

A Boy's Love And a Whore's Oath

by Meriwether Wren

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath.

– The Fool, “King Lear,” 3.6

“Money isn't everything,” his father said. “In your case, it isn't anything.”

Chase had an unpaid for BMW in the driveway. He suspected that his father was not going to pay for it. It's not fair, Chase thought. I'm only fourteen. “Where can I get twenty thousand dollars?”

“Ask your mother.”

That wasn't fair either. His mother was in St. Croix. She never had any money left over for Chase. “She always says ask you.”

His father guffawed. “Ask what's his name. If you're a whore, get paid for it.”

“His name's Gene. He hasn't got much money. I give him some of mine. I mean I did.”

“He works in a bank, doesn't he? He can embezzle it.”

“He'd go to jail.”

“So? Screwing a fourteen-year-old boy is a felony, as he certainly knows, even if you don't. He should thank me for not calling in the police. Yes. Get him to write a letter. A nice long letter. A sort of thank-you note.”

Harrison Cleveland – that was Chase's father's name – Harrison Cleveland seemed quite cheerful. Chase's hope rose. “Then will you pay for the car? Gene could write a real nice note. I'd help him.”

“Well, let's see. Tell him to write how he met you, exactly what you two do, I mean full details, who puts what where, you know what I mean? It would be interesting reading, things I don't know much about. With dates and places. Yessir. Then I'll think about it.”

Chase realized, not for the first time, that his father's cheerfulness was fake. "You'd give it to the police."

"Well, yes, maybe. One or the other. I'd pay for the car, or I'd give it to the police." By "it," Chase understood his father meant the letter.

"You'd give it to the police." Chase was becoming very pessimistic.

"About ninety-nine percent sure – but one percent says I'd pay for the car."

"Dad!"

"Take a chance. I might even help you get a driver's license."

"Dad." Chase was plaintive. "You said I needed a car. I mean, it's miles to anywhere." His father had three cars and two chauffeurs. Chase had been forbidden to use them since his father found out about Gene. Bill Hopkins, who drove the Mercedes, had told.

"Take taxis."

"You won't give me any money."

"Money, my son, isn't everything. Forgive me reminding you. Art, music, books..." Cleveland waved his hand vaguely. "Bill will drive that car back. Who's the dealer? Never mind. BMW's Nepritz, right?"

"Yes," Chase said, looking at the floor. He handed his father the keys.

Bill Hopkins stood in the doorway. He seemed always to know when Cleveland wanted him.

"Bill. Here are the keys to that BMW. Use a hammer on the front end. Mess it up good. Headlights, grille. Then take it back to Nepritz. Tell him we're sorry, Chase and I. Also tell him he's a stupid asshole. Got that? Quote unquote."

"Yes, sir," Bill said.

"Gus can follow to bring you back."

Chase almost hid his agony and despair. "What'll I do?"

"Art," his father said. "The house is full of splendid pictures. Contemplate Henry Moore's Redundant Figure, or whatever it's called in the garden. Play Wagner on videotape. Read books. Hell, maybe getting screwed is good for a kid. Read Plato."

After an hour of very boring swimming alone in the pool, Chase wandered naked into the library. Mrs. Austin, the housekeeper, saw him. "Mr. Chase Cleveland," she said severely, "go put clothes on now!"

"Shut up," Chase said mildly, "or I'll piss on you."

"I'll tell your father."

"If you do I'll piss on the rug."

She left, and Chase leaned on a wood and glass case in the center of

the room. He could see himself in a huge mirror. He smiled and posed. He went close to the mirror, turned his back to it, bent over, and looked back at himself between his legs. "I'm a nice asshole," he said aloud. "I've got one and I am one." He smiled at his upside down face and right side up bottom, then straightened up and did body builder poses. He held onto his penis until it was almost erect, then leaned on the case provocatively. On as disinterested an evaluation as was possible for him, he looked good. Good muscles, good tan, nothing special face unless he smiled. He sighed and said, "Useless."

He looked into the case. It contained a small book with large, brilliant letters that contained pictures. Handpainted and very old. Chase pulled gently on the lid. To his surprise, it opened. "Dad forgot to lock it," he said, falling into a habit of talking to himself aloud today. He put the lid down and walked back a few steps, thoughtful. Then he went to his room and put on jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers.

"Where did you get this?" the book-dealer asked. He seemed angry.

"It's mine," Chase said. "If you don't want it, give it back."

"It's yours. So? Who are you?"

"What's it to you?" Chase was getting worried.

The dealer changed his manner. "Well, quite a bit. You see, if I don't know who it is I'm buying it from, I can't sell it. So tell me your name, and show me some identification, and maybe we can make a deal."

"That's okay," Chase said, relieved. "I'm Chase Cleveland."

"Un-huh. Any relation to Harrison Cleveland?"

"He's my dad."

"I see. Now, I think, I understand. He gave you this book, I bet, maybe as a birthday present, and you have documents to prove it?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, Chase Cleveland, I'm not going to give you a lecture on theft, but..." He did anyway.

Gene was naked on the bed in his one-room apartment. He was twenty-nine, six-two, with a light blond mustache and large muscles. His flaccid penis was also large. Chase loved him, and Gene knew it. "What you got there, Ralph?" Gene always called Chase Ralph, even though he knew his real name. Gene wasn't Gene's real name. Chase didn't know what it was, except that it wasn't Gene.

"I thought you'd be at work."

"Then why did you come?" Gene looked at Chase through lowered

eyelids. “Your chauffeur was fucking bored and you were cruising. You didn't find another trick you liked, so you came here. What you got there for me?”

Chase got on the bed and kissed Gene, until Gene pulled the hair at the back of Chase's head. “It's nothing, and I wasn't cruising. Just a book.”

“Let me see.” Chase did. Gene whistled. “This is – What the hell, Ralph? You swipe this?”

“I was going to sell it. I need the money.”

“What the hell you need money for?”

“Dad stopped my allowance.”

“No shit.” Gene was visibly irritated. “Why?”

“Bill Hopkins told him about you.”

“Jesus Christ!” Gene sat up in the bed. “You said you could trust that son of a bitch.”

“Yes, but I didn't know my father – ”

“Your goddam father. Fuckall, man. Was he mad? What's he going to do? “

“He was mad, sort of. Last night he said I couldn't use his cars anymore.” He decided not to tell Gene about the BMW. “I walked here.”

“You – you walked?” It was all obviously very surprising to Gene.

“I guess I had to. I don't have a bike. You know, we live so far out.” Chase was feeling worried. Gene's reaction wasn't reassuring. Chase began to play with Gene's penis, to sort of change the subject.

“Hold it, Ralph.” Gene pushed Chase's hand away, “You know what else your father did? He got me fired. That's why I'm home this afternoon. I got fired this morning. Now I know why.”

“Dad wouldn't do that.” Chase put his hand back.

“He did. Now get your goddam hand off my prick. We got problems.”

“He doesn't know your name.”

“Then why did I get fired?”

Chase couldn't answer that. “Can we go somewhere, Gene? I mean just you and me?”

“Your old man would slap my ass in jail. No way, Ralph, I've been there.”

“In jail ?” The idea excited Chase.

“Yeah. That's where I got these tattoos.” There were crude hearts and daggers on Gene's upper arms.

“I thought you got those in the navy.”

“Same thing. Now let go of my dick, dammit. This is serious.”

Chase felt desperate. “Look, Gene. This book's worth lots of money. Couldn't we maybe go to St. Louis and sell it there? I mean, around here, they ask a lot of questions.”

Gene looked at the book and then at Chase. “Let me think a little.”

“And after, we could go to Mexico. We can live cheap there. I mean, just us.” Chase began again trying to arouse Gene's penis.

“Yeah. Maybe it's an idea.” Gene lay back. “Get your head into it if you're going to keep doing that.”

“Shall I pull my pants off?”

“I guess. Strip, Ralph. What the shit.”

Later, much later, Chase whispered, “I love you, Gene.”

“I love you too, Ralph. I swear to God, but I got to eat.” Gene swung himself off the bed and went to the toilet. “We got no money to travel on. Fencing this book's gonna be a bitch. Can you steal some stuff easy to sell, like gold watches, a big diamond, you know the kind of stuff?” He urinated.

“Then we can live together, just us, all the time?”

“New Orleans, Mexico – you name it. It's all you and me, Ralph. I fuckin' swear it. Go home and steal that stuff and come back tonight. I'll fence it and we can cut out on the night bus.”

Chase went into the bathroom and kissed Gene's chest, stomach and crotch until the pull on his hair drew him away. “It'll be great, Gene, won't it?”

“You fuckin' right. Look, Ralph, don't get caught. Now get dressed and move your ass. You got a long walk.”

Harrison Cleveland's Rolex Oyster was heavy with gold, and some of Chase's mother's diamonds were in his father's file cabinet that should have been locked but wasn't. Two gold bracelets were very heavy. Chase figured that was as much as he could carry without anyone noticing. He went to the kitchen and, ignoring the cook, put a hamburger into the microwave. He ate it with a glass of milk and then walked back into town. As he walked the sun set and the day grew dark.

Gene was gone. The apartment door was open, but all Gene's stuff was gone. The book too. “Gene had to go,” Chase said aloud, reassuring himself again. “He'll meet me at the bus station.”

The bus station. Trailways or Greyhound? They were about ten blocks apart. Chase would go to one and then the other. Gene would be

looking for him, too, so they couldn't miss. "He ought to have left a note," Chase said, then repented, thinking, he doesn't like to write much.

Gene wouldn't like to find Chase talking to a man, so Chase avoided the many eyes that tried to catch his attention, and refused to talk to three men who took a more direct approach. But when the policeman looked at Chase, Chase knew immediately that the policeman had found what he was looking for. "You Chase Cleveland?" he asked.

"No."

"What's your name?"

"Ralph."

"Ralph who?"

"Ralph –" Chase's mind went blank.

"All right, Chase, come on. Your father wants to talk' to you."

"I'm not Chase."

"All right. That's fine, Ralph. Just come on anyway."

"I want a lawyer." Chase had seen enough television to know what to say.

"Sure, Ralph. But I better tell you that I know you have on your person a gold watch, and diamond and gold jewelry, stolen from Mr. Harrison Cleveland. Mr. Cleveland might just be willing to give you a break, Ralph, if your turn out to be Chase Cleveland."

"Okay," Chase said wearily. "Let's go see Dad." He would have liked to ask about Gene and the book, but all he really wanted now was for Gene to make it to St. Louis. After he sold the book, Gene would find some way to take Chase to Mexico.

"You're either tougher or stupider than I thought you were," Harrison Cleveland said. "Probably both."

Chase wasn't talking without a lawyer.

"Stupid. Tell him, Harry."

The policeman said, "Isaac Moss. Do you know who he is?"

Chase still waited for his lawyer.

"He buys and sells books."

"Oh," Chase said, involuntarily.

"Isaac Moss telephoned me this afternoon about a book you wanted to sell. He thought your father would like to know."

"Chase," his father said, "you took the things you stole to your friend's apartment, but he wasn't there. I advised Harry to go get you after you'd been to Greyhound and Trailways twice each. Your buddy's

gone.”

“Good.”

“Good. Fine. Dandy. Until he tries to sell that illuminated breviary you gave him. Then we've got him.”

Chase was thinking. “What for?”

“Theft.”

“I gave it to him.”

“Sodomy with a juvenile.”

“He never touched me.”

“Bill saw you in bed together.”

“We were playing blackjack.”

“With your clothes off?”

“Chase giggled. “Strip blackjack.”

His father looked at the policeman, who shrugged.

“Well, maybe there's some comfort. You may not be stupid.”

They arrested Gene anyway. Harrison Cleveland was jubilant. “Your friend Gene isn't Gene, Chase. He's Dominic Andreyev, who was first arrested thirteen years ago for mugging a queer. He's been indicted in Indiana for organizing boys your age to work as prostitutes, and for possession and sale of kiddie-porn. That was last year. He walked out on his bail and met you. You know that bank job he had? It wasn't a bank. It was a banker. Your mother's favorite bridge partner, Rick Turnbull. He got travel money from Rick while you were stealing my watch. Did you know he was cheating on you?”

Chase's viscera churned: fear for Gene's safety, disbelief in the accusations, jealousy of Rick Turnbull, hatred of his father – nausea swept over him and he vomited his breakfast onto his father's favorite bearskin rug.

“Goddam,” said his father, without moving to comfort the boy. “You really care. Son of a bitch. Look what you've done to the bearskin.”

Nathan Martins, M. A., Ph. D. (dissertation topic: “The Provocative Child: Infantile Behavior and Family Neurosis”), like most doctors of whatever sort, did not usually make house calls. Harrison Cleveland's house was, however, a place to see, and its owner paid rather well. Dr. Martins was nevertheless afraid that his prognosis would not please Mr. Cleveland.

“You're unrealistic about money,” he said, speaking to Chase but intending for his message to reach Mr. Cleveland (Dr. Martins refused,

ever, to refer to someone present in the third person.)

“I think his parents can be blamed for that,” Harrison Cleveland said, understanding Dr. Martins' intention.

“Blame isn't important, Mr. Cleveland. What interests us – or ought to interest us – is helping you, Chase, to understand the realities about money.”

“I thought,” Chase said, “we had plenty.”

“We do,” his father said, “but you don't.”

“We can come back to that,” Dr. Martins said hastily; that fight belonged in a better context. “You're otherwise fairly healthy, both mentally and physically.”

“Doesn't wanting to be screwed by a felonious male prostitute indicate a little mental screw up?”

Dr. Martins ignored the unintended pun; getting into that could upset the father too much just now. “It would, certainly, if you felt guilty about it, Chase. Do you?”

“No. I just want Gene –”

“Oh shit!” his father interrupted. Then he reddened. “Sorry,” he said to Dr. Martins. “I thought I was over that.”

“Go ahead, Chase,” Dr. Martins said.

“I want Gene back. I don't care if he is a prostitute.”

“Do you have the money to pay for him?”

Chase looked at his father. “No.”

“So,” Cleveland said, “you'll have to leave him to Uncle Rick, if Rick still wants him when he gets out of jail.

“I'll still want him, and maybe I'll have money then.”

“If I'm dead.”

“Dead?” Chase thought, then decided. “I would. Yes, I would.”

“One more line like that and I'll cut you out of my will in self defense. What are you planning to use? Arsenic? Forget it. No matter what I die of, there'll be an autopsy.”

That had been stupid. “I wouldn't kill you, Dad.”

“The feeling is mutual. I get tempted though.”

Dr. Martins was enthusiastic. “That's realistic! You are both strong personalities. That can mean hostility, it always does, but it can also mean respect.”

“All right. Realism. What the hell do I do about school for Chase? Do I tell his headmaster that he has a penchant for men, preferably recently out of jail?”

“No,” Chase said. “You stay out of the school.”

Dr. Martins looked inquiringly at the father.

“You can get expelled for crap like that.”

“Then why do I have to go away to school?”

“So you won't pick up any more criminals, steal any more breviaries, and leave the goddam jewelry alone. What's why.”

Chase got angry. “Well, what do you expect when you won't give me any money? And you won't let me drive, and Bill spies on me, and all that fucking crap?”

“It was a damned good thing that Bill did spy on you.”

“Was it?” Dr. Martins' mild question stopped Cleveland briefly.

Chase cut in. “Nothing would have happened!”

“You'd still be having your ass reamed out by that pervert.”

“I wish I was, right now!” When no one spoke immediately, Chase added, “We sucked each other's cocks too, and I wish we still could. Goddam Bill, goddam Bill, goddam Bill –” A sob stopped him, ashamed.

“Look, Dr. Martins, you can't say a fourteen-year-old boy having an affair with a male prostitute, or any prostitute, female, neuter, or sheep, is a healthy thing.”

“As a matter of fact, I haven't said that.”

“Well?”

“My impression is that you, Chase, and you, Mr. Cleveland, differ as to its health.”

“So I'm wrong.”

“I haven't said that either.”

“What the hell do you say?”

“About health? Mental health? You both seem pretty healthy. Chase is feeling bad because he has lost a lover, he cared for very much. You are feeling bad because Chase had this lover and also because Chase stole from you in an effort to maintain the relationship. It appears that you are both justified in feeling bad about all this. I'd say that, under the circumstances, it would be unhealthy not to react as you both do.”

“All right, doctor.” Harrison Cleveland respected expert opinion in areas he did not understand well. “I'll accept that. But I've got to think about this. Chase takes on a pederastic pimp. How long do you suppose it would have been before he got into blackmail, extortion? He's not the type to settle for the kid's pocket money.”

“Could Gene have blackmailed you, Chase?”

“He wouldn't have,” Chase said, but by now he wasn't absolutely certain Gene wouldn't have wanted more money, not if Uncle Rick – he

didn't pursue the thought.

"But could he?" Dr. Martins insisted. "Did he take any pictures of you, for example?"

"In living color," Cleveland said, picking up an envelope from his desk, "using Chase's own Polaroid, right? Would you like to see my son's formerly private parts? Or how about a couple of shots of his handsome head fellating a rather large penis?"

Dr. Martins did not reach for the envelope. "Would you," he asked Chase, "like for your friends at school to see those?"

"Gene wouldn't –" Chase didn't go on because he saw it was pointless. "I wouldn't care."

"Might he have used those pictures to get money from you, Mr. Cleveland?"

"Ask Chase." Harrison Cleveland flipped the envelope back onto the desk.

Chase was silent.

Harrison Cleveland did not become rich by allowing difficult situations to frustrate him. "Chase," he said. "I'll deal. If you accept, you can go to St. Andrews instead of Kent."

"Dad!" Chase almost lept from his chair.

His father waved him back. "You won't like all of it, so you get the good parts first. I'll buy you an Accord. Gus can drive you in it until you're sixteen. Take care of it because it's the last car you get unless you're admitted to Princeton, where, God knows, nobody cares who screws who anymore. It wasn't like that when I –" He sighed briefly. "Your allowance is thirty dollars a week, including gas, lunch, junk food – everything except clothes and reasonable extraordinary expenses – so if you want to hire a whore you better save up for him. Gus won't spy, but he also won't take you into fag territory. All your charge accounts are canceled. You can go out at night only on Fridays and Saturdays, if you get back by eleven. We can negotiate that when you're sixteen."

"Thirty dollars a week?" Chase couldn't believe it.

"If you don't like it, you can go to Kent.

"That won't pay for gas."

"Ten round-trips to St. Andrews per week – I'd say that's about ten dollars."

"Soccer practice is at East Stadium."

"You were cutting that to get fucked. Anyway, it's thirty until you're sixteen. Then we can renegotiate the whole thing."

When Chase didn't answer, Dr. Martins asked, "Can you agree to

that?"

"Dad," Chase said, "what about Mom?"

"What you do in St. Croix is between you and her."

"Fifty a week?"

"Forty. That's final"

Chase stood and extended his hand. "I agree." His father took the hand briefly. "Dad." Chase hesitated; his father was going. "Dad!"

"Yes?"

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Why do you care? You got a deal."

"Are you?" Chase kept looking at his father.

"Hell, yes. And don't tell me you care."

"All right. I won't. I don't care."

"Don't you?" Dr. Martin asked.

"Well, do you? Say it." Harrison Cleveland was impatient.

"No," Chase said.

"We need to talk more," Dr. Martins said.

"You and Chase talk."

Chase watched his father leave the room. Dr. Martin's question, "Would you like to talk some more?" distracted him.

"No, thanks," he said.

"Will you call me if things get rough for you?"

"Sure." Chase wanted him to leave.

"All right." Dr. Martin shook hands with Chase. "Call me. Even if it's not important. I'm going to urge your father to talk with us some more. But you come to my office anyway."

"Sorry," Chase said. "I can't afford the gas."

"I'll pay for it."

"Okay." Chase looked at the floor while Dr. Martins left.

Alone, he stood irresolute a moment. He went to the desk and pressed a lever on an electric address file. He looked at the file a moment, again doubtful. Then, decisive, he dialed.

"Uncle Rick? This is Chase." He listened.

"I hoped you would," he said, "but I wasn't sure – I mean, well, you do know – don't you?"

The reply discouraged him a little. "Okay. I just thought I'd phone anyway."

Then suddenly he smiled. "All riight!" He sat on the edge of his father's chair.

"Yeah, I puked when Dad told me, but –" The interruption was a long

one.

“Got ya,” Chase said; “no problem.” For the first time in days, he laughed. “I mean it, Uncle Rick. That's no problem at all!” He listened briefly.

“No, no. Dad made a deal. You know Dad. A deal's a deal.”