

Billy

by Meriwether Wren

"I'm the only one I know." Leigh was stretched out, six-one, restless, on the bed. Andre was in a desk chair, tilted. His feet, shod, were on the side of the bed near Leigh's chest.

"Advertise."

"Closet sons? I could start a club."

"Kloset Kids Klub. Think about it. Riots. You'd never be alone."

"You can't understand. You grow up until one day you're eight or ten and he's a fag. He tells you what it means. Move your feet. All I see is rubber treads."

"Urethane."

"What?"

"You don't want to know you know. You're in the closet."

"I told you, so I'm out. I'm not ashamed." Andre was motionless.

"I just – how do you tell a Kappa from west Texas?"

"My dad's gay."

"Move your goddam feet."

"My dad's an adulterer."

Leigh pushed Andre's feet off the bed and sat up. "So?"

"Whoremaster? He's also stuffy and fat."

"Dad looks okay."

"I wonder what he's like in bed?"

"That's it. How would you like me asking what kind of fuck your mother is?"

"Ask Dad. He may remember."

"Go to Houston. Any hustler can tell you. From the whore's mouth. How big's his dick? Ask."

"How big's his dick?"

"I mean – shit."

"You know."

"I'm not telling you."

"I guess I can find out."

"That's the point. It isn't funny to me." Leigh stared at nothing a moment, then flopped back on the bed.

Andre replaced his feet. "Kloset Kids Klub. Anglo- Saxon empathy.

Shared protestant shame. Straight kids only?"

"Damn right. You got to draw the line somewhere."

Terry got the last bar stool. A boy squeezed to the bar beside him, in a hurry, and asked for a beer. The barkid – hunky, barechested – cut him and got Terry's whiskey. The boy asked again. "Driver's license." The barkid was bored with the boy already. Terry looked at him in the bar mirror: moonface, tall for fourteen, small for sixteen. The reflection saw he was looked at and smiled. Terry smiled back, amused.

The barkid took the license to the light. He and the senior barkid (twenty-two?) studied it and the boy. He returned the license and drew a beer. Terry shoved out his change, but the boy put his hand on Terry's. "I can pay." He put a dollar on the bar. His smile caught Terry's reflection again. Then he turned. "It's my first time. Here, I mean." The boy looked a little embarrassed, as if no one came to Twinky for the first time.

Terry asked questions. The boy's name was Billy. No last names at Twinky. A swimmer. "I do sixty laps every day the pool's open. If it isn't, I run."

Terry shifted so he couldn't see his own face in the mirror. He felt younger than he looked.

The manager (at thirty the oldest employee except the janitor) threaded his way among the bodies to look at Billy's license. "I don't believe this and the police won't either. Get out." He pushed; the boy didn't resist. "I'll wait for you at the Texaco station." They were gone.

I'm being set up, Terry thought into his drink. Boys at Twinky have homes to go to. Less risk. I take too many risks. Maybe I need gas.

He drove to the full service station. Billy got into the car.

"Is that license real?"

Billy showed it. "That's my picture and stuff. You know."

William Watson. The Westheimer address was beyond the loop, apartments with no lease. "What do I know?"

"My mom's got a friend in the Highway Department."

"So how old are you?"

"Eighteen. Look." His hand was on Terry's again, holding the license.

"You don't need no oil. Six twenty-three." The attendant's tone said he didn't like queers who pick up kids in service stations and don't need gas.

"You want to go home?" The car was moving.

“Whose?”

“Yours.”

For a moment the boy didn't answer. Then, “Twinky. It's gay, isn't it? A gay bar?”

“Yes.”

“Are you gay?”

“I guess.”

“Don't you know?”

“Jesus, kid, I've been married twice and have three children, all of them grown. I'm gay, fun-loving, happy, and queer.”

“Let me out.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Here.”

“Here? It's almost midnight. This is a rotten neighborhood.”

“You don't care.”

“I don't – the hell I don't. Why the hell do you think I came and got you at the fucking Texaco station?”

“Then don't yell at me.”

“I wasn't – oh, shit.” It's his own goddam fault if I yell at him. “You don't want to go home. You hungry? Eighteen-year-old boys are always hungry.”

“Yes.”

Paranoid, Terry talked to a tape recorder in the boy's underwear. “We can get burgers and eat them at my house.” No proposition, no price. Fuck you, cops.

“I worry about him.” Leigh and Andre were in a joint where the cheap atmosphere was authentic.

“He needs that.”

“You'd worry too if you saw a maniac break a bottle of Scotch on his head and then knife him because he wouldn't fall down. I was thirteen. You see that? I grabbed a meat cleaver and chased the faggot out.”

“Life-saver merit badge.”

“I quit the Scouts. No badge anyway. He said you can't drive without a license even to save his goddam life. We waited for a taxi while he bled.”

“Agnes. Bring a pitcher.”

“A couple of his tricks broke into the house –”

“A trick's a customer.”

“Gay talk. A trick's a fuck.”

“Don't get mad.”

“I'm telling you. Three hundred bucks, my *stereo*, the color TV, two watches, and they beat the shit out of him. Next weekend he was out cruising with bandages on his face. Another trick left the front door open half the night. Stole money too. Then he took away my house, so I wouldn't get hurt.”

“Your mind's like mush.”

“Because I loved our house, or because it wasn't safe?”

“You paid for the last pitcher.”

“It was my grandfather's house, big and beautiful until the queers moved in.” Leigh drank a full glass, refilled, thought a moment, then smiled. “We had an exercise room. Weights, the works. We worked out together. No talk. Well, hand me that, or something, but that's all. Anyway, we communicated. That's dumb. I must be drunk.”

“You just started making sense.”

“He gets loud because he doesn't understand me. But there, pushing weights, there's nothing to understand. He's made the study in the new house into a weight room, but I don't – I don't know.”

“Your mind went mushy again.” Andre touched Leigh's shoulder. “Tell me. I'm going to risk my life, so what is there to be afraid of?”

“The crazies. They come in from Pasadena for a blow job, or a queer bash, or both. Even straights get raped. I mean, give head with a knife at their neck then a foot in the balls. And they're ashamed to go to the police. Gee, officer, sir, I sucked a nigger's cock and he kicked me.”

Billy munched a Whopper, slurped milk, crunched fried onion rings. Terry put the trash in a compactor and glasses in the dishwasher. Billy said, “That was excellent.” He stretched. “When do we go to bed?”

“When do you go home?”

“Monday's okay. I got to go to school first, though.”

The whole weekend. It was absurd. “Look. When I bring a trick home I want to know what it's going to cost.”

“You're too late. I'm already here.”

“So what's it going to cost?”

Billy didn't answer for a moment. He looked down at his hands, then looked straight at Terry. “My mom's a hooker. I'm not.”

When Billy was asleep, Terry watched him breathe. He'd been odd; eager, then tentative, even afraid. Terry kissed Billy's lips, and Billy, asleep or awake, smiled.

“Mom was dying. Listen, damnit. You ask me a question, so you get an answer. Cancer of the cervix. Started there, or spread there, I don't know. I was eight.”

“Your dad tricked with a male nurse under her bed.”

“He was depressed. This guy, Eddie Sanchez, was in love with him. But no sex. Dad didn't dig that.”

“You may not be smart, but at least you're clear.”

“He liked Eddie, or – I don't know – Eddie says he likes being loved. Anyway, they see a gay hustler. Dad tells Eddie, if you looked like that, I'd fuck you. So fuck him, Eddie says.”

“Orpheus ascendant.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he loved your mother.”

“Orpheus looked back.”

“I could read when I was four. That's how.” They'd body surfed for over an hour; now they lay on beach towels.

“Nobody reads in Dallas.”

“It was Titi. She read to me. It was something to do. I started reading back. I remember because she made a big deal out of it. Every hooker in the house came to a party so I could read to them.”

“How old are you now?”

“Eighteen.”

“And just started tenth grade? What did you do? Forget how to read?”

“All you know's my driver's license. That way you're safe.”

“Safe for thirty years in Huntsville.”

“The license. I figured it out myself.” He was on his elbows, looking serious. “It protects you.”

Terry touched Billy's hair. “It protects me.”

“See, Terry. It's been bad in Houston.”

“You shouldn't have come.”

“Titi died. Her heart was too big.”

“Rheumatic heart, or were you being poetic?”

“That's it.” Billy lay back again. “She was an old hooker. She had an old man, but kept the son of a bitch away. Said I was all the man she needed.”

“Tell me about Houston.”

Billy rolled over to face Terry and laughed. “Since last night?” No. He turned away. “After Titi, Mom got Rudi. He wants me to sell my

ass.”

“Wait. This is your mother's – ”

“Old man. Pimp, Terry.”

“He'd let you?”

“Let me? He wants to be the first. Now it's too late.”

“Billy, are you saying – ”

“I'd have cut his dick off first.”

Terry closed his eyes. “Does your mother know?”

“Sure. But she's a hooker. Don't you know about hookers and pimps?”

“I'm learning.”

“If he's my pimp, he don't even have to pay.”

“He doesn't.” This goddam baby wants me to think I can save him from pimp's prick. “So you're on the street without him. I'm queer, but I'm not stupid.”

Billy lay on his back and looked at the sky. “They think I'm at Aunt Luanne's. She's not my aunt. Sort of a cousin, I think. Mom, I mean Rudi, pays her to feed me. I sleep there, too.”

“That's the home you go back to Monday.”

“Uncle Al told me to get out. I was two weeks behind. Forty bucks. He said, go hit your mom between tricks. So I left.”

“Say you got out of my car last night, got mugged, raped, and killed. Who'd care?” Billy's mouth was a hard line. What do I know about whores' kids? “I believe you. I'm dumb.”

“No. You're smart.”

“Dumb. I didn't know hookers had sons.”

“She wasn't a hooker than. Some dude knocked her up in high school. Someday I'm going back to Waco and find that son of a bitch. I just don't know his name.”

“Would your grandparents know?”

“I wrote them. They didn't answer.”

“We better go.”

“Why? It's nice here.” Billy put a hand on Terry's chest.

“You have to give Uncle Al forty bucks.”

“Don't pay me Terry.”

“Well, I'll have to buy you clothes.”

“No. I'll get along.”

“Bullshit.”

“Don't yell.”

What does this goddam kid expect? “Okay. Quietly. I can spend

money on gasoline to bring you to Galveston. I can buy food. So I can buy clothes, too.”

“All right. But no cash, right?”

“What about your goddam lunch money?”

“Can't I carry sandwiches?”

“He's been unfair to me. Ever since I was eight. Screwed around with my personality. Never understood me or tried to. He's a bad father. It's not – you're very fair – because he's queer. He just puts his sex life ahead of my ordinary needs as a healthy American son.”

“Did I sound that stupid?”

“That's what I hear.”

“He lent me the money for this apartment. When I graduate, I can sell it, pay him back, and bank the difference. Without touching my trust fund. He hasn't taken a nickel out of it ever: It just grows.”

“Poor big rich kid.”

“How can I talk about what I can't describe? I feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The fags he fucks. They don't mean anything. Sure, some have hurt him; he can like someone too much. He just doesn't love them exactly. He – shit. I'm not making sense.”

“Say it. He...”

“He?”

“He loves you.”

“Right. But he can't say that.”

“For Christ's sake, neither can you. Now, slowly, repeat after me. I love my father.”

“You do?”

“Did you call your mother?”

“She's okay; Yes, I did.”

He's hiding something. “Did you swim?”

“Pool wasn't open.”

Terry drove east. “What did you do?”

“Ran. I don't mind waiting. I did all my homework, too.”

“How can the team practice?”

“They just do.”

“It's such a big deal you don't want to talk about it.”

“It's no big deal.”

"It's team practice and you damn well do care."

"Don't yell, Terry."

Terry swore softly. "Okay. But tell me."

"They all... No."

"They all what?"

"There's a club. We don't have a swim coach at school. Just a sponsor. That's all."

"How much does it cost?"

"I only told you so you wouldn't be mad at me."

"What is it called?"

"The Wesleyan."

Terry turned right, drove four blocks and turned right again. "You know where it is?"

"Don't —"

"You want me to yell at you?"

"No."

"Then show me where the goddam thing is."

"Left on Wesleyan." A long silence. "Terry."

"Yah."

"One of the guys on the team lives near St. Thomas. If I ride with him, I can get back to the house easy. You won't have to pick me up."

You could have been taking the bus. "You'll get home before I do."

"I'll wait on the steps. It's cool."

On Avoldale? No, you will not wait on the steps. "I'll give you a key." And the alarm code. Billy, you work fast. And I'm a high-risk faggot.

Leigh unlocked the front door and punched the code on the alarm box opposite. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"It was your idea."

"I invited you. You manipulated the rest."

"You can be manipulated in any direction you are anxious to go."

"Come on up. You can have the guest room."

"Close to your dad?"

"Forget that."

"You keep reminding me."

"These rooms are Dad's. This was supposed to be a study."

Andre whistled. "Nautilus at home. Where you and he commune."

"In the old house. His desk and stuff are over here in the bed room."

"What's this?" Andre picked up an algebra text book in a high school

protective binder. Other school books and a notebook were on the desk. On a chair were jeans and an undersized sweat shirt labeled PROPERTY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT. “Your dad’s got a roommate.”

Leigh frowned. “No. Somebody’s kid – he’s got straight friends, lots of them. He just changed clothes here after school. Dad did someone a favor.”

“Sure,”

“Dad’s gay, but he’s no pervert.”

“What did I say?”

“He could have made passes at friends of mine, but he never did,”

Andre held the jeans to his waist. They were far too short.

“Come on. Stuff your crap upstairs. I want you to know, that’s all.”

Andre obeyed.

Later Leigh found Coors in the fridge. He opened two. “I guess,” Andre said, relaxed, “being queer for kids is pretty bad.”

“The worst. I know.”

“How?”

“I tried it once.” He examined Andre’s face. “I didn’t know. Maybe it’s hereditary. I was fifteen. I went to the Greyhound bus station, with a bag, like I’d just got to town, like a runaway, you know.”

“Like, I know.”

“Right away, this man was talking to me. He was what they call a chicken hawk. I said I was from somewhere, Dallas.”

“Nice man?”

“He said Houston wasn’t safe. He’d help me out. We went to his car. Christ. I remember it. A blue Pontiac.”

“Gimme another Coors. What’s with your father’s politics that he buys this stuff? And stop shaking.”

“He groped me in the car. I let him unzip me.”

“While he was driving? Thanks.”

“I helped. But I didn’t get stiff. I was afraid I would, but I didn’t. Hey, kid, get it up, he said. He stopped the car – one of those dark streets just north of the bayou. You wouldn’t know. Anyway, he pulled out his cock and put my hand on it. He said suck it. I knew then I didn’t want to. Ever. He grabbed my arm and twisted it. Suck it, he said. I swung my right fist around into his mouth. He cut my hand, but I didn’t notice it then. I just got out of the car and waited for him to come after me. He didn’t. He called me a motherfucker a few times and drove off.”

Andre grinned in admiration. “He wouldn’t eat a tough chicken?”

Terry drove into the Texaco station. Billy got out to use the rest room. "Fill it and check the oil," Terry said. After a while Billy got back in the car.

"Want to see my driver's license, mister?"

"Yes. Why look at that. You really are eighteen years old."

"Your oil's okay, sir. That's seventeen eighty-five." It was the same attendant, real sweet this time.

Terry paid and drove off. "Hungry?"

"Uh-huh. How about a Whopper, onion rings, and milk?"

"I got milk at home, kid."

"You won't try nothing if I Go with you?"

"That's right."

Driving from Burger King, Billy snuggled close. "One week. After a year you have an anniversary. What do you have after a week?"

"A septenary?"

"I'm going to do something tonight I haven't done before. Something you'll like. A set – set –"

"Septenary."

"Septenary present."

Billy pressed the double code to open the garage door. In the kitchen, Leigh said, "That's Dad."

"Sit down. He won't see you when he comes in. Sit. Don't you want his reaction?"

"I should have phoned. This isn't fair to him."

"He knows about the game tomorrow night."

"What if he forgot?"

Terry, getting out of the car, saw that the alarm was off.

He unlocked the door and moved in cautiously. The sight of Andre did not alarm him. Billy, his hands full, said, "Move your ass, Terry."

"Billy, we have company." He saw Leigh. "There, behind you, is my son, Leigh. And –"

"Andre Horton. We haven't met before, sir."

"This is Billy Watson."

Leigh was up. He passed Billy. "It's late."

Billy said, "I'll cut these in half. They're big. And there's enough onions for everybody."

"Not us. I guess it's okay for Andre to use the guest room. Or will... he... ?"

"The guest room is fine, Andre." He turned to Leigh. "Andre's free

to do as he likes in your home.”

“Yeah. And right now we're free to go to bed.”

At the guest room, Andre stopped. “I have to starve because you're pissed.”

“Go eat their fucking hamburgers.”

“That kid could punch your father in the teeth if he wanted to.”

“Don't try to get to me.”

When Andre emerged from the shower, Leigh was lying on the guest room bed. “Move over.” Leigh moved and Andre sat by him. “Remember when you wanted to know how I felt about gays? I wondered if you were talking about yourself.”

“I know. I risked that.”

“And I wondered if I should risk refusing. I wasn't sure how far I'd go to keep you as a friend.” He put his hand on Leigh's stomach. “Suppose it was the other way. What would you do?”

“If I said no?”

“I'd find a better friend.”

Leigh touched Andre's hand. “I'd try, I think. I don't think I could, though. Is this some kind of test? Did I pass?”

“No. But give that kid down there a break.”

“What's the connection?”

“Just get out of here before I get a hard on and change my mind.”

In the kitchen, Billy had said, “He doesn't like me.”

“I'm the one he's mad at.”

“He knows? I mean –”

“He's never liked it much.”

“I don't want the hamburger.”

“Or the onions? I don't either.”

“I can put all this in the fridge.”

“All right.”

“One fucked set – septenary.”

“Too bad.”

“I wanted it special. You'll probably find out why. Don't get mad if I don't tell you now. It may not happen.”

Leigh put on a jock and shorts and went down to the exercise room. He was going to be nice. “Your friend still asleep?” He didn't really hear the answer. He began doing warm-ups. As he finished, his father was setting the timer on the cycle. “Is he staying long?”

“As long as I can keep him here.”

Fuck it. Leigh went back to his room, dressed, and then went to the kitchen.

Terry finished ten minutes on the cycle, went to the bedroom and stripped for the shower. Billy was awake. "Wait for me, Terry."

Andre, coming to the kitchen, heard them. "They're having fun up there. In the shower."

Leigh listened, then slammed the door. "That's obscene."

"People laughing?" He looked at the stove. "Your idea of an omelet is obscene."

"Fix your own."

"You don't want to know, do you?"

"Don't tell me, then. You want an obscene omelet?"

"Obscener the better."

Leigh left when Terry and Billy came to the kitchen.

"I'll try to get him back," Andre said to Terry.

"Just stay with him. He'll be all right later."

Billy's distress was obvious. Terry kissed him gently. "He's not around much. I told him you're staying as long as you want to."

"You'll change your mind."

"No. He doesn't have that much influence."

"It's not just him. How do you want your eggs?"

Leigh opened the front door. What he saw pleased him.

The woman was small, pretty, maybe thirty. What you noticed were her breasts. A lot of lace over a lot of them. Sleazy respectability. The dude's shirt was open to the waist even though he was wearing a suede jacket. "How do," said the man. "This where Billy Watson's been sleeping lately? This here's his mom."

"Sure. Come in. I'll get him."

"No need. We really want to see, you know, the man?"

"I know." Leigh went to the kitchen. "Dad, some people to see you. Your friend's mom's one of them."

Terry didn't answer, didn't look at Billy, but went.

"Your mom come to take you home?"

"She don't – she doesn't want me at home."

"You better come on."

"I could make it worse."

"What worse?"

Billy's distress was almost enough to move Leigh. "I asked her not to

come. Not to let him come.”

Fuck you, Leigh said silently, and followed Billy into the living room.

“Here he is,” Terry said. “Safe.”

“You sure have a fine group of good looking boys here,” the dude said.

“You met my son. I think he let you in.”

Leigh said to Andre, “He tried to con me in the kitchen. Said he didn't want to come in here. Now look at him.”

“This is something. A whore and a pimp in a friend's living room. You don't see that every day.”

“Yes you do. Just not this cheap.”

The pimp lit a cigarette and dropped the match on the rug. “Now, mister, let's you and me let them visit. She ain't seen her little boy for two weeks. Maybe they'll compare notes, like?” He put an arm around Terry's shoulders, pushing him away from Billy and his mother. “I dig the gay scene, man.” He waved to include Leigh and Andre. “We're all friends here. We all like, you know, a little action? For a change?”

“Some people don't,” Terry said, sitting beside Andre to escape the arm.

The pimp looked a sneer at Leigh and turned away.

“Billy-boy, c'mere.” Billy looked. “Billy-boy, you just tell your friend here – our friend – he wants to talk to me. Private.”

Billy stared. “I guess he knows it now.”

“Sure thing,” Terry said. “Come to my office.” He took a card from his billfold. “Monday. Anytime.”

“Let's fuck her,” Leigh said.

“And come tell Billy the details? What every little boy should know about his mama.”

The pimp was loud after examining the card. “Well, sir, we got to go. Peg needs her beauty sleep. Saturday night she's real busy.” He dropped his cigarette onto the rug. Leigh moved to get it, but Billy was already there.

“Pleased to meet you.” Peg said generally, departing. Billy put the cigarette out, using spit on his fingers. No one spoke. Billy crossed the room, picking up the discarded match as he went. “I'll throw out those eggs, Terry. They're no good now. I'll start over.”

Leigh watched his father follow Billy. “Son of a forty- buck whore. And a cheap pimp and a queer hustler who's going to blackmail my father.”

“The pimp's not his father.”

“So? Should I say, keep your ass clean, kid; it's my dad's?”

“I think he's on our side.”

“Ours?”

“You got me down here to share your life, blood brothers; lover, man, if I say you got to.”

“All right. Ours. But I don't have to agree.”

“You do. I think you do.”

“Don't get too close to Dad. I don't need that, too.”

While Billy scraped eggs into the sink, he said, “He's going to blackmail you.”

“He thinks he is. I've been there.”

“Terry.” Billy stood, facing him, serious. “Terry, listen. Rudi picked you out for me.”

“Rudi?”

“Rudolpho. Mom's old man. The pimp. He picked you out.”

Terry sat, silent.

“When Mom's working, he goes to the bars.”

“I never saw – ”

“He saw you. You like the young hustlers. They told him. He watched you, too. You go to Twinky Friday nights. You know. You did go. He got the driver's license so I could follow you in.”

“He set me up. You both did.” I thought so from the first. Too good. Too goddam wonderful.

“He waited a week, to see if you'd really go for me.”

“You shit,” Terry said. “You stinking little pile of wet shit.”

“I'll go.”

“You're fucking right.”

“And leave all the stuff.”

“Right now. And give me the key. Forget the copy you made, mother fucker. I'm changing the alarm code this morning and the locks Monday.”

Billy put the key on the kitchen table. It was attached to a disk. On one side was a swimmer and on the other “T.C./for Billy.” They'd picked it out and engraved it Thursday. “I'll pay you back for the swim club, and I won't go again. I didn't copy the key.”

“Just get out. Go back to sucking that pimp's prick.”

Billy had to pass behind Terry. “I'm going. Good bye.” He reached out and touched the back of Terry's neck. He whispered, “I love you.”

“God damn you!” Terry screamed. “Damn you, damn you, damn you!” Billy scrambled for the door, but Terry caught his wrist, yelling, “You whore's bastard, I – ”

Billy bit Terry's hand as hard as he could. Released, he reached the door just as Leigh did from the other side. Leigh slowed Billy, but it was Andre who caught him in the hall and brought him back to the kitchen door.

“Damn him.” Terry said. “I felt that.”

Leigh looked from one to the other. “What did he do?”

“Billy,” Terry said, “go up to the bathroom.”

“You'll hurt me.”

“No, I won't. Goddammit, I'm bleeding. Where you bit me. Get the iodine.”

“We don't have any.”

“Get something. You want me to have rabies? Jesus!”

No one moved. “Well, let him go. He can't even get a goddam Band-aid if you don't let him go.”

Andre released Billy. The boy shrugged off Leigh's hand and looked toward the front door.

“See what you did to my hand?” Terry said.

Billy came closer, but stayed out of reach. “I'm sorry.”

“Now do something about it. Leigh, pour me a goddam whiskey. For snake bite.” Billy started up the stairs.

“Shit, Andre, tonight at the Astrodome won't be half this show.”

Leigh poured Terry two fingers of Scotch. Andre took a glass and held it out. “Hell,” Leigh said, “I'll have one, too.” He poured. “Dad. What are you going to do? About Billy.”

“Do?”

“You want a picture?”

“Draw it. Andre's a man of the world.” His glass was empty. He held it out.

Leigh poured. “Dad He's got to go. I'll tell him if you won't.”

“Stay put.”

“Remember that blackmailing pansy? Edwin? I saved you. What do you want now? The rest of your life paying that pimp, or would you rather go to jail?”

“What do you care? You're covered. You've got your mother's estate.”

“I don't care about the money. You're my father.” He turned away from Terry only to see Billy returning. Leigh said it again, “You're my

father. Oh, shit.”

Billy had a pamphlet with a red cross on it and a box of Band-aids. When Leigh didn't go on, he started, “It says –” then looked at Leigh again.

“What does it say?” Terry ignored Leigh.

“Wash with soap and water, but stop the bleeding first.”

“Dad!” Leigh said.

“Billy, Leigh wants to know what all the fuss is about. Tell him.”

“No, Terry. Please.”

“All right. Tell him just the last thing you said.”

“No. I'll tell him the rest if you really want.”

“Say it.”

“It was only for you.”

“I want him to hear it.”

“I'll say it a hundred times when we're alone. All you want. Let me wash your hand.”

“Say it!”

“I'll say it. Then I'll go. You won't stop me this time.”

“I wasn't trying to stop you before.” Terry went to the sink and turned on the tap. “Christ, look at all these eggs.” He turned on the water and the disposal.

“Be careful.” Billy washed the eggs away and turned the disposal off. “It says – Let me do it.” He held Terry's hand under the faucet, then rubbed soap on and rinsed.

Leigh came over to watch.

Billy said, “It's not so bad. Just that one place.” He dried it with a paper towel. I'll put a Band-aid on it.”

“Which fang was it?” Terry asked. “It's my bite. I've got a right to know.”

Billy giggled. “This one.” He touched his left incisor.

“I'll be damned,” Leigh said.

Billy looked up, surprised.

Leigh touched Billy on the arm. “What was it you said? What did you say to him?”

Billy looked at Terry. “I mean it. If I have to say it now, I'll go. I won't come back.”

“No,” Leigh said. “Don't go. Maybe I know anyway.”

Andre asked Leigh, “Can you say it now?”

“I always could. But why should I?”