and was twisting it in farther and farther, doing it slowly, carefully, not sure what might happen if he pushed it too deeply into the tight, mucousy hole. Matthew could barely control himself; his legs were trembling and his hips were rigid as he raised his bottom to accept more and more of Andy's finger, squeezing and gripping at it with his sphincter muscle. Andy gladly obliged, inserting his finger all the way in, all the way to the last knuckle, triggering something that made Matthew go suddenly and crazily

orgasmic and start ejaculating into Andy's hand. Even without seeing it, Andy could tell that there was more stuff than the last time.

They paused after that, both of them, to let Matthew settle down and recapture his breath. Then Andy slowly removed his finger from Matthew's butt and lifted his other hand away from Matthew's dick.

Underneath, on the boy's belly, there were two dribbles of white semen – fully mature white semen – with even more of it still on Andy's fingers. Matthew raised his head and looked down at himself. “God, man, I can't believe it,” he marveled softly, touching the white stuff on his stomach. “This is real sperm!”

“Yeah, it looks like it,” Andy nodded.

“That's the first time I ever busted a real nut like this,” Matthew continued, still amazed by his own new found potency. “I can do some totally excellent fucking now, man, I swear to God!”

“Yeah, terrific.”

“I'm serious, Andy, it felt way better than anything else in my whole life!”

“I know, dork, I've been doing it for a long time,” Andy said.

He wiped his messy hand on his blue jeans, getting ready to unzip them for his own performance. But he never got the chance. Outside, a car came pulling suddenly into the driveway. “Fuck, it's my mom,” Matthew exclaimed, jumping up and running to the bedroom for his pants. A few minutes later, after reluctantly saying goodbye to his friend, Andy was on his way back home. He didn't like Matthew's mother, and he especially didn't like hanging around with her in the same house.

Walking up the street, Andy kept sniffing at his hands – his left one for the tart smell of Matthew's sperm, his right one for the dirtier, fishier smell of Matthew's ass. He couldn't get enough of the two odors. Later, in his bedroom, he added the smell of his own semen to the pungent blend. Once again, he was forced to masturbate alone; and, once again, he ended up feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled. Solitary sex would never again be good enough or exciting enough for Andy. He needed other boys with him for full enjoyment. It occurred to him, in fact, that he would always need other boys for any type of sexual pleasure. For the first time in his life, Andrew Damon decided that he was actually gay. And he decided that he liked it.

17

Andy got his hair cut on Monday, just enough to keep it at the shaggy length that he liked best. Next day, on the school bus, he took his usual seat with Manny and asked immediately about the job interview.

“It went OK,” Manny told him. “Red was nice.”

“So? What happened?”

“He wants me to come back on Friday... for a delivery.”

“That's the same night I work,” Andy smiled. “That's excellent, man. Did he tell you about the parties?”

“No, nothin' about that.”

“Every Saturday night there's a party,” Andy revealed eagerly, “and I can go whenever I want... and I can bring a friend, too.”

Manny looked at him with a timid, almost apologetic grin. “I can't go to no parties like that,” he said. “My popi don't want me out late at night.”

“Oh, that's all right,” Andy said quickly. He was sorry now for making the other boy feel uncomfortable. “Those parties probably suck, anyway.”

“But this Friday night we get to go out,” Manny went on to say. “You know, to the Autumn Fest thing.” He was talking about the parade and the carnival held every year in Sandburg at the end of September. “Me and my whole family goes.”

Andy didn't reply at first, then said, “That's pretty cool. My family never goes to the Fest. My mom doesn't like to go out much.

“Too bad.”

“It must be nice... to go places, I mean, like to the carnival and stuff.”

“You can come with us,” Manny proposed. He glanced at the other boy to see whether or not he should continue. “Maybe after we get done delivering shit... you could meet us there maybe.”

“That would be totally decent, man, big time.”

“My little brother should be happy,” Manny added, looking at Andy once more.

“You mean Fern?”

“Yeah,” Manny smiled, “the little monkey. He asks all the time for you to come with us.”

“He's a cool kid.”

“He likes you for sure.”

“Well,” Andy said, “tell him I'll be there, no doubt.”

Later that day, once again thinking about the Saturday night parties at Badger's house, Andy approached Timmy Jenco with the same invitation he'd already given Manny. But Timmy couldn't go either, not that first week. He already had plans for Saturday night with his girlfriend Melissa. “It's the Autumn Fest dance, man,” he said simply, as if Andy should have known. “No way can I miss that, Damon, forget it.”

“These parties are bitchin', Jenco,” Andy insisted. He and Timmy were in the gym waiting for calisthenics to begin. “Some really wild shit goes on, no kidding.”

Timmy was wandering in lazy, restless circles as they talked, holding his shirt up and drumming lightly on his white belly. “Maybe I can make it some other time,” he decided. “Ask me again next week.”

“Fuck you, man, maybe I will and maybe I won't.”

“Suck my dick, asshole.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Serious,” Timmy said, smacking Andy on the shoulder as he wandered past, “I'll come when I'm free, don't worry.” He said it like someone who assumes that he'll be wanted whenever and wherever he shows up. And maybe he was right, because Andy didn't argue.

Meanwhile, closer to home, Andy went out several times that week cruising the neighborhood for Matthew, who seemed to have disappeared since Sunday. Andy decided, eventually, that his friend must have left early on his trip to Peoria; by Friday, Andy had stopped wondering about it and was back at Red Dog Comix for his next delivery. He came into the shop hoping to find Manny – but no one was there except Red, who quickly recognized the quizzical expression on Andy's face. “Your friend was already here,” he said. “About five minutes ago. He just left.”

“Was everything OK?”

“Just fine,” Red smiled. “Why?”

“No reason,” Andy shrugged. “Just because, I don't know, just because it was his first job and everything.”

Red paused as another boy came through the door, then smiled again and said, “Don't worry about Manny. He's a terrific kid. He's perfect.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. You did good, Andrew. I couldn't have found anyone better myself.”

“I'm glad you like him so much.”

“You and him are good buddies, right?”

“Pretty good,” Andy said, nodding. “Manny's a cool guy.”

“Does he have any girlfriends?”

“I don't think so.”

“That's what I figured,” Red said, more to himself than to Andy. The other boy in the shop came over to the counter just then and asked Red about using the toilet upstairs. Red smiled slowly. “Your name is Jason, isn't it?”

The boy said, “Yeah, that's me,” smiling back. He was close to Andy's age, maybe a year younger, probably a freshman at Sandburg High. “How did you remember me?”

“It was two weeks ago, right? You needed to use the bathroom, same as now.”

“That's right.”

“I'm like an elephant,” Red chuckled, “I never forget.” He kept the boy talking while Andy ran upstairs for the bag of marijuana. When Andy came back, Red sent the other boy up and looked at the clock behind the counter. “See you in about thirty minutes,” he said to Andy. “By the way, nice haircut.”

“Thanks.”

“You look better and better every week, pal.”

“Thanks,” Andy mumbled again, sidestepping Jason's bicycle as he hurried outside. He liked Red well enough, but he wasn't sure how he felt about Red's constant flirting and flattery. It seemed almost pushy in some way, and made Andy feel vaguely uneasy, like maybe Red was just bullshitting him or trying to use him. Andy was a skillful manipulator himself, after all, and was always quick to spot the tendency in others.

His delivery was completed as smoothly and efficiently as ever, and he was easily back to the shop within thirty minutes. Red, as always by this time, was preparing to close for the day. He gave Andy his twenty dollars and patted him on the shoulder.

“No bagging or cleaning this week,” he said. “That only happens once a month.”

“That's OK,” Andy told him, “I've got plans tonight, anyway.”

“With Manny,” Red nodded, “I know.”

Andy shook his head in amazement. “How do you always know everything?”

“Manny left you a message,” Red laughed. “See, I'm not really psychic or anything like that.”

“Manny was back already?”

“You just missed him again. And he did a good job, in case you're wondering.”

“What message did he leave?”

“You're supposed to meet him by the Ferris wheel at seven o'clock. Does that make any sense?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“A secret date?”

“We're going to the Fest together,” Andy said. “To the carnival.”

Red was stroking his droopy mustache as he listened. “Well, you'll need some extra cash then,” he decided. He took another ten-dollar bill from the envelope and gave it to Andy. “There you go, man, have fun.”

“Thank you,” Andy said softly. “That's really nice.”

“Hey, my boys deserve the best, don't they?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Go on, Andrew, take off, have fun.”

Andy turned to leave. Behind him, he discovered something that made his stomach tighten with a strange, queasy excitement. It was Jason's bicycle, resting against the wall near the door – which meant that Jason himself was still upstairs, still in Red's apartment. Andy almost stopped and looked back, but then caught himself and kept going. He needed to get home for supper; no matter what, he couldn't afford to be late.

After dinner, Andy's father offered him a ride to the carnival, but Andy decided to take his bike instead. Before he left, his mother slipped him ten dollars to use for rides and concessions, and then his father added an extra five for good measure. Suddenly, between his parents and Red, Andy had more money than he could possibly use in one night. He ended up taking twenty-five of it with him, more than enough, he figured, to have a bitchin' time.

By seven o'clock, Andy was at the Ferris wheel waiting for his friend. It was a cool, breezy night, and Andy was wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt and a Chicago Bears cap to keep himself warm. He waited there about fifteen minutes before Manny and his family finally showed up. Fernandito spotted him first and came running to him at full speed, nearly knocking Andy backwards when they collided. "Take it easy, man, you almost killed me," Andy laughed. The little boy had both arms wrapped around him and kept saying, "Andy, I knowed you be coming, I knowed you be coming!" He was still hugging Andy when Manny and the others joined them. Fernandito looked at his older brother and said, "You see, stupid, I tell you Andy be coming here!"

"I never said nothing different," Manny shrugged. He looked at Andy and waved. "Sorry we got here a little late."

"That's OK," Andy said, "I've only been here a few minutes."

Fernandito had finally released him, but was still standing beside him, holding his hand. The little boy definitely resembled his big brother, with the same round face and large mouth, but his skin was lighter, and his black hair was straight instead of curly, cut short all around except for a long tail down his neck. It was obvious, by the way he was clutching Andy's hand, that he intended to keep the older boy to himself for the entire evening.

After a brief discussion, the Fuentes family decided to split into three groups: the girls went with their friends from school, two of the boys stayed with their parents, and Andy ended up with Manny and Fernandito. As soon as they were alone, Andy asked the other boy about his first delivery.

"It seemed pretty easy," Manny replied. He was wearing his brown corduroy pants and a dirty white sweatshirt that had BROOKFIELD ZOO on the front in faded red letters. He reached into his pocket and pulled out ten dollars. "I can pay you back some money now," he offered, holding it out.

Andy waved it away. "I don't need it, man, really. Just keep it."

"You don't want no money back?"

"Not right now. Did you buy your gym uniform yet?"

"I got it yesterday," Manny nodded. He put his money back into his pocket. "My mom and my popi is really happy. They call you a good angel."

"A good angel," Andy repeated, laughing. Fernandito, impatient by now, started tugging at Andy's hand. "Come on," the little boy yelled, "take me on the ride!" He was pointing to the Ferris wheel. "Take me!"

"*Coño;*" Manny said, shaking his head and smiling, "don't be a monkey all night, man."

Fernandito ignored his brother and dragged Andy to the nearest ticket booth. All three boys ended up in the same gondola chair on the Ferris wheel, with Fernandito in the middle gripping Andy's arm on one side and Manny's on the other. It was Andy's first ride on a Ferris wheel in several years, probably since kindergarten, and it was fun, no other word for it, just plain fun to be going 'round and 'round on it and

seeing the whole town from above, all lit up and looking glittery and nice.

After the Ferris wheel, the boys worked their way around the fairgrounds from one ride and one game to another, trying everything at least once: the tilt-a-whirl, the flying saucers, the baseball toss and the ring toss and the shooting gallery. It was there, at the gallery, that Andy managed to win something other than the usual plastic charm bracelets and whistles and two-dollar sunglasses. He managed, in fact, to hit enough of the moving targets to win a gigantic stuffed panda nearly as large as Fernandito. The little boy went crazy for it as soon as he saw it, assuming instantly that Andy had won it for him. "That thing is for me," he squealed, jumping up and down and clapping his hands.

"That thing is Andy's," Manny told him. "Don't be selfish."

But Andy was happy to give the giant panda to Fernandito. "He can have it, no problem. I don't want it for anything."

"Don't give everything to him so easy, Andy."

"No, really, I want him to have it."

"He want me to have it," Fernandito echoed gleefully, still jumping and clapping.

"Then it's OK, I guess," Manny shrugged. He ended up carrying the panda himself, since it was too large for his little brother to handle. But Fernandito never left its side, talking to the panda and caressing it like some kind of fragile new pet that needed his affection.

By now, all three boys were hungry and thirsty and ready for something more substantial than the cotton candy and peanuts they'd been nibbling all evening. They stopped at the closest concession stand and loaded up on hot dogs and nachos and burritos, then found a bench nearby where they could rest comfortably and devour their feast. While they were eating, the lights of the midway went dark and a display of fireworks started bursting and blazing in the sky overhead. Fernandito wasn't sure how to react; he enjoyed the lights and the colors, but the explosive noisiness obviously made him uneasy; he spent the last several minutes of the display snuggled like a scared little rabbit between his brother and Andy, munching nervously on his burrito.

Afterwards, as the Fuentes family was reassembling near the Ferris wheel, Fernandito started badgering Andy about staying overnight. Andy didn't take the notion seriously until Manny added an invitation of his own. "It would be OK," he told Andy, "if you really want to."

"Seriously?"

"Sure, why not? My family don't care."

"I'd have to take my bike home first," Andy said, suddenly excited. "And I'd have to tell my parents."

Manny nodded, then explained the situation to his father in a rapid burst of Spanish. "We can follow you in the car," he finally said, "back to where you live."

"That would be excellent."

"But there ain't nothing great to do at our house," Manny warned the other boy, apparently finding it hard to understand Andy's interest. "You don't got to come just for Fern."

"Shut up, baboon," Fernandito shouted at him. "Andy be coming with me!" He was holding the panda himself now, barely able to see over the top of it. "Ain't you coming with me, Andy?"

"It looks that way, yeah," Andy smiled. He ran to get his bike, then waited for Manny's family to join him in their old Chevy station wagon. They followed him back to his house, only a mile or so away. Andy worked fast once he got there, stashing his bike in the garage before racing into the house to get permission from his parents. It didn't take long. His mother and father peered out the front door to get a look at the station wagon, seemed satisfied by what they saw, then told Andy to behave himself and to call them next day for a ride home. "Don't make Mister Fuentes bring you back here," his father said. "There's nothing worse than being a pest."

"I'll call you," Andy promised. He gave his mother a quick kiss and ran back outside. Manny had the tailgate of the station wagon down for him. Andy climbed inside and found an empty spot between Manny and Fernandito for their ride back across town.

It was almost ten o'clock by the time they got home. As Manny had warned, there really was nothing to do beyond watching a bit of television and then going to bed. On this night, especially, everyone including Andy was worn out from the Fest and ready for an early bedtime. Andy went with the other four boys into their room and waited to see what he should do and where he should sleep. The two middle brothers were named Cesar and Nestor, one of them seven and the other ten. They were quiet and shy, much more like Manny than Fernandito, always staying to themselves and minding their own business.

Now, to prepare for bed, they stripped off everything except their underwear and scurried to the bathroom for a final pee. Fernandito, after leaving his stuffed panda safely in the corner, went with them – all three of them wearing the same type of colorful little Underoos underpants. Manny, alone in the bedroom with Andy, had also stripped to his underwear by now, but then just as quickly put on a pair of cut-off sweatpants like the ones he wore to play soccer. Andy, also undressing, got down to his blue jeans, then paused. "Is it OK for me to sleep in my underwear?"

"It don't make no difference," Manny said. "Whatever you do at your house is good here."

"I always sleep in my underwear," Andy mumbled, taking off his jeans. He dropped them to the floor with his shoes and socks and sweatshirt. "What about the bathroom?"

"It's right out here," Manny pointed, moving towards the door. "Them other guys is already in there."

"That's OK."

"You can kick them out."

"That's OK," Andy said again. He stepped around Manny, who seemed somehow flustered or distracted, and hurried across the little hallway to the bathroom. The three younger brothers were all at the toilet having sword fights, crisscrossing their streams of urine and making a mess. They were just finishing as Andy came in. He wandered over to them and put his hand on Fernandito's shoulder. The little boy looked around with a delighted squeal. "Andy, is you going to pee with me?"

Andy didn't have much choice. "Sure," he said, "move over, man." Fernandito and Nestor made a space between themselves and stood there watching, along with Cesar, as Andy brought out his penis and started pissing. It took him a few seconds to get started because of everyone watching, but after that he was all right, especially since his bladder was full and urgently needed emptying. He kept pissing so much and so long that it finally made the other boys start laughing. All of them were still holding their own little brown wieners as they watched him. None of them, obviously, had ever seen a *guevo* quite like Andy's before, one that was so meaty and pink and had such a big bare knob at the end of it. Fernandito was hopping from the excitement of watching it and being so close to it. Andy had to laugh at the little boy's reaction, which kept getting more and more animated as Andy kept pissing and pissing. It seemed that Andy would never finish. When he finally did, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Manny standing behind them at the sink. The other boy was gazing into the mirror and carefully removing the dangly silver crucifix from his left earlobe. He looked around at the toilet when he noticed the sound of Andy's urine trickling to a stop. Andy turned himself slightly and Manny looked right at him, right at the thing in Andy's hand. Both boys held their positions for a moment without moving or looking away, and then Manny returned his gaze suddenly to the mirror.

He finished removing his earring and took a bottle of disinfectant from the medicine cabinet. "Stupid thing is getting sore," he said to anyone who cared. He was talking about his earlobe, which was slightly reddened and puffy. Now that the performance at the toilet was finished, the younger boys were on their way back to the bedroom. But Andy stayed behind to give Manny some company. "You kept your earring

in too long,” he said, touching the ruby stud in his own ear. “You need to clean it all the time.”

“I should know that,” Manny agreed. He leaned over the sink and drizzled some of the Bactine disinfectant directly over his left earlobe. He didn't seem very good at keeping himself clean. His hair always looked tangled and a little dirty, and his body had a stale, sour odor about it that never went away. Andy noticed it every day on the school bus, and he could smell it now even from across the room. But it wasn't necessarily a bad smell; it was sweaty and it was spermy and it reminded Andy of sex – like the odor of a stinky, unwashed jockstrap.

He stepped closer to Manny. “Do you need any help?”

“No, I think it's OK,” Manny said. He recapped the bottle and put it back into the cabinet. He was so thin and bony through the upper body that Andy could count the ribs beneath his skin. The two boys paused and looked at each other for an awkwardly silent moment, with Manny chewing on his bottom lip and Andy cracking his knuckles. Finally, Manny moved towards the toilet. “I need to go,” he said, making it sound like a request for privacy. Andy wasn't exactly surprised, not considering Manny's extreme shyness. Maybe if they had been peeing together it would have been different – but doing it by himself, with Andy watching, was too much like exhibitionism for someone as bashful as Manny.

Andy left him alone and went back to the bedroom. Fernandito was waiting impatiently on his bottom bunk for the older boy to return. “You be sleeping with me tonight,” he shouted, pounding at the mattress. “Come on, Andy!”

“I don't know,” Andy said, teasing the little boy. “Maybe I'll sleep on the floor.”

“No... with me!”

“Well, it might be OK, I guess. But we should ask Manny.”

“No,” Fernandito hollered, “don't ask the big baboon!”

Manny, just returning to the room, said, “*Coño*, chico, stop being so noisy.”

“Andy be sleeping with me,” Fernandito informed him quickly, lowering his voice to an urgent whisper. Manny didn't object or argue. He still seemed distracted or muddled in some strange way, even more quiet than usual. Andy figured maybe he was tired, or maybe he didn't feel good, or maybe he was just annoyed at his little brother; but whatever, it probably was no big deal, and Andy didn't feel like worrying about it.

Across the room, Nestor and Cesar were already in bed and half asleep. But Fernandito was still pounding impatiently at his mattress. Andy finally said, “OK, OK, man, spaz down,” and sat next to him on the bunk. Manny was waiting at the light switch near the door, watching Andy. “Is you sleeping there for sure?”

“If it's OK, yeah,” Andy said, happy for now to be bedding down with any of the boys. “I mean, there's more room with Fern than with, like, with you or whatever.”

Manny nodded without saying anything and turned out the light. He crossed the room and put his foot on the mattress between Fernandito and Andy to climb up to his own bunk. Fernandito grabbed him by the leg. “Give me a kiss, big stupid monkey!”

Manny smiled and stepped back down. “Sorry,” he mumbled, “I forgot.” Fernandito hugged him around the neck as they leaned together for their good-night kiss. Manny also went across the room to give a kiss to Nestor and Cesar, then came back to resume the climb to his own bunk. But Fernandito stopped him once more. “Give a kiss to Andy,” the little boy demanded, tugging his big brother by the arm.

“Stop it, Fern.”

“Do like last time... all together!”

Andy was still seated on the edge of the bunk. He looked at Manny and shrugged. “It's OK with me.”

Manny also shrugged, then leaned forward again with his hands on his knees. Andy put one arm around Manny's shoulders and started kissing him and Fernandito both at the same time. Again, as before, Fernandito dropped out first and left the two older boys to continue, both of them staring into each other's eyes as they held their lips together in a long, long kiss. Andy slid his hand down Manny's back and squeezed him on the ass, which made Manny start laughing. Fernandito, at that point, pushed himself between the other two boys and told them to stop playing. "It's time for sleeping," he announced, pulling at Andy. "Come on, lay down with me!"

Andy let go of Manny with a final, helpless shrug. Manny stayed there for a moment to watch his little brother get beneath the covers with Andy, then climbed with a nimble hop onto his own upper bunk. Down below, Andy found himself with the little boy immediately nestled against him. They were lying face to face beneath the warm sheet and blanket, with Fernandito's head against Andy's chest, right where Andy could smell the sweet little-boy fragrance of his hair. Andy had no choice, really, but to put one arm around him and to hold him, which encouraged Fernandito to nestle even closer. Andy's dick was already hard from before, from when he was kissing Manny, and it was getting harder now as he hugged and caressed the little boy next to him. He didn't know what to do about it – so he did nothing, just stayed where he was and hoped that maybe, somehow, he might eventually manage to fall asleep.

In the meantime, he continued to enjoy the feel and the smell of Fernandito's warm little body. He was petting Fernandito's hair and cheek when the little boy took Andy's hand and began to suck on the thumb as if it were his own, holding it gently with his lips and his teeth, sucking on it like a pacifier as he drifted toward sleep. He couldn't seem to get enough of the bigger boy, finally even throwing his arm and his leg across Andy to wrap him in a full, tight embrace. In that position, he was pressed directly against Andy's boner. He squirmed against it at first, enjoying the pleasant hardness of it, nice and firm against his bare tummy. For Andy, it was like being tortured. Having his thumb sucked and his boner rubbed was driving him slowly crazy, and there was no way to escape from it or to find relief.

Above him, Andy could hear Manny turning restlessly on his own bunk – clearing his throat, coughing, sighing. After a while, the noises diminished and then stopped altogether, and Andy could hear nothing in the room but the deep, even breathing of four sleeping boys, including the smallest one partially on top of him. No question about it, Fernandito had fallen asleep by now, still with Andy's thumb in his mouth. Andy wiggled it slightly to check for a response. Nothing happened. Again Andy wiggled it, then slid it in and out a few times, pretending he had something else in Fernandito's mouth besides his thumb. The little boy mewed softly in his sleep and turned his head just enough to dislodge the thumb from between his lips. Andy gratefully moved his hand away and flexed his sore arm. He felt better with some freedom of movement, but he was still just as horny as ever.

He waited again, listening for telltale sounds of interrupted breathing from anywhere in the room, then reached back beneath the sheet and the blanket and cautiously pulled down his own underpants – just to his knees at first, then all the way down over his feet, being careful the whole time not to disturb the little boy wrapped around him. He paused once more after that, making sure that everything was still quiet and secure before continuing. His bare boner was pressed up tight against Fernandito, and he could feel it beginning to leak against the little boy's belly.

With the same cautious, slow-motion technique as before, Andy went ahead and started pulling down Fernandito's underpants, not managing very well until the little boy helped out by rolling slightly backwards and lifting his hips. Apparently he was still only half asleep and at least vaguely aware of being undressed. Andy, proceeding with greater confidence now, quickly finished the job. He got Fernandito's underpants off with an eager yank and hugged the little boy back against him. Fernandito snuggled happily into his former position, throwing his top leg over Andy's hip to press himself as tightly

as possible against the older boy's hard, slippery penis.

Andy was in no hurry to finish. He had all night to enjoy himself, and he wanted to start by spending a good long time cuddling naked with his little boyfriend. He had his hand on Fernandito's butt, keeping the boy's warm, soft body right up against him. Later, if everything went according to plan, Andy intended to treat himself to some real sex, like maybe rubbing off against Fernandito's belly. He would use his own underpants to catch the mess, he figured, and then maybe jerk off again after that, at least once more before morning. Then it would be time to put Fernandito's underpants back on, as well as his own (soggy or not), and to grab an hour or two of sleep.

But that was for later, and Andy was willing to wait. Take it slow and easy, he kept telling himself, slow and easy all night long.

18

Andy couldn't stop thinking about the night before. Busting a nut against Fernandito's belly had been awesome – messy, but definitely awesome. As always, though, it had done more to increase Andy's appetite than to satisfy it.

He was sitting at home thinking about it when he heard the Sunday newspaper thud against the front door. Instantly, Andy jumped from the couch and raced outside to catch Matthew, forgetting momentarily that his friend was supposed to be in Peoria. The paperboy he found outside on the sidewalk was a stranger. Andy yelled for him to stop. The other kid turned back with an exasperated scowl. “I won't hit your stupid door no more,” he grumbled. “Sorry.”

“I don't care about that,” Andy said. He caught up with the other boy and looked him over. “Where are you from, man?”

“I live on Mulberry,” the boy told him. He was only ten or eleven years old, still young enough to be vaguely intimidated by an older teenager like Andy. “Why? Did I do somethin' wrong or what?”

“No, moron, I just want to know about Matt.”

“Matt who?”

“Matt McCann! You know, the regular paperboy. Where the fuck has he been all week?”

“You mean the other kid from before?”

“Jesus, man, are you retarded or something?”

The new boy scowled again and mumbled, “I think he went to jail or some place like that, I don't know.”

“To jail! What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I don't know nothin' more about it,” the new boy said. He turned away to continue his route. “This is my fuckin' job now, that's all I know.”

Andy stood in the middle of the sidewalk without moving. He was sure that there must have been some sort of confusion or mistake. There was no way Matthew could have been arrested or sent to jail. Hoping to find an answer, Andy took off running in the other direction, straight to Matthew's house.

He pounded on the front door for nearly a minute without getting an answer. He tried the back door next, then even stopped at Matthew's bedroom window to try for a peek inside. But everything was locked and dark and silent. The house, obviously, was empty. Andy finally gave up and started back home, figuring that Matthew and his mother were in Peoria after all, and that the new paperboy had been full of shit.

Andy's opinion changed on Monday, after school, when the same paperboy showed up and Matthew remained missing. Once again, Andy rushed to Matthew's house and pounded on the front door. This time, after only a few seconds, Matthew's mother answered. She was wearing a bath robe and smoking a cigarette and she smelled of beer. As soon as she saw Andy, she muttered, "He ain't home," and started to shut the door. Andy blocked it with his foot. "I came to see Matt," he said quickly. "I haven't seen him since...."

"I told you he ain't home," the woman interrupted. "Are you deaf?"

"No, but... I mean, where is he? Did he stay in Peoria or something?"

The woman paused for an impatient drag on her cigarette.

"I'll tell you where he is," she finally said. "That little brat got himself kicked out of school and now he's in the Davis Home, right where he belongs."

"Was he fighting again?"

"He was trying to sell pot," the woman said with a dry, contemptuous laugh. "And now he's out of my hair for six weeks, thank God."

"They sent him away for six weeks?"

"Listen, honey, I don't have time for this crap right now."

"Sorry, but I was just...."

"I'm busy," the woman muttered again, shutting the door in Andy's face. The boy turned slowly and wandered down the steps of the porch. He could hardly believe the news about Matthew – and yet, there really was nothing surprising about it. Matthew had been begging for trouble since the beginning of school, and now he had it, big time. He must have been caught trying to sell his three joints of marijuana, the ones given to him by Andy, who couldn't help feeling a little guilty about it. But just a little. Matthew wasn't stupid, and he wasn't a baby; he should have known better. Getting caught was an asshole thing to do.

As the day went on, Matthew's absence kept hitting Andy harder and harder, almost as if the other boy had been killed in some kind of sudden accident. The loss, for whatever reason, struck Andy as dreadful and permanent, leaving him lonely and depressed, without his best friend. At one point, thinking again about the marijuana, he was hit with a moment of fear, concerned that Matthew might have said something stupid to the cops about Red. But probably not. Everything had seemed OK at the shop on Friday, no different from any other day.

A few hours later, when Andy was getting ready for bed, he decided to roll himself a joint from his own tiny stash of weed, desperate for something to ease his sadness and his anxiety. He used a book of matches from the kitchen to light up, sitting in front of his opened window to ventilate the smoke and the smell. Just two or three hits were enough to bring on the good feeling inside his head. It was there at the window, while he was gazing into the darkness toward Pine Street, that Andy suddenly remembered Matthew's fish. Out of nowhere, it occurred to him that the fish would have no one to feed them or take care of them while Matthew was away. Andy knew, without any question, that Matthew's mother would ignore them and let them die; he knew that when Matthew got back, all of his tetras and loaches and hatchet fish would be dead. Andy couldn't explain it, but the thought of Matthew's dead fish brought the whole terrible day into sudden focus, and he found himself crying there in his bedroom, in front of his window, staring out at the quiet, lonely darkness.

It took a couple of days before Andy was able to snap out of his funk about Matthew, finally consoling himself that it was only temporary, that Matthew would be back in a few weeks, that it was no big deal.

By the end of the week, after spending time with Timmy and Manny and his other friends at school, Andy's feeling of sadness had entirely evaporated, and he was back to work at Red Dog Comix with his old energy and enthusiasm.

Figuring that he'd be in and out quickly with the bag for Badger, Andy left his bicycle in front of the shop and hurried inside. (Manny, apparently, had once again come and gone before Andy's arrival, always one step ahead because of his earlier bus schedule after school.) Red was busy with several customers when Andy came in, so the boy went upstairs on his own to fetch the bag. He rushed up the steps and through the living room without slowing down, but then came to an abrupt halt outside the bedroom door, which, for some reason, was shut and locked. Andy was still jiggling the handle when he heard muffled voices and laughter from the other side. He backed off quickly, confused by this unexpected obstacle. Just a few seconds later, the door opened and one of the twins came out in his underwear, followed closely by his brother. "Shit," the first one hissed, "it's just Damon, man!"

"Fuck, man, we thought you was Red," the other boy said. Both of them had recently gotten their hair cut, with the sharp stripes along the sides and the square wedges on top freshly shaved and sculpted.

"I need the bag for Badger," Andy told them, still not sure what was happening. The twins moved away from the door to let him through. Andy hurried past them into the bedroom, where he found another boy hastily putting on his pants. It was Jason, the kid who had been hanging around the week before, back again for another visit. Andy didn't even stop to say hello, just grabbed the bag from beside the bed and went back to the living room. The twins took one look at him and started laughing. "Yo, this boy be buggin' out," Deacon said. "Look at his face!"

"Shut up," Andy muttered, "I'm in a hurry, that's all."

"No shit, man, a big fuckin' hurry!"

"I need to make this delivery, asshole."

"You ought to see your face, Damon," Snickers said, still laughing. He had wandered across the room and was putting one of the sex videos into the VCR. "It's pretty damn funny, man, no shit."

Andy gave both of them the finger and headed for the door. Snickers called him back. "Yo, man, yo," he shouted, "why ain't you been to none of Badger's parties yet?"

"I haven't had time," Andy shrugged. "No special reason."

"Don't be a pussy, man," Deacon said. He was sparring playfully with Jason, who had just come out of the bedroom, dancing around him with soft hooks and jabs. Snickers, across the room, had settled himself onto the couch to enjoy his video. "You definitely need to come," he told Andy, "don't forget."

"Is there a party tomorrow?"

"Fuck yes, man, every week."

"OK, then, I'll be there," Andy promised. "What time?"

"Whenever," Snickers mumbled, staring at the TV. "It don't make no difference."

"I'll be there," Andy said again. He took one more glance at Deacon and Jason, who were starting to grab at each other and wrestle, and then he turned away quickly and left the room. Halfway down the steps, he heard someone lock the door behind him.

In the shop, Red was still busy with the rush of after-school business. Andy paused just long enough to make eye contact with him before leaving on his delivery. When he got back, the last customer of the day had just left and Red was in the process of straightening the messy shelves. Taking time out, Red counted the money and gave Andy his usual twenty, then handed him a free comic book as a bonus. "It's the new *Dreadstar*," he said. "That's your favorite one, right?"

"I forgot all about it," Andy smiled. "It seems like a million years ago when I got the last issue."

"Nope," Red smiled back, "just a few weeks." He pointed toward the stairs. "Did you see Jason and

the twins before?”

“Yeah, they were up there.”

“I didn't get a chance to warn you.”

“I know,” Andy said uncomfortably, “it's all right.” “Snickers told me about it,” Red continued, watching the boy carefully. “He said you found them in the bedroom. -Is that what happened, Andrew?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Did it bother you?”

“No, not really.”

Red lowered his voice slightly and said, “The twins like to have fun, that's all. And so does Jason. You know all about that stuff, right?”

“Sort of, I guess,” Andy said. “But really, I already told you, it's OK.”

Red nodded slowly, still staring at the boy. “Your eyes are a strange color,” he suddenly remarked. “Are they green or brown?”

“I always say they're brown.”

“But not quite,” the man said, taking hold of the boy's head between both hands. “You're really somethin' to look at, man, you know that?”

“I think I'm ugly,” Andy murmured in response, exaggerating out of nervousness and embarrassment. “My nose is all pushed up... and I think my mouth looks funny.”

“Jesus Christ,” Red laughed, “give me a break!”

“I'm serious.”

“Fine,” Red laughed again, “whatever you say.” He leaned forward and gave Andy a kiss on the forehead. “Are you in a hurry to get home?”

“I don't know,” Andy mumbled. “Why?”

“I thought maybe you'd like to stick around for a while.”

“For what?”

“You could come upstairs,” Red proposed cautiously, massaging the boy's temples with his thumbs. “We could have some fun together.”

Andy hesitated, then backed away and said, “No, sorry, not today, sorry, I can't.”

“Hey, no problem,” Red said quickly in a loud, cheerful voice. “Forget about it.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Maybe some other time.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Andy said. He spun away without saying goodbye and raced back outside to his bike. He hadn't gone more than a couple of blocks before he started questioning his decision. Maybe he should have accepted Red's offer and gone upstairs to his apartment. What could have happened? Red was a nice guy and probably just wanted to mess around a little and jerk off, the same way Andy himself enjoyed screwing around with Matthew and Fernandito. But it was too late now. Andy couldn't imagine returning to the shop without looking like a total idiot.

Before going home, the boy spent a few minutes on Pine Street cruising back and forth in front of Matthew's house, lingering there like someone at the grave of a dead friend. He wanted to stop and ask about Matthew's fish, maybe even offer to take care of them from day to day, but after remembering his last miserable encounter with Matthew's mother, he finally decided to keep his distance and let Matthew's fish take care of themselves.

Later, as dinner was ending, Andy told his parents about the party at Badger's house, letting them know that it was only a few blocks away and that he would be there with friends from school – once again manipulating the facts to suit his own needs. His mother and father quickly gave their permission, having

no reason to distrust him or to suspect his story; he was a good kid, after all, almost never getting into trouble at home or at school. His father did tell him to be back by midnight, and not one minute later, but then that was the end of it, and Andy was free after that to relax and to celebrate in his own room, alone with the last of his weed.

He smoked the joint, as before, in front of the opened window, depending on the fresh night breeze to ventilate the sweet, illicit aroma from his room. He started wondering, sitting there, what he should wear to the party. All he knew, so far, was that it had to be something good, because he definitely needed to look cool. Definitely, totally cool.

19

It had been dark for nearly an hour when Andy finished lacing his shoes and took a final look at himself in the mirror. Besides his black Air Jordans, he was wearing his best blue-and-orange Chicago Bears cap and a matching outfit of white sweatpants and white hooded sweatshirt, perfectly snow-white from top to bottom. He appeared almost fluorescent, glowing like a punk angel in snowy fleece. It was a good look. An excellent look. Andy rewarded his own reflection with a smug little squint-eyed grin, fully satisfied and ready to go .

On his bike, it took no more than a minute to cover the four blocks to Badger's house. Even from the street, Andy could hear the music booming from inside, thumping and thudding like a gigantic drum in the earth. There were cars filling the driveway and several more lined up along the curb in front of the house. The yard was just as cluttered with bicycles and skateboards. Andy walked his own bike into the yard and left it there right next to the porch. He paused to straighten his cap and to adjust the hood on the back of his sweatshirt, then bounded up the steps and gave the front door several loud whacks with his fist. The young man who answered the door took a long look at Andy before rushing off to fetch Badger, who finally OK'd the boy and brought him inside. "Fuck, man, it's the shrimp," he said to Andy. "What's up, little bro?"

Andy smiled nervously and glanced around the room. "Are Snix and Deacon here?"

"Somewhere, man, I don't know," Badger shouted over the music. He nudged Andy towards the kitchen. "Go on, shrimp, get a drink, chill out."

Andy nodded compliantly and went strolling across the living room, which was crowded with at least fifteen or twenty men and boys and young women, some of them dancing, some of them just standing or sitting around with drinks and snacks and lit joints. As Andy crossed the room, several heads turned his way, both male and female, prompting Andy to walk just a little bit slower, just enough slower to give everyone a better look at him.

In the kitchen, the scene was much the same, with a group of mostly younger men and boys gathered around a keg of beer and shouting to be heard over the pounding rhythms of N.W.A. And Public Enemy and Das Efx. The twins were huddled at the table with two middle-aged black guys wearing silk shirts and too many gold chains. The four of them were just reaching some sort of agreement when Andy showed up. Snickers, who saw Andy first, gestured for him to wait near the keg, then pointed him out special to the men at the table. Once again, Andy found himself being ogled and appraised. After a moment, Snickers and Deacon both got up from the table and quickly joined Andy at the keg. "Yo, nature boy," Snickers said, "glad you made it, man."

“You're in luck, Damon,” Deacon added, grinning at Andy. Both he and his brother were bouncing on their toes with nervous excitement. “We got a sweet offer for you, man, I ain't lyin'.”

“What kind of offer?”

“See them guys over there?”

“Yeah, big deal.”

“Them two niggas is real hot for your vanilla ass,” Deacon said, yelling directly into Andy's ear. “You know what I'm sayin', man?”

Andy nodded, waiting to hear more. Snickers leaned in to his other ear and said, “We could all make us some stupid easy cash tonight, nature boy. So are you in or out?”

When Andy still hesitated, Deacon shook him by the arm and shouted, “Make up your mind, motherfucker! Them niggas is waitin' to leave!”

“Where to?”

“Back to their hotel, chump... over to the Sheraton.”

“To their hotel?”

“Fuck yes, man, we been there before,” Snickers said. “It's hype there, man, no shit!”

This was more than Andy was prepared to handle. Whatever might happen at Badger's party, in Badger's house, was all right; but going to a hotel outside of town with a couple of strangers seemed not only risky but stupid, totally brain-dead stupid. “No way, forget it,” Andy finally decided, “I don't feel like it.”

“You two fuckers is wack,” Deacon said with a disgusted flick of his hand. Andy, at first, didn't know who the other “fucker” was besides himself, but then glanced over his shoulder and realized that Jason was standing slightly behind him. Apparently, to judge from Deacon's comment, Jason had already received and declined the same offer. The twins, wasting no time, reported back to the two men at the table and then disappeared with them out the back door. Andy, not sure what to do without them, stepped back next to Jason. “Are they coming back or what?”

“Don't know,” Jason said, shrugging and making a goofy, perplexed face. He seemed every bit as uncomfortable and out of place as Andy. They were about the same size, he and Andy, but Jason had a leaner, lankier look about him, with slouchy shoulders and gangly arms. Andy didn't know it, but Jason's nickname among the other freshmen at Sandburg High was “E.T.” because of his long neck and narrow face and big saucer eyes. He had dark blond hair, almost brown, and his ill-fitting clothes added to the gangly scarecrow look of him: navy-blue trousers that appeared to be from an old parochial school uniform and which were both too short and too tight, and a plain orange button-down shirt with the tails carelessly tucked half-in and half-out of his pants.

Eventually, since they were already standing there at the keg, both boys decided to drink a few beers to get themselves into the party mood. Andy had never much cared for the taste of beer, but he managed to chug three plastic cups of it before the gassiness of it slowed him down and then stopped him altogether with a sudden, enormous belch. Jason let out a belch of his own at nearly the same time, which led inevitably to a belching contest between the two of them, which also led to the chugging of more and more beer. Jason, even more than Andy, seemed deliriously amused by the whole process. He had a way of hunching forward and squirming whenever he laughed, like someone being tickled in the ribs, that made Andy laugh along with him every time.

After five or six beers, both of the boys were starting to feel and act decidedly drunk. By this time, several of the other boys and young men had also gathered around the keg, most of them drawn by the unfamiliar little punk in the Bears cap and the snow-white sweats. Andy was vividly aware, even drunk, of the attention focused on him, and it made him feel cocky and hyper and eager for more of the sloppy,

giddy high that he was getting from the beer. He filled his cup once more and started guzzling it, spilling some of it down his chin. Somebody beside him said, "Careful, loverboy, you're getting all messy."

Andy looked at the person talking to him. It was a man with glasses and a little gray mustache and a dark, tropical suntan, like someone who had just returned from a vacation in Florida or Hawaii. Andy wiped his chin and smiled. "I'm not drunk," he shouted to the man. "Really, I'm not drunk at all."

"Oh, I can see that, absolutely," the man said, laughing. He had his hand on Andy's shoulder and was leaning against him as they talked. "You seem just right to me, beautiful."

"I am, no doubt."

"Are you having a good time?"

"Fuckin' right I am!"

The man put his arm all the way around Andy's shoulders.

"What about your friend here? How's he doing?"

Andy glanced at Jason, who looked more like a disheveled scarecrow than ever. "He's OK, I guess. We're both OK, man, no fuckin' problem!"

"My name is William, by the way," the man said, putting his mouth nearly against Andy's ear. "What should I call you and your friend?"

Andy, after pausing for another gulp of beer, introduced himself and Jason to the man, then concluded with a long, loud belch. "Sorry, couldn't help it," he giggled, making Jason laugh at the same time.

William smiled indulgently at the two youngsters and moved himself between them, keeping one arm around Andy's shoulders. "Would you boys like to go upstairs?"

"Upstairs for what?"

"For whatever you'd like," William said. "I'm not fussy, dear."

Andy, after chickening out on Red the day before, wasn't about to chicken out again. He craned his neck forward to look over at Jason. The boys nodded at each other, and then Andy said, "When do we go up?"

"Immediately if not sooner," the man shouted back, taking both boys by the arm and escorting them from the kitchen. He guided them upstairs to the main bedroom, then closed and locked the door behind them. "There we go," he smiled, "nice and private."

Andy still had the cup of beer in his hand. He drained it in two gulps and took a slow look around the room. "Maybe we shouldn't be in here," he said, finally able to talk without shouting. "This must be Badger's bedroom, right?"

William nudged him, and then Jason, toward the bed. "Go ahead, relax," he told them. "Believe me, there won't be any problems. I've known Badger since he was ten years old."

Andy and Jason sat on the king-size bed with their backs against the headboard, watching as William put a video into the VCR across the room. "I think you'll enjoy this," the man said. He pointed to the television screen as the tape started. "Do you recognize this young rascal here?"

"I don't think so," Andy mumbled. He glanced at Jason, who also shook his head and mumbled, "It's just some kid, I don't know." Both of them were droopy-eyed and barely able to focus. William let them watch a few more moments of the tape.

The young black boy in it was kneeling on a bed and playing with his hairless dick. "Do you recognize him yet?"

"Fuck," Andy said, breaking into a dopey grin, "it looks like Badger! Is that really him?"

"In the flesh," William replied happily. "He was lovely, wasn't he?"

"He had a little dick," Jason said in a soft, slurry voice. "He was only eleven, darling, be charitable."

“This shit is funny.”

“And wonderfully exciting,” William added. “Is anyone here getting a hard-on besides me?” He crossed to the bed and loosened the belt on his trousers. “Well? Anybody?”

“A little bit,” Jason nodded. He looked down at his pants. “It's starting to be.”

“What about you, Andy?”

“Mine is too, I guess.”

William poked Jason to make him scoot over, then sat next to him on the edge of the mattress to remove his own shoes. “Never put your dirty shoes on the bed,” he said over his shoulder to the boys behind him. “It's terribly impolite. Come on, children, off with them!”

The two boys obediently took off their shoes and tossed them overboard onto the floor. Jason wasn't wearing any socks, and his toenails were black around the edges with grime. Casually, as if by accident, he let his hand drop back to his lap and started moving it slowly between his legs. Andy took a glance at him and started doing the same thing to himself. William settled back against the headboard and smiled at the two of them. “That's what I like to see,” he said. “Are we enjoying our- selves?”

The boys nodded, both of them slouching lower and lower on the bed as they continued fondling themselves, almost flat on their backs by this time, keeping their heads just high enough to watch the video. William put his hand on Jason's thigh, giving it a squeeze through the navy-blue fabric. “Have you boys ever done this before... with each other?”

Andy and Jason glanced at the man and shook their heads. William seemed especially pleased. “Never? Well, my goodness, this is even better than I thought.” He gently pushed aside Jason's hand and took a feel for himself between the boy's legs. “Would you like to see each other's hard-ons?”

“Sure, whatever,” Jason said in the same slurry mumble as before. He looked at Andy, who looked back and nodded. William went ahead happily and unfastened Jason's trousers. “Let's see what we have here,” he said, pulling the trousers down to Jason's knees. “Hmm, no underwear,” he remarked, apparently disappointed. Andy, meanwhile, wasn't waiting for any help; he pushed down his own pants and underwear and then pulled his sweatshirt up and out of the way to provide a clear view of his erection. William smiled as the two boys took a long look at each other's meat. “You're both absolutely lovely,” he finally told them. “I'm very impressed. What a pretty thing this is,” he smiled, touching Jason's penis. “It's nice, isn't it, Andy?”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

“What about you, Jason? Do you like Andy's cock?”

“It's OK, yeah.”

William got up on his knees and reached across the bed. He gave Andy's underpants a light tug. “Take these all the way off for me, dear, if you wouldn't mind.”

“My underpants?”

“If you wouldn't mind,” William repeated. He tugged at them again. “I'd love to have them. I'll pay you for them, of course.”

“You want to buy my underpants?”

“It's a silly little hobby of mine,” the man confessed. “These white briefs are my favorites.”

Andy laughed quietly, too drunk and horny to argue. He took off his sweatpants and his underwear, then offered the white Jockeys to William. But the man waved them away. “Not yet, beautiful, not yet,” he smiled. “Add a little something to them first.”

“He wants you to cum in them,” Jason mumbled.

“I know, asshole,” Andy mumbled back, “I'm not an idiot.” “Actually,” William said, “I'd like both of you to cum in them.” He patted Jason on the leg. “Facing each other would probably be best, don't you

think?"

The boys nodded and rolled towards each other onto their sides. Andy paused to take off his cap, then put the underpants between himself and Jason on the mattress. William, still on his knees at the foot of the bed, watched them as they started masturbating together. "That's it, boys, take your time," he said softly, caressing their legs. "Do a good job of it for old Uncle William." He leaned forward to reach and caress their bare asses. "Make a nice juicy mess for me."

The boys, staring down at each other's dicks, eagerly obeyed.

It was ten minutes before midnight when Andy got home. His mother had already gone to bed, but his father was still in the living room, still in the big La-Z-Boy chair by the window. "Well," he said, "did you have fun?"

"It was OK," Andy said, desperately trying to look and sound as sober as possible. "I'm not late," he added hastily.

"No, you're not late," his father agreed. He sat forward and slapped his knees. "So... I guess it's time for bed."

Andy nodded quickly and headed across the room. But his father stopped him once more before he could get to the stairs. "We're going to see your grandparents tomorrow, don't forget."

"Yeah, that's right," Andy said. "OK, no problem."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Yeah, Dad, I'm fine."

"You had something to drink at the party, didn't you?"

Andy looked at his father without saying anything, then shrugged and lowered his eyes. "Maybe... I guess."

"What was it? Beer?"

"I guess so."

"I don't like that, Andy."

"I know... sorry."

"Your Uncle Ray was nothing but a drunk," Andy's father reminded him. "I don't like you messing around with that crap."

"I don't even like the taste of it," Andy assured him. "It was just... I mean, I just had a little bit."

"Go to bed," his father said. "But I'm serious, buddy, watch your step with that crap."

"I will, I promise," Andy murmured. He darted up the steps without another word, escaping before his father could call him back. He shut himself in his room and dropped heavily onto his bed to take off his shoes. The laces seemed like tangled spaghetti to his clumsy fingers and bleary eyes. Vaguely, he noticed that his throat was feeling scratchy and dry, and that his head was sore and hot, as if he had a fever – but he dismissed it all as simply the unpleasant aftereffects of too much cigarette smoke and too many beers.

With his shoes and socks finally off, the boy stood again to remove his sweatpants. It was only when he found himself without underwear that he abruptly recalled everything from earlier in the night – all the weird stuff in Badger's bedroom, from jerking off with Jason to getting paid by William, fifty bucks just for a pair of soggy, spermy underpants. Quickly, Andy reached into the pouch of his sweatshirt and pulled out the money, relieved that he hadn't lost it. He stood there staring at the crumpled bills in his hand, trying to concentrate, still wearing his cap and his white sweatshirt but nothing below the waist. He decided, at last, to put the fifty dollars with his other money from work, beneath the bed in his box of pictures.

Nearly losing his balance, he brought out the box and put it on the mattress. When he opened it, the first thing he saw was the picture of River Phoenix, the one that looked so much like Matthew. Andy picked it up and smiled at it. How much longer before Matthew's return? Three weeks? Four? Five? Andy couldn't remember. "Hurry back, spaz, I miss you," he whispered to the picture. Then he kissed it, just once, and put it away.

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For the next two days, Andy continued to dismiss his sore throat and his headaches as the symptoms of a lingering hangover, nothing more than his just punishment for being an asshole and drinking himself sick. But by Tuesday, it was clear to himself and to everyone around him that he was legitimately ill, so ill and weak that he could hardly get out of bed. His mother, Tuesday morning, took him to the clinic on Main Street, where he was eventually diagnosed with mononucleosis – sore throat, fever, swollen glands, a rash on his back, the whole thing. He returned home that afternoon and didn't leave the house again for two weeks.

His main concern, that first week, was getting in touch with Red. He managed it, finally; with a furtive phone call on Thursday afternoon. Red was already aware, through the twins, that Andy had been absent from school, and he sounded relieved to hear from the boy over the phone. "We've all been worried about you," he said. "How do you feel? You sound pretty lousy."

"I'm really sick," Andy croaked pitifully. "My glands are all swollen and shit."

"Don't worry about this Friday," Red told him. "Or next Friday, either. You just rest up and get well."

Andy thanked him quickly and said goodbye, hanging up before his mother could wander into the room and overhear the conversation. He spent the rest of that day back in his usual spot on the couch, doing nothing hour after hour but napping beneath his favorite old blanket, drinking lots of Seven-Up and staring drowsily at the TV.

At the end of that first week, on her way home from school, Cheryl Turner stopped by to deliver Andy's homework. There were batches of it from every class, more than enough to keep Andy busy for the entire weekend. The girl told him that she would be back on Monday to pick up his completed assignments. She seemed almost giddy with excitement to be in the same house with him, to be doing something for him like an actual girlfriend; even if the boy of her dreams was sick and croaky and pale, she didn't seem to mind, not at all.

Andy managed to get the homework finished by Monday, just in time for Cheryl Turner's return visit. She had a card with her this time, a big get-well card signed by all of Andy's friends from school. It had been Cheryl's idea, of course, which was a sweet and thoughtful thing for her to have done, Andy had to admit. As she was leaving, she hesitated in front of the couch, then leaned down impulsively and planted a kiss on Andy's cheek. It made Andy feel almost sorry that he didn't like girls.

On Wednesday, when Cheryl had promised to return with more homework, it was Timmy Jenco who showed up instead. He came strolling into the living room behind Andy's mother, who introduced him as "some nice boy from your school." Andy mumbled something like, "Yeah, no doubt, I know who it is," praying for his mother to leave. When they were finally alone, the boys relaxed and smiled and greeted each other with an exuberant high-five. "I thought Cheryl Turner was supposed to be here today," Andy said. "What the hell happened?"

“She's got a cold or something,” Timmy shrugged, glancing curiously around the room. “I guess you made her sick, Damon, what can I say.”

“Fuck you, man.”

“Hey, asshole, suck my dick.”

“Yeah, right, eat me,” Andy smiled, feeling happy and energized for the first time in ten days. “So who picked you to come over here?”

“Your home-room teacher asked Coach Zimmerman, and then he asked me,” Timmy said, roaming in his usual restless circles. He had his rose-tinted sunglasses on, plus his green-and-white Sandburg High School letter jacket. “So I sort of volunteered to be your slave, I guess.”

“What a chump.”

“No shit, Damon, you owe me big time.”

“Oh, right, like I'm real grateful for all this crap,” Andy said, gesturing toward the pile of fresh assignments on the coffee table. “So what about Friday?”

“What about it, man?”

“Are you coming back here or what?”

Timmy grinned at the other boy and said, “You pushy fucker! Why should I?”

“Because I'll kick your ass if you don't.”

“Listen to you, man, don't make me laugh,” Timmy said. “You look like shit, Damon, I'm serious.”

“I'm a lot better,” Andy replied, a little defensively. “I'll be back to school on Monday.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah... the doctor says I'm good enough to go back.”

“That's cool,” Timmy said. “So I guess I'll bring your stuff again on Friday... if you kiss my butt real nice.”

“Fuck you, jack.”

Timmy was chewing gum and blowing bubbles as he talked. “Come on, Damon, what's your best offer?”

“You really suck, man.”

“Thanks, asshole.”

“I already invited you to a party... like a million years ago,” Andy reminded the other boy. “You can come with me any Saturday.”

“That's right,” Timmy admitted, “I forgot.” He blew another bubble and wandered closer to the couch. “That might be decent.”

“It's definitely decent, believe me.”

“Is it OK if I bring my girlfriend?”

“I don't think so,” Andy quickly responded. “These parties are like, you know, real private.”

Timmy squatted in front of the couch and lowered his voice. “Do they have shit there? Like grass and beer and shit?”

“Everything,” Andy nodded, using the same low, conspiratorial tone. “You can do anything there, Jenco, it's totally bitchin'.”

“How do you know these guys?”

“They're friends of mine, that's all.”

“You're a fuckin' low-life, Damon, I swear.”

“Eat me, spaz.”

“Yeah, suck my giant dick,” Timmy snarled back, grinning. The boys talked for a few more minutes after that, and then Timmy hand-slapped his friend goodbye and headed back home on his bike. He

returned Friday, as planned, with Andy's final batch of make-up homework – and with more questions about the parties, obviously eager to attend one for himself. “Maybe we can go to the one next Saturday,” Andy finally proposed. “Or maybe the week after that. I don't know for sure. I'm not supposed to do much for a while.”

“Whenever,” Timmy shrugged nonchalantly, trying not to appear overly eager. “Except not next week,” he suddenly remembered. “That's homecoming, and me and Melissa are going to the dance.”

“The week after, then.”

“Whenever,” Timmy shrugged again. “Just let me know, that's all, don't forget.”

Three days later, with his bag stuffed full of books and folders, Andy headed back to school for the first time in two weeks. As soon as he stepped onto the bus, everyone started muttering about him as if he had returned miraculously from the dead. But no one looked more astonished or delighted than Manny, who actually rose half-out of his seat, like someone seeing a vision, when Andy appeared. He and Andy grabbed hands and slapped each other's shoulders in a boyishly clumsy show of affection; it seemed to Andy that Manny wanted to hug him and kiss him outright – if only they hadn't been on the bus, in front of the other kids. And Andy had to admit, he felt the same way.

Even after the bus started moving, Manny was still patting and poking at Andy's arm, still ecstatic about the return of his missing friend. “Where you been so long, Andy? Was you sick or what?”

“I had mono,” Andy told him. “I almost died, man, I'm serious.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean it. You should've seen me. My glands were all swollen and shit, like out to here,” Andy said, cupping his hands alongside his neck to illustrate. “It was awesome!”

“Are you all better now?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

“You look OK,” Manny said. “Just like before, it seems to me.”

“I can't exercise or run around or do shit like that for a couple more weeks,” Andy explained. “I have a note from my doctor... for gym class.”

“You can't do gym?”

“Not for a while.”

“That's not so bad,” Manny said, still looking at Andy and smiling. Andy was smiling back. He had never seen Manny so animated and happy. The boys didn't stop talking until they had finally arrived at school, when Manny gave Andy another timidly affectionate pat on the shoulder and disappeared down the hallway towards his home room. Andy went in the other direction, feeling almost like a stranger starting his first day at a new school. But the nervousness didn't last long: by lunchtime, Andy was actually enjoying himself, especially when he got the chance to rejoin his friends in the cafeteria and be the center of everyone's attention. Snickers and Deacon came quickly over to greet him, pounding and slapping playfully at his back and teasing him about being such a worthless, lazy-ass pussy. Andy took the opportunity, while the twins were there, to send a message to Red. “Tell him I can't come back this Friday,” he mumbled to Snickers, keeping his voice down. “I'm not supposed to be outside riding my bike around until next week.”

“What a puss,” Snickers mumbled back. “You be missin' all the baggin' and shit this week. Lots of groceries this time, man.”

“I can't help it,” Andy said, close enough to Snickers to smell the sweet coconut fragrance of his hair. “Just tell Red that I'll be back next week.”

“What a puss,” Snickers mumbled again. He and Deacon gave Andy a few last friendly punches, then ran back to their own table across the cafeteria.

About two hours later, Andy's long day ended in gym class, where his doctor's excuse kept him on the sidelines of every activity as a bored and lonely spectator. But he got his reward at the end of class when he was given the job of handing out towels to all of the other boys. Having been away for two weeks, Andy couldn't get enough of the naked teenaged bodies parading in front of him. He tried not to be too conspicuous about it, but it was difficult to keep his eyes from dropping constantly as each different boy approached. Most of them, of course, probably noticed and probably didn't care; all boys look and compare and appraise, and all of them happily conspire in the silent ritual of it.

Only one boy made a point of meeting and returning Andy's curious gaze: a sophomore named Frankie Bucciarelli whose dick was just stiff enough, for whatever reason, to be wagging prominently in front of him as he towel-buffed his ass. He saw Andy looking at it, so he buffed and shimmied a little more vigorously to get his dick wagging even better. Some of the other boys were also looking at him, but nobody said anything – nobody broke the macho locker room code of silence by laughing or pointing or acknowledging the aroused penis of another boy. Even so, everyone wanted to see it, and everyone was secretly excited by it. Frankie Bucciarelli knew it, and Andy knew it, and Timmy and Eric and Neil and all the others knew it; they all shared the same homo delight in boners and semen and sex, but everyone of them, by this age, had learned to hide it and to keep it secret.

When Andy got home later that afternoon, draggy and achy all over from fatigue, he immediately retreated to his room to take a nap before dinner. As he closed his eyes and dozed off, he once again saw Frankie Bucciarelli in front of him – only this time Andy was on his knees, and Frankie's big hard thing was in his mouth.

21

Andy was feeling much stronger and steadier by the end of the week. Even the weather seemed to be cooperating in his recovery; the rain and the chill of early October had given way to a warm and sunny Indian summer, with temperatures so comfortable on Friday that Andy was once again wearing his favorite white shorts and his Wayne's World T-shirt to school. At home that afternoon, he even managed to talk his mother into letting him go out for a while – but not before she had called the doctor for his official go-ahead. “He says it should be all right,” she informed Andy. “Just don't overdo it, that's all.”

“I won't overdo it, Mom, don't worry.”

“One hour, that's it,” she warned, giving the boy a kiss. “And don't work up a sweat, for heaven's sake.”

Andy agreed, once more, to take care of himself, then rushed outside to get his bicycle from the garage. He decided, after a few moments of aimless cruising, to ride downtown to Red Dog Comix, just to stop by and to say hello. When he got there, Red welcomed him back with a long, smothering hug. “I didn't expect to see you today, old buddy,” the man said. “The twins must've gotten your message wrong.”

“No, they were right,” Andy said. “I wasn't supposed to be here until next week.”

Red finally let him go. “Well, I'm glad you changed your mind.”

“But I can only stay for a few minutes,” Andy quickly added, afraid that Red might have misunderstood the purpose of his visit. “I mean, I don't have time to make a delivery or anything.”

“Hey, no problem... your friend Manny is covering for you.”

“Manny?”

“He's been handling your deliveries since you got sick,” Red nodded. The shop was empty, allowing him to converse freely with Andy. “He's a great kid, that Manny.”

“He never told me he was doing so much.”

“He's a quiet one, that's for sure.”

“Is he out now?”

“Yep,” Red said, glancing at the clock, “he won't be back for another twenty or thirty minutes.” The man pointed toward the steps. “But the twins are upstairs... if you're interested.”

“Maybe I'll go up,” Andy said, “just for a few minutes.”

“Are you sure you can't stay?”

“Yeah, I'm positive, sorry.”

“You're a tough kid to pin down,” Red said to the boy. “It would be nice to have you around more often.”

“I was at one of Badger's parties,” Andy pointed out. “But you weren't there.”

“I know, I know, I couldn't make it that night. I was out of town. It really pissed me off, believe me.”

“Maybe next time you'll be around.”

“Maybe next time,” the man agreed, smiling. “And when do you expect that to be?”

“I'm not sure,” Andy said softly. “Next week, I hope.”

“Not tomorrow?”

“I can't go out tomorrow night... not even to the homecoming dance. I'm still, like, recuperating and stuff.”

“Well, we wouldn't want you to get sick again,” Red conceded. “But maybe next Saturday we can all have some fun together, right?”

“Right,” Andy said, “maybe next Saturday.” He left Red in the shop and ran upstairs to the apartment. The twins were on the floor with all the bricks of marijuana piled around them. Deacon looked up at Andy and said, “Fuck, man, I thought you was Manny.”

“Or Jason,” Snickers added. “You ain't supposed to be here, nature boy.”

“I can't stay for very long.”

“Well shit, man, what good are you?”

“Fuck you.”

“What a punk,” Deacon grinned. He continued to bag and weigh the weed as he talked. “You stick around, man, and you be seein' some crazy wild shit in a little while.”

“Like what?”

Deacon pointed to Red's bedroom. “Check that out, man. Me and Snix already got everything set up.”

Andy, from where he was standing, could look through the opened doorway and see a video camera mounted on a tripod. The camera was aimed at the bed. “Is that for you guys?”

“That's for whoever feels like gettin' busy tonight,” Snickers said. “We be havin' ourselves a little party here, you know what I'm sayin'?”

“Forget it, Snix,” his brother mumbled, “this pussy ain't interested in our shit.”

“I'm interested,” Andy mumbled back. “You're a real asshole, Deacon, you know that?”

“You never do no shit with us,” Deacon insisted. “You always be buggin' out or turnin' pussy or some shit like that. Yo, Snix, ain't that right?”

“Yeah, that's about right.”

“You guys are totally full of shit.”

“So why was you dissin' us at Badger's party?”

“Like how?”

“Like not comin' with us,” Deacon said, pausing to look up from his tedious work. “Like hangin' out with Jason instead.”

“Come on, get serious.”

Deacon looked at his brother. “This motherfucker think we ain't serious, Snix. Don't that be pitiful?”

“Come on,” Andy said again, “me and Jason were just screwin' around, that's all. Why are you so pissed off?”

“We heard about you and Jason,” Snickers said. He reached up and hooked his finger beneath the leg of Andy's shorts. “Yo, man, you got any underwear on today?”

“What the fuck are...?”

“We hear you be goin' into the underwear business, nature boy.”

Andy laughed suddenly and shook his head. “You fuckers are nuts, man, no doubt.”

Snickers put his finger up higher into Andy's shorts to get at the underpants beneath. “You gonna be sellin' these here to some old queer later on?”

“Yeah, sure I am.”

“That shit is wack, man.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Deacon said, “them old fuckers is tired, man, nothin' but tired all over.”

“He gave me fifty bucks.”

“That's chump change, man. Me and Snix each got us a hundred from them niggas at the Sheraton.”

Snickers pinched at the crotch of Andy's underpants. “You be givin' this away too cheap, man, you understand what I'm sayin'?” He pulled out his hand and sniffed at the fingers. “Word up, man, this boy be smellin' funky!”

“Shut up,” Andy said, laughing again. “You're really an asshole.”

“You need to wash them balls of yours,” Snickers continued, also laughing now. “Here, Deac, smell this,” he said, holding out his hand to the other boy. Deacon sniffed his brother's fingers and pretended to faint backwards onto the floor. “Them balls is deadly,” he groaned, as if dazed by the fumes. “Hurry, Snix, open the window!”

“I'll see you fuck-heads later,” Andy said. He reluctantly left the twins in the living room and started back downstairs, stopping halfway when Jason suddenly came at him from the other direction. Jason had a friend with him, some blond freshman kid that Andy recognized vaguely from the hallways at school. All three boys paused there on the steps without knowing what to say, until finally Andy mumbled, “Later, Jason,” and kept going. Downstairs, he stopped quickly to say goodbye to Red before running outside to get his bike and hurry home.

Andy hadn't gone more than three blocks when he met Manny returning from his delivery to Badger's house. They skidded to a halt next to each other on the sidewalk. Manny shook his head in confusion. “I didn't think you was workin' today,” he said, looking at Andy with one of his big nervous smiles.

“I'm not, it's all right.”

“You wasn't lookin' for me?”

“No, I was just going home, that's all.”

“I been doin' your delivery for you,” Manny said. He started gnawing at his bottom lip and glancing skittishly up and down. “I didn't tell you before now.”

“I know.”

“I was afraid you'd get pissed at me maybe.”

“That's stupid, man.”

Manny shrugged and broke into another of his wide chipmunk grins. "So you isn't pissed at me then?"

"No," Andy said, "it was nice of you to help out. Don't be such a dummy."

"I got enough money to pay you back," Manny said. "After tonight for sure."

"That's cool."

"Monday I can give it to you maybe... on the bus."

"Whatever, man, there's no rush."

"Monday is good," Manny insisted. He stared at Andy for another moment, then rocked forward on his bike to start it moving. "I got to go," he said. "Red is waiting for me to do more work."

"Are you going to help the twins?"

"Something upstairs," Manny shrugged. "I don't know for sure."

"You'll definitely be helping the twins," Andy informed him.

"It's a boring job, man, but you'll get paid extra for it."

Manny apologized again for having to go, then leaned his weight onto the pedals and rode away up the street, back to the shop. Andy headed in the other direction. On his way home, he kept thinking about Manny upstairs in Red's apartment, upstairs with the twins and with Jason and with Jason's blond friend. And he kept thinking about all of them, later on, in Red's bedroom, maybe taking turns on the bed, pairing off in different combinations, one after the other, with the video camera aimed right at them, recording every moment of it.

22

Throughout the following week, Andy's biggest concern was figuring out some way to get himself to Badger's next party. After the last time, when his father had busted him for drinking, Andy couldn't bring himself to ask for permission outright; a direct request, and a direct refusal, would have ruined his chances altogether. For this occasion, he needed a more cunning strategy; he needed, more than anything else, a really convincing lie.

Meanwhile, true to his word, Manny showed up on Monday ready to pay back his loan. He slipped Andy the money while they were on the bus together, handing it over in three ten-dollar bills. Andy stashed it quickly into his knapsack. "Are you sure you can afford this, man? I mean, you don't really need to pay it back right now."

"It's no big problem," Manny said. "I made extra on Friday, just like you said."

"Did you get home late?"

"Not too late."

"So, like, how long did you stay?"

"Just for a while."

Andy looked at the boy beside him, wondering how to proceed. "Who else was there with you?"

"The twins," Manny said, "and Red."

"That's all?"

"And two other kids, I guess."

"So you just helped them clean the stuff? And then you went home?"

Manny was staring out the window to his left. "I stayed for a little, not long... maybe till about dark."

"You guys must've had a party," Andy said, trying to make it sound like a casual little joke. "Too bad I missed it."

Manny, still staring out the window, shook his head and smiled. "There wasn't no party," he said. "It wasn't nothing like that."

"So what happened?"

"We just did some extra work... and then I went home."

It was obvious to Andy that he wasn't going to learn anything from Manny. Whatever had happened in Red's apartment, in Red's bedroom, was still a mystery, and it was going to stay that way.

It was later that day when Andy started plotting various ways of getting to Badger's party, which represented his first chance in a month to go somewhere and to do something fun with a bunch of other boys. Since Badger's last party, with Jason and William, Andy had been trapped at home and at school with nothing to do except homework and chores, trudging through the same routine day after day after day.

Even his brief visit to Red's apartment had been nothing but a tease, nothing but a glimpse of all the wicked little pleasures he'd been missing.

The solution to his problem, although he didn't realize it at first, showed up on Friday, just a few minutes after he'd gotten back from his job at Red Dog. From the kitchen, where he was getting himself a drink of water, Andy heard someone knocking at the front door. There was something about the frantic intensity of the pounding that made Andy start thinking about Matthew even before he opened the door.

And sure enough, it was Matthew himself standing there on the front porch. "Fuck," Andy mumbled to him, "it's you."

"I just got back today," Matthew smiled cheerfully, as if he'd just returned from a pleasant few weeks at camp. "Did you miss me?"

"Fuck," Andy mumbled again, feeling embarrassed about having forgotten Matthew's homecoming. "What's up, you stupid little jag-off?"

"I just got home like ten minutes ago."

"And you're back to stay? I mean, is everything cool and shit?"

"I guess I'm back," Matthew shrugged. "I don't really give a shit, anyway." His spiky hair had been shaved down to a butch crew-cut, making his round head look like a fuzzy blond cue ball. He was wearing a new pair of blue jeans and a long-sleeved khaki shirt. "It ain't so bad at the Home, really. You get lots of good food there and stuff like that."

Andy had come out onto the front porch with the other boy. "You look different," he said to him. "Like maybe taller or something."

"It's probably my new clothes."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Did you get your cap back?"

Andy shook his head slowly, not sure what the other boy was talking about. "What cap? You mean my Bulls cap or what?"

"Yeah, of course! Didn't you get it?"

"No, moron, I didn't get anything."

"That bitch," Matthew said, apparently referring to his own mother. "I told her to make sure you got it. Right before I left. I told her to make sure."

"Forget about it, man."

"It must still be in my fuckin' room, I guess."

"You don't need to give it back, anyhow," Andy said. "You might as well keep the stupid thing."

Matthew started down the steps. "Come on," he proposed suddenly, "let's go see if it's still there."

Andy went inside to inform his parents of Matthew's return, then ran back out to catch up with his friend. The two of them ended up racing the short distance to Matthew's house, with Andy just barely beating out the younger boy. "That's no fair," Matthew protested. "Your legs are too fuckin' long!"

Andy had to sit on Matthew's front porch to catch his breath. He hadn't exercised in over a month, and it made his chest ache and his lungs burn to run so hard and so fast. "Fuck, man, I'm gonna die!"

"What's wrong with you?"

"I had mono," Andy said. "I haven't dressed for gym or done anything in a long time." He got to his feet and wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his gray sweatshirt. "I'm OK, man, let's go."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm OK," Andy assured the other boy. They went inside to Matthew's bedroom, where the aquarium was still set up on the table near the window, still with a few fish swimming in its dirty green water. "It needs to be cleaned," Matthew admitted before Andy could say anything. "My mom didn't take care of it very good."

Andy stepped closer to it and peered through the murky glass.

"I'm surprised there's anything alive in it at all."

"Some stuff died... but not everything."

"What about your loaches?"

"I can't find them," Matthew said. He tapped on the glass to rouse any missing inhabitants of the tank. "I think they're probably dead."

"That's too bad, man."

"Maybe I'll get some new ones for my birthday... if my mom feels like it."

"When's your birthday?"

"In November... on the third."

"Next week?"

"Yeah, right after Halloween," Matthew said. "I'll be thirteen, man... a real fuckin' teenager!"

"Cool," Andy smiled. "My birthday is in November, too... on the twenty-sixth."

"Awesome, man! You'll be like sixteen, right?"

"No, idiot... fifteen."

Matthew's gaze shifted abruptly to the floor as he spotted something near his bed. "There's your cap," he said, scurrying to pick it up and show it to Andy. "I knew it was here somewhere!" He put it on, then quickly took it off again to loosen the strap in back. "Fuckin' thing is too small."

Andy sat on the edge of the bed. "So what happened, spaz? How did you get caught?"

"It was them joints, is all. It was excellent, Andy, I swear to God, Everybody totally freaked!"

"You're such an idiot."

"I needed money for a new bike," Matthew said, shrugging nonchalantly. "But some asshole turned me in."

"Money for a new bike? From three stupid little joints? Jesus, Matt, you must be brain-damaged or something, I'm serious."

"Yep, that's what my mom always says."

"I didn't mean it like that, not for real," Andy said. "It's just... I mean, you should be more careful about shit, that's all."

They were only able to talk for a few more minutes before Andy had to get back home for dinner. It wasn't until the following morning, when desperation was setting in, that Andy thought of the simplest and the safest way of getting to Badger's party, a way that hadn't been available until twenty-four hours

earlier: pretending to spend the night at Matthew's house. "It's like a welcome-home thing," Andy explained vaguely to his parents. They were all sitting together at the kitchen table, eating breakfast. "And then I'll just stay there overnight."

"I suppose it's all right," his mother said, glancing at her husband. "Don't you think so?"

"It's OK, sure," Andy's father mumbled. He was studying the football scores in the newspaper, barely listening to the discussion. "He's not a baby."

Andy stayed at the table long enough to finish his breakfast, then rushed to Matthew's house to tidy up a final detail of his plan. Matthew was cleaning the aquarium in his bedroom when Andy joined him. They talked briefly about other things, and then Andy quickly explained the situation surrounding Badger's party. "So just be careful not to go around my house tonight," he told Matthew in conclusion. "I don't want my parents to see you without me."

"I won't, don't worry," Matthew promised. He had his arm in the water up to his elbow in order to adjust one of the big rocks on the bottom of the tank. "Anyway, why ain't I invited to your stupid party?"

"It's real private, Matt," Andy told him. "It's only for workers and customers and shit like that."

"Do you smoke weed and stuff there?"

"Sure, lots of stuff. I got really wasted on beer last time."

"What about sex stuff?"

"What about it?"

"Is there fucking and stuff like that?"

"Sure," Andy said. "Me and some girl went up to Badger's bedroom and did shit together."

Matthew still had his hand in the water, fiddling with the rocks and plants as he listened to Andy's story. "Did you fuck her all the way?"

"Yeah," Andy said, "and she wasn't even a girl, really, she was more like a grown-up lady, and she made me take off my pants and underwear and everything so that she could see my dick before we did it."

He paused for a breath, excited by his own phony tale. "I spermed like crazy, man, it was excellent."

"That's awesome," Matthew agreed. He pulled his hand from the aquarium and shook the water onto the floor. "That's what I'll be doin' tonight, man, is fuckin' my girlfriend."

"Yeah, right."

"No, Andy, I'm serious," Matthew said. "I've got a date with Nancy. I was just kiddin' before about goin' to your party."

"You've got a real date?"

"Fuckin' right! Nancy and me is gonna be here tonight after my mom leaves."

"She's going to be *here*? You mean, like, alone... like when I was here?"

"Yeah... and this time we're gonna fuck for real," Matthew guaranteed. "I can't wait!"

"Thrilling."

Matthew finished drying his hand by wiping it on his jeans.

"I can do real fucking now," he reminded Andy. "Remember?"

"Yeah, of course I remember."

"Look," Matthew said, unfastening his pants, "see how much hair I've got now." He glanced at the door to make sure it was safe, then opened his jeans and stretched down his underpants to show off his pubic hair. "See it?"

"Yeah, no doubt."

"It's not as much as yours... but there's a lot more than before, right?"

Andy nodded, staring at the frizzy hair. "Yeah, there's more for sure."

"And my dick is getting bigger, too."

“Is it?”

“Yeah, can't you tell? Look at it.”

“I guess so,” Andy shrugged. “Probably a little bit.”

“You can tell better when it's a boner,” Matthew said. He closed his pants and pulled up the zipper. “Fuck, man, I can't wait until tonight!”

Andy didn't want to hear any more about Matthew's date. He spent another couple of minutes in the bedroom, and then he mumbled something about needing to do his chores at home and he went back outside. But he didn't go home – not for a while, at least. He spent almost an hour roaming the neighborhood and thinking, just thinking about all the people in his life who seemed to be drifting farther and farther away from him. He had expected Matthew, for one, to be disappointed and envious, not preoccupied with his stupid-ass girlfriend. And what about Manny? What had he been doing with Jason and the twins when Andy wasn't around? It seemed to Andy that nobody was interested in him, that nobody cared about him anymore. “Everybody hates me,” he mumbled to himself. But then he had to smile, because he knew it wasn't true. He was just being a jerk, feeling sorry for himself. Besides, he had Badger's party to look forward to, and he still needed to call Timmy Jenco. He didn't have time for any more self-pity crap. At least, not right now.

23

Over the phone, Timmy agreed to be at Badger's house by eight o'clock. He was getting a ride from his older brother Robert, but he didn't seem concerned one way or another about getting home. “Robert might come back for me after midnight,” he told Andy, “or else I can call a cab.”

“What about your parents? Aren't they going to be pissed off?”

Timmy laughed on the other end of the line. “Get real, Damon,” he finally said. “Why would they give a shit?”

“I don't know, I just thought....”

“They don't know if I'm home or not, man, believe me.”

“That's cool,” Andy said, but not with much conviction. He had never been to Timmy's house, but he knew that the Jencos lived on North Academy Street, which was commonly regarded as the wealthy section of town. Apparently, Timmy's parents were too busy with all of their friends and parties to worry about their own sons, who were free to come and go with no rules or restrictions of any kind. Andy didn't think he'd like being ignored by his parents that way. Not really ignored, not all the time.

As their conversation was ending, Timmy once again asked about bringing his girlfriend to the party. And, once again, Andy quickly rejected the idea. “Badger wouldn't like it at all,” he insisted. “I can only bring one guest at a time.”

“Are there usually lots of chicks around?”

“Sure, I guess so.”

“That's good,” Timmy said. “I like some pussy around when I'm gettin' wasted, man.”

“Yeah, no doubt.”

“Have you ever gotten laid at one of these parties?”

“Of course,” Andy said, then went on to tell Timmy the same story he'd already given to Matthew. “You can do anything there, man, I'm totally serious.”

He had to hang up a few moments later when his mother came into the room to vacuum the carpet. It

was already late in the afternoon by that time, late enough for Andy to start putting together his outfit for the party. He finally decided on a new pair of stone-washed denim overalls with a red Nike T-shirt and red bikini briefs underneath. Of course he would also be wearing his black Air Jordans, mandatory for every special occasion. Later, just before leaving the house, he finished his outfit with a bandanna, a red zebra-striped one worn in his favorite way, pirate style, over the top of his head.

Badger's house, when Andy arrived, was just as crowded and noisy as the last time, filled with people and music and so much smoke that Andy's eyes started burning before he got halfway across the living room. He went straight to the kitchen to start on the beer. He knew already, from having talked to Badger, that he could crash there for the night, so he wasn't worried about getting drunk. Still, he remembered his last hangover, as well as his long bout with mono, and he didn't want to drink himself sick. Just a few beers, maybe, and that would be all.

On his way through the living room, and now in the kitchen, Andy kept looking around for someone familiar. Finally, next to the keg, he found the twins. They were smoking weed, as usual, sharing the joint with five or six other boys and young men whom Andy recognized from his last visit. "I was hoping you fuckers would be here," Andy yelled to them. "Let me have a hit!"

"Yo, man, yo, it's the one and only nature boy hisself," Snickers yelled back. "You ready to party, my man?"

"Big time," Andy said, taking the joint. He glanced once more around the kitchen. "Where is everybody? I mean, like Jason and Red and the old underwear guy?"

Deacon, who was waiting for the joint, held his hand out limp-wristed and said, "You mean old Uncle William, sweetheart darling, that gump motherfucker? He ain't here, man, but who gives a fuck!"

"What about Jason? And Red?"

"Jason ain't comin' no more," Snickers said. "He got hisself into some serious deep shit last week, man, tryin' to boost some of Red's weed."

"Seriously?"

"Fuck yes, man, he had a fuckin' ounce in his pocket!"

"A fuckin' ounce," Deacon confirmed, nodding slowly as he took a hit from the joint. "Red just about kicked his ass, man. He was lookin' to dress that boy up real bad!"

"What about Jason's friend?"

Deacon passed the joint along. "That sorry asshole weren't nothin', man. I ain't lyin' to you, he couldn't even give good head!"

Andy laughed, more from surprise than anything else. He filled a cup of beer for himself, then asked again about Red. "He said he was going to be here this time. What happened?"

"He'll be here most likely," Snickers said. "It's early, man, just chill for a while." He and his brother were both dressed in their favorite colors of silver and black: caps, sweatshirts, sweatpants – every piece of their clothing was silver-and-black Raiders or White Sox gear. Snickers, drawing himself a beer right behind Andy, had the hood of his black sweatshirt up over his cap. "This here crowd tonight ain't exactly happenin'," he remarked to Andy. "Most of these fuckers is wack, man, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"They seem OK to me," Andy shrugged. He paused to wipe the beer from his top lip. "What's the problem?"

Snickers put his hand on Andy's shoulder and leaned in closer, tired of having to shout. "There ain't no action here, man. It's fuckin' boring."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"It's boring, man, believe me."

Deacon leaned in from the other side. “Why don't you never bring nobody over here, Damon? Don't you got no friends?”

“I did bring somebody, asshole,” Andy said, poking Deacon with his elbow. “Timmy Jenco is coming over tonight. He should be here in a few minutes.”

“Jenco? That preppy motherfucker?”

“He's not so bad.”

“No way, man!”

“I'm serious,” Andy said, “Jenco is a cool guy. He likes to party.”

The twins looked at each other with identical grins. “Yo, Snix, the preppy boy likes to party,” Deacon yelled to his brother. “You hear that?”

“Fuckin' right I heard it.”

“You believe it?”

“Not till I see it, man.”

“Jenco is OK,” Andy insisted once more. “You fuckers are idiots.”

“Hey, man, don't be buggin',” Snickers laughed. He raised his cup of beer. “Drink some more shit and be cool.”

“Yeah, man, be cool for a change,” Deacon said. “Get fucked up and have some fun.”

Andy shrugged and smiled and said, “OK, OK, whatever,” then finished his first beer and got himself another. About ten minutes later, Badger came into the kitchen with Timmy Jenco behind him. Andy started across the room to meet them halfway. “It's about time you got here,” he shouted to his friend. “I thought maybe you changed your mind.”

Badger pointed to Timmy. “You know this guy?” “Yeah,” Andy yelled back, “it's OK, I invited him.”

Badger nodded and headed back to the living room. Timmy strolled forward with his hands in the pockets of his pants. He was wearing khaki trousers with brown loafers and no socks, plus a brown leather jacket, a pink T-shirt, and a white Hard Rock Cafe baseball cap. “I had to wait for my brother,” he said to Andy. “He dropped me off on his way to another party.”

“I know,” Andy shouted back to him, “you already told me over the phone.” He led Timmy back to the keg where the twins were waiting. They had never met Timmy face to face, but of course they knew him by reputation. “Check it out, Snix,” Deacon said, “it's Richie Rich! He showed up for real.”

“I've seen you guys at school,” Timmy said. “Did Damon bring you here?”

Both twins laughed at the same time, poking at each other's shoulders to share the joke. “No, man, we didn't come here with Damon,” Snickers finally replied. “This here is like *our* fuckin' party, jack, you know what I'm sayin'?”

“Yeah, man,” Deacon added, “this ain't no fuckin' country club.”

Andy stepped between them and pulled Timmy toward the keg. “Go ahead, Jenco, have some beer.” He went ahead and refilled his own cup while he was there. Another joint had appeared by this time, a big one made of yellow rolling paper, and all four boys shared in the passing and the smoking of it as they drank their beers. Timmy, right from the start, spent all of his time ogling girls and making lewd comments about their asses and their tits. After a while, the twins moved closer to him and mumbled some sort of proposition into his ear. Timmy grinned and nodded and guzzled the rest of his beer, then got himself a refill. Andy didn't know what was happening until Snickers turned toward him and grabbed him by the arm. “We all be goin' upstairs,” he told Andy. “Jenco wants to check out some porno shit.”

Andy felt suddenly uneasy. “What kind of shit exactly?”

“Porno shit, man!”

“I know, but... I mean, Jenco likes girls,” Andy muttered, getting right next to Snickers' ear. “He's not

into any other stuff, I don't think.”

“I ain't retarded,” Snickers muttered back. “Do I fuckin' look retarded, man?”

“OK, forget it,” Andy relented, “let's go.” He decided, right then and there, to stop worrying and arguing and to start enjoying himself, to take full advantage of whatever might happen in the next few hours. With his beer cup in hand, he headed upstairs with Timmy and the twins. Deacon, before leaving the kitchen, had snatched a full half-gallon jug of vodka and a shot glass from the cupboard above the sink.

“This here is for our private party,” he hollered on their way up the steps. They went straight to Badger's bedroom, where a teenaged boy and girl were making out on the bed. Deacon waved his bottle at them and told them to get their motherfuckin' asses out. The other boy cussed back, but he was outnumbered four to one and ended up leaving without a fight. “Fuckers ought not be in here,” Deacon grumbled, slamming the door shut and locking it. “Right, Snix?”

“Fuckin' right, man, this room ain't for no chumps.”

“OK, come on,” Timmy said, “show me these big-deal videos of yours.” It was a relief to all of the boys to converse without shouting. Timmy sat on the foot of the bed and sipped at his cup of beer.

Snickers rummaged through the video cabinet until he found a tape that seemed appropriate, something just right for Timmy. “Here we go, man,” he grinned eagerly, “wait till you see this here.” He put it into the VCR and pushed the “play” button. Andy, watching anxiously from beside Timmy, breathed more easily and relaxed when the tape turned out to be safely hetero, just a boy and a girl, both about seventeen or eighteen years old, screwing on a bed. Timmy seemed pleased with it. He watched silently for a moment, then smiled and said, “This shit is pretty decent, man, I have to admit. That chick has huge tits!”

The twins went across the room to Badger's desk, where each of them spent several minutes rolling five or six fat joints, enough to keep everybody happy for the rest of the night. That was how all of the boys spent their next hour: finishing their beers from downstairs, smoking weed and watching sex videos.

There was also a half-empty bottle of bourbon on Badger's desk which the boys freely sampled while they smoked. Deacon still had the bottle of vodka as well, but he was saving it for something special. “We can play quarters with it,” he told the other boys. He was talking about a drinking game in which the players vie for a shot of liquor by flipping quarters (or any other available coins) at the glass; the first player to get his coin into the shot glass wins the drink.

“Definitely, man, that game is the dopest,” Snickers agreed, still peering out from inside the black hood of his sweatshirt. “You ever play that game, nature boy?”

“Nope,” Andy mumbled, already totally buzzed from the marijuana and the bourbon and the beer. “But I know how.”

“What about you, preppy?”

“Playing quarters?”

“Yeah, man, listen up!”

“Fuck yes,” Timmy said. His eyes were watery and bloodshot, and he was beginning to slur his words when he spoke. “I've played it a million times, fucker.”

“Word up, Jenco, you so bad,” Snickers said, making fun of him. “Ain't he totally bad, Deac?”

“The baddest motherfucker in town,” Deacon chuckled. He was lighting another joint – maybe their fourth, maybe their fifth, nobody was keeping track anymore – especially not Andy, who could barely make sense of what was happening around him through his fog of weed and booze. Snickers, by this time, had replaced the sex video with a regular movie (Andy noticed vaguely that it was “New Jack City”), which allowed the boys to concentrate on a pile of skin magazines from beneath Badger's bed. Deacon, while his brother was still across the room playing with the VCR, brought out the magazines and started passing them around. “Pussy, pussy, pussy,” he shouted cheerfully, “get it while it's hot!” He threw one of

the magazines onto Timmy's lap. "Check it out, Jenco, have yourself some fun."

"Most excellent," Timmy said, flipping through the pages. Next to him on the bed, Andy was also looking through one of the magazines, but only half-heartedly, not terribly interested in the pictures of adult men and women fucking each other. Timmy seemed to be having a much better time, constantly shifting his position and plucking at the crotch of his trousers to ease the pressure inside. The twins, obviously observing him and waiting for the proper moment, finally decided that it was time to get busy.

Deacon, after passing the joint to his brother, fetched the half-gallon bottle of vodka and the shot glass and settled himself onto the floor. "Game time," he announced, holding up the bottle for everyone to see. "Let's go, pussies, no more fuckin' around!"

Snickers joined his brother on the floor – but he kept his eyes on the television screen the whole time, seemingly more interested in the movie than in the game. Deacon swatted him on the arm and muttered, "Yo, Snix, yo, forget that fuckin' movie, man, you done seen it a million times!"

"I know, Deac, but it's pumpin', man, it's the best."

"Forget the fuckin' thing," Deacon said again. He waved impatiently to Timmy and Andy. "Yo, motherfuckers, get your asses over here!"

The two boys tossed aside their magazines and dragged themselves clumsily from the bed. They sat cross-legged on the floor to complete the circle, all four boys facing one another and surrounding the shot glass. Deacon filled the little glass with vodka, then held out a handful of quarters like a magician performing sleight of hand. "Take one, take one," he said, passing them out. "Time for some' serious business, man."

"Sounds good to me," Timmy said with a dopey grin. He turned his white cap backwards to get ready for action. "Who goes first?"

"We all shoot together, preppy boy," Snickers said, still glancing back and forth at the TV. "You know what the rules is, man?"

"We all shoot together," Timmy repeated with a shrug. "First one to get his quarter inside wins the drink." He looked across the circle at Andy. "Isn't that right?"

"I guess so," Andy said. "Don't ask me."

Deacon was flipping his quarter up and down in one hand and grinning at the other boys. "That's about half of it, man," he told them. "But we all be playin' strip quarters here tonight, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Definitely," Snickers said, "there ain't no other way to do it."

"Fuck that shit," Timmy muttered. "I never played strip quarters before."

Andy quickly said, "I'll do it, I don't care." He glanced at the twins, then back at Timmy. "Don't be such a pussy, Jenco."

"Check out nature boy," Snickers laughed, patting Andy on the back. "Now he be makin' some serious sense."

"Come on, Jenco," Andy said again, "don't be such a chicken-shit."

Timmy was much too drunk and stoned to keep arguing for long. He looked around at the other boys and started smiling. "You assholes are queer," he mumbled. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Fuck it, let's start," Deacon said, crouching a little lower to aim his quarter. The other three boys also lowered themselves into better aiming positions, and then all of them started shooting. After three or four attempts, Deacon was the first one to score. He picked up the shot glass and downed the vodka (after removing his quarter), and then he took off his cap. "We got us a long ways to go," he said. "I swear, man, we gonna be fuckin' wasted inside and out!"

Once again, the boys aimed and shot. Deacon scored for the second time, losing his shoes in the

process. (“Both shoes go together,” he explained to the others. “And socks go together, too, that's the rule.”) Snickers was the next one to score, and then Andy, who took off his bandanna to get started.

Snickers scored after that, and then finally Timmy. He seemed relieved to take off his leather jacket, which had become uncomfortably warm by this time. There were big circles of sweat under the arms of his pink T-shirt. “It's goddamn hot in here,” he grumbled, tossing back the shot of vodka. It made him wince as it burned its way toward his stomach. “Damn, that's nasty!”

“Get used to it, preppy,” Deacon chuckled. Even he and his brother seemed to be losing some of their usual control: Snickers spilled at least an ounce of vodka trying to refill the shot glass.

“Don't be movin' the motherfuckin' room,” he growled, causing the whole group to burst out laughing. It took them longer and longer each time after that to score a hit, but eventually all of them had lost their caps and their shoes and their socks, followed gradually by their various sweatshirts and T-shirts – which left the twins in their black sweatpants, Andy in his denim overalls, and Timmy in his khaki trousers – and all of them so drunk that they could barely flip their quarters, much less hit the shot glass. Andy, as it turned out, was the first one to lose his pants. “OK, Damon,” Timmy laughed, blinking slowly as he tried to focus, “take off the... take off those fuckin' things, man, go ahead.”

Andy got to his feet, nearly lost his balance, then managed to struggle out of his overalls. He still had on his red bikini briefs as he sat back down in the circle. Snickers reached over and snapped the briefs by the waistband. “Word up, Andy, these fuckers be sharp.”

“Sharp,” Deacon echoed groggily. He picked up the shot glass and held it next to Andy's mouth. “Here go, bro, you ain't had your drink yet,” he said. “Open up, man, open up.” Andy obeyed, and Deacon poured the vodka sloppily into his mouth, spilling at least half of it down Andy's chin. Deacon laughed at his own clumsiness and leaned forward to clean the mess, using his tongue to do it, licking first at Andy's chin and then at Andy's chest and stomach to remove every drop. Snickers nudged Andy from the other side and said, “Careful, nature boy, careful you don't be gettin' no boner.”

“Don't worry about my fuckin' boner,” Andy snarled back playfully. Deacon finished licking him on the stomach and sat up. It took a while for everyone to get back into the game. Finally, after several moments of futility, the twins somehow managed a rare double score, both of them hitting the shot glass at the same time. They were out of their pants quickly and obviously eager for the next round. “I'm gettin' a chub, man, I ain't lyin'!” Deacon said, up on his knees so that everyone could see the stretched-out front of his underpants. “Boned out like a motherfucker, man.”

“No shit,” Timmy mumbled, looking around at the other boys. “All you fuckers have boners, man.”

“You ain't lyin' about that,” Snickers said. He had already refilled the shot glass and was flipping his quarter at it, down on one hip to get the best possible angle. But it was Timmy, this time, who scored first. “All right, Jenco,” Andy yelled at him, “strip down, man, hurry up!”

Timmy leaned backwards and raised his knees in order to slip off his pants without standing up, but he got his left leg tangled about halfway through and collapsed helplessly onto his back. Andy and Snickers both moved quickly to finish the job for him, each of them taking one leg and tugging at it until they had the trousers all the way off. Deacon, at that point, leaned forward with the shot glass and poured the vodka into Timmy's mouth. Timmy choked and laughed and spit most of it back out. He was still on his back, wearing nothing but his white Jockey briefs and a thin gold chain around his neck. His freckly skin was nearly as white as his underpants, reminding Andy, as always, of sculpted marble. Even now, sprawled there helplessly on the floor, he looked muscular and strong, like a dazed, fallen wrestler.

Deacon once again refilled the shot glass. “Time to get bare-assed,” he announced. “Come on, fuckers, wake up and shoot!”

Timmy struggled upright and joined the others in trying to hit the glass. It seemed to take forever

before Snickers finally managed to score. "About fuckin' time," he grinned to the other boys watching him. He peeled off his underpants and tossed them aside. His dick was totally hard, pressed up tight against his belly and curved to the left like a slender chocolate banana. Andy could hardly believe what he was seeing. This wasn't like Matthew's little red boner, or even like Jason's; this was the real thing, at least as large as his own, with big healthy balls underneath holding lots and lots of ripe teenaged cum. "Check out this here hard-on," Snickers said, leaning back against his elbows and spreading his knees. "Fuckin' thing is wicked, man!"

"Game is over," Deacon suddenly declared. He drank his brother's vodka and then removed his own underpants. "That feels a whole lot better, man, no shit." He got up to fetch a joint from Badger's desk, then came back and knelt between Timmy and Andy, stumbling against Andy's shoulder in the process. "Sorry, man," he mumbled vaguely, already lighting the joint. His chocolate-banana boner was identical to his brother's. Andy, only about two or three feet away, was watching it twitch and twitch and twitch to the rhythm of Deacon's heartbeat. "Here," Deacon told him, "have a hit, nature boy."

Andy took the joint and filled his lungs with the hot, acrid smoke. He kept it for one more hit, then passed it to Snickers, who back-handed him on the arm and said, "Yo, Andy boy, why ain't you gettin' comfortable, man?"

"Like how?"

"Comfortable," Snickers said more loudly, pointing to his own naked body. "Like this here, man! See what I'm sayin'? Get comfortable!"

Andy, in his stupor, hadn't even realized that he was still wearing his underpants. But he was totally willing to take them off, no problem; he was eager to get comfortable, big-time comfortable, eager to finish what he and the twins had started at the lake two months earlier. He lifted his hips and stripped off his red bikinis, letting the other boys get their first look at his fully erect penis. Timmy responded with a boozy laugh as soon as he saw it. "Shit, Damon," he slurred slowly, "look at you, man! I can't believe... I can't believe you, man. Look at your fuckin' dick."

"Nature boy has hisself a good old chub," Deacon said. "Check it out, Snix."

Snickers was lazily smoking the joint as he stared at Andy's erection. "He's got hisself a good one, no shit."

Andy leaned back against his elbows, same as Snickers beside him, and spread his legs nice and wide to give everybody a better view. "This feels totally awesome," he grinned. "Come on, Jenco, let's see your stupid ugly pecker!"

"I have to piss," Timmy mumbled back. Conveniently for all of them, Badger's bedroom had its own private bath and toilet, which the boys had been using constantly throughout the entire evening. Andy had just recently emptied his bladder, so he stayed behind this time as Timmy got up and shuffled out. But the twins went with him, stumbling and laughing right along behind him into the bathroom. They stood on either side of him at the toilet. Andy, smoking the last of the joint, watched them through the doorway. Timmy started laughing as the twins pulled down his underpants to check out the goodies inside. "Fuck you, man," he told them, "I have to piss, I'm serious."

"Go ahead," Snickers said. He reached down and took hold of Timmy's penis, which was still soft enough to use easily for peeing. "Go ahead and piss, man, let's see it."

Timmy laughed again, then gazed down at himself to concentrate on the job. "This is fuckin' crazy," he kept mumbling as he began to urinate. "I've never... I've never done; I mean, this is crazy."

While his brother was holding Timmy's dick, Deacon pulled Timmy's underpants all the way down and started feeling him on the ass. Timmy glanced around briefly to see who was groping him, then looked back down at himself to finish peeing. Snickers, right at the end, started massaging Timmy's penis

to coax out the last few dribbles. “You about done, man? Is that all?”

“That’s all,” Timmy nodded. Finished at the toilet, he allowed himself to be escorted back into the bedroom. But his underpants stayed behind, crumpled in front of the toilet where Deacon had dropped them. All four boys were naked now as they reassembled on the floor in Badger’s bedroom. Timmy collapsed immediately onto his back – not passed out, but too drunk and stoned to move or to resist in any way as the twins started going at him for real, touching and fondling every bare inch of him. Andy, finished with the joint by now, scooted closer to the action. He had seen Timmy naked before dozens of times in gym class, but never like this, never sprawled out with his legs open and his arms flung back over his head, smiling stupidly as his dick got harder and harder. The twins were feeling him all over, glancing at each other and laughing while they did it. Snickers touched the little gold chain around Timmy’s neck. “Yo, preppy boy, your girlfriend give this to you?”

Timmy nodded and mumbled, “Yeah, Melissa got... Melissa gave it to me.”

Snickers ran his hand down from the gold chain to Timmy’s belly button. “You fuck her all the time, man?”

“Yeah, all the... all the time.”

“You like to fuck her?”

“Sure I like it,” Timmy said, still answering in a low, gravelly mumble. “I like to... to fuck her a lot.”

“He likes to fuck her,” Deacon nodded, grinning at his brother. “This boy here is a sex machine, man.”

“Check out these pubes,” Snickers said. He moved his hand down to Timmy’s pubic hair. “Fuckin’ stuff is red, man!” He glanced at Andy, who was still watching and waiting. “Yo, nature boy, yo, how you like your friend here?”

“He looks OK to me.”

“He’s havin’ hisself a stupid good time,” Snickers said. “Check out his dick, man.”

“No doubt,” Andy murmured, scooting a little closer, right up to Timmy’s side. “Nice fuckin’ boner, Jenco,” he said to his friend, laughing. Timmy had a full, straight-out erection by now: a thick stump of red meat against his stark white belly, with balls like two fuzzy red plums beneath. He looked up at Andy with a goofy grin and said, “Biggest fuckin’ boner you’ll ever see, Damon.”

“Don’t make me laugh, Jenco.”

“You’re an asshole, man.”

“Hey, eat me, moron.”

“Yeah, suck my dick,” Timmy muttered. Maybe he meant it as an insult, or maybe as a command, but either way it made the other three boys start laughing and tickling at him in a sudden flurry of excitement. Timmy had just enough energy left to poke and tickle back at them with both hands, which led to an even wilder bout of grabbing and laughing, with all the boys going after one another’s boners and asses as they rolled together onto the floor. Andy found himself grappling with Timmy, on top of him without knowing what to do next, suddenly naked on top of his best buddy from school, naked and rubbing boners with the most popular sophomore at Sandburg High. And then he could hear the twins shouting and laughing from behind him. “Nature boy gettin’ busy,” one of them said. “Go to it, man, do the nasty!”

Andy could feel and smell the sweatiness of Timmy’s body beneath him, and he started sliding himself against it, staring at Timmy staring at him. It didn’t seem possible that they were actually having sex together right there in Badger’s bedroom, right in the middle of the floor with Snickers and Deacon watching them. But it was true, it was definitely happening, and the absolute raunchy queerness of it made Andy totally crazy with excitement. He began humping faster against the other boy, boner against boner, getting everything deliciously slimy between them as he and Timmy both started oozing more and more of

their leaky pre-cum onto each other. Timmy seemed actually stunned by what was happening, staring at Andy's face and shivering like someone with a fever chill. The twins were still laughing and hollering at the two of them, telling Andy to have fun screwing his boyfriend, to do it harder, to bone Jenco for real. "Look at that white ass movin'," one of them said. "This nature boy be fuckin' like a rabbit."

"Bone him, man," the other one yelled. "Bone him up the ass!"

"Do it, chump!"

"Go ahead, Damon, stick it up his ass!"

Andy was willing to try, but he was too drunk and clumsy and inexperienced to manage with any skill. He wriggled himself a little lower and got his boner under Timmy's balls and started humping him like that, trying to find the actual hole of Timmy's ass, feeling for it with the tip of his penis. Timmy rolled his head to the side and bit his bottom lip, still submitting quietly to whatever Andy might do to him, even if it meant getting fucked like a girl. But it never got that far. As Andy humped awkwardly in search of his friend's butt hole, he lost control of himself and started ejaculating, raising himself so that he ended up doing it right onto Timmy's dick. He kept thinking, over and over as he did it, that he was sperming onto Timothy Jenco, shooting a load of cum all over his best friend from seventh-period gym class.

He rolled off after squeezing himself dry, then watched bleary-eyed as the twins moved in and took over. Timmy seemed helpless to react. He let the twins have him without a word of protest. Deacon, who obviously enjoyed using his tongue, went to work licking off the milky mess of Andy's semen from Timmy's balls and boner. Before long, the licking turned into sucking, and Timmy was getting himself a noisy, slurpy blowjob from Deacon Spinks. At the same time, Snickers quickly straddled Timmy's head and started masturbating. He lowered himself until he was actually sitting on Timmy's face, scooting his bare ass slowly back and forth across the other boy's nose and mouth. "Yo, motherfucker, lick it," he demanded in an urgent mumble. "Go ahead, man, lick my asshole for me!" Andy raised himself to watch as Timmy obediently started tonguing the crack of Snickers' butt. Snickers laughed and said, "That's it, preppy boy, get it nice and clean down there." He laughed again and squirmed his ass tighter against Timmy's face.

Andy dropped back to the floor and closed his eyes – just for a moment, just to rest and to regain his strength. But that was the last thing he did all night. He didn't open his eyes again until morning. For Andy, the party was over.

Sometime around dawn, Andy dragged himself from the floor to take a much-needed piss in the bathroom. When he returned, he paused long enough to survey the situation in Badger's bedroom. The twins, still naked, were asleep on the bed, but Timmy was nowhere in sight. All of his clothes had also disappeared. Maybe he had wandered back downstairs, or maybe he had gone home – Andy didn't know, and he was too tired and sick to care. His only interest now was sleep, lots of sleep. He staggered across the room and crawled into bed with the twins, pushing one of them aside to clear a space for himself on the mattress. He fell asleep again as soon as he closed his eyes.

It was sunny in the room when Andy awakened for the second time. Gradually, as his head cleared, he noticed the gentle pressure of someone's hand on his ass. He was stretched out on his belly, still totally nude, and it took him several moments to realize what was happening around him. "Holy fuck," he finally muttered, blinking at the bright sunlight, "it's morning."

"Time to get up, man," one of the twins told him. "You be wastin' the whole day."

"What time is it?"

"Fuck, I don't know, about nine o'clock."

"That's good," Andy murmured sleepily. There was still plenty of time for him to get home. He cleared his throat and yawned and became aware once again of the hand on his bare behind. He glanced

over his shoulder at the boy touching him. It was Deacon, also naked, lying on his side next to Andy and grinning slyly. “How you feelin' today, bra?”

“My fuckin' head hurts.”

“My fuckin' head hurts, too,” Deacon chuckled. “The one down here, man, on my dick,” he added. “You understand what I'm sayin'?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“We had us a dope fuckin' party last night, nature boy.”

“No doubt.”

“You remember everything we was doin'?”

“Sure, I guess so.”

Deacon kept squeezing and rubbing at the cheeks of Andy's butt. “You busted all over Jenco, man, I ain't lyin'. It was fuckin' wild, man, fuckin' wild.”

Andy stayed on his stomach, enjoying himself. “What happened to Timmy, anyway? Where is he?”

“I guess the fucker went home, I ain't sure.”

“After he spermed like a motherfucker,” Snickers added from somewhere beside the bed. “That preppy boy won't never be forgettin' last night, man, believe me.”

“That's the fuckin' truth,” Deacon laughed softly. He slipped his hand lower, down where he could play with Andy's testicles. “How's this feel, man? You gettin' hard?”

“A little bit, yeah,” Andy said, spreading his legs slightly. “It feels pretty good.”

“You got some hair on your balls, man.”

“Yeah,” Andy mumbled, “I know.” He brought one knee up even higher on the mattress, opening his legs as far as he could for the other boy's hand. Suddenly, Snickers said, “OK, Deac, I'm ready, man, get started.” Andy turned his head to see what was happening. A few feet away, Snickers was standing and holding a video camera, aiming it at the bed. “Smile, nature boy, you're in the movies,” he said to Andy. “This shit gonna be hype, man, word up.”

“You're taping this?”

“Fuckin' right,” Snickers laughed. “You ready to get busy?”

“What am I supposed to do?”

Deacon mumbled, “Just be cool about it, man, just bust a good nut for us.” He slid his hand underneath Andy from behind, up beneath Andy's dick. “Yeah, this boy definitely be ready, Snix. He's boned out wicked!”

“Get busy,” Snickers directed again. “I'm startin' this shit right now.” A faint hum came from the camera as he pressed one of its buttons. “Yo, start doin' some shit together! Make it good, man!”

Andy could feel Deacon moving closer to him on the mattress, getting himself into a more comfortable position – and then Andy caught his breath as Deacon's tongue started playing between the cheeks of his ass, like some kind of slippery little animal slithering its way up and down inside his crack, working itself in deeper and deeper until it was actually fluttering against his hole. Andy raised his butt to open himself wider, to let the tongue in deeper. From beside the bed, Snickers said, “Move away, Deac, let me see his ass better.” Deacon quickly pulled back to give his brother a clear shot. Andy also cooperated eagerly; he raised his rear end higher and reached back with one hand to spread his cheeks. “That's good, man,” Snickers told him, leaning in for a close-up. “Spread 'em just a little more, yeah, like that, yeah, that's a stupid excellent shot of your hole, man.”

“That looks fuckin' perfect,” Deacon agreed. He touched his finger to the fuzzy pink opening of Andy's rectum. “You got it, Snix? Can you see it good?”

“Definitely I got it. Now lick it some more, Deac, go ahead.” Deacon leaned back into the picture

and put his tongue right where his finger had been, then spent the next few minutes eating and licking inside Andy's butt. "You be rimmin' that boy raw," Snickers chuckled as he stood there recording. Andy, by this time, felt ready to explode, ready to fuck the mattress itself in order to find relief. "I need to sperm," he muttered over his shoulder to the other boys. "I totally need to sperm, I'm serious."

"Chill a minute, chill a minute," Snickers told him. "Let Deac finish hisself first." Andy didn't understand what Snickers was talking about until something warm and wet suddenly squirted against his legs. He looked back around at himself to see what had happened. There were gooey splashes of semen across both of his thighs and also on the sheet beside him. Snickers let out a delighted whoop of laughter. "Deac, man, you done shot a mile, motherfucker, I ain't lyin' to you!"

"Did you see that?"

"Fuckin' yes I saw it!"

"I shot clear across the fuckin' bed," Deacon laughed. He sat up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You done missed it, Damon! I busted violent, man, you shoulda seen it!"

"I need to sperm right now," Andy reminded them in a desperate mumble. "I'm not kidding."

"OK, chump, so turn over," Deacon said. He waited as Andy rolled onto his back. "Check out his boner, Snix. Get a good shot of it."

Snickers aimed the camera right at Andy's hard, red-raw penis and took a long, lingering close-up of it. Andy lifted it with his thumb to make it stand out better, to show it off nice and big for the camera. "How's that look?"

"Fuckin' nasty," Snickers grinned. "Now, like, play with your balls, man, yeah, that's it, slide 'em around with your hand, hold 'em up, hold 'em like that, yeah, definitely nasty."

Deacon got down on one elbow next to Andy's hip. "Yo, Snix, how you think we should finish this?"

"I think nature boy needs hisself a good blowjob," Snickers proposed, "you know what I'm sayin'?" He lowered the camera for a moment and looked at Andy. "What about it, man? You feel like gettin' head from Deac?"

"Sure, of course," Andy said. "What should I do?"

"Just be cool, man, and let me suck it," Deacon told him, gripping him by the dick. "But let me know when you be ready to bust."

"Make sure you bust for the camera," Snickers warned him. "Don't be wastin' it in Deac's mouth, you understand?"

"Yeah, whatever," Andy agreed. Then, like something from a dirty dream, his boner was suddenly in Deacon's mouth – his bare, erect penis was actually in the mouth of another boy. He had never imagined that anything could feel so good; it was warm and slippery and wonderfully wet, a thousand times better than jerking off. He could feel Deacon's tongue and teeth working on him, nibbling and licking and sucking at him, bringing him closer and closer to orgasm. It didn't take long to get him there all the way.

Andy reached down and touched the other boy's head, Deacon's head, so fine and handsome with its carefully sculpted kinky black hair, and so busy now bobbing and bobbing between Andy's legs. "I'm ready," Andy murmured to him. "Watch out, Deacon, I'm ready." He grabbed his own dick from the other boy's mouth and finished stroking himself to orgasm. Doing it in front of the twins was awesome enough; doing it like somebody in a real sex show, with a camera pointed right at him, made the whole thing even more wildly, sinfully exciting. Anyone watching the show would have seen a lean young bobcat-boy squirming naked on the bed, his mouth open, his knees up, squirming and shivering as he spurted all over his own belly.

"That was stupid perfect," Snickers told him. "No shit, Damon, you busted just perfect, man, good job." He moved in for a close-up of the spermy slop on Andy's stomach. "OK, Deac, go ahead and eat it

off.”

“Check it out,” Deacon smiled, “I be lickin' this fucker clean, man, just watch.” He rested his hand on Andy's thigh and leaned down to get started, lapping hungrily at the oozy puddle of fresh semen, scooping it up like melted ice cream with his tongue. Andy watched in silent amazement. Deacon paused and glanced at him and said, “You cummed a stupid big load, man.”

“You don't have to finish it all,” Andy told him considerately. “I mean, whatever, I don't care.”

“Don't be sweatin' it, man,” Snickers reassured him. “Deac there, he likes that shit, don't you, Deac?”

“Yeah, man, it tastes funny, it's good,” Deacon nodded. “I can grub on this stuff any time, you know what I'm sayin'?” He put his head back down and happily completed the job.

Andy, at that point, assumed that the show was over. But he had forgotten about Snickers, who was still standing beside the bed with a big, twitchy erection. Deacon hopped off the bed and took the camera from his brother. “Go on, Snix, now you do somethin' with him.”

“Hold on,” Andy said, sitting up against the headboard, “I have to leave pretty soon.”

“This here won't take long,” Snickers promised him. “Just give me a blowjob, man, that's all.”

Deacon raised the camera to start taping. “Yeah, chump, just give him a blowjob,” he said. “That don't take too long.”

“A blowjob?”

“Yeah, a blowjob,” Snickers said impatiently. He got down on his back next to Andy. “What's wrong, ain't you never gave head before?”

“No, not really.”

“He ain't never fucked nobody and he ain't never gave head,” Deacon muttered. “Don't that be pitiful?”

Snickers wagged his brown boner and said, “It don't matter, man, just go down on it and suck it, that's all, you'll like it.”

Andy was getting on his knees above Snickers when someone started rattling the handle of the door. “Yo, motherfuckers, open up,” the person yelled from the hallway. It was Badger, and he sounded more panicky than angry. “Move your asses and open up, man, I ain't jokin' with you!”

The boys, just to be safe, hastily put on their underwear before Snickers unlocked and opened the door. Badger rushed into the room and announced that Red had been busted, that Red had been arrested at his shop earlier that morning. “Fuckin' state cops, fuckin' FBI and DEA, fuckin' everybody was there, man, fuckin' everybody!”

“Yo, man, time to jet,” Deacon said, swiftly gathering the rest of his clothes. “Let's go, Snix, we're out!” He slapped Andy's arm on his way past. “It's over, Damon, take off”

Andy didn't have time to think about what was happening as he threw on his clothes and ran outside to get his bike. Before leaving Badger's bedroom, he had found Timmy's white cap on the floor near the bed, and he was wearing it now as he pedaled the few blocks back to his own house. When he got there, it was empty and the doors were locked, forcing Andy to use the spare key taped beneath the electric meter box to let himself inside. His parents and sisters, obviously, were still at church, which allowed Andy the free time to relax and to gather his wits before anyone could bother him with questions.

He went straight to his bedroom and shut himself in; like a fugitive scrambling for cover. There, for the first time, he let himself think about Red being busted. It meant no more Red Dog Comix, no more delivery job, no more parties at Badger's house – no more Red, period. As Deacon had said: “It's over.” But maybe it wasn't, not really. What if the cops had found out about the twins, or about Manny, or about Andy himself? What if they showed up at the front door? Andy's stomach knotted with fear as he thought about it. He was going to end up in the Davis Home for sure, just like Matthew, and his parents were

never going to forgive him. Never.

Vaguely, beneath the fear, there was something else that kept bothering Andy. It had to do with Snickers, and with giving Snickers a blowjob – or rather, with not giving Snickers a blowjob. Even after all the other sex with Timmy and with Deacon, Andy couldn't help regretting that final missed opportunity. He kept thinking about having that hard brown dick in his mouth, and about getting a taste of its cum – actually tasting real teenaged cum. A few more minutes and it would have been a reality, not just a daydream.

Andy wondered, hiding there in his room, if he would ever be satisfied. Was it possible? Was it possible to be satisfied and happy, to get enough of other boys? Probably not, Andy decided. Even after the sex party at Badger's house, he wanted more. One pleasure always demanded another, and then another. Always and always another.

24

By Sunday evening, Andy was starting to feel safe again. It seemed less and less likely, with each passing hour, that the cops would be showing up at his front door. After supper, he actually felt good enough to go out for a cruise on his bike. Turning the corner onto Pine street, he found Matthew strolling along the sidewalk from the opposite direction. The boys stopped next to each other in front of Matthew's driveway. "I was just over to see Nancy," Matthew said, pointing back over his shoulder. "She weren't home, though."

"What happened last night?"

"With Nancy?"

"Yeah," Andy said, "of course with Nancy."

"It was pretty cool," Matthew smiled. "We was totally naked and everything, and she let me fuck her for a while."

"And then what?"

"And then, well... she wouldn't let me sperm inside her, but she jerked me off, so it was OK, it was definitely excellent."

"She jerked you off?"

"Yeah, she wouldn't let me sperm inside her," Matthew explained again. "She's a real bitch sometimes."

"Didn't you have rubbers, moron?"

"No, but... like, do you got some?"

"Not right now," Andy muttered. He decided to change the subject. "Are you going out for Halloween tomorrow?"

"I don't know for sure. What about you?"

"I'm too old, man."

"You're not too old, not really," Matthew shrugged. He was kicking at the rocks in the driveway. "I've got an army uniform I could wear, like with a jacket and a hat and stuff."

"That would be cool."

"I figured I could go as a dead soldier or something."

Andy was rocking his bicycle back and forth as he talked. "I've got my great-grandfather's old aviator uniform," he said. "I wore it two years ago. You ought to see it, man, it's tripped out."

“What's an aviator?”

“An old-time pilot. You know, with a leather helmet and goggles and everything.”

“Awesome, Andy, you should wear it!”

“You think so?”

“You and me could go trick-or-treatin' tomorrow,” Matthew nodded happily. “We could go with Rickie and Calvin and Stevie,” he added, talking about three younger neighbor boys. “You want to?”

“Sure, man, let's do it.”

By the time Andy got back home, his earlier fear had almost entirely vanished. Just being with Matthew had made everything feel normal again. After putting his bicycle away, Andy went up to the attic to fetch the aviator uniform from its old steamer trunk: the khaki canvas jumpsuit, the leather helmet, the goggles – all of it smelling of age and mildew and mothballs.

He took the whole outfit down to his bedroom and retrieved his brown leather work boots from the closet to complete his costume. He certainly hadn't been expecting to need them for Halloween; trick-or-treating was for little kids, not for big guys like Andy; but he thought it might be OK – just this one last time.

Andy, by Monday morning, had nearly forgotten about Red and the police. But the fear came rushing back as soon as he stepped onto the school bus and discovered that Manny was missing. He asked one of the other Mexican boys about him, but got nothing but a silent shrug in response. What if Manny's absence had something to do with Red? What if the cops had taken him to the Davis Home? Andy sat at the back of the bus and let his paranoid fantasies run wild. It took all of his energy, once he got to school, just to control his fear and to concentrate on the classwork in front of him.

Finally, at lunchtime, he thought maybe he might get some answers from the twins. He pulled them from the cafeteria line and started peppering them with questions before they could even get any food on their trays. “Just chill, man,” Snickers finally told him. “Ain't no cops after you, most likely.”

“But what about Manny?”

Deacon shrugged and mumbled, “We don't know nothin' about him.”

“Red and Badger and three other fuckers got busted,” Snickers said. “That's all we know, man.”

“They got Badger?”

“Yeah, man, that ain't no big news. Badger's done been popped lots of times. He won't be in for long.”

“Just chill out and forget about it,” Snickers advised once more. “Ain't nothin' to do right now but stay low, man, you know what I'm sayin'?”

“Yeah, yeah, I guess you're right.”

The twins took their trays back into line to get their lunches. Andy felt a little better after talking to them. There was only one other item he needed to deal with before the end of the school day: confronting Timmy Jenco for the first time since Badger's party. Because it was Andy's first day to resume dressing for gym class, he and Timmy found themselves together again in the locker room as they changed into their uniforms. They greeted each other as usual, did their calisthenics together, even showered together – but they never mentioned the party, not until the very end of class when Andy suddenly remembered to return Timmy's cap. He pulled it from his gym bag and took it over to the boy's locker. “You forgot this at the party,” he said. “I found it for you.”

“Oh, fuck, I wondered where it was,” Timmy smiled. He took it from Andy and put it on his head. “I figured it was gone for good.”

“It was in Badger's bedroom.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Andy said, watching Timmy's face. “I found it the next morning.”

“That's good, man.”

“You were gone by then.”

“I must've called a cab, probably.”

“Don't you remember?”

“Fuck no,” Timmy said. He shut his locker with a loud bang. “I don't remember hardly anything about that stupid party.”

“I don't either,” Andy said. “I got way too blasted, man, no doubt.”

“Way too blasted,” Timmy agreed. “I won't be going back there anymore, that's for sure.” He glanced at Andy, then headed for the door. “Anyway, Melissa was pissed off that I left her at home.”

Andy followed him into the hallway. “I won't be going back either. Those parties are pretty much over, I guess.”

“Whatever,” Timmy shrugged. “I'll catch you later, Damon.”

Andy watched him jog away up the corridor. It was hard to explain, but something about his attitude had seemed different. Instead of his usual insults and playfulness, he had treated Andy with a certain cool, polite friendliness – a subtle difference that no one but Andy himself probably would have noticed.

Andy, still standing there in the hallway, felt like running after him to make everything better again, to make everything all right. But, of course, he didn't. He couldn't. It was too late for that.

Back home, Andy went straight to the telephone to solve the mystery of Manny's whereabouts. There were four families listed in the phone book under the name of Fuentes, and Andy tried all of them without success. Manny's family, apparently, either had no listed number or no telephone, which left Andy just as baffled and frustrated as ever. But he decided to take the twins' advice and chill out. Manny, most likely, was OK, just sick probably, just gone for a day or two. Worrying about him was stupid, absolutely stupid.

After an early dinner of Kentucky Fried chicken and biscuits, Andy phoned Matthew and told him to come over with his Halloween costume. Matthew showed up a few minutes later with his surplus army uniform and a tiny tube of white “zombie make-up” from the novelty shop. He made his first stop in the kitchen, where he gladly accepted Andy's invitation to finish the leftover pieces of chicken. While they were at the table, Andy asked him about the other three boys. “Stevie and Calvin and... who else was there?”

“Rickie.”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“They're waiting for us at Calvin's house,” Matthew said between bites. “This chicken is grubbish, man, I swear to God.”

“Go ahead and finish it.”

“No problem,” Matthew said. He ate the two remaining pieces, then went with Andy into the bedroom to put on his army cap and jacket and his white facial make-up. Andy, right beside him, put on his aviator helmet and goggles and jumpsuit. Matthew was delighted by his friend's outfit. “You look like Snoopy and the Red Baron,” he laughed. “It's way excellent!”

Andy was tying the laces of his leather boots. “Do you want to wear my camouflage pants?”

“Me?”

“No, genius, I was talking to the bed.”

“Sure, I'll wear them,” Matthew said. “They'll look cool with my other stuff... like a real uniform.”

He took off his blue jeans and replaced them with the green-and-brown camouflage trousers. “OK, I guess I'm ready.”

“Yeah,” Andy told him, “that looks better.”

“Do I look really dead?”

“No doubt, man, really dead.”

“Excellent,” Matthew said, straightening his green cap. “Let's go!”

The boys grabbed two bags from the kitchen to use for their treats, then hurried outside to keep their rendezvous at Calvin's house. The three younger boys were already waiting for them in the front yard.

All of them, with Andy and Matthew leading the way, eagerly embarked on their trip around the neighborhood, roaming from house to house through the cold October darkness. One of the younger boys, dressed as a devil, fell down a flight of porch steps when he tripped over his tail, but otherwise there were no problems or accidents, and the group ended up back at Calvin's house by seven o'clock with their bags full of candy and cookies and taffy apples. Matthew, before returning to his own house, went home with Andy to change back into his blue jeans. He kicked off his gym shoes to get started, carelessly sending one of them beneath Andy's bed. As he was pulling on his own pants and zipping them up, he suddenly revived an old, forgotten piece of business. “I could seriously use a fuckin' job,” he told Andy. “I don't even got my paper route anymore.”

“Yeah, I know, that's too bad.”

“You think maybe I could get a job with Red? Remember, you said that I....”

“Forget it,” Andy interrupted, brushing his hair in front of the mirror. “Red sort of got busted over the weekend.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No, man, I'm serious, it's true.”

“So... what happened to your job?”

“It's over,” Andy said. “I'm out of work, I guess... same as you.” When Matthew didn't respond, Andy glanced at him in the mirror, then spun to look at him directly. Matthew, while retrieving his shoe from beneath Andy's bed, had discovered the box of secret pictures and was just beginning to dig through it. “What the fuck is all this stuff?”

“Nothing,” Andy mumbled, panicky with embarrassment. “It's just... it's just some stupid pictures and shit.”

“There's about a million of them.”

“Anyway, fuck-head, it's private, so.... “

“God,” Matthew said, “you've got naked guys in here!”

“It's just for drawing, for like making pictures, for like an art class.”

“What kind of art class?”

Andy rushed forward to kick the box back beneath the bed. Matthew still had one of the pictures in his hand. Andy snatched it away from him to rip it up, just to prove to Matthew how worthless and insignificant it was. But it was the picture of Cupid, Andy's favorite, and he stopped himself in time and tossed it onto the floor instead. “It's all just a bunch of old junk, that's all.”

“You ought to have naked girls,” Matthew suggested, “not naked guys.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“I'm serious, Andy, naked guys are way bogus.”

“OK, OK, I heard you.”

“It would be better to have girls,” Matthew said again, more softly this time. He pulled on his other shoe and got up to leave. “See you later, Andy,” he yelled on his way out, pausing to grab his trick-or-treat bag. Andy started to follow him, then decided against it and stayed behind in the bedroom. His stomach was in knots all over again. For a moment, he thought that he might actually vomit right there

onto the floor. It was all too much: Red, Timmy, Manny, the twins, Matthew – Andy had lost, or seemed to be losing, all of them, one by one by one. He dropped onto the bed and held his hands over his eyes, as if he could shut out the world and make it somehow, magically, disappear.

25

It was hard to tell one day from the next as the week dragged itself forward. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday – to Andy, they all seemed the same: Timmy remained politely friendly to him in gym class; the twins maintained their distance during lunch; Matthew was nowhere to be seen after school (probably at his girlfriend's, Andy figured); and Manny, mysteriously, remained missing altogether. On Friday, Andy decided to end the mystery of Manny's whereabouts once and for all. He got on his bicycle and headed across town to the projects, taking a brief detour en route to ride past Red Dog Comix, which was closed and dark and had a big white police notice posted on the front door. Andy wondered, for the first time all week, if he would ever see Red again, or Badger, feeling a sort of homesick nostalgia for them and for all of the excitement and fun of the last two months. Starting way back at the end of August, way back at Lake Swanson with the twins, and ending just a few days ago at Badger's party, the last several weeks had been a blast, a total blast, and Andy couldn't honestly say that he regretted any part of them.

It was already dusk when Andy got to the Fuentes home and knocked on the front door. Manny's father broke into a smile when he answered the door and saw Andy waiting there. He immediately took the boy's arm and brought him inside, telling him in broken English to go ahead, to go ahead and see Manny, pointing him toward the bedroom. But before Andy could get there, Fernandito came charging at him from the kitchen and grabbed him in a fierce hug. "I ain't seen you in ten years," the little boy hollered. He reached behind Andy and started spanking him, punishing him for his long absence. "Why ain't you been here?"

"Easy, man, give me a break!"

"Is you staying here tonight?"

"No," Andy said, "I can't stay, sorry." He put his arm around the little boy's shoulders and went with him into the bedroom, where Manny was resting on his top bunk, listening through earphones to a Sony Walkman. Andy snuck up beside him and poked his arm. Manny jerked to attention and looked around, then grinned in joyous surprise when he saw Andy. "*Ay, coño,*" he said, taking off the earphones, "what you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

"No joking?"

"Yeah, man, I was worried about you," Andy said. "You've been gone all week."

"I had the stupid flu," Manny told him. "But I'm coming back Monday."

Andy almost started laughing. "You mean that's it? You've just been sick is all?"

Manny responded with a perplexed, apologetic shrug. "I was throwing up every day," he said. "We don't got no phone, so I couldn't call you or Red or nobody."

"That's all right."

"Is Red pissed off bad?"

"No, man, listen...."

"I wanted to call, really, but I couldn't."

"Seriously, man, listen," Andy said. He stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Red is gone. He got

busted last week.”

Manny narrowed his eyes in sudden disbelief. “Red got busted?”

“Last week,” Andy nodded. “The shop is all closed down. Everything is closed down.”

“What about the twins and...?”

“We're all OK, don't worry.”

Manny sat up on the edge of his bunk. He was wearing his usual red cut-off sweatpants and a baggy white T-shirt. “I'm surprised,” he finally said, shaking his head. “I didn't know nothing about all this.”

“It's been weird, no doubt,” Andy agreed. He could smell Manny's familiar body odor, stale and sweaty. “I'll miss the money, that's for sure.”

“I got this thing here last week,” Manny said, holding up his Walkman for Andy to see. “Now I don't got much money left.”

Andy took the earphones and put them on to sample the sound. “This is excellent, man, no lie.”

“I got myself that cassette, too.”

“What is it?”

“The Gypsy Kings,” Manny said, loud enough for the other boy to hear. “They're my favorites, I guess.”

Andy listened to it for a while longer. He rested his elbow on Manny's leg. “This stuff is totally decent.”

“It's my favorite,” Manny said again, smiling. He draped one arm across Andy's left shoulder, then across both shoulders as Andy edged closer. The two boys seemed to be finding some sort of comfort in each other's touch. Andy shifted his arm so that his hand was resting directly on Manny's bare knee. Fernandito, who had been playing across the room until now, brought one of his toys over to show Andy. “It's a new G.I. Joe, see! Manny buyed it for me.”

Andy slipped the earphones off and smiled at the little boy. “That's awesome, man, definitely.”

“See his gun?”

“Yeah, it's cool,” Andy said. He was leaning against Manny, who still had one arm around him. “Your brother is really nice, Fern, no doubt.” Somehow, being openly affectionate with Manny seemed perfectly proper and natural, not at all queer or clumsy or embarrassing as it would have been with the twins or with Timmy or even, more and more lately, with Matthew. It seemed OK to be playing with Manny's knee, squeezing at it and rubbing it; Andy didn't even feel the need to be subtle or secretive about it.

Manny, meanwhile, was watching his little brother and grinning. “I had some extra cash, so I gave the monkey a toy.”

“Yeah,” Andy joked, “back when you were rich.”

“It was fun for a while,” Manny said. “Red was nice.”

“He was totally nice, man, big time.”

“It's too bad what happened.”

“Yeah,” Andy agreed again, “too bad for sure.” It was strange, but he and Manny were actually holding and caressing each other while they talked, behaving in a tenderly affectionate way that Andy had never thought possible between two boys. Some secret knowledge was beginning to stir within him, some notion or idea that there might be other boys in the world like himself, other boys with the same hungers and the same passions, interested in more than just a few minutes of frantic humping and sperming. And maybe one of those special boys was right there beside him, holding him around the shoulders and shyly petting him on the arm. Andy looked at Manny and smiled. “Anyway, I'm glad you're OK and everything.”

“First you was sick and now me.”

“No doubt, man, it sucks,” Andy said. He was running his hand back and forth on Manny's thigh. “So... I guess I should go home.”

Fernandito stomped his foot angrily at Andy's announcement. “You never be staying here with us like before!” He reached out and pinched Andy between the legs, then giggled from the surprise of what he felt. “You got a hard thing again!”

“Quiet, man.”

“It's in your pants,” Fernandito giggled once more. He used his G.I. Joe to poke at it. “Why is it being like that every time?”

Andy looked from Fernandito to Manny and then started laughing. “I can't help it, man, leave me alone!”

“Stop it, chico,” Manny said, also laughing. “Don't bother everybody so much.”

Andy glanced between Manny's legs. “Look,” he said to Fernandito, “your big brother has a hard thing, too.”

“Let me see!”

“OK, man,” Andy laughed, “come on up.” He grabbed the little boy beneath the arms and hoisted him high enough to get a look at Manny. “See, I told you.”

“Stupid baboon,” Fernandito said to his brother, “you got something in your pants like Andy!” He climbed onto the bunk and gave Manny's bulge a poke with his G.I. Joe. “It's looking funny.”

“Stop it, that don't feel good.”

“Go pee with it.”

“For what? Why should I pee?”

“Go ahead and do it,” Fernandito insisted, bouncing with excitement. “Make it pee!”

Andy didn't know for sure, but he suspected that Fernandito was probably talking about sperming, not peeing, and that he had probably learned about it from Andy himself, during Andy's last visit. Just in case, Andy decided to leave before the little boy could say anything more about it. “I really have to go,” Andy said quickly. “My dad is going to be pissed off.”

“OK, well... come back sometime,” Manny told him, apparently disappointed to see him leave. “It's nice when you come here.”

“Thanks,” Andy said, “I like it here a lot.” He leaned forward to give Fernandito his traditional hug and kiss goodbye, then, before he could think about it or stop himself, he turned his head and also gave a kiss to Manny, right on the mouth. Manny kissed him back without any hesitation or awkwardness. Andy, just before he pulled away, reached between Manny's legs for a quick feel, making it seem as playful and casual as possible, nothing but a friendly little squeeze. The two boys looked at each other and grinned, and then Andy forced himself to head back home.

When he got there, he found Matthew waiting for him on the sidewalk in front of the house. “Watch out,” Andy yelled to him, “or I'll run your ass over!”

Matthew smiled and grabbed the handlebars of Andy's bike.

“I'll make you crash, you fucker!”

“Take it easy, jerk.”

“Where were you?”

“At a friend's house,” Andy said. “Why? What's up?” Matthew straddled the front tire of the bicycle to get himself closer to the other boy. “Do you got any rubbers yet? Could I, like, borrow some?”

“Rubbers?”

“Yeah, you know, for fucking.”

“No shit, Einstein, I know *that*.”

“Do you got any yet? Remember, I asked you last week?”

“Yeah,” Andy said, “I remember... but no, I don't have any. Not right now.”

“Will you help me get some, at least?”

“I guess so... if you really need them.”

“I do, Andy, I swear to God,” Matthew said. “Where can I get some by tomorrow?”

“What's the big rush?”

Matthew was pushing and pulling excitedly at the handlebars of the bike. “Nancy says I can fuck her if I use a rubber! So I need some by tomorrow night!”

“Great,” Andy mumbled. He rolled the bike forward to bump it against Matthew's nuts. “Just go to the clinic downtown, man, they'll give you some rubbers over there.”

“Will you come with me?”

“Why?”

“Because... I'll feel way stupid by myself.”

“OK, OK, I'll go with you,” Andy said, laughing softly. “Tomorrow morning.”

“Excellent,” Matthew shouted. He thrust his fist triumphantly into the air, then lowered his arm and held it out for Andy to see. “Hey, look at my new watch! Ain't it awesome?”

“It's too dark, moron, I can't see it.”

“It's a sports watch,” Matthew explained eagerly, holding it closer to Andy's face. “My mom bought it for my birthday.”

“Your birthday,” Andy said quietly. “Fuck, man, I forgot all about it.”

“That's OK.”

“Did you get any new fish for your aquarium?”

“No, my mom sort of like didn't remember.”

Andy gave Matthew another bump with the front tire. “I could probably buy one for you,” he offered. “Like maybe a loach or a gourami or something.”

“Seriously?”

“Sure, no problem. I've got lots of money saved up from my job.”

“Yeah, I saw it in the box,” Matthew said. He pushed back on the handlebars. “With them bogus pictures of yours.”

“We could go to the pet store tomorrow after the clinic,” Andy continued, ignoring Matthew's remark. “It's up to you, jag-off.”

Matthew happily accepted the offer, then went running and dancing up the sidewalk back toward his own house. Andy stayed where he was and watched him, staring at Matthew as he disappeared into the darkness.

26

Andy rolled onto his back and opened his eyes. He had been dreaming about Manny, about kissing him and being naked with him and doing sex stuff with him while Fernandito watched from beside the bed. More and more, Andy found himself thinking and dreaming about Manny, fantasizing about the two of them being together like real boyfriends, like real lovers.

Later that morning, Andy and Matthew met outside and rode their bikes downtown to the family-

planning clinic on Cherry Street. They parked their bikes near the entrance and ventured nervously inside. There was a card table in one corner of the room with a box of condoms and a little homemade sign that said, "BE SMART, BE SAFE, USE PROTECTION." The boys tried to make it across the room without being noticed, but they were joined halfway by a young woman who worked there at the clinic. She greeted them with a pleasant smile and escorted them to the table, spending a few moments to give them a handful of brochures and a quick reminder about unwanted pregnancies and, especially, about AIDS. "You're smart to be so careful," she told them, then left the boys alone to help themselves to the condoms. They each took a few and stuffed them into their pockets. "That's enough," Andy muttered to Matthew. "Let's go, man, come on."

They hurried back outside and jumped onto their bikes, like two robbers fleeing from a crime scene. "We did it," Matthew hollered as they sped away. "This is so totally fuckin' radical!"

"I told you it's easy," Andy yelled back, as if he had done it before. "No big deal."

Only a few blocks away, they stopped at the pet shop to buy something for Matthew's aquarium. Andy ended up spending six dollars on a pair of blue gouramis and three dollars on a leach. Matthew thanked him and thanked him all the way back home, then invited him inside to help introduce the fish into their new tank. "They like it, see," Matthew smiled as he released them from their little plastic bag. "This was my best birthday ever, man, I swear to God. First my watch, and now my fish! This is so cool."

As he was drying his hands on his jeans, Matthew felt the condoms in his pockets and excitedly dug them out. He had six of the little foil packets altogether. "That ought to be enough for a while," he decided. "How many did you get?"

"Five," Andy said, feeling his pockets to make sure he hadn't missed any. Then he put them back again. He didn't know when or how he'd be needing them, but he wasn't about to admit that in front of Matthew. "I'll be using these later, man, no doubt."

Matthew put five of his condoms into the drawer of his aquarium table, then turned his attention to the remaining one for a closer inspection. "How the fuck do you use these things, anyway?"

"You just put them on your dick, that's all."

"It's like a balloon, right?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"I don't understand how it fits on," Matthew mumbled as he ripped open the foil. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"No," Andy said, glancing at one of the brochures from the clinic, "it just slips on easy. Any moron can do it."

Matthew took out the condom and turned it over and over in the palm of his hand. "It's too small," he said. "I mean, what is it? Where's the balloon part?"

"Here, look at the pictures," Andy told him, showing him the brochure. "See, you put it on top and slide it down. No problem."

Matthew glanced back and forth between the illustrations in the brochure and the real thing in his hand, still not clear about the whole procedure. "I wish I could try it," he finally said. "You know, before I do it tonight. Then I wouldn't look so stupid."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"Do you care if I try it?"

"You mean right now?"

"I really want to, yeah," Matthew nodded. He started unfastening his blue jeans. "Do you care?"

"No, man, it's cool."

Matthew paused to shut the door, then took a seat on the edge of the bed and pushed his jeans and underpants down to his knees. "Now what happens?"

“You need to put it on your dick,” Andy explained once more, taking a seat next to him. “Don't be such a shit-head, man.”

Matthew put the condom against his limp penis. “Like this?”

“No, man, it has to be hard!”

“You mean it has to be hard first?”

“Of course!”

“Oh shit,” Matthew smiled, “that means I need a boner.”

“What a genius.”

Matthew started fiddling with his dick to make it stiffen, but it wouldn't stand up no matter how much he jiggled it or played with it. “This is fucked up,” he finally muttered. “It won't do anything.”

“Poor baby.”

“I'm serious, man, it's fuckin' dead or asleep or something.” Andy, not knowing what else to do, laughed at the other boy's predicament and poked him between the legs. Matthew, always ticklish, dropped onto his back and started rolling from side to side in order to protect himself. Andy kept poking at him around the thighs and the balls, making him squirm and giggle there on the bed, then gradually stopped tickling him and started fondling him instead, petting lightly at his testicles and his pubic hair. “Your balls and stuff are definitely bigger,” Andy told him. “It's really weird.”

“Fuck, now I'm gettin' a boner for sure,” Matthew said.

“Look at that fuckin' thing.”

“No doubt.”

“Is it hard enough for the rubber?”

“I think so,” Andy said, nudging it with his finger. “Go ahead, put it on.”

Matthew, still on his back, placed the condom over his penis and slid it down the shaft. “There, it's on good.”

“Does it feel OK?”

“It feels funny,” Matthew said. He started to do a little masturbating as an experiment, just to see how it felt. But after only a minute or two he stopped and shook his head. “This really sucks,” he concluded. “It don't feel good with this stupid rubber on.”

“Tell it to your girlfriend, man, not me.”

“Am I using it wrong?”

“No,” Andy said, “that's the right way.”

Once more, Matthew started masturbating to test the condom, stroking faster this time to get a better feeling from it, to maximize the pleasure. His dick looked like a cherry-red Popsicle inside its latex sheath, and it was getting harder and redder all the time as he stroked it and stroked it. “This is better,” he mumbled after a while. “It's feelin' pretty good this way.” He glanced at Andy beside him. “Should I stop or keep going?”

“Keep going, man, definitely.”

“I think I can finish pretty soon.”

“Go ahead and do it.”

“I just want to see if it works,” Matthew said. His voice sounded a little shaky. The muscles in his thighs were getting tighter and tighter. He tried to bring his feet up onto the mattress to spread his legs, but the jeans and the underpants were bunched around his knees and he couldn't get out of them. Andy quickly assisted by pulling Matthew's pants down for him – then went ahead and pulled them off altogether, first the jeans and then the underwear. Matthew seemed slightly surprised by the way his friend was stripping him. But Andy still wasn't satisfied.

He crawled back onto the bed and started unbuttoning Matthew's shirt, determined to get the other boy naked all the way. He had the shirt opened and was trying to pull it off when Matthew suddenly went tense and shivery and began to ejaculate. Andy stopped what he was doing to watch Matthew's semen come oozing into the tip of the condom. "Jesus, that's excellent," he said. "You can really see it come out, really good."

Matthew nodded, still stroking himself lazily as he tried to catch his breath. Finally, he used both hands to remove the condom from his penis, which flopped back soft and red against his belly, glistening with its own cum. "I guess it works OK," he said, dropping the used rubber onto the mattress. "It caught everything pretty good." He sat up and took off his unbuttoned shirt. Andy, misjudging the situation, moved closer to him on the bed and started to unzip his own pants. But Matthew immediately drew away. "Don't do that, Andy, stop it."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I was just goin' to take a bath, that's all."

"Oh," Andy said, feeling so suddenly ridiculous and embarrassed that he actually jumped off the bed. "Fuck, well fuck it, just forget it."

"Shit, man, don't get pissed off," Matthew told him. He put on his underpants to wear them to the bathroom. "I just don't feel like doin' no gay stuff anymore."

"Fuck you."

"Why are you so mad?"

"I'm not mad, asshole."

"I just wanted to try out the rubbers," Matthew muttered defensively. "What's the big deal?"

Andy took a deep breath to calm himself, then looked at Matthew and tried to smile. "Anyway, I was just kidding around. I have to go home."

Matthew smiled back at him. "Can you take the rubber with you and throw it away?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I don't want my mom to find it."

"Yeah, whatever," Andy said, picking up the warm, squishy condom. He put it into the pouch of his sweatshirt and followed Matthew out of the bedroom. Before they split up, Matthew thanked Andy once more for the new fish. Andy nodded and forced another smile, then went back outside. He wondered, while he was walking home, why Matthew had given him the rubber. Why hadn't he just flushed it down the toilet? Whatever the reason, Andy was glad to have it. He reached into the pouch of his sweatshirt and touched it, giving it a little squeeze to feel the pleasant squishiness of it.

At home, in his own room, Andy urgently undressed and stretched out on his bed to masturbate. He took a few moments, before doing anything else, to savor the gift of Matthew's semen, opening the condom to get at the slimy goodness inside. He sniffed at it briefly, then licked some of it off the tip of his finger, disappointed by the sharp, bleachy flavor of it. Eagerly, he put the condom over the head of his own penis and worked it down, inch by inch, until he had the whole gooey, slippery thing over his boner. Then he started rubbing it. He wanted to sperm inside it, to mix his own stuff with Matthew's. It was his only way of being with the other boy now – because Matthew, obviously, was no longer interested in playing around with Andy. Somehow, the funny little neighborhood puppy dog had grown up and discovered girls. He had moved on to another place – to a place where Andy could never follow.

Two weeks of cold rain and clouds finally gave way to blue skies and warm sunshine, a false spring in the dead middle of November. But not even the pleasant weather could lift Andy's spirits. He seemed, every day, to be slipping deeper and deeper into a lonesome depression. All of his old friends had deserted him. Timmy, Matthew, the twins – every one of them seemed to be involved with other projects and other friends. Andy still saw all of them and talked to them from day to day, but he found himself feeling more and more disconnected from them, more and more isolated.

His only moments of comfort came on the school bus each morning and each afternoon when he was able to spend some time with Manny. They never said much to each other, but Andy didn't care about talking; just being next to Manny was enough. Sometimes, when they managed to get a seat in the back of the bus, back where no one could see them, they actually held hands together, shyly, not saying anything about it, just holding hands and gazing silently out the window. It was their way of sharing something secret, something impossible for either of them to discuss or explain.

On the Saturday before Thanksgiving, with the depression and the loneliness feeling like an actual sickness in his heart, Andy finally made a decision to act, to break free, to do something drastic about his deadly isolation. He took his bike and rode across town to the west-side park where men often prowled for boys. He wasn't going there for the money; he wasn't even going there for the sex, necessarily (although he had a condom in the pocket of his jeans, just in case); what Andy wanted, most of all, was a dose of excitement, a rush of energy and adrenaline to slap him back to life.

But the park was nearly deserted. Some teenagers were tossing a football back and forth, and a few younger children were on the swings, but otherwise the playing fields were empty and quiet. No men were out cruising for action on that particular afternoon. Andy was plotting his next move when he spotted another boy, also by himself, practicing kicks and headers with a soccer ball. It was Manny, maybe fifty yards away, wearing his usual red cut-offs and white T-shirt and red paisley bandanna. Andy swung his bike in the other boy's direction and pedaled across the field. "Hey, kid," he yelled at the last moment, "move your stupid ass!"

Manny spun to protect himself, then smiled when he saw Andy. "*Coño*, man, you scared me!"

"Pussy."

"Where you coming from?"

"I was just cruising around," Andy said, skidding to a stop. "I guess I was bored or something."

"Yeah, it's boring for sure."

"This place is dead today."

"Nobody's around," Manny nodded. He bounced the soccer ball up and down off his knee a few times, then caught it again with his hands. "You want to play?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"We can just kick it around."

"Yeah, that sounds OK," Andy said. He laid his bike onto the ground and grabbed the ball from Manny. They played a game of keep-away for a while, then spent most of the next hour practicing kicks against each other – first with Andy as the goalie, then Manny, then Andy again, switching back and forth until both of them were exhausted. "No more," Andy finally announced. He was feeling better, much better, since finding Manny in the park. "I'm glad you were here today," he told the other boy. "It turned out good."

"You should come over here more."

"It's a long ride... and you don't have a phone," Andy said. "And it's been raining almost every day."

"Yeah, you're right."

"But... I'd like to come over more, definitely."

"I'm always here," Manny said. "I don't hardly never go no place." He tucked the ball beneath his arm and started walking towards the street. "Come on, we can get something to drink."

Andy ran to his bike and rolled it alongside him back to Manny's apartment house. The place was less crowded than usual, with most of the family out for a visit to relatives in Rock Island, about forty miles away. Only Cesar and Nestor were still at home, busy in the living room playing Nintendo on the television. "The little monkey ain't here right now," Manny said, talking about Fernandito. "He's going to be pissed off at missing you."

"Fuck, that's too bad."

"He goes crazy about you."

"I know," Andy smiled, "it's funny, like when he makes us kiss and stuff."

"He likes to kiss all the time, that's for sure:"

"It's funny," Andy said again. He and Manny, each with a can of Coke from the refrigerator, sat next to each other on the couch, close enough to be touching at the shoulders. "You're hot," Andy told the other boy. "You're sweating a lot."

"Yeah, I do a lot of sweating."

"No kidding, man."

"But it's getting cold in here now."

"Aw, poor thing," Andy teased. He put his metal Coke can against Manny's bare leg. "How's that?"

Manny jumped from the shock of it. "Fuck it, man, don't be doing that! It's freezing me!"

Andy smiled and put his arm around Manny's shoulders. "Sorry, little baby," he said, "I didn't mean to freeze you to death."

"Shut up," Manny smiled back. He elbowed Andy in the stomach, then let his arm drop back across Andy's lap. They stayed like that for several minutes as they watched the other two boys playing Nintendo across the room. Andy spent a while rubbing at Manny's shoulder, then moved his hand to the side and started playing with the sweaty hair on Manny's neck. Manny took off his bandanna and leaned more heavily against Andy. "That feels good doing that," he mumbled.

"Does it really?"

"Yeah, I like it, no joking," Manny said. He turned his head to glance at Andy. They smiled at each other, then kissed quickly and looked at each other once more with a soft, nervous laugh. For the first time, they truly seemed to understand what was happening between them, as if both of them had suddenly shared the same revelation. Andy felt something like fear as he held the other boy tighter and then kissed him once again on the mouth, and then again and again, recognizing the same fear and the same hunger in Manny's eyes. They put down their cans of soda and turned so that they were facing each other more directly, making it easier for them to hug and to kiss and to feel each other's bodies. Andy slipped his hand down Manny's back and then up again into Manny's T-shirt, getting at the bare, sweaty skin beneath. That was when Nestor and Cesar started giggling quietly at them from across the room. Andy didn't know much Spanish, but he recognized the word "novio" and he knew that the little boys were laughing about their older brother having a "boyfriend" or a "sweetheart."

"Just shut up about it," Manny snapped at them. "It ain't no business of yours, man!"

Nestor and Cesar, never ones to make trouble, turned back giggling to their Nintendo game without any further comments. But the mood had been broken, and both Andy and Manny found themselves feeling too self-conscious to continue what they'd been doing. Instead, they picked up their cans of soda and went back to watching the other boys. Andy, trying to ease his own tension and discomfort, started talking about school and about other students and about anything else that came into his mind. "Oh, yeah, I almost forgot," he finally said. "I talked to the twins yesterday and they said that Red is out on bail."

“You going to go see him?”

“No way, man, forget it!” “Not me neither.”

“I mean, he was nice and everything, but... I'm finished with all that shit. It was too fucking dangerous.”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“I wonder if he's back living above the shop.”

“Probably.”

“He had a cool little apartment up there,” Andy said. He paused for a sip of Coke. “You were up there a few times, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“With the twins and with Jason once, remember? And with Jason's friend, too.”

Manny responded with a nod. Andy waited a moment, then kept going. “What were you guys doing up there together? You never told me about it.”

“I didn't do much.”

“Come on, fucker, tell me,” Andy said, lowering his voice. “Were you guys, like, messing around together or what?”

Manny started gnawing his bottom lip, then broke helplessly into a huge, embarrassed grin. “We was going to, but 1 couldn't stay,” he confessed. “They was all doing stuff and making movies when I left.”

“Did you see anything?”

“I watched for a little, not much.”

Andy put his arm back around Manny and leaned closer.

“So, like what did you see exactly?”

Manny glanced at Andy and let out a tight little laugh, like someone choking on a piece of food. “It was that Jason kid and his friend.”

“Yeah?”

“They was starting to do, you know, stuff with their mouths.”

“Sucking?”

“Yeah,” Manny said, “like that.”

“On each other? At the same time?”

“Yeah, just like that.”

Both boys were actually whispering now as they talked back and forth. “Jason and his friend,” Andy said, taking a moment to linger over the scene in his imagination. “Fuck, that's wild.”

Manny started chewing on his lip again, then broke into another toothy chipmunk grin. “I still got some weed left over from back then,” he said. “I got it hid in my room.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, I can show you.”

The two boys finished their Cokes, then went together into the bedroom and shut the door. Manny took the little bag of marijuana from beneath his mattress and quickly rolled a joint.

“You should maybe open that window,” he told Andy. “I don't want no smell in here.”

“Good idea,” Andy said. He opened the window between the bunk beds. “I haven't smoked any weed in a long time.”

Manny held up the finished joint. “This is all I got.”

“That's OK, I just want a little buzz.”

“Ay, *coño*,” Manny suddenly muttered, “I don't got no light.” He looked at Andy. “Do you got any matches or something?”

Andy checked inside the pouch of his gray sweatshirt, then inside the pockets of his jeans. He felt something in his left pocket and pulled it out, surprising himself when it turned out to be the foil-wrapped condom. "Shit, I forgot about this thing," he said with a startled laugh.

"What is it?"

"Just... just a rubber, that's all."

"What you doing with rubbers?"

"In case I need to fuck somebody," Andy said, laughing again. "You want it?"

Manny took it in his hand and looked at it. "I don't think I need it for nothing," he decided, but then stashed it under his mattress anyway. He asked Andy to wait for him while he went to the kitchen for matches. Alone in the room, Andy picked up a pair of Jockey underpants from the floor. They were too large for any of the three younger boys, so Andy assumed that they must have been Manny's. In fact, they even smelled like Manny. Andy held them to his nose and sniffed at the yellowish crotch. The odor was so pungent that it made him wince, like sniffing at a raw onion. There was a single dark hair stuck to the white fabric. Andy plucked it off and rolled it between his fingertips, delighted to be playing with an actual strand of Manny's pubic hair. It was strange, but he loved everything about Manny, right down to the hair from his dick.

Andy was still playing with the underpants when Manny came back into the room. "These must be yours," Andy remarked lamely, caught off guard. "I was just looking at..."

"Them is dirty."

"Yeah, I know, I was just..."

"All my stuff is dirty," Manny said, as if he needed to explain.

He sat on Fernandito's bottom bunk and lit the joint. "I been out of underwear for two days already."

"What a pig," Andy smiled, glad for the opportunity to make a joke. He tossed the dirty underpants to the floor and sat next to the other boy. They each took a deep hit from the joint, then settled back more comfortably on Fernandito's bed. On the second hit, they started sharing the smoke, passing it back and forth between each other's mouths and kissing at the same time. It seemed normal by then, kissing together and holding each other like boyfriend and boyfriend, something that both of them cheerfully accepted as a natural, special part of their friendship.

After the third hit, Andy sat up and took off his sweatshirt and his undershirt and his shoes. "It's better like this," he explained. "I mean, it's more comfortable." He paused for a moment, listening to the silence. "I don't hear the Nintendo game. What happened to your brothers?"

"They ain't playing no more," Manny said. He followed Andy's example and pulled off his own T-shirt and shoes.

"Where are they?"

"Outside somewhere," Manny shrugged. "They was leaving when I got the matches."

Andy took off his socks, then stretched out again on the bed, leaning on one elbow and facing Manny. "This feels better, right?"

Manny nodded as he took another hit from the joint. Again, the boys leaned against each other to share the smoke, pressing their lips together in a tight, open-mouthed kiss. Manny held the smoke for a few moments, then blew it gently into Andy's mouth. Andy went next, repeating the process in reverse, and then Manny took the final hit, getting the last bit of smoke from the joint before it burned itself out. But even then, even when the weed was gone, the boys kept kissing and kissing, using their tongues to taste each other's smoky-sweet saliva. Without the joint to pass, their hands were also freed now to roam and to explore, shyly at first, then more and more boldly, all over each other's shoulders and arms and backs. Andy, eventually, moved his hand down onto Manny's pants, rubbing at the bony hip and at the hard, thin

buttocks beneath the flimsy red fabric. The boys paused in their kissing and rested their heads together on Fernandito's pillow, both of them still on their sides, still facing each other. "No underwear," Andy mumbled to the other boy, grinning at him. "What a fucking pig, man, I swear."

"Underwear is for pussies," Manny grinned back. "I don't need none."

Andy slipped his fingers beneath the waistband of Manny's pants. "There's nothing under there, you're right," he said, as if he hadn't believed him. He slipped his entire hand inside and started squeezing at Manny's bare ass. "No underwear at all."

Manny let out a nervous laugh, then tugged at one of the belt loops on Andy's blue jeans. "So what kind of underwear you got on?"

"They're excellent," Andy said. "Go ahead and look at them." Manny timidly folded down a bit of the denim waistband on Andy's jeans. Andy impatiently shook his head and said, "No, I mean you can undo the whole thing, it's OK." He rolled backwards a few inches to make it easier for Manny, who gladly proceeded to unbutton and unzip Andy's jeans for a look at the bright yellow underpants inside. "See," Andy told him, "they're cool, aren't they?"

"They're nice, yeah."

"Hold on, I'll show you better," Andy said quickly. He rolled onto his back with his knees up and wriggled eagerly out of the blue jeans, all the way out, leaving them discarded at the foot of the bed. "See, I have bikinis on."

"They're nice," Manny said again. "I like them."

Andy smiled and rolled back towards the other boy for another few minutes of kissing and hugging and petting. The marijuana had both of them feeling deliciously sexy and light-headed. Andy put his hand back inside the seat of Manny's pants; Manny reached down to Andy's underpants and did the same; both boys suddenly and happily found themselves playing with each other's bare butts, trying awkwardly at the same time to push and to pull down the other one's pants. They finally stopped kissing long enough to break apart, to acknowledge what was happening between them. Andy raised himself on one elbow and looked at the other boy. "Will your brothers be gone for a while?"

"I don't know," Manny admitted. "Maybe, I hope so."

Andy hesitated cautiously. What he and Manny were doing together was different from anything he had ever done with the twins or with Jason or with Timmy, different even from all of the sex stuff with Matthew. None of that had been anything but simple fun and fooling around. With Manny, it was different, completely different. This was more than just busting a nut with some other kid. Andy was still a young boy, still five days shy of his fifteenth birthday, but he was old enough to realize what was happening between himself and Manny. He was old enough to realize that they were both gay, and that they were both hot for each other, and that they were both definitely, totally in love.

Andy smiled down at the other boy. "I've got a boner, man, big time."

"I know," Manny murmured back, "me too." His curly hair looked very black against the white pillow. He smiled self-consciously when Andy kept staring at him. "Why you looking like that? What's wrong?"

"You look like Cupid," Andy told him, touching his hair. "Just like him, man, no kidding."

"That don't make no sense."

"It's a picture I've got. At home. You know... Cupid, the god of love, the angel."

"I don't know about him much."

"You look just like him, believe me," Andy said again. He reached down to Manny's pants. "Except Cupid always went around naked," he added, then hooked his finger underneath the elastic waistband and pulled it down, exposing most of Manny's right hip. "Do you want these off?"

“I think so, probably,” Manny mumbled, raising his other hip off the mattress. Andy peeled the pants down and off, then ran his hand back up the whole length of Manny's top leg, feeling every lean, naked inch of it from the ankle to the ass. Manny took a shaky breath and bent his leg forward so that the thigh was modestly covering his genitals. Andy laughed softly and tickled him around the tummy and the butt. “Come on, don't be stupid,” Andy told him. “Look, I'll show you my ugly dick, man, I don't care.” He stripped off his own underpants and tipped his hips backwards to let Manny see his erection. “There it is, no big deal.”

“Yours is good,” Manny said. “I like yours a lot better.” He looked very skinny and brown and pathetic lying there huddled on his side. “Mine is stupid.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Yours ain't got so much stupid skin on it.”

“Fuck, Manny, don't be an idiot,” Andy scolded him gently. He pushed at Manny's knee to get his top leg down and out of the way. Manny reluctantly cooperated, finally allowing his friend to get a full look at him. His penis, long and thin and curved up hard against his belly, was a dark reddish brown, like a stick of raw sausage with a big twitchy vein along one side of it. Andy touched it with his fingertips. “You look really nice, Manny, I'm serious.”

“I don't think so.”

“You've got a Cupid dick,” Andy told him, “with the skin on top.” He touched the knob, which was still mostly hidden by its veiny hood of foreskin. “I like it a lot.”

“Thanks,” Manny said softly. He reached down and started feeling Andy's balls. And then the two boys were kissing again, only this time they were naked and playing with each other's bare boners and testicles and asses; this time they were squirming against each other with their legs and with their bellies; this time they were actually having real, honest-to-god sex right there on Fernandito's bed, both of them actually making love to another boy for the first time in their lives.

Andy didn't wait long before he started working his way downwards, licking and kissing his way down the front of Manny's body, tasting and smelling the tart sweatiness of the skin, down and down Manny's chest and stomach until he was licking between Manny's legs, licking him on the balls, causing him to roll onto his back and to spread his legs with a hoarse moan of pleasure. Andy paused to swallow a mouthful of saliva, then leaned over Manny's erect penis and started sucking on it – first just the fleshy knob of it, then a little more and a little more of it until he had all six or seven inches of the hard thing filling his mouth. Manny started pumping his hips in an eager counter-rhythm to Andy's sucking. Andy, jerking himself off at the same time, was skimming his tongue around and around the foreskin, getting under it where it tasted like sweet garlic, making Manny pump faster. And then, much too soon for Andy, it was over. Before he could fully savor the taste and the feel of another boy's boner in his mouth, he was nearly choking on the sudden warm gush of its semen, like coping with a mouthful of rancid buttermilk. Not especially fond of the taste, he swallowed it all anyway, every dribble and drop. At almost the same moment, unable to control or delay his own orgasm, he finished messily by ejaculating onto Manny's leg.

Neither boy moved or said anything for several moments, and then Manny sheepishly apologized for spilling his load inside Andy's mouth. “I couldn't stop it,” he murmured to his friend. “Sorry.”

“That's OK,” Andy said. “Do it that way every time, man, I liked it.” He picked up his own underpants and used them to clean Manny's leg. “Anyway, I made a worse mess on you, no doubt.”

“It don't matter.”

Andy finished cleaning his friend, then straddled him playfully across the hips. “Next time, would you maybe, like, do it to me?”

“Sure,” Manny smiled, “I want to.”

“It was pretty excellent, right?”

“Yeah, I liked it a lot.”

Andy could feel Manny's dick beneath him. He started rubbing his bare butt cheeks against it. “We still have the rubber,” he reminded the other boy, rapidly growing a fresh boner. “Have you ever used one?”

“No, I never needed it for nothing,” Manny mumbled, also getting hard again. “But it's easy, I think.”

“Yeah, it's no big deal.”

Manny was staring at Andy's penis. “I put it under my mattress,” he said, pointing to the upper bunk. Andy nodded and started to reach for it, then stopped abruptly, frozen by the sound of footsteps and laughter. “Listen,” he whispered, resting both hands on Manny's chest, “did you hear that?”

Manny didn't even pause to answer. He rolled nimbly from beneath the other boy and grabbed for his pants. Andy also went scrambling for his clothes, getting into his soggy under-pants and his jeans before bothering with anything else. There were voices now from the living room. Manny picked up Andy's sweatshirt and tossed it to him. “It's my brothers for sure,” he muttered. “They got back fast.”

“It's all right,” Andy assured him. “Everything is cool. We were just listening to music and shit.” With all his clothes back on, he stepped in front of Manny for one more hug and one more full, long kiss on the mouth. “I had an awesome time, man, thanks.”

“I wish you wasn't leaving.”

“Come to my house tomorrow,” Andy proposed. “Seriously, Manny, come over tomorrow afternoon sometime.”

“I ain't never been inside your house,” Manny said, still holding Andy by the arms as they stood facing each other. “It's OK for sure?”

“Fuck yes, anytime!”

“OK, I'll come tomorrow.”

“We can listen to music and do other shit,” Andy smiled. “And I've got some cool pictures I can show you, too. You'll like them a lot, no doubt.”

Manny shifted his eyes timidly. “You want for me to bring the rubber?”

Andy glanced over his shoulder at the door, making sure that Cesar and Nestor were still safely in the other room. “No, it's all right, I've still got a bunch at home,” he said, then laughed at the realization of what he and Manny were planning for the next day. He reached behind Manny and shoved one hand inside the back of his pants. “I've got four more rubbers at home, man! You think that'll be enough?”

“I think probably,” Manny laughed back.

“For a while, at least,” Andy said, getting his hand between Manny's buttocks. He found the hole inside and started rubbing at it with the tip of his finger. “Make sure you come tomorrow,” he mumbled into Manny's ear.

“I will.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yeah, Andy, I promise you.. from my heart.”