

## A Man Is a Beautiful Thing

---

---

John likes to quote a theory he picked up somewhere that the last stage of the maturation process involves having children. With John at sixty-eight years old, and his junior partner, Bill, at forty-eight, they were a little long in the tooth to be contemplating having children. Indeed, they *weren't* thinking about having children; Bill just suggested opening their home to a young gay prisoner. He had been pen pals with the guy for six months as his release date approached. Shortly before the day arrived in midsummer, Jim called and asked if he could stay with them, even if it meant sleeping on the floor. He had no money, no place to stay, and he didn't want to go to the halfway house.

When Bill first reached out to Jim in prison, Jim had seemed standoffish. After the first month of that, though, he started to crack. He sent Bill some long letters in which he described graduating high school in Ithaca, New York, at seventeen and telling his folks he was gay. His parents were devout Christians, so they promptly kicked him out of the house. His father slipped him a hundred bucks, but his mother stormed back into the house without saying a word. Jim was on his own. He didn't know where to turn. He had been something of a loner in high school with only two close friends, both of whom were sympathetic. He couldn't stay with them,

however. In one case, the boy's parents were friends with Jim's folks. In the other, the family lived in cramped quarters, with little money, and couldn't make room for him. So he bought a bus ticket to the Port Authority in Manhattan.

Hundreds of young boys and girls come into the Port Authority every day, with a few twenties in their pockets and a backpack full of clothes. And predictably, there are older males waiting for them. "You need a place to stay, kid?" asked one guy, with a considerable belly, fat little hands, thin hair swept across his bald spot, and sweat glistening on his forehead.

"I don't have a lot of dough," Jim told him.

"No problem. I can hook you up with a job. My place is fun, you'll see." It was the promise of a job (which never materialized) that enticed Jim into saying yes. Shortly, they were off to Queens. The man lived in a small house on a quiet suburban street, which Jim was comfortable with, but the guy didn't want him leaving the house much. The first afternoon, the guy suggested they watch some porn. Then he offered him some meth. Jim had smoked pot before, but he had never snorted meth. The feeling was electric. The guy gave him more until Jim really didn't mind sucking his sweaty little dick.

The pair slept together in the bedroom. While the guy was at work during the day, Jim was ordered to stay indoors and not answer the door. When the dude came home at five thirty, he would give Jim some meth and encourage him to suck his dick. He never asked to fuck Jim; he seemed satisfied getting his dick sucked. Sometimes the guy would send Jim on errands, or tell him to clean the house. If he didn't do everything right, the dude got angry, wouldn't give him any meth, and told him he was a bad guest. Jim was trying his best. And he was increasingly craving meth during the day.

One day Jim felt miserable. He took a screwdriver and broke open the locked bureau drawer where the meth was stored. He didn't anticipate breaking the lock. Nevertheless,

he snorted meth all afternoon, not caring about the consequences. The guy came back in the evening and discovered the broken lock and a wasted Jim. The dude smacked and punched him until Jim swung back. The guy had enraged eyes. He grabbed the boy's arm and dragged him out to the car. He drove him into town and kicked him out at Fifty-Ninth and Lexington. The guy was relieved—he was getting tired of Jim.

All this was more or less described in Jim's letters to Bill. Jim told his story matter-of-factly, with no embellishments or indications of how he had felt about all this. He did not seem to be trying to enlist sympathy. That didn't mean Bill didn't shed a tear or two, but he mostly felt angry rather than sorry. As the months wore on, Jim wrote more.

After Jim was left off in Manhattan, his first need was for more meth. He had lost his clothes and money in Queens, so he now had only the clothes on his back. But he had a mouth. He was old enough to know how to get quick cash. He hiked to the West Village—a substantial journey—and he walked around smiling at the gay guys. He was tired, he was jonesing, and it was getting late. Eventually, a guy, much more attractive to Jim than the guy from Queens had been, picked him up, understanding that Jim wanted cash. They went back to the dude's apartment and had sex. The dude gave him \$150, but insisted that he leave. Jim walked over to the river and slept on a park bench.

The trick had told Jim where to score meth, and happily, the bar he sent him to housed older patrons who would give him money for sex. Only a few guys wanted him to stick around afterward, but he got plenty of meth. At first, he stuck to blow jobs, but then, one night, a guy pushed him facedown on the couch and crawled on top of him. Jim had never been fucked before. He thought about resisting—he was strong enough to take him—but he didn't have the psychic energy to

fight. After the first few minutes, what felt like a violation turned into something endurable. After that, he freely offered up his butt to his tricks, with or without condoms, demanding only that they give him an extra “kicker.”

About a quarter of the time, he was allowed to sleep indoors overnight and take a shower the next day. Mostly he slept on the streets, where he got to know the other homeless dudes. Jim actually had plenty of money for occasional sleazy hotel rooms, and he would have had enough money for rent anywhere else in the country, but New York was hopelessly expensive. As is the case for so many New Yorkers, if he had gone somewhere else, like Syracuse, he wouldn't have had the income and the easy drugs he had in the West Village. He liked New York.

One of the homeless guys told him about a Catholic church where he could sleep in cold weather. He could sleep on the floor in the rectory basement, but he had to be out by 6:00 AM. The homeless guys couldn't hang out there in the basement when the church was busy with mass and congregants. It was much better than the homeless shelters, which were hopeless. He slept at a shelter twice; both times his money was stolen.

He also found out about a free clinic he could go to. He did, and he found out he had syphilis and HIV. One round of penicillin shots took care of the syphilis, but for the HIV, he had to take several medications daily. The clinic staff helped him get assistance in paying for the meds. In a few months, that was also under control.

After two years, the constant meth high began to wear at Jim's sanity. He thought the police were watching him with secret cameras. He thought some of his tricks were government agents, and he attacked one with a knife from the guy's own kitchen. The trick survived unscathed, punching Jim senseless and sending him packing. All the way back to the

West Village, Jim thought people were watching him. But he kept feeding his meth habit.

One of his homeless buddies offered him a gun late one Thursday night in September. The guys knew Jim often had hundreds of dollars, because he was considered “cute.” Jim bought the gun for three hundred. He stored it away in his gym bag. When he went in search of tricks, he put his few belongings in a locker at a twenty-dollar-a-month gym. Then he came back the next morning to pick them up. He usually carried the stuff around with him. There wasn’t much: just a spare pair of sneakers, several shirts, two pairs of jeans, his HIV meds, cigarettes, pot and a pipe, and the gun.

He thought about robbing a store. It would be so simple. He could walk in at, say, three in the morning and look around the place for customers. When the store was empty he could point the gun at the cashier and demand the money. He would choose a store on the Upper West Side, where he spent little time. He wouldn’t be recognized.

When he tried to execute his plan, however, the cashier didn’t move. He yelled and shook the gun. Shortly, the man gave him some money, and he ran out. The cops were there before he reached the next cross street. The cashier had pressed a button signaling for them. Jim was the only guy running down the street. That’s how he went to prison. Because of his age and skin color, he only got three years before parole. He would be just twenty-three years old when he got out.

\* \* \*

When Bill finished reading the last letter telling the story of Jim’s life, he crumpled the paper in his lap. John looked over at him. Bill whispered into the air to no one in particular, “*Will no one have mercy?*”

“That bad, eh?” John uttered.

Bill smiled and stretched his arms. “Yeah, pretty bad.”

“*You* wanted to have a prisoner pen pal.”

“I’m not complaining, John,” Bill responded.

Bill wrote back to Jim with every new letter. He *never* expressed sympathy. Instead, he acknowledged Jim’s story and related scenes from his and John’s own lives to show the boy that it could get better, if he could learn lessons from his experiences. Bill told him about his youth in Troy, New York; his coming-out story; and his getting beaten up three times subsequently. He told him how he came to New York to attend City College and started working out so he’d never get beat up again. He wrote about his own drug problems, which had derailed his college career. He explained how he’d met John at twenty-seven and how they’d set up shop together soon after. It was John who reined in his drug problem, encouraging him to spend increasingly longer times sober. John helped him find a psychotherapist to talk to. John taught him how to substitute pot for hard drugs, and how to appreciate clarity and stability.

Bill worked at a warehouse in Long Island City. The job didn’t pay that great for New York, but John’s income from freelance book composition was considerably greater. Also, the apartment had been John’s for twenty years before Bill moved in, and it was rent stabilized. They had a comfortable living room, with a kitchenette separated by an island. A narrow hallway ran along the entrance to the kitchen to three small rooms: an office, a bedroom, and a bathroom. The rent was more than manageable on their income. They lived in Chelsea, on Twenty-Forth Street off Ninth Avenue. By the standards of New York and Chelsea, they lived lower-middle-class lives.

By the time Jim called Bill three weeks before his release date to ask if he could stay with them, Bill felt he had no choice but to say yes. He didn’t ask John. He just blurted out

“Yes, OK” to Jim on the phone. He knew he was going to face resistance from John, but he could no more say no than he could walk through a wall. This wasn’t because he felt sorry for Jim. He actually felt intimidated by the idea of having an ex-con in their midst. It was because he felt a moral *compulsion* to help. John yelled at him and told him to call Jim back and decline. Bill demurred, until John contemplated it for a while and relented.

They bought a sizable chest of drawers to put in front of a bare wall in the living room, and slowly got used to the idea that a stranger (well, not really) was going to be sleeping on their couch. How long wasn’t clear. Jim’s probation would last six months. It would take him some time to save enough money to find his own place. They figured maybe as much as a year. Bill was forcing a considerable commitment on the family, but by the time they rented a car to go pick Jim up upstate, both of them were looking forward to it.

They both thought Jim was quite hot. In prison, he’d worked out and built up a lot of muscle. He shaved his hair close-cropped, like a Marine, and his demeanor was decidedly tough. He had patchy, uneven prison tattoos on both arms, and he liked to wear sleeveless shirts to show off his biceps. Bill was starting to sweat when they shook hands, but suddenly he grabbed Jim’s shoulder and pulled him in for a hug. The boy smiled in gratitude. Then he hugged John. It looked like they were going to get along.

John turned around in the front passenger side toward Jim in the backseat, while Bill drove. Jim told them that he’d laid low in prison. He had become involved with the leader of a group of white guys who looked out for one another. Were they a gang? Yes, but their sole purpose was to keep out of trouble. They weren’t Nazis, for example. They were mostly Irish guys, actually. All Jim had to do was give the leader an occasional blow job and transfer drugs to other inmates. Did

Jim take drugs while he was in prison? Now and then, but he had regular urine tests as a condition of his confinement, so he would only take drugs right after a test, in hopes that the next test was sometime in the future. He got caught twice, but it didn't derail his getting out on time. He convinced the staff psychologist that he was doing his best.

He had zero viral load. His medications were working, with a minimum of disruptive side effects. He worked in the kitchen, but he didn't cook. He hauled crates around, mopped the floor, scrubbed the industrial mixers—that sort of thing. The work had helped him bulk up. Bill told him he liked working at a warehouse for the same reason. John didn't work out anymore, largely because he'd lost interest in sex, and he had developed a gut and flabby arms. They laughed and put on some music for the ride home.

Back at the apartment, Jim put all his worldly belongings in one of the drawers and sat down on the couch. “Nice,” he said as he sank into the cool black leather. “Listen, I wanna thank you guys for letting me stay here. I really appreciate it, and I won't overstay my welcome. I plan on getting a job and finding a place I can share with a roommate.”

Bill sat down in a chair directly across from him, spread his legs, and put his hands on his knees. “OK, Jim. Here's the situation. You're going to be bunking here on the couch. We don't have anyplace else to put you. We will take you out to get you some clothes, new shoes. We will feed you. Can you use a Mac?”

“I learned some PC skills in high school and then in jail, but I think I can learn the Mac.”

Bill went on. “You're going to need it to look for a job. You're going to need it to connect to the outside world, and you're going to need it to possibly *get* a job. We'll help you. As a condition of your parole, you *may not* take drugs or drink alcohol. They will test you once a week. How are you going to handle that?”



Jim shifted forward to convey the force of his convictions. "I'm absolutely determined not to go back to prison. I'll deal with it. I think I can handle it for six months. I do."

Bill was unconvinced, but he said nothing. "You may get laid. We're going to get you a cell phone. That's for two things: getting a job, and calling us to let us know what you're up to. You *should not* be going to bars. If you want to hook up with guys for sex, you need to use Grindr or something. We'll point you in the right direction. We'll set you up with your own email address. You might want to hook up with guys who say they are drug-free. Whatever you do, if there's pressure to party, get out of there. If you want to bring a guy back here, call us, and we'll go in the bedroom. As long as that doesn't happen too often, we're fine with that. We'd rather have you here and sober than off somewhere partying. Do you understand all that?"

"Thank you so much. Yeah, I got it."

Bill proceeded. "Now I've got to say something, and I don't want you to take it the wrong way. Sometime while you're here, you may want to steal from us. I'm not saying that because you've been to prison. I'm saying that because you're twenty-three years old, have a troubled past, and I remember what *I* was like at twenty-three. We don't have a lot of money. Sometimes, once we pay our monthly bills, we have less than a hundred dollars for a week. We'll give you some money for you to run around with. You'll have to make do with what we give you. If you need more, or if you need anything at all, *ask* us. We'll be open and honest about what our situation is. Ask. But *never* steal from us. As long as we have trust, everything will be cool."

"I understand. It's cool. I get it. And thank you, thank you so much, guys."

\* \* \*

The first weeks went considerably well. John taught Jim about mail on the Mac (inmates weren't allowed to have email in prison), TextEdit, the ins and outs of Safari versus Firefox, downloading files, and on and on. Jim learned fast. He asked good questions. He was able to anticipate issues before John started to address them. John and Bill had given up on word processors. John taught Jim Quark. At first, John thought Jim would use it like a simple word processor, but soon, he was asking about the other features. John found himself teaching style sheets, hyphenation and tables, for example as well. Jim understood quickly. He said it was due to the fact that he'd learned Word in jail. John could see that Jim had a considerable intelligence.

Shortly after Jim started exploring the Mac on his own, John checked on him. The office had a window, and gray light from a summer rainstorm dimly illuminated the pair. Jim swung around on the chair. "Listen, thanks, this is great." He grinned at John, his forehead a foot away from the man's large belly. "Maybe I could repay you." His words became smoky. "You want some head?"

John chuckled, smiling down at the boy. "You're cute, Jim, but I don't *have* sex anymore. I have no interest in sex at all. Four years ago I had a bad case of pneumonia and I landed in the hospital. I was in a coma for two weeks. When I woke up, my sex drive was completely gone, and it never came back. The doctors offered to give me testosterone, but I've actually been kind of happy not having sex. I really don't miss it." He thought better. "If I *were* going to have sex, though, I'd have it with you, kiddo." He tapped the side of the boy's head with his open hand.

Jim looked at him quizzically. He wasn't sure what to make of this. He'd had sex with plenty of guys John's age,

and they had usually been the most forthcoming with gifts and money. They also tended not to be as sexually demanding as the fortysomethings. He felt odd. Why else would John spend so much time teaching him how to use the Mac? “Well, anyway, thanks for the computer tips.”

“Start working on your job search.” John mentioned his encounter with the boy to Bill later on.

Jim *did* get a job. Wandering around Chelsea, he’d met and impressed an Indian man named Oscar, with an unpronounceable subcontinental name, who hired him to work at his bodega. It was on Eighth Avenue. Jim would work from 10:00 PM to 6:00 AM, Monday through Friday—for the first four hours stocking shelves and mopping floors, and for the last four hours at the register. He would get \$360 a week take-home. Oscar didn’t mind that Jim had been in prison. It was difficult to find someone close by to work those hours for so little money.

Bill was delighted. It was Jim’s first legitimate job, other than the one he’d done in the prison kitchen. Privately, John told him he thought Jim could do better. The boy was intelligent—John related the ease with which Jim had learned Quark. Bill countered with the fact that the boy had a prison record. They should be impressed that he got a job the first month he was out. But actually, Bill secretly harbored another reason why he was so happy. At that rate of pay, it would take longer for Jim to get on his feet, and Bill was very quickly getting used to having Jim around.

Bill worked during the day, but in the evenings and on weekends, he liked hanging out with Jim. They might go to the diner and talk for hours, with Bill teaching Jim about politics or ways of looking at ethical questions in the news or general insights about life. He encouraged the boy to think about psychotherapy now that he was out of jail. Unfortunately, Jim had no health insurance. So Bill worked with Jim

to apply for Medicaid. Jim had to lie and say that his roommates didn't contribute to his well-being, but he eventually got the insurance. Then they consulted the approved list of doctors and found one in the neighborhood. Bill let him know he had to feel comfortable with the therapist. If he didn't, they would find him a better one. But the boy never complained.

Unlike John, Bill *did* have a sex drive. He went prowling on Saturday nights once a month or so, but otherwise he usually visited one of three fuck buddies he played with. In his youth, he had been a bottom, like Jim seemed to be, but as he aged, he became more versatile. Bill and Jim frequently watched porn and jerked off together. They wouldn't touch one another, though, only tapping each other here and there on the shoulder with their fists. Not long after Jim arrived in their home, Bill and Jim were alone in the apartment. They were facing each other in the hallway outside the bedroom. Jim was horny. His voice lowered into its seductive register, and he reached out to massage Bill's dick through his sweatpants. He smiled at Bill.

Bill immediately grasped his wrist with his fist, forcing Jim's hand back to his side. "No, Jim," he said firmly.

"Why? You're not my father or my brother."

Jim's words stung Bill, which surprised him. He furrowed his brow in reaction. "It would be . . . a transgression."

"A transgression?" The boy wrinkled his nose and forehead in mock shock. "What does *that* mean?"

"It would be wrong." Bill stared with his dark eyes into the boy's own eyes.

"*Why?*" Jim howled.

Bill was searching his mind for the answer to that. *Because I'm your caretaker*, he thought. But he said nothing about that. Instead, he glanced away and said, "Jim, you've got to stop trading sex for favors and money. That's not what sex is for. Sex is a wonderful meeting of two minds and souls, a mutual exploration, and above all it should be fun—not work. Sex

shouldn't be a crass capitalistic transaction. Do you think you can try that? Try not manipulating your tricks by giving them what you think they want?"

Jim looked down at the floor. A spiritual light began to dawn in his mind's eye. Could it be like Bill said? Something really wonderful? "Sure," he said, and turned back dejectedly toward the living room. In the ensuing weeks, however, he thought a lot about Bill's revelation.

\* \* \*

Afraid of the temptation to take drugs, Jim didn't have much sex. Nor did he leave the house much, except to go to work. One Sunday afternoon, Jim was lying on the couch daydreaming, while John was reading Plato's *The Last Days of Socrates*. Bill entered the living room, looked at Jim, and asked him what he was up to.

"I'm bored," Jim growled. He lifted up his legs like a baby, and grabbed his head between his hands. "TV's boring, the Internet is boring."

"Why don't you *read* something, Jimmy? Did you ever think of that?" Bill spoke with his cutting edge voice, part sarcasm, part exasperation. He turned his head toward a bookshelf. His eye caught sight of a copy of Lattimore's translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. "Here, read *this*. There's sex, drugs, and violence in it. It'll hold your interest." He tossed the book on the boy's stomach.

Jim picked it up and thumbed through the pages. Then he opened it to Book I and began to read. "I don't understand this. This isn't in English," Jim complained. John interceded. He sat next to Jim and read along with him, explaining what it meant. Bill stormed back into the office.

John's experience with teaching Jim to read Homer turned out to be similar to teaching him Quark. In ten minutes, Jim

was reading and understanding the poetic phrasing. John relayed all the background information he needed to understand the Trojan War, Telemachus' search for his father, and Odysseus' return home. He briefly described some of the other heroes' stories—most notably, those of Agamemnon and Menelaus. He told him about Achilles and Petroclus. Jim was fascinated.

John told him he didn't need to understand absolutely everything. All he had to do was avoid reading too many lines without comprehension. If he did, John told him to read more slowly, and study what he didn't understand. It would come to him. If it didn't, John would help. The boy finished the book in less than two weeks.

\* \* \*

Oscar's store was open all the time, all year round. Therefore, Jim had to work Thanksgiving night. At 3:00 AM, Bill strolled over to find Jim reading a magazine at the counter. They discussed the end of his probation in January. They commiserated about John's upcoming birthday. And they traded cracks about the male models in the magazine. At that hour, on that day, no one came into the store. The fluorescent bars hummed above them, and an occasional car passed by on the street. Other than that, they were alone.

At 4:00 AM, a stocky Latino dude came in. He walked back to the beer refrigerators, with their glass doors shiny from Jim's ministrations with the Windex. Then he went up and down the aisles without taking anything. Jim was paying attention. Was the guy going to buy something or not? When the guy seemed satisfied that Bill wasn't going to leave, he proceeded to the register and drew a gun from his satchel. His eyes were wild. He uttered something in Spanish, and waved the gun at them. He obviously wanted Bill to get down on the floor, but they both pretended not to understand him.

“The money,” he hollered, “give me the money.” He stood back from them. Both Bill and Jim were anxious, but they somehow felt safe. Jim gathered some bills from the register, and placed them on the counter. The guy looked frightened and frustrated. He swung the gun around in an arc, warning them not to do anything. He approached the counter to take the money.

Bill lunged, grabbing the guy’s wrist and raising the surprised gunman’s hand toward the ceiling. He fired. Jim had the bat they kept behind the register in his hands in a shot. While Bill and the gunman struggled, Jim came out from behind the counter and swung the bat at the gunman’s head. The guy released the gun into Bill’s hand and dropped, stunned from the crack of the bat.

Jim stood over the guy, while Bill placed the gun on a shelf some feet away. The guy looked up at them, wondering what was next. Were they going to kill him? Were they going to call the police? He winced up at them, resigned to his fate, looking like he was going to cry.

“Good job,” Bill grinned at Jim.

“You too, Bill,” Jim said.

They were out of breath from the excitement. “What do you want to do?” Bill asked him. “It’s your call.”

Jim kicked the guy in the side. “Out. Out. Get outta here, fucker.” He started kicking him and motioned toward the door. The dark-skinned, chunky guy scrambled toward the door. He was up and out. Jim lowered the bat. By the time they followed him out onto the street, the guy had run away. They wondered how he had gotten out of sight so fast, but they were fine with that. Jim dropped the bat and hugged Bill. Bill was startled by the response. “Jesus, Bill,” he exclaimed after the embrace. “We could have been fuckin’ killed.”

Bill laughed. “On Thanksgiving—never.” Bill hung out with Jim for the rest of his shift. At 6:00 AM, they went home, put on some porn, and jerked off. Bill bought a six-pack at the

store, and brought it home. He drank the beers in the kitchen, out of Jim's sight. He felt sorry for Jim. He couldn't drink, but if there ever was a reason to drink, it was because you almost got shot.

On Friday evening, Bill took the gun to the local precinct and turned it in. He had to tell them what had happened, which he did, except that he said the guy ran away before they had a chance to call the police. Why hadn't they called the police after the guy ran away? He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. We were pretty shaken up, and we weren't thinking," he told them.

\* \* \*

On January 18, Jim finished his probation. It was a Wednesday, and Jim and Bill took off the rest of the week from work. Bill accompanied Jim to the probation office. The officers talked with him and made him sign some papers. Then the officer said, "You're free and clear now."

The pair went directly to a nearby Irish pub and got shit-faced. Bill kept the beer and whiskey shots flowing, until Jim threw sixty dollars on the bar. Bill smiled, and said, "OK."

When they walked through the apartment door, John wrung his hands and said, "Oh dear." The two drunk dudes sat on the couch and talked nonsense loudly. Within twenty minutes, they quieted down and fell asleep at opposite ends of the sofa. John got a huge blue blanket from the closet and spread it over them both. The pair slept soundly until Thursday morning.

John joined his younger compatriots for breakfast at the diner. Bill and Jim were quiet, nursing mighty hangovers. Since Jim hadn't had any drugs or alcohol since prison, he recovered faster than Bill. Back home, Bill spent some time in the office, while Jim read *Huckleberry Finn* in the living



room. Jim had started reading more often. He was something of a reader in high school, but he had completely gotten out of the habit since. John and Bill had dozens of shelves full of books, and he picked out what he wanted to read on his own. *Huck Finn* had been a recommendation of John's. Jim balked that it was a kid's book, but John assured him that it was not.

In December, Bill had asked Jim if he needed any money. For the first time, Jim said no. The conversation went no further. Bill never offered Jim money again. Jim was making enough from his job to pay his running-around expenses and stash away \$150 a week in the bank. He even began to buy groceries for the house and razor blades and toothpaste for everyone. On the Thursday following the end of his probation, he took John and Bill out for dinner at a Thai restaurant on Eighth Avenue. He had accumulated a couple thousand in his bank account, but he never discussed it with John or Bill. They didn't ask either. Two thousand dollars wasn't quite enough to strike out on his own, but the reality was that none of the three were eager for Jim to move out.

On Friday, John called the pot guys. They were there in forty minutes. John bought three fifty dollar plastic containers of pot, and got a fourth one free. John and Bill had furtively smoked in the bedroom now and then in the previous six months, but now they explained that pot smoking was allowed anywhere in the apartment. John gave Jim one of the containers for him to keep. Jim was grateful.

"You can smoke the family pot anytime you want," Bill told him, "but that's for you to take with you if you go out. If you're going to do drugs, Jim, the best drug for you to do is pot, except of course for the harm it does to your lungs. Alcohol is a bad thing to become hooked on. You don't get hooked on pot, except maybe it becomes a habit." Bill wanted Jim to think about what he was saying.

“You were a meth addict, Jim. You had a serious problem going there. I’d really like you not to do meth. If you’re going to do a hard drug, take a hit of Ecstasy. Really, do anything other than meth. You know what a record is, an LP?”

“Of course,” Jim replied.

“Your meth addiction created a groove in your psyche like the groove on a record. If you start it again, playing that record, it’ll inevitably play out just like before, almost immediately. Maybe with far worse consequences. And the consequences you experienced in the past were quite serious. I’d rather you stay away from hard drugs altogether, but I know that’s unrealistic. I hope you’ll be able to ration whatever you do out, and spend a lot of time sober. You seem to like working, and reading, and you didn’t seem that unhappy while you were sober all these months.”

“No, I really wasn’t,” Jim responded.

“Just . . . please, whatever you do, *don’t do meth*. Please.” Bill sat back and exhaled pot smoke. Their minds were beginning to cloud over. “Pot’s the best bet, dude. It’s not cool to smoke pot more than once or twice a week, if you can, but of all the mind-altering substances, pot can be your friend. All the others quickly turn into ravenous tigers chasing you through a dark jungle of fear and self-loathing.” Bill smiled at him.

John laughed out loud. “Ravenous tigers chasing you through a jungle. That’s awesome, Billy.”

Jim giggled. “I like it too. That’s great.”

\* \* \*

Bill held his breath over the next month in anticipation of what could happen. Jim started going out on Saturday and Sunday nights and hooking up with guys on the Internet, but he always came home coherent. He kept working with his

therapist. He didn't smoke pot during the week, except occasionally a little bit before bed when he got home from Oscar's. He didn't seem to like drinking. Perhaps getting drunk in January turned him off of alcohol. John and Bill thought things were working out fine through February.

In March, Jim started hanging out with some guys in their early twenties who partied, but Jim didn't seem to be partaking. He told Bill he stuck to pot. John and Bill offered to buy him pot, but when the delivery guys came over, Jim paid for his own. Once Jim stayed out all night on a Saturday, and when he came home he seemed strung out. John and Bill were scrambling eggs and making toast. He confessed that he'd taken a hit of Ecstasy, which they believed, because he laid down on the couch and fell asleep. He wasn't tweaked.

In April one of Jim's new friends invited him to a sex party in Brooklyn. They were to meet on Saturday afternoon at Xces, a bar two blocks from the apartment. Bill walked over with him. He'd never seen any of these guys before. The temperature was in the sixties. The sun was shining. The grass and trees were green. Jim was in a good mood. Bill was quiet, even somber.

Jim's friends were hanging out on the street in front of the bar. The guys dressed in black. Their bodies weren't well developed. They were young, skinny, and cute. They also appeared to Bill to be tweaked. Red eyes, excited gesticulations, nervous shifting from foot to foot. Bill observed but said nothing. Then he patted Jim on the back, and wished them well. He turned and walked back toward Seventh Avenue. Suddenly, he reversed course and called out to Jim. Jim didn't hear him at first, but when he called again, Jim told the guys to wait. He came trotting up to Bill.

"You got your pot?" Bill asked him. Jim motioned to his backpack. "You got your condoms and lube?"

"Actually, I fuck, I don't get fucked with these guys."

“You can pass it on to one of them,” Bill said. Jim smiled. Why was Bill delaying? Finally, Bill’s shoulders dropped. “Have fun.” Jim ran back to them and Bill left.

He stopped at a store and bought four bottles of 5-Hour Energy. When he got home to John, the older man put his arm on Bill’s shoulder. Then he gave him a hug. “Don’t worry, momma.” Bill told him about the “friends.” He told him he knew what was going to happen. Hadn’t they both been twenty-four before? Hadn’t they both been to sex parties before? These guys weren’t school marms. John looked him in the eye and said, “Then he’ll get back on the wagon come Monday.”

Bill refused to sleep. When he got tired on Saturday night, he swigged a bottle of 5-Hour Energy. That kept him going until early Sunday morning. Then another bottle. His vision sharpened and became faintly fluorescent. John ignored him. That afternoon, John reminded him that they were supposed to go to their friends’ house for dinner. Bill glared at him in his sleepless stupor and told him to go alone. John knew better than to argue. He phoned the other couple and told them the situation. They insisted John come alone, which he did.

At six, the evening light was diminishing in the living room. Bill sat in his chair staring at the bookcase near the front door. He had just had another energy boost. He had changed his shirt. The new shirt sported a flying bald eagle, talons outstretched. He heard boots on the stairs. The key turned in the lock. Jim came in. He was pale and nervous. He really didn’t want to argue with Bill.

“How was it?” Bill asked him, minus any joviality. There were no lights lit, so only the soft evening’s gray glow illuminated their faces.

“It was great. It was a lot of fun. Really awesome,” Jim suggested. He leaned up against the back of the leather couch. He looked away, out the window, avoiding Bill’s glaring eyes.

“Did you snort? Slam? Meth?”

Jim looked in his eyes. He couldn't lie to Bill. He didn't think it necessary. Instead, he would apologize and promise to shape up. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. I'm sorry. The last time was eight hours ago, and I'm really feeling bad now.”

Bill got up and crossed over to him. Jim straightened his body and turned toward him. Bill was visibly agitated, so Jim backed up toward the door. Bill swung his fist, thrusting his arm with all his might, slamming Jim in the cheek. The boy fell to the floor. He dared not retaliate. Bill knelt down beside him. He grabbed the scruff of his shirt at his neck.

“You . . . can't . . . do that, Jimmy. You're gonna fuck yourself up. This is the *real deal*, dude. Meth will fuck you up. Don't you get that? Please, God, please don't do this.” He dropped the boy to the floor and sat back on his haunches.

Jim felt drops of water land on his forehead. What *was* that? Bill wasn't sweating. Where did that water come from? He looked up at Bill's face. There were tears in his eyes. The liquid glancing Jim's forehead was Bill's tears. While the light in the room was dimming, the glow in his soul brightened. This guy really *cares* about me. *He cares more about me than I care about myself.* With that, Jim's heart burst open. He began to sob uncontrollably. He bolted up, and wrapped his arms around the man and sank his face into his chest. All of the loneliness and the exploitation and the thoughtlessness and the hopelessness he had endured came flooding out of his chest. In his mind's eye, he saw the dudes who had exploited him with meth for sex; he saw the cold rain falling on him when he was homeless and looking for a place to sleep; he saw the nurse's face when she told him he had HIV; he saw the gangleader's face when he ordered him to suck his dick in prison; he saw his own mother's face when he told her he was gay. He wept for what seemed like hours. Bill gripped him with his arms and fists at his back. He held him together

this way, because it must have felt to Jim like he was going to disperse all over the floor like a glob of viscous, sticky oil. His tears soaked the screaming eagle on the man's shirt as the room descended into darkness.

\* \* \*

Jim never absorbed so much as a granule of meth again. If he was tempted, he needed merely think about that night when he sobbed into Bill's shirt. Some aspect of Bill's character was becoming a part of him. It was a kind of masculine self-love growing inside him that said "Fuck you, no, I won't snort meth with you" if a hookup suggested it. When he faced internal weakness, he pictured Bill in his mind's eye with his muscle, his determination, and his abiding affection.

Jim began to think about going to college. John and Bill couldn't afford tuition and books, but that wasn't the reason Bill discouraged him. He could have gotten financial aid. Bill explained what holding down a full-time job and going to college would entail. Between 6:00 AM and 8:00 AM, he would have time to relax before heading out to school. He would probably be there until 5:00 PM, depending on his schedule. Then he'd come home and get five hours of sleep tops before he had to head to Oscar's. Homework would need to be done between classes, or on weekends. It could be done, but knowing Jim's habits—sexual habits, drug habits, reading habits, and all the miscellaneous things a guy had to do every day, like shop or visit the doctor—it would be a rough four years. Also, even if he were willing to give up most of the extraneous aspects of living, and even with John's and Bill's help, there was a good chance he'd have to live with Bs and Cs. Bill recommended an associate degree or a vocational school.

John was livid. Jim was bright. He deserved to go to a good college. He could reduce his hours at the store, live off

the room and board allowance, and stay with them for the four years. Jim would have a much happier future if he went to college. College graduates earned a million dollars more over their lifetimes than non-college graduates. But above all, Jim was entitled to the intellectual and spiritual benefits of a liberal arts education. Wasn't that obvious?

"What would you like to study in college, Jim?" Bill asked him.

"I'm interested in literature," he replied.

"What would you like to do with that?"

"Become a writer, maybe teach."

"So much for Jim's rosy, wealthy future, John," Bill insisted. "Writer you can become by reading and attending workshops at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center. Teach? Teachers make slightly more than I do at the warehouse. To teach at the university level you have to have a master's and, in the end, a PhD. Do you want to put up with all that schooling, along with all the bullshit that comes along with it, for eight years, Jim?"

John grimaced and growled at Bill. Each thought the other outrageous. Jim prevented a quarrel by telling them he'd have to think it over. John and Bill both trusted Jim's judgment. After all, it was *he* who would have to do all the work, and make the sacrifices that his decision would demand. He decided to postpone making a decision. He had until late summer to apply for spring semester. It was only May.

\* \* \*

In the meantime, John completed a major project for a publisher in Boston. He got paid at the end of May: nine thousand dollars. That would definitely ease things for the summer at least. John took Jim aside and told him he'd give him three grand if he chose to go to college. Bill needn't know. That

was something Jim couldn't do. He thanked him for the offer, but indicated that the money would make no difference to his decision. On the other hand, the duplicity might corrode their family life. For once, it was Jim who taught John something.

They began to spend every weekend at art museums, galleries, theatrical performances, and concerts. They stood in front of paintings or sculptures and encouraged Jim to talk. What was he seeing? What adjectives could he use to describe the subject matter, lines, forms, colors, and attitudes? What did natural clarity versus vague haziness suggest to him? Where they knew them, they explained the narratives depicted or some background about an artist's point of view. Jim fell in love with the Greek rooms at the Met. In addition to *The Odyssey*, he had read *The Iliad*. The sculptures at the museum brought the heroic but all-too-human characters to life. Gods walked the earth. Men were forever young and beautifully proportioned—power and fragility perfectly balanced.

What boy doesn't like music? Jim liked rap and rock, in all of its manifestations, so John and Bill took him to Broadway musicals. He took to them immediately. They bought the cast albums, and Jim played the CD from the most recent show ad nauseum. Then, John exposed him to Prokofiev and Shostakovich. What bliss! The quiet tension, the rolling swells, the aggressive piano against the sweeping strings made Jim shudder. The masculine Russians gave him emotional orgasms, even though they were long dead. John broadened his approach. They listened to Bach, Mozart, Chopin during the week while Bill was at work. Then, one day John played *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* by Rachmaninoff. Jim enjoyed it. It was in turn tense, delicate, aggressive, and mathematical. Then came the Eighteenth variation. John was overjoyed to see Jim openly weeping while the broad, upside-down restatement of the theme filled the room with such beauty, it broke Jim's heart.



They ate out together, during the week as well. They related stories from their pasts, they talked about recent thoughts they'd had, they had philosophical disputes. John guided Bill in the name of wisdom, and they both gave the boy deeper insights where his thoughts were shallow. He welcomed it. He trusted them. They laughed, told jokes, commiserated. Early Saturday mornings, Bill would hang out at the store, keeping Jim company. They went to parties at the apartments of friends. But they each avoided talking about their feelings for the other two. Bill figured his feelings should be obvious. Why destroy the magic with words?

So summer turned into fall and fall turned into winter. They all had birthdays. No one noticed, or wanted to notice, that Jim had been with them for eighteen months. They stopped talking about Jim's future. He never made a decision about college. He had all he could handle at home.

In December, Jim noticed a poster in the subway advertising a school that taught sound recording and mixing. He didn't have anything to write the number down, but he memorized the name of the school. At home, he googled it. Maybe this was for him. He loved music with an increasing passion, and he would enjoy working in a field involving that art. He called and discovered that he could apply by mid-January and start attending at the beginning of February. It would cost everything he'd saved for a semester. To go for the full two semesters (seven months), he'd need John's and Bill's help. He could sign up for afternoon classes, which were four hours a day, three days a week. He found out the school had an excellent reputation.

When he explained it all to John and Bill, they were delighted. They both thought it was an excellent idea. John asked a musician friend about it, who told him the school was noteworthy. They would give Jim the money for the second semester, although everyone would have to cut back on ex-

penses for a while. Jim applied and got in, but not easily. With little background in music, he was put on a waiting list at first. Then someone cancelled. The school called and invited Jim into a class cycle. On February 4, he began classes.

\* \* \*

In late April, Bill and Jim watched a Rangers playoff game on TV. In a couple of hours, Jim would head off to Oscar's, but they had two beers each anyway. Jim got hungry and wandered into the kitchen. At the commercial, Bill strolled to the other room, where Jim was making a sandwich.

"Do you want one?" Jim asked.

"Sure." Bill stood in the doorway, beer bottle in hand. Jim busied himself with the other sandwich. "Jim, I love you."

The boy dropped what he was doing, and looked up, surprised and serious, at the man. This had never come up before. In their almost two years together, no one ever gushed or revealed barely hidden emotions. Jim wasn't exactly uncomfortable with Bill's admission, just slightly embarrassed. He didn't know quite what to say.

He smiled. "Does John love me too?"

"What do you think?" Bill said calmly. Jim waited for more. "I guess I should explain what that means. It means you are our family. You will never want for anything we can give you. You will never hurt where you can't lean on us. This will always be your home. You will certainly never be homeless again. We will fight for you. We will damage your enemies. We will give you good counsel. We are your friends and buddies *forever*."

Jim stood dumbfounded for several seconds. Then he said, "I love you too."

Bill went on. "You will *never* betray the family. You will never take anyone's side against the family. You will never

speaking out against the family. Regardless of where you go, you will work to sustain the family. Your friends, if you have a partner one day, he, are all welcome here in a sort of extended family.”

Jim was in astonished agreement. *Of course*, he thought, *it should be so*. “Yes, absolutely.” After a brief pause, he crossed over to Bill, put his arms around him, and hugged him close. “Thank you. But I’m not going anywhere.”

Bill smiled painfully over Jim’s shoulder. He hoped it would be a while.

\* \* \*

In September, after he graduated from sound-mixing school, Jim met Ricky. Jim was nearing twenty-six years of age, while Ricky was twenty. The boy worked at Macy’s in one of the men’s designer boutiques. He was questioning whether he wanted to go to college, not having much aptitude for studying, and he was having a lot of fun going to bars and having sex. Ricky was a bottom. Despite his past, Jim was increasingly enjoying the Top role. It felt more natural to him. So the pair hit it off psychologically and physically.

John and Bill welcomed Ricky into the home. Ricky was actually the first boy Jim had ever had sex with in the living room, which served as his bedroom. The older men went into the office or the bedroom whenever Jim and Ricky wanted to have sex. They didn’t mind in the slightest. Ricky was a little shallow, frail, and effeminate for their taste, but being gay for fifty-plus years, they certainly had encountered a lot of boys like him. When Bill jokingly and tactfully let Jim know Ricky was somewhat limp, Jim replied, “Let him be a boy now. I’ll make him into a man later.” Indeed, Ricky became a fixture at the homestead, and he frequently attended concerts or shows too.

Gradually, Jim began to get sound-recording gigs. He worked solo on a rock album for free for the experience. He assisted a pro with a recording of a string quartet performance of Brahms. Oscar was lenient if he needed time off, given that Jim had always been a great employee. Each job paid more than the last, and each provided him with additional experience. Nevertheless, a full-time job eluded him.

Just as gradually, the time Jim spent with Ricky escalated. In December, they saw each other every day. John and Bill didn't mind at all. How could they deny Jim the pleasures of a boyfriend or potential partnership when they enjoyed one? Bill steeled himself for the inevitable. Despite himself, he tried to spend as much time as he could with Jim, even if it meant interfering with Jim's other commitments. Couldn't Jim stay home and watch hockey instead of going to Ricky's place? Couldn't Jim get away from a sound-recording gig early to go out to dinner with John and him? Couldn't Jim call in sick to Oscar's so they could get stoned and listen to music? Of course, these were halfhearted attempts. Jim almost always demurred. But the more exciting Jim's life became, the more barren Bill felt.

Unbeknownst to John and Bill, Jim asked Ricky to marry him. He gave the boy a cheap ring, but a ring nonetheless. Ricky was delighted. John and Bill didn't notice Ricky's new band, and the boys kept their engagement a secret from them. Jim would not marry Ricky until their mutual financial situation improved, which might take years, but he slipped the ring on Ricky's finger with a pledge of monogamy. Ricky had squealed with joy.

"Why can't John and Bill know about this?" asked Ricky. He wanted to tell the world.

Jim thought about how to answer that question. "I just want it to be between us for the time being. OK?" Ricky acquiesced.

Then, at the end of February, Jim's breakthrough came. He discovered a job listing for a sound-recording artist/mixer paid

apprenticeship at an independent film studio in Los Angeles. The job was permanent and full-time. There would be promotional opportunities within three to five years. Jim had the education and the experience for the job. The only problem was that he was a felon. When he got up the nerve, he revealed his interest to John and Bill. They expressed uninhibited excitement. This was a great chance. Jim pointed out the difficulty, and Bill immediately offered to write a serious, extensive letter to the studio. Ricky burst into tears when he heard about the plan. "We're going to Hollywood!" he shrieked.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Jim asked with a big grin.

"Good. Good," Ricky howled, and flung his arms around him.

\* \* \*

Of course, it was unclear whether Jim would get the job, and as the weeks dragged on, he feared the worst. Then, in mid-March, the studio called him on his cell phone. Could he come for an interview? He took some of his savings and bought a ticket to Los Angeles. He would leave on Tuesday, have the interview on Wednesday, and return on Thursday. Bill had to work, but John escorted him to JFK. Bill was home when John returned, bitching and moaning about the rush-hour traffic. It was a total mess. The train to the A train wasn't running, so he had to take a cab. They had sat on the LIE for an hour and a half, and it cost forty-nine dollars plus tip to get into Manhattan. The weather was miserable.

"Good to see you, though." John patted Bill on the knee and sat in his usual seat with his back to the kitchenette. Bill sat on the couch where Jim's head would have been when he was sleeping. Bill usually sat opposite the couch, but now, his seat was empty.

John calmed down and adjusted to the silence in the room. Then he began to see the situation. He sat looking over at his lover. He felt he didn't need to say anything. But then Bill spoke. "What's for dinner?"

"He loves you very much, Billy."

Bill cast a sharp glance at John. He was unused to opening the spigot of emotion. He didn't think emotions should be so freely and openly discussed. Especially *these* emotions, he thought. "What's for dinner?"

"I'm exhausted. We'll have to order Chinese."

After a pause, Bill said, "I didn't foresee it would be this way." His pecs clenched to suppress any possibility of tears.

"No one ever does."

\* \* \*

The studio offered Jim the job within days of his return to New York. Once again, they called him on his cell. He asked if he could have twenty-four hours to make his decision. They assured him they really wanted him and they hoped his answer would be yes. Jim hung out at their apartment until Bill came home. Jim went in the office and got John to come out. He told them the situation. They both said he'd be a fool not to say yes. Jim told them it would be tough on the money he had saved up. He and Ricky would need an apartment and a car, and he really worried about being able to find a place close to the studio.

"How much do you need?" John asked him. John and Bill had an account they were using to save for a vacation, with four thousand dollars.

Jim winced. "Can you loan me three thousand?"

"Absolutely," John said with a smile. He didn't turn his head toward Bill, and Bill didn't turn his head toward John. They both understood they could no more say no than walk through a wall. It would never be discussed.

Jim called Ricky. Ricky came from his place in Brooklyn right away. Bill went out for a couple of bottles of champagne and a bottle of his favorite cheap whiskey. The champagne was for everyone else. The next day, Jim reassured the studio he was on his way. He was due to start work in two and a half weeks. He said good-bye to Oscar and some friends. He bought one-way tickets for himself and Ricky on a 2:30 AM plane a week later. Everything was smiles and happiness.

Three days before the flight, Bill and Jim were sitting in the living room on the couch. It was a Saturday morning, as bright sunlight flooded the room and illuminated their faces. They were chatting absently. Suddenly, Jim said, "I'm really scared about this, Bill."

Bill reached out his arm and laid it on the back of the couch. His hand fell behind Jim's neck. "What do you think you're scared about?"

"I dunno," Jim mused. "Maybe I'm worried that it's not going to be all that it's cracked up to be."

"People are oftentimes the most frightened when they're about to get something they've been wanting." Bill's voice was soft and reassuring.

"Because they might find out they never wanted that thing in the first place?"

"No"—Bill's voice vibrated in a slight laugh—"not at all. You're not at all scared it's not going to be all it's cracked up to be."

Jim looked at him. "Why then?"

"You're scared that it'll be wonderful and perfect in every way."

Jim opened his mouth in a crooked, objecting shape. "Why would I be scared of that?"

"Because you don't think you deserve it."

\* \* \*

John, Bill, Jim, and Ricky rode in a limo to JFK at midnight on the appointed day. At that hour, traffic was light. The airport was technically closed, and security looked to be no problem. John and Bill weren't going to be able to pass beyond security to the gate, so they hung out in front.

John bubbled with enthusiasm. He had to make up for, and hide, Bill's crestfallen stare. But it didn't get past Jim. Jim knew Bill was sad, but he was much too young to understand how Bill was actually feeling. He knew, however, that Bill wouldn't want to openly address it. They chatted about the flight and the job. The studio was helping with Jim's and Ricky's apartment hunt. So long as Ricky got some sort of job, it looked like they would be able to afford something modest in Hollywood or Burbank. Jim confessed to John and Bill that he and Ricky were engaged. John was delighted. Bill smiled politely and shook both their hands.

As the time came for Jim and Ricky to proceed through security, Bill said, "Now, call when you get there, and call often."

"No question, Bill," Jim concurred.

"And maybe you can come back for a visit when you get some vacation time," said Bill.

Jim winced slightly. "It might be hard at first, especially for both of us to get vacation at the same time." He realized immediately that he'd said the wrong thing, so he added, "Absolutely, Bill, we'll see what we can do."

"Don't abuse drugs, don't smoke cigarettes, use condoms," John chirped.

Jim chuckled. "Absolutely."

"Don't worry, John. I'll look after him," Ricky suggested.

Then it was time for the couple to pass through security. John and Bill waited until they started toward the X-ray ma-



chine, where they were asked to take their shoes off. Just as John and Bill were about to turn away, Jim hollered over to them: "Bill." They turned back and Bill raised his hand to wave. "We'll be back often for holidays. I promise." How could Jim not do his duty? And then the boys passed through the scanner and were gone.

In front of the airport, the first place passengers can smoke again, John asked Bill, "Well, should we go home?"

Bill hesitated, speculated, and then said, "Let's go to Brighton Beach."

"Brighton Beach," John chortled. "Why on earth do you want to go there at this hour?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling."

The pair, alone now and with no baggage, hailed a cab and rode through Brooklyn to Brighton Beach. The driver seemed annoyed that they didn't have a specific stop in mind, but Bill told him they wanted downtown, somewhere close to the beach.

By the time they got there, the surprisingly warm late-March air combined with the dark night, lit only by urban street lamps, made the seaside neighborhood seem inviting. They found a bar on one of the streets perpendicular to the boardwalk. It was a quarter after three. John and Bill drank—Bill drinking several shots of whiskey in gulps, then grimacing as the warm liquid flooded his chest. They sat in silence.

The Russian bartender closed up at 4:00 AM, but told them that he would serve them until five, while he cleaned up the bar. Bill was grateful. He liked the music, and asked if the barkeep would leave it on. Of course he would; he liked it too. By the time 5:00 AM was nearing, Bill was somewhere between buzzed and drunk—but still coherent, nonetheless. John had nursed his booze so as to be clearheaded when it was time to make their way back to Manhattan. Close to final call, a plaintive song came on the radio. Bill wrinkled his nose and

creased his forehead painfully. It wasn't time yet. The music flooded the room. "*Nobody said it was easy . . .*" John watched him for any indication he was needed. Shortly after five, the couple dropped a big tip and left the bar.

"Let's go down to the beach," Bill suggested. As they were walking toward the boardwalk, a woman, dressed in a black dress, rushed out onto the street suddenly. She was drunk, and strangely, Bill couldn't tell if she was middle-aged or elderly.

She fell against Bill, and held herself up by grabbing his arms. She looked up into his face and cackled, "*C'est la fin du monde.*" Then she pushed him aside and wandered off into the night.

John and Bill gave each other looks of surprise. "What did she want?" John asked.

"Who knows?" Bill answered.

They came to the boardwalk, and John was feeling tired. He sat down on a bench. Bill moved forward, down the stairs, and out onto the dark beach. He stopped halfway between the boardwalk and the waterline. He couldn't see the buildings anymore. He stood at the origin of a giant quarter sphere, the moonlit foggy sky at all points equidistant from him.

Then he started to cry. Why did it have to be so hard? Why was the world thusly constructed? Why was God so cruel? The pain overflowed his chest, washing over him with a smooth, almost pleasant intensity. Crying turned to sobbing. *His boy was gone.* He knew it had to be—but why this inevitable, complex, physical causality that produced in him such pain? Why, God? Please, please, he couldn't bear this. He dropped to his knees in the sand. The slight waves lapped at the shore a couple yards away.

John got his old, aching bones off the bench, and walked down the stairs and over to Bill's crumpled body. The sky had become violet with the first pangs of morning. When he got to Bill, he found the strength to kneel down behind him. He

wrapped his arms around the man, who took his hands, clasped them together, and lowered his head to kiss them. Bill's wailing and sobbing ceased briefly when he felt his love's pressure on his back.

"How does it feel to be old?" John asked.

They rested that way in their interlocking position as the surface of the quarter sphere turned from violet to purple to pink. Any moment now, the top of the sun will spring up to their left over the horizon, flooding the sky with light. But we shall remember them this way, forever in the pink half-light of an unfinished dawn.

— PUP

JULY 28, 2015