

BUDDHA BOY

Friday 10:00 a.m.

Mike Andreotti is sitting at the head of a rectangular Formica table in a gray rectangular classroom trying to keep himself awake and concentrate on the exercise he has just assigned to the eleventh graders that he coaches for the SATs. A sagging, middle-aged face, left eyebrow raised, mouth tilted in a semi-permanent frown. His Styrofoam cup of instant coffee is a moderately effective shield against the constant onslaught of whispers and giggles from the back of the room. The usual hand goes up, "Can I go to the bathroom?" Mike thinks *why don't you stay in the bathroom for the rest of the period, and masturbate while you are at it? Idiot.* He says, "Of course you may, Jonathan," and then he turns to the rest of the class, "Let's go over the last paragraph once again, shall we? Can you tell which roots are Greek, and which are Latin? Make a list of all the Greek derivatives, and underline all Latin prefixes. Remember the multiple meanings of the prefixes *con* and *de*? What about the Greek prefix *syn*, otherwise known as *sym*?" Another hand goes up. "Excuse me, sir, but are you sure this kind of stuff will actually be on the exam?" "Nobody knows what exactly is going to be on the exam, Rebecca. In the meantime, let's just concentrate on finishing the exercise." The drone continues for a while. Mike glances at his watch: Thank god, just two more minutes to the bell. The only geek in the class raises his hand excitedly, as usual. His name is Lucas. "So, in other words, sir, considering the Greek and Latin origins, the word *sympathy* is quite the same as the word *compassion*." "Quite so, quite so, but only from an etymological point of view; usage is, of course, another story altogether," answers Mike with a smile too faint to convince the gloating Lucas that the teacher is particularly impressed with his observation. Somebody asks for a clarification on the upcoming homework.

The bell rings, and Mike is relieved to see the students go. As Jonathan returns from the bathroom to collect his books, Mike wonders why he got so pissed at him a little while ago. So what if Jonathan *is* a frequent bathroom visitor? Who wouldn't need a break or two or even three from the excitement of this gray rectangular classroom? Mike would do so *himself* if he could afford it. He is not made for this shit. He is just trapped in it. Ah, he had so many dreams when he was Jonathan's age, he muses, as he takes another sip from the Styrofoam cup, and hunches over a pile of essays that need immediate correction. Over three decades ago he came to Hollywood to be a writer for the movies. The scripts, the sets, the limousines, the Oscars, the parties, the martinis, the bank accounts. Like so many

other poor pathetic dreamers who end up settling for some menial teaching job after years and years of disappointments. Yes, it's always been shit, and it continues to be shit up to the present moment. How about that for consistency? Except that now he's also sagging, these days the mirror finds him rather repulsive, the wrinkles and the gray hair seem to multiply by the hour, and it's much harder to control the bulging of his waistline. And now, having to teach the most ridiculous of idiotic classes ever invented, to kids aspiring to nothing but a high score on some stupid exam! Oh, well. It is only typical of his good luck to throw him once again into the Roman arena with the proverbial lions - what else is new? If he believed in god, he might console himself with the explanation that, possibly, his faith is being tested. That would be so convenient right now, wouldn't it? He grabs onto the stereo foam cup almost as if he's looking for protection, and takes another sip of his cold instant coffee. And yet, instead of the expected perky boost, he feels the old green-brown cloud start to descend again. He knows this cloud all too well. The eyelids get heavier, the muscles of his face go numb, his chest is tightening. Water, water, that's what he needs. He lets go of the essays and his red ball point pen, and quickly downs a glass of water. Yes, that was better. And now for the breathing. Sitting still, he takes a couple of deep breaths, and closes his eyes. A few more breaths. He feels his clasped fingers resting on his stomach. Palms, joints, thumb scanning the wrist to hear the blood pulsing its drum beat. Good.

Why on earth did he accept this SAT assignment six months ago? He knows the answer, of course. He's doing it strictly for the money. The English literature classes that he used to teach pay about half as much as the SAT preparatory seminars, and when the SAT position opened, he was among the first to rush in and submit an application. Farewell to those lengthy deep discussions on the historical prose of Gore Vidal, or Harry Potter and the Arthurian legends. And not just the discussions. The opening of minds beyond the little box. But then, with SAT enrollment being so much higher than English Lit in recent months, Mike has come to see himself as just another casualty of the bizarre priorities in an imperfect universe. God makes a shitty world, so let *him* fix the shit that he creates. "I refuse to take it upon myself to fix his shit," Mike whispers to himself. Of course, he wouldn't vocalize this thought ever in public. It would be blasphemy for liberals with Mike's credentials to take such cynical positions. And yet, he sees that it's this simple, and not at all uncommon view that has informed his recent professional decision. A certain bitterness about joining the herd? Oh, yes, indeed. But then the check that he is bound to receive later in the afternoon is not exactly negligible. And anyway, life does not begin and end with his teaching gigs. There is his

writing, there is the bar, and most importantly, there are his sexual escapades. Mike begins to smile. He inhales deeply once again, and stands up to prepare himself for three more periods of the SAT drudgery in his gray rectangular classroom.

Friday 4:00 p.m.

Mike stops by the administration office to pick up his check. Edward Fogg, assistant to the principal, smiles to him from his desk. Mr. Fogg is best known to both faculty and students as "Frog" on account of his enormous protruding stomach, triple chins, bulging eyes, and almost total absence of hair and eyebrows. His tenor voice, discreetly hissing with whistling sibilants, exudes an aura of effeminacy. He is the exact opposite of the principle, Jake Gallagher, a mustached aging jock, beaming with sports and family values. Gallagher shakes Mike's hand and asks about the students' readiness for the upcoming finals. He flashes his dentures in full confidence that Mike is the best man for the job, then excuses himself for a trustees' meeting, after first inviting Mike to a barbeque after the finals, adding that both Ruthie and the kids would be very honored by his presence. Mike accepts. When the door closes behind him, Mike notices that the radio is on at low volume, playing the allegro maestoso from Chopin's Concerto No 1. His eyes meet Fogg's, who says with a knowing smile, "Great music, isn't it? I simply love baroque music. Don't you?" Mike thinks, *It's not baroque, for crying out loud, it's anything but baroque.* He says, "Of course I do, Mr. Fogg." "Oh, please, don't call me that. Just call me Ed." "OK, then, Ed," Mike corrects himself with a smile. After an awkward silence, Fogg remembers the task at hand. "Ah, yes, the check." He begins to type the check, as Mike wonders if Fogg can really tell that Mike is gay. Unlike Fogg, Mike is very meticulous about presenting a straight front at work. With a boss like Gallagher, he wouldn't be comfortable to do otherwise; and, after all, his nature is not really effeminate. Fogg hands him the check and says in a respectful tone, "I hear you talk a lot about the origin of words in your class." "That's true, I do." "This is so absolutely marvelous for the youngsters. You must know Latin, then." "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do." "Oh, how much I envy you. To know the language which is the mother of Spanish, French, Italian, and all of the Romantic languages!" Mike thinks, *The languages are called Romance, you silly Frog, they're not "Romantic."* He says, "And also mother of all baroque languages, too." Frog, oblivious to the sarcasm, shakes his head in silent agreement, as Mike grins, pockets the check and bids him goodnight.

The ride back home is luckily against the traffic, but the occasional screeching sound of his brakes is nerve wracking. He wanted to run around and party this weekend, not have to worry about the god damn brakes. This sound has been growing through the last several days, and now returns a little more pronounced than before. Last time this shit had happened, he had to pay no less than four hundred and fifty dollars to the car mechanic. It's an old second hand car, what can you expect, you buy a second hand car - you buy somebody else's problem. Mike has never bought a brand new car. The ever elusive, fleeting dream: to buy a brand new car. Oh, forget it. Not on his crappy little salary. No, you have to suffer through your fucked up breaks, leaking transmission, overheating, and god knows what else. You have to pay for your sins. Now, *Frog* drives a brand new car, isn't that curious? But then Frog is not faculty, Frog is administration. Big difference. Frog is uneducated enough to be rewarded with a higher salary by this ass backwards society of total nuts. So, there you have it in black and white: pure, total, unadulterated shit.

By the time he arrives home, Mike is seething furiously about uneducated administrators, overpaid but inferior script writers, boys of rich fathers, who were given multiple brand new cars as Christmas presents, and all other types of people whose luck appears to never have thrown them in the Roman arena with the proverbial lions. His face in the bathroom mirror is flushed and distorted: the face of the most misunderstood genius that ever lived, very superior and erudite. But also very ugly. As the green-brown cloud begins to descend once again, Mike's instinct orders him to grab a shower, clean all the garbage off his skin, and then take a nap. He does so.

Friday 6:00 p.m.

When Mike wakes up from his nap, his eyes fall upon the picture of a Tibetan buddha, perched on a blue-green crystal shelf on his wall. He gets up, lights a stick of incense in front of the picture frame, and gazes at the twirling shapes of the rising smoke. He feels the vague need for a little religion right now, and even though he is not a practicing Buddhist of any variety, he is one of several westerners of his generation attracted to the idea of finding inner peace without having to believe in god. So, he has developed the habit of lighting an occasional stick of incense, and then, for a while, he feels a little calmer.

The picture of this particular buddha was given him by a friend, and portrays in fairly vivid colors a man of about forty years old, dressed in ochre and crimson robes. He is fit, handsome and content, and he is flying from one mountain top to another. A halo of light emanates from his

smiling face as he flies through the multi-colored clouds and the empty sky, his right toe raised delicately in an elegant, feminine manner of total abandon.

Mike, with his talent for creative mythology, has decided that this is actually a gay buddha, and he has even named him Kirim. The fact that Kirim is gay and forty years old are both important to Mike, who is also gay and fifty seven. And since Mike has an aversion to celibate buddhism, the idea of a celibate Kirim is, to him, unacceptable. He feels that Kirim's all-knowing smile is too mischievous for celibacy. His forty years of age place him over the hill, and therefore acquainted with aging, as Mike is. His flying symbolizes a desirable independence to Mike, a freedom from oppressing bonds. Today, as Mike sees him leaving one mountain top and reaching for another, he imagines that Kirim is leaving one hustler and reaching for another, like a butterfly tasting the nectar of a flower, then flying to another- always kind to the flowers, always light, and innocent, and free.

The picture is surrounded by votive candles, and right in front of it stands a tiny metal box with a blue jewel on top. Mike opens the box and touches a piece of skin covered with black fur that is tucked up inside. As he touches the skin, he is transported to a scene from the past, a scene that happened fifteen or sixteen years ago.

The fur belonged to Mike's cat Cookie, who was dying of kidney failure at the time. Mike had loved that cat. For five happy years, and every single afternoon, when he came back from work, Cookie would run to him and rub her head against his leg, her tail wagging with excitement, as if she lived only for him. And later, at night, she would curl up next to his pillow and lie there staring at him with her black amber eyes half-closed, purring, as if in meditation, until he fell asleep.

And then, all of a sudden, Cookie was dying of kidney failure. She first stopped wanting to be petted, then she started hiding in the closet, then she stopped eating. Mike's cousin Anna was horrified. She came over right away to check Cookie. Anna had originally rescued Cookie, the homeless kitten living behind the trash bin, and had given her to Mike five years prior to her illness. When Anna arrived that final day, Cookie could hardly walk. She was desperately trying to drag her feet to the litter box because she was too well-trained to just go on the floor. She had a face of pure pain, and now and then let out her little muffled screams. Anna looked at Mike in despair, and said that she would call Dr. Luigi, their vet, who had agreed to do a house call and administer euthanasia, if necessary. As she reached for the phone, Mike asked her, "How much does he charge?" "One hundred," said Anna. "One

hundred! Hm... Do I have one hundred?" he wondered aloud, intending to be heard by Anna. His tone implied that perhaps he didn't have the one hundred dollars. But Anna knew that he did. Mike had already told her that he did have an extra hundred, which he was saving to go buy a hustler in Hollywood that same evening. Anna stared at him. She was white with anger that Mike would even think of going hustle-hunting rather than paying for Cookie's euthanasia. But in her anger, there was also a maternal sweetness, as if begging Mike's heart to open up. And yes, his heart did open up a bit at that moment. Her plea exposed his selfishness for him to see, and as he saw it, he felt ashamed. Although he had to look away, Mike allowed her to get a glimpse of his shame, as he mumbled that *of course* he had one hundred dollars, how could he have forgotten, and that *of course* they should call Dr. Luigi to come over at once. When Luigi came, before he euthanized her, he shaved a little piece of fur to clean her skin for the injection, a piece that Mike kept for all these years: a sacred charm inside the tiny metal box with the blue jewel on top.

And it isn't accidental that Mike would touch that sacred charm again today, having first lit the incense for Kirim. Because he's going on a hustler-hunting expedition tonight, and feels the need for Cookie's blessing.

Friday 9:00 p.m.

He gets into his car, and starts driving to the Stagecoach, a West Hollywood gay bar, where, along with the drinking middle aged couples, several younger prostitutes are admired and pursued by an older clientele. It is certainly the only kind of gay bar that Mike would patronize these days. He likes young men in their twenties, who are slim, and have fat penises that they allow him to play with for a reasonable amount of money. Young men, whether straight or bisexual, who normally chase girls, possibly have unpaid sex with cute hairless boys, but are also aroused by the admiration and generosity of older gay men. Verbal abuse is welcome, if genuine, and occasional "robbery" scenes are particularly titillating, if safely controlled. In the latter case, Mike pretends that he can not afford the agreed upon amount, so that the prostitute has reason to get furious and aggressive about the payment, which, in addition to rude language, incorporates the extra thrills of slapping, and/or kicking, pushing and/or punching. Obviously Mike has to be careful lest these additions lead to bodily harm, but he considers himself divinely protected, for nothing serious has ever really happened to him, save a tiny permanent scar on the right side of his upper lip.

Mike does not need an analyst to elaborate on the development of his sexual idiosyncrasies. He remembers

himself quite vividly as a middle school student falling in love with older boys as if he were a girl. He remembers their indifference or rejection, and he can trace exactly how his sexuality, in order to survive, has turned the tables on life, and demands indifference or even rejection as a prerequisite for arousal. Later on, of course, money was required, and the necessity for money has become an additional prerequisite for arousal. Masochism of this variety may look repulsive or exotic to an outsider, but after years of practice, Mike has come to view it as an innocent, even pedestrian routine, one of millions of ways that human beings may choose in order to attain sexual release.

On the way to the bar, he drives by the Community Meditation Center, an old Victorian building, currently used for Buddhist lectures and retreats. Mike used to come to this place on and off twenty five years ago, partly to learn Buddhism, but more in order to possibly find a boyfriend. Indeed this is the very last place where Mike ever looked for a boyfriend, before he plunged into his masochistic scenes with the hustlers of Hollywood. This is the place where he had met the unforgettable Eric, about his age at the time, extremely handsome and very enlightened. Mike fell in love with him at first sight, and even more so after they talked about Buddhism, art and linguistics. The idea that this beatific smile, these sparkling eyes, the fresh originality of thinking, the shining spirit... were all emanating from a perfect swimmer's body endowed by an undoubtedly fat penis... was an electrifying thought indeed. Granted, the shape and size of Eric's penis were products of Mike's imagination, but Mike was instinctively certain about the accuracy of his appraisal. During one of the retreats, where both participated, they found out that they had a common interest in jogging. So Eric invited Mike to jog together, if he wanted, during the midday intermission. Mike was extremely elated with the invitation, feeling much closer to his secret goal, but then became very, very frightened. He *wanted* Eric to be straight, therefore he *believed* Eric was straight. Now, if Eric was straight, he would possibly see Mike as a potential straight buddy. So, the more Mike was going to approach Eric, the harder he would fall when rejected as a lover in the end. So, when the midday intermission arrived, Mike hid in the bathroom and was nowhere to be found, leaving Eric to jog on his own. And during the afternoon meditation session, Mike requested a private interview with the teacher.

Although consumed by his burning desire for Eric and simultaneously numbed by his fear of rejection, he heard himself posing to the teacher an ostensibly irrelevant question, "Sometimes I get tired of the social games one has to play in order to get laid. It appears that paying a prostitute is a simpler solution. What is the Buddhist view

on this matter?" The teacher did not appear surprised at his bluntness. He said, "Buddhism does not prescribe a type of sexuality as being more spiritual than another: monogamy, polygamy, celibacy or prostitution can all be based on kindness or unkindness. We encourage kindness, that's all. If you go with a prostitute, be kind to the prostitute." Although Mike was more than satisfied with this answer, he pressed on with another question, "And what is the Buddhist view on the addictive nature of sex?" This time the teacher laughed. "Once you get addicted to the spirit, young man, you don't need to fight any of your other addictions. And why? Because the spirit offers the most powerful pleasure of them all. Now, our bodies are incomplete and need a partner to feel complete; that's biology. But if you are in spirit, the absence of a partner, should it have to be that way, will not lead to devastation. That's how powerful the spirit is. A little sadness on the surface is natural, but then there is such depth and pleasure in the spirit." "So what is the spirit?" asked Mike. The teacher became animated, starting to use hand gestures to explain his point. "Look here: Ninety nine per cent of you is spirit and one per cent is body-mind-and emotion. If you look at your one per cent from the outside, then you *become* the outside, you *become* the ninety nine per cent. And then you realize that you are the *whole* thing: you are both the one per cent *and* the ninety nine per cent. When it's all together, that's the ultimate truth, and the ultimate pleasure." "I see," said Mike, although he felt rather confused. The teacher addressed his perplexed facial expression, "When I say ninety nine per cent and one per cent, don't take this literally. I'm just trying to explain. The most important thing to remember is that you are bigger than yourself. Much bigger. Yourself is only a very small part of you." And then he fell silent. Mike stood there for a minute, trying to digest his words, then bowed, thanked the teacher, and went back to his pillow to meditate for another hour.

At the end of the retreat, he found a few minutes to talk to Eric. He picked up the thread of a discussion they had started on linguistics, and avoided any reference to the jogging. Eric appeared to have registered that Mike had been, for some reason, unavailable for jogging, so he decided to go it alone, and that was that. Mike was relieved. He focused on a paper that their mutual linguist friend Judy had written on the English verb system. Eric seemed very interested in the paper, and Mike, electrified once again by his beauty, told him that, if he wanted, he could stop by his house and take a look at the paper. Even as he said so, he knew that he was going too far. Eric replied with a half smile, "So, now you are going to give me your phone number and your address, too?" Mike turned whit, mumbling, "Or... you can get the paper from Judy herself, of course, if you want." "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

said Eric, realizing how hurtful his comment had been. And it took Mike several seconds to compose himself and pretend that all was fine; then he announced that it was time for him to get going, he had a date with a girl, and they were going to a hot party and so on. And this was the last time he ever saw Eric, the Buddhist teacher or the meditation center. Mike had, of course, no date with a girl or any hot party to go to. He was hurt once again, but this time more permanently. He wanted to be finished with the hope for a boyfriend. That very night, just like tonight, he had taken his car and driven straight to the Stagecoach with the clear intent of buying a hustler. And it was here, at the exact spot where he's parking right now, that he encountered his long-time hustler Rocky for the very first time twenty five years ago.

Friday 9:30 p.m.

wondering which penitentiary is housing Rocky at the moment- they have lost touch for a while- and whether Eric has aged gracefully or not, he locks his car and starts walking to the bar. It's better to remember Eric as he was, in spite of the pain that always accompanies his memory. But let us change the subject. The Stagecoach neon sign is flashing at the entrance. He lifts the heavy curtain and scans the young men available for rent, but he discovers nothing worthy of notice. Oh, well. Perhaps it is too early. As always, he's come prepared for such eventuality, having brought paper pad and pen to do some writing while he drinks and just waits. He orders his customary Crystal Geyser, and sits in a corner sufficiently lit by a fake torch to allow writing, but also centrally located so he can be checking the changing scenery at the same time. He is working on a scene of his upcoming story called *Berdache*, and he needs to correct some references to daily life in a Hopi Indian village of the eighteenth century. Twenty minutes later, satisfied with his corrections, Mike looks up to scan the bar once again for the newcomers. He is acquainted with a couple of recently arrived faces. He has actually been with them before, and they have been disappointments. Too small, that is, in spite of the appropriate thug attitude. "Olive country," Mike whispers to himself, referring to his metaphorical chart of penis sizes, starting at the lowest end as *olives*, then moving up to *okras*, *carrots*, *bananas*, *cucumbers*, and ending with the all-desirable *eggplants*. "Olive country," he repeats, and refocuses himself on the Hopi village, while enjoying the gangsta rap that is now playing on the juke box. Thirty minutes later he is so absorbed by his thoughts that he does not notice two men in their fifties who are obviously discussing him, smiling and casting frequent glances in his direction. They finally get up and walk over to his table.

"Mike Andreotti?" says one of them. Mike looks up, but can not remember the face he is looking at. "Sean Perkins," the man says, "from USC, Gay Students' Union." Mike can not recall at first, then he gradually sees a glimpse of a much younger face under the wrinkles and the gray hair. "Sean Perkins! My God! Holy Jesus! We have changed, haven't we? Unbelievable. Who would think. After all these years." They embrace. "This is my husband, Robert." Mike and Robert shake hands. "Always the intellectual," says Sean about Mike, pointing to the paper pad lying on the table. "Oh, just avoiding boredom in a gay bar," Mike answers with a shrug of his shoulders. Sean proceeds to explain to Robert about Mike's academic and creative achievements at USC, stopping occasionally to confirm the accuracy of his accounts, and waiting for Mike's smiling nod before continuing the story. Mike eventually breaks this one-sided biographical diatribe by asking about Robert and Sean. A stream of tit-bits of information cuts through the loud disco tune now blasting out of the juke box. They've been together for fifteen years, got married in Holland six years ago, their upcoming cruise of the Greek isles should be most fascinating, who does the cooking and who the gardening, how they bought a second home without a down payment, and their recent involvement with the struggle for legalizing gay marriage in this country. Mike is listening, but also watching their vibrations, and indulging in secret thoughts behind a frozen grin. These guys are both girls, for crying out loud, in spite of some slightly more masculine veneer over Robert's tone of voice and body movements. What could they possibly be doing in bed together? Of course they should have the right to get married in this country if they want, but how do they make it work in bed? Is Mike's mind too fucked up, imprisoned in his pursuit of the ever elusive straight dude? Is there a "gay" sexual feeling that he is simply not wired to witness in this lifetime? Or have they developed a dignified defense against social hatred, loneliness and despair by squinting their eyes a little bit, turning down the light, and indulging in a bizarre but safe lesbianism where the straight male hunk is recreated artificially in the bedroom? Mike thinks the latter to be true, but he believes that people, and especially desperate people should be allowed their comfortable illusions. "And what about you, Mike?" asks Sean when Robert excuses himself to go buy a Budweiser. "Are you with...?" "A prince charming?" Mike completes the question. Then answers it with a rueful smile, "well, not quite. I have found many princes, but none of them were all that charming. I don't know, Sean, I guess I'm more of the...loner type." "A confirmed bachelor?" "Oh, let's rather say a

dirty old man. The guys I like are usually on dope. Very expensive and dangerous as roommates. But I rent their services." "You do?" "I do." "From here?" "When I can. As you see, if you look around, there are a few looking to be rented right now." Sean spends a few moments evaluating the surroundings, and starts to ask "How much...", but as he sees Robert returning with the beer, he changes the subject, "Mike Andreotti! I'll be damned. After all these years. Will you tell us what it is you are writing these days? Is it a gay story like the ones you used to write in graduate school?" "Yes, as a matter of fact, it is." "I love gay stories," says Robert expectantly. "It is a story about a berdache." "A what?" Robert looks confused, so Mike explains. "You know, several American Indian cultures were berdache cultures. Which means that some boys would have a dream of the moon goddess, who told them that they were girls in boys' bodies. After such a dream, those boys would dress in women's clothes and identify themselves as berdaches to their family and the whole village. Although parents often tried to dissuade them, *the boys had the blessings of the goddess, and the village eventually obeyed the wish of the goddess.* Isn't this remarkable? The berdache would sometimes marry a husband *who might also be married to a woman.* Which means that the husband would satisfy both, and, not surprisingly, the berdache would do the harder manual work in the house, as she, being a man, would have more muscle than the wife. Some tribes considered the berdaches special spiritual beings, and asked them to play a leading role in religious ceremonies. Pretty heavy stuff." "Very interesting," says Sean, careful to underplay his fascination. But Robert raises his eyebrows, "Very different from modern gay culture. Kind of tied to the traditional roles of man/woman and that sort of thing. Definitely not my cup of tea." "Well, I guess I'm quite old-fashioned myself," says Mike with polite contempt, and excuses himself for the bathroom. On the way he thinks, *You, stupid Mary. Wait until you and your committed husband go to the Greek isles, and fall for the same sailor he-man. Fucking "modern day culture" bullshit. Stupid little Mr. and Mrs. Roberta, with your stupid little white picket fence doll house, monopolizing homosexuality and restricting it to your little pink boudoir. Go ahead, commit yourselves to each other, and then commit yourselves to a mental institution, while you're at it!*

Mike bumps onto Big Don, an obese sixty man in his early sixties, who is returning from the pool table. They hardly know each other, but they have the warm affinity sometimes found between fellow Johns. He recognizes Mike through his

alcoholic stupor, "Looking for a young man again?" he winks. "Small dick country today, isn't it, Don?" says Mike with disappointment. "You can say that again," sighs Don. "I know all three of them over there. Lots of attitude, zero dick. But what are *you* into, darling?" asks John with a leery smile, "...I mean, other than a good endowment from mother nature?" "Robbery," says Mike flatly. "Oh, really?" Big Don's smile widens into laughter "Ooh, my, my, my. Then I recommend the Pearl." "What Pearl?" "It's a jewelry store on Sixth and Broadway, you uneducated slut. The best for cheap, fake material. Five bucks a ring, eight bucks for a fancy watch that works for at least a week or two. Not bad. And gold chains too, three bucks a piece. You can't beat the Pearl." He pinches Mike's cheek, and continues his way, chuckling and burping, finally landing with a thump on a chair right next to the juke box.

Louis follows Mike into the bathroom. He is a thin, gaunt, twenty-five year old Puerto Rican, very straight, and very much the hustler. Mike has tried him before, and has been aware of his presence in the bar tonight, but has chosen to ignore him, labeling him as an "okra" at best. After Mike is finished urinating, he walks over to the sink to wash his hands, and catches sight of Louis, who has proceeded to the urinal. Louis pretends to be interested in urinating, but he does not take his penis out of his pants with the intent of displaying the bait. He must certainly be aware that at least some of the customers remember his faulty merchandise. He just stands there looking at Mike, trying to hypnotize him with his deep dark eyes demanding submission. He says, "Whazup." And, lo and behold, a little miracle just happens. The "okra" momentarily forgotten, Mike feels a hormonal surge for the suave voice, the arrogant look, the criminal gleam of the tongue ring half-seen through the sneer. "I didn't know you had a tongue ring," Mike says, almost in a girlish tone, trying to work up an appetite for Louis, vaguely conscious that the lack of better candidates tonight is playing a big part in this desperate attempt. "It's new," says Louis, and sticks out his tongue, in full realization that the vulgarity of the projected image is beginning to work magic on the customer. Mike's bones freeze in servitude. *This straight motherfucker wants money*, he makes himself think, and starts getting an erection. Louis catches it at once. He proposes a room in the nearby Galaxy hotel, to which they hurry, going through the back door of the bar in order to avoid Mr. and Mrs. Roberta. As they walk on the street, Mike begins to entertain the possibility that Louis' penis may have been misrepresented on their previous engagement due to Louis' copious consumption of heroin, his drug of choice at that time. "Are you doing junk these days, dude?" he hears himself asking. "Naw, haven't got no money for that kind o' shit, man," comes the answer. Mike works on convincing himself that an alternative Louis would emerge during this

second, drug-free engagement, although part of his mind insists that he is in the presence of a totally strung out heroin addict. Oh, what the hell. Mike pays the hotel manager for the room, and they go through corridors covered with a cheap, green-brown carpet. In the bare, stark room, featuring a queen size bed undoubtedly infested with all varieties of bedbugs, Louis takes off his clothes except for his boxers and turns on the TV to watch a soccer game. Mike turns off the volume, without protestations from Louis, who continues to watch the silent picture. Mike has never tried this particular perversion: bothering a straight boy who wants to watch TV. He begins to touch the straight boy's thighs. Louis is experienced enough to immediately understand the scene. He tells Mike bluntly that if he wants to touch, he's got to pay upfront. Mike, in total rapture, walks over to his wallet and brings some money, which Louis quickly stuffs in his socks. "Is that OK?" "For now," sneers Louis, and casually exhibits his tongue ring. The melting Mike begins to happily masturbate himself, although his ecstasy is dampened by the realization that the "okra" has remained an "okra" after all. But he will not give up; he compensates by visualizing how the "okra" turns into an "eggplant" in the presence of vaginas. Therefore it is very understandable that, given the present circumstances, the straight boy cannot get it up. "Do you fuck girls?" he asks. "All the time, man. I just do this for money," comes the expected answer, which throws Mike into a new whirlwind of aphrodisia. But the "okra" factor keeps coming back as an issue, which of course delays his ejaculation. Louis becomes impatient, and asks for more money, verbally harassing Mike for taking too long to finish, slapping him in the face, and urging him to get done because his bitch is waiting for him at home, and he's got to get going. In this storm of insults and under the spell of Louis' black, angry eyes, Mike eventually reaches a climax, pays the rest of the money (total seventy dollars) and lies back on the pillow. "Feeling better?" asks Louis with a smile, as he lights a cigarette. "Yeah, yeah, thank you, babe" answers Mike. But somehow the thrill has already dissipated.

Friday 11:00 p. m.

At least it was not expensive, he thinks, trying to end the experience on a positive note as he leaves the Galaxy hotel and drives back home. But suddenly the size issue returns. *A foul-mouthed okra on sale; that's what I got!* The thought makes him furious at the okra, furious at his stupidity for knowingly buying the okra, furious at the heavy traffic ahead of him that won't let up, furious at the whole fucking mess. He spends several minutes cussing out the city mayor who has totally ignored the ongoing Friday night traffic congestion in spite of his pre-election promises, then

starts entertaining himself with imaginary bizarre scenes from the life of Mr. and Mrs. Roberta. Their attempt to liven up their sex life with a little S and M, and fighting who will be the slave tonight. And then, their tragic meeting with the sailor he-man on the Greek isles, ending in murder and double suicide, made into a major feature release called Death in Myconos.

The traffic lets up, and he is finally ready to enter the freeway. Waiting at the red light to make his turn, he adjusts his rear view mirror and catches sight of his face: soaked in the red light, and very stressed, as if blood were oozing from his pores. An endlessly babbling face with a raised eyebrow, tightened into a wrinkled ball. And as he starts driving again, he glances at the mirror once again and notices the black space of the night sky *around* the wrinkled ball. Something about the smallness of the wrinkled ball and the largeness of the night sky with its myriad of glimmering jewels gives him a chill. Is he turning into the person he had promised himself never to become? Is the sky laughing at his predicament? He opens up the side windows and the sun roof as he speeds down the freeway. He tries to imagine what the little wrinkled ball looks like to the all-engulfing sky. No, there would be no criticism on the part of the sky about the little wrinkled space rock for its particular shape - raised eyebrow and frown included. There would be only an observation, just as a scientist would observe various natural objects, a gnarly tree trunk, for example, a twisted root, or a half-rotten leaf.

Mike eventually gets off the freeway, and drives through a dark alley to the back yard of an abandoned house very near his own apartment, where he parks, opens his trunk, brings out a bag of dry cat food, and proceeds to pour its contents into a feeding bowl. Two little hungry faces emerge from the dark. "Pookie! Shnookie! *There* are my two little shits! Am I late, sweethearts? So sorry you guys. I was held up by Small Dick Louis. Come on now, dinner time! I'll change your water too." Mike looks at the two feral cats. They are devouring the food while casting satisfied glances at the grinning face of their benefactor. The two wild things were never domesticated. Ten years ago the owner of the property, who used to feed them in the back yard, suddenly died, and none of the neighbors could be bothered with feeding them ever since. So Mike picked up the feeding, and named them after his late cat Cookie, who could not have been replaced by another domestic cat, due to Mike's rental agreement at his new studio apartment. As Pookie and Shnookie continue to be absorbed by their dinner at present, Mike reflects on his inability to eat a meal without reading the newspaper at the same time. Or correcting papers. Or mulling over some pressing problem in his head.

Friday 11:30 p.m.

with his mood greatly improved, Mike lights a stick of incense for Kirim, and silently thanks Cookie for bringing Pookie and Shnookie into his life. Then he lies on his bed and tries to recapture the feeling that he had in the car driving on the freeway. The wrinkled ball: angry for the Louis incident, and then angry at the anger. Two layers of anger, then another layer of frustration at the double anger, plus a negative comparison with the more "together" person that he should have been but unfortunately is not. And all of these layers mixed together to make the wrinkled space rock uniquely lined with crevices and webs and veins. "How peculiar and mysterious, this rock; and how very, very tiny," whispers the starry sky while looking at the wrinkled space rock flying through his enormous space body. And for a split second Mike feels as if these words are coming out of his own mouth. "How peculiar and mysterious, this rock; and how very, very tiny. . ." Now other space rocks are flying through, some going very fast, with a high velocity that blurs their exact characteristics, others much slower and dignified, some more transparent, and others more opaque, and then one that grows so immense it ends up filling up the whole night sky: the image of the unforgettable Rocky.

The slim, gangster-looking mulatto boy with the massive penis, which he liked to exhibit while dancing in the back room of the Stagecoach. A bisexual kid, earning his living by dating older gays and selling dope. There were always a couple of girlfriends in the background, an older man paying his rent, an ugly woman doing his laundry, a few arrests or warrants for his arrest, and an empty bullet hanging from his neck chain, like an amulet. *Rocky, Rocky, Rocky, a lifetime of submission to your enormous reproductive organ. Rocky, Rocky, Rocky, this life would have been so terribly impoverished without you,* muses Mike, as he lies with a robust erection on his empty bed. It is true, of course, that being seen with Rocky on the street was a rather risky proposition for Mike, who had no interest in meeting any of the detectives and police officers that were constantly on Rocky's tail. And it is also true that, ten years into their hustling relationship, Rocky gained substantial weight, which forced Mike to request that Rocky wear an extra extra large hoodie in bed, which proved to be a somewhat effective way of covering up his bulging stomach. But still, the massive organ, coupled with Rocky's abusive yet merciful attitude, continued to entertain Mike. Rocky would proceed to empty all of Mike's pockets, search his socks and shoes for more cash, and then leave. Twenty minutes later, Mike would call him back on his cell phone, begging him to return, and confessing about the additional

money that he was stupid enough to try and hide from him during the first visit. The second visit would be accompanied by a good beating "for trying to play me," and, of course, a thorough search for the remaining cash. Where was Rocky now? In some federal penitentiary or other, doing time for sales of narcotics or breaking of parole or god knows what. Mike had not heard from him for over five years.

Saturday 11:00 a. m.

Mike has just finished masturbating while looking at his porno magazine collection. He drinks his morning coffee, eats his favorite kind of granola, corrects a couple of essays, then sits in front of his computer screen, and starts cruising a website loaded with provocative pictures of naked young men. He appears to be looking for an antidote to his severe "okra poisoning," and, considering the other choices available the night before at the Stagecoach, he has decided to avoid the bar, and attempt to find a date through electronic means. After about an hour of clicking the mouse, checking and evaluating, he has finally located him. He is twenty one, Hispanic, straight looking, with pitch black uneven hair, fleshy lips, and a condescending smile, exhibiting his enormous eggplant to the potential admirer. His phone number and price are both listed underneath. Instead of a name, the label reads ACTION NOW - ESCORT SERVICES. Brimming with excitement, Mike calls the phone number. "Hello?" says the voice of an undergraduate jock. "I just saw your picture on the internet," says Mike with a timid, submissive voice. "Are you available tonight?" "Of course I'm available," says the young man. Mike quickly interprets the tone of the voice as one hundred per cent straight, but he still has to ask the important question in clear English, "Are you straight? Because, you know, I like *straight* boys." "I'm straight, man," the escort says, "I have a girlfriend, she lives upstairs from me. You can watch us together if you want. For an extra fee, of course." "Of course," says the timid voice, "but I'd like to meet *you* first." "When?" "Tonight at eleven," says Mike, "if you tell me where you live." The escort gives him the address. Mike hangs up, and returns to Kirim, chuckling with joy. He feels as if he is flying along with him in total bliss, both of them navigating through the golden, pink and white clouds, with their big toes curling upwards, their orange robes flapping in the wind, reaching for the highest mountain tops of the majestic Himalayas.

Saturday 11:00 p. m.

Mike knocks on the door. "It's open," says the voice of the escort, who is sitting on the sofa of a dark, messy apartment. When Mike enters, he finds his dream come true, inviting him to take a seat. His name is Juan. He is friendly, sounds somewhat educated, possibly a College junior putting himself through school by working in the library, and occasionally hustling on the side for some extra cash. Next to Juan on that sofa, in the span of three and a half hours, Mike achieves ejaculation records comparable only to his early sexual affairs, at age twelve, with his classmates in seventh grade. During an interlude in this unbelievably glorious evening, Mike learns that Juan happens to own a small gray cat by the name of Dirty Bird. Soon enough, the totally non-judgemental and open-minded Dirty Bird climbs between the two naked bodies. After he receives the required massage, Juan lifts him up with kindness, kisses him, and confines him to another room. Juan's kiss is the ultimate topping on Mike's ice cream sundae. For Juan is not only cute, young, trim, friendly, straight and well-endowed; he is also kind. Mike is in heaven. And when, later, he realizes that Juan is not really a College boy at all, but a full blown coke addict who works older gays to pay for his dope, Mike is disappointed but not alarmed. Juan explains that he is getting ready to go into a serious detox and rehabilitation program. And on a desk, next to a pile of dirty laundry, Mike catches sight of a copy of the Alcoholics Anonymous book, open at a random page. *Has it been read recently?* Mike wonders. He is intrigued that Juan, as a druggie, defies society's laws (an audacity, which adds masculinity to his image). At the same time, he is touched by Juan's aspiration to return to the fold of society, a difficult task indeed, but not impossible. A task in which Mike would be willing to offer his assistance, like an understanding, nurturing mother. Given this lofty goal, Mike's money would be supporting a good cause in the future, although today it is, quite certainly, supporting the bad habit of living on cocaine. Of course, that which half of Mike's mind calls a "bad habit," the other half considers "a sexy audacity." Go figure. At any rate, the evening ends with a lengthy discussion about Dirty Bird, and Mike's insistence that the cat should be fixed and vaccinated immediately. Juan says fine, and Mike offers to help him do it for free. As they say goodbye, it is arranged that Mike will call Juan the following morning, and give him the phone number of a free municipal vet service in his area. He leaves Juan's apartment swimming in ecstasy, and when he arrives at home, puts on a facial mask to remedy the growing wrinkle problem, something he has seriously neglected for the past several months. Then he kisses Cookie's jewel box, thanks Kirim for his good fortune, and falls into a deep sleep.

Sunday 10:00 a.m.

Mike showers and shaves to Handel's Messiah, then approaches the open window to watch the first greening of the bogonvia, and the almond blossom superbly framed by the opulent biblical clouds of early spring. And then, ever so methodically, he proceeds to clean his desk, after months of avoidance, going patiently through his piles, and placing sheets of paper in neatly designated folders. Finally he picks up the phone to call Juan and give him the information he promised for Dirty Bird. Hearing the jock voice answer on the other end of the line, Mike's heart flutters like a little girl's. He gives Juan the information about the cat, then talks about this and that, his toes curling as he savors the testosterone that pours out of the receiver. Then, just before hanging up, in the tone of an older sister who wants to make sure her younger brother will not be negligent, he adds, "Now you have no excuse not to do it. And I'll be on you until you get it done. You hear me?" It is said in jest, of course, and it is taken as such. Juan responds with an automatic "Oh, stop it!" said in such an effeminate fashion that Mike is taken aback. "Uh.. okay then, I'll call you later," he says, in a hurry to get off the phone. He spends an hour mulling over the tone of Juan's voice. Is he a poor fag playing straight jock for money, and temporarily caught off guard? That would be the most depressing theory. Or is he camping a fag for kicks? Or a straight guy with a few effeminate moments from time to time? Mike knew a student in college who was definitely straight and who still made some gestures that could be misunderstood that way. If the latter theories were proven true, Mike's mind would be put at ease. Suddenly, on an impulse, he decides to drive over to Juan's house, pretend he forgot something, and listen to his voice a little more carefully, even look around the apartment for evidence, or possibly meet his girlfriend who lives upstairs. So he drives to Juan's house, parks across the street, and sits there trying to decide what is the thing he's going to tell him he forgot. And as he sits there, he sees the outer door of the small apartment building open, and a tall eighteen year old boy run out, with Juan chasing after him, yelling "You're gonna pay for this, motherfucker!" As the boy disappears around the corner, Juan returns to the apartment building, and explains to a concerned neighbor, who has come out to check what's happening, "He's stolen my CDs! He's stolen my CDs!" Mike lowers himself in the car to avoid being seen until the fuming and cursing Juan enters the building, slamming the door behind him. So, there you have it! This time the tone of voice and the bodily movements leave no room for discussion: a little Latina fag playing straight jock to buy her coke. *You fucking shitface Juanita! Who do you think you're kidding with the god damn girlfriend who is supposed to live upstairs! Fuck you, you mother fucking queen! Jesus!* And he drives off.

Sunday 9:00 p.m.

Mike in his car, returning home from an aborted visit to the Stagecoach, depressed by the assortment of the usual older clientele, and a few unattractive, over the hill hustlers. He turns into the familiar boulevard, where some younger men are standing in doorways or street corners, some pretending to wait for the bus, others openly touching themselves to invite the hungry, graying and balding costumers who are driving by. He feels a sudden flood of warmth for all them. They look benign and harmless in spite of the social hatred aimed at them. Mike smiles to them, but they don't smile back, consumed as they are by their single focus on the prey.

Mike's attention is caught by a young blond thug with a shaved head and a long silver earring. He is trying to hitch a ride. Could this possibly be the straight or bisexual hustler who would exorcise the bad taste left by Juanita and her stolen CDs? On closer look, he appears to be a youthful thirty five year old man, and after further investigation, he proves to be very well endowed by nature, and, price-wise, quite reasonable. His name is Hadrian. When they arrive at his apartment, Hadrian takes off all of his clothes, indulges in several puffs of crystal meth, and starts navigating through a fast succession of straight porno websites to excite himself. Mike has no objection to Hadrian's obsession with straight porno; in fact, he finds it fascinating. Being ignored, he has to beg, kissing the straight shaved head, and then the straight right earlobe from which is hanging the long silver earring in the shape of a cobra ready to attack. The phone rings, and Hadrian takes a break from his website to talk to a woman's voice. It's clearly the girlfriend. While they chat, Mike plays with the enlarged reproductive organ ever so tenderly, like caressing a beloved little puppy. He curls up in a warm pool of humiliation, as he continues to be disregarded by Hadrian. His climax comes when he hears Hadrian laugh on the phone, "Alone? No, I'm not alone. I'm here with a fool I picked up on the street. No, bitch. I'm not putting you on. Here. Fool, say hello to Cielo." He hands the phone over to Mike. "Hello, Cielo," mutters the ejaculating fool. Cielo is rather shocked and unable to talk. Mike hands the phone over to Hadrian and gets up to pay the reasonable fee. Then he excuses himself for a lengthy defecation in the roach-infested bathroom. Yes, he does feel better after this. The moment he decides that he will be seeing Hadrian again, both the okra and crazy Juanita begin to recede in the background. The same flood of warmth he felt for all the hungry costumers returns to touch the shiny bodies of the roaches crawling up the green wall next to the toilet. They are *also* benign and harmless, like the johns on the boulevard: just minding their own business, going god knows

where, to do god knows what, busily moving their antennas, probably passing on important news to one another. In spite of all the social hatred aimed at them. In spite of all the senseless loathing and squashing. As he usually does with roaches, Mike gives them upper class Victorian names: Ophelia and Cordelia. The bottom line is that neither Ophelia nor Cordelia, unlike ninety-nine per cent of human society, could care less about the "reprehensible abomination" of Mike's encounter with Hadrian in the adjacent room. The roaches are above and beyond. They wouldn't give a shit. All they ever wanted was not to be squashed. For them humanity is divided into only two camps: not gays and straights, not normals and perverts, but simply squashers and non-squashers. As he wipes his anus, and just before he flushes, Mike bows to them with a smile, and bids them farewell. "Good night, Ophelia. Good night, Cordelia."

He proceeds to the bedroom, gives his phone number to Hadrian, who continues to chat with Cielo on the phone, and happily exits the premises. The way home is rather pleasant in spite of the continuing screeching sound of his deteriorating brakes. It's been a strange weekend, but at least he found someone, at the very last moment, who is definitely worth seeing again. And that's a victory *right there!* All is well that ends well. Tomorrow morning he can sleep late, because he is not due at school until the afternoon. But he does have to wake up promptly and correct the remaining essays. Oh, well. Life continues. Ta ta ta...

Sunday 11:30 p. m.

It is only when he undresses at home that he realizes his wallet is missing. Blood drained from his face, he stares into space. Oh fuck! It must have happened as he was contemplating the cockroaches. Not that there was more than forty extra dollars in his wallet. *But the credit cards?* Oh my god! There are two credit cards in there! He immediately calls Hadrian's number, but gets a busy signal. Is it because he's still on line? What if he's robbing him this very moment? Not play-robbing him, but actually robbing him for real, using his credit cards? Mike begins to freeze in terror, then luckily finds the strength to slap himself out of shock, and starts to look for his credit card bills. He shakes as he tries to locate the toll free number, and calls in to report that his credit cards were stolen about an hour ago. Has anyone charged either account? Yes, someone has. Twice, within the last thirty minutes. Total: four hundred and sixty five dollars. Mother fucker! He cancels the cards and sits motionless at his desk. Two minutes after cancellation, Hadrian calls. "Is this Mike? Hey, Mike, whazup. You know, you left your wallet here, dude. I just got off line, you know, and saw it

lying on the bed. You must have dropped it or something. Should I send it to you at the address on your driver's license?" Mike can not stop his voice from shaking, "You mean you just got off line charging stuff on my cards only because they told you that the numbers are no longer valid, since I just cancelled them a moment ago." There is an awkward silence on the other end of the line, then Hadrian starts concocting a story about a friend who came to crash on his floor after Mike had left. It must have been *he* who did it while Hadrian was taking a shower. But Hadrian would definitely have a word with him about this, and figure out what happened and call Mike right back . . . and blah, blah, blah. Mike hangs up, throws Hadrian's phone number in the trash, and lays on his bed looking at the ceiling, ignoring Kirim and Cookie's fur, and sinking into a deep, dark swamp. Here we go again. It figures, doesn't it? His life has always been like this, constantly being taken advantage of. At age fifteen his *watch* was stolen, and later, at twenty, his *leather jacket*, and, at another time, his *ring*, even his *shoes*. That's right. Once he had to walk back home without his fucking shoes. And now the credit cards. And as he's growing older, the rip off will intensify. His figure will become increasingly repulsive to all these sexy youngsters that strike his fancy. Straight or gay or bisexual, *the young crave the young, and that's the truth, baby. That's the law of nature.* And as for monetary compensation, he's not a wealthy man, he knows that. He may have had some extra hundreds he could spare for entertainment right now, but they will certainly *not* continue to be there for ever. And he has nobody to blame when he's old and penniless - except himself. Nobody but his stupid choices through the years. His dead-end teaching job that pays only peanuts. His inability to save for a comfortable or even livable retirement. His inability to write a shitty action movie - some horror flick or other about the supernatural - and make a load of money. What will happen when he's ill or just too old to go on teaching? When his daily crucifixion by the little stupid bastards comes to a crashing end? He's already fifty seven now, and isn't getting any younger. Given that he has saved only crumbs, and owns no property except his car, why, then he may just have to move into his old beat-up Honda, and end his days in a depressing dark alley, next to some grimy old dumpsters, with only distant memories of what he'll end up calling "the good old days," the days of Rocky, and the Stagecoach, and his Formica table at Fairview School. His head is spinning images about life in the car, and then imaginary scenes of Eric's married life, painted in idyllic colors as if intended to intensify the pain: a dream job, a splendid house in the countryside, a good wife and wonderful kids, grown up of course by now, they may have even finished graduate school. And then Eric in the middle of it all: as handsome and as slim as ever, with slightly graying hair, but no wrinkles, no stress, no trace of bitterness.

He eventually falls asleep, only to find himself swimming in a charcoal gray ocean, tossed by billowing waves, foam full of debris, and dark clouds hanging low overhead. He's been swimming like this for hours, his face barely visible above water, arms flapping in despair, skin white with terror, his mouth gaping like a black hole in a silent scream. He hears the wail of dark sirens whispering from below: *Give up, Mike. Give up, man. It's better that way. There is no rescue boat coming. It was all a hoax. You're all alone now. Just sink to the bottom and rest. There will be no more falls when you lie at the bottom. No more disappointments.* And yet, something inside of him keeps pushing on. His arms keep flapping in the swelling mass of gray water. Until...

He sees it gliding and somewhat elevated above the surface of the ocean: a ghost ship of smiling faces coming to his rescue. Figures of ancient male and female buddhas are standing on the deck, all holding candles, chanting magical syllables of unknown languages, and beaming warmth and benediction. The old Buddhist teacher is among them with an incense burner; he is attended by a Hopi Indian transvestite boy with a gong. And right in the center stands Kirim holding Cookie the cat, his right arm extending to pull Mike up to safety. Kirim helps him dry his wet, freezing body with a big, white towel, and smiles mischievously, "Smart move with the credit cards, old boy, changing the numbers before he charged even *more* money. You shouldn't be so careless with your wallet in the future. 'Buddha', as you probably know, simply means 'awake'. When walking through the underworld, the Buddha is careful with his wallet. Elementary precautions." "Yeah, I know, I know... But this is Cookie, isn't she?" "Of course she is. You introduced us to each other when you put her little box right in front of my picture. She has adopted me ever since. But I doubt that she has forgotten her original father. Do you remember who this guy is, Cookie girl?" Cookie extends her paw and touches Mike on the cheek, then speaks with a clear human voice, "Thanks for the hundred dollars, dad. That last day, with Doctor Luigi. It was really nice of you."

Monday 5:30 a. m.

The phone rings, and Mike wakes up with a start. He does not answer, just listens to the message. "Mike, pick up. It's me, Hadrian. I know you're listening. Pick it up. Don't be a bitch. I said, pick up the phone" Pause. "Fuck. You are being a bitch now, aren't you?" Long pause. "Listen, fuckhead. You want your wallet back? You got to pay me three hundred dollars and it's yours. I got your driver's license: Michael Andreotti, right? Your health insurance card is here, and hey, guess what? I even got your work

address on some fucking receipt or something. Hm. . . Let me see. Fairview School, West Hollywood. Is that cool or what? Even the phone number. Michael Andreotti, Instructor. How convenient. A teacher corrupting the youth. Ts, ts, ts. Michael, how nasty of you! Now, listen, fuckhead. You have six hours to cough up three hundred dollars - you hear me? And I mean cash. I'm not talking checks, comprende? I'll be on the boulevard at eleven on the dot, standing exactly where you met me, next to the coffee shop on the corner of Hoover Avenue. Let's make it smooth and civilized. We drink a cup of coffee at the coffee shop, and make our little exchange under the table. I'll even buy you a donut- how nice is that? I don't want to have to call the principal and tell him about instructor Michael - whatever the fuck your last name is - ... Andreotti. Don't make me do it, faggot." Pause. "You hear me?" Pause. And he hangs up the phone.

Mike feels the walls of his room closing in on him. With a sudden, almost violent push, he makes himself stand up, opens both of his windows and starts breathing deeply. How could he have been so stupid? How did he forget the goddamn invoice for his desk copy of the fucking SAT workbook in his wallet? That's what it was - the invoice! Fuck! He doesn't have three hundred for this asshole. After the rent that's due today, and his grocery bill tomorrow, he couldn't spare more than a hundred and fifty dollars until Friday. Perhaps he ought to call him right now, and try to reason with him. If he could have until the evening, he might be able to borrow some money. But borrow from whom? His cousin Anna is out of town on vacation. He couldn't go to his loaded uncle Perry, who hates his guts after he came out to him, like an idiot, six years ago. No other close friend appears on the horizon. He probably should borrow off his credit cards -yeah, that's it, his credit cards. And drive to the coffee shop eleven o'clock, and get it over with.

Suddenly Mike is overcome with shame at his stupidity and anger at his - his what? His luck? His life? His *everything!* what a wretched, miserable story: decades of humiliation, decades of being ripped off, decades of suffocating in tiny little studio apartments, decades of seeing your dreams squashed, your hopes crushed to the bone. And the only relief in the midst of hell, the one oasis - the great penis in the sky- has ended up in total, unadulterated shit! *Why me?* he whines, looking at a pretend-God in the morning clouds outside his window. *Can't you pick on any other motherfuckers, like the war-mongering president, or the cruel shareholders of the evil multinationals that destroy the earth and poison our bodies? Why pick on Mike Andreotti, the peace-loving liberal fag, the insignificant SAT instructor at Fairview School in West Hollywood, California? Has he ever been unfair to the goddamn hustlers who freely (yes, freely) chose to go to bed*

with him for a pre-arranged amount of fucking cash? Because I tell you what, you idiotic little deities and other dime-a-dozen gods and angels who hide behind those pretty clouds: They could be taxi drivers these guys, they could be janitors, they could be hairdressers - they decided to be hustlers instead. You get my drift? Huh? As no answer arrives from the possibly offended clouds, Mike shuts the windows and heads for the shower.

The cold water raining on his unacceptably bloated stomach brings up another scary thought that Mike has been trying to suppress: Even if he does pay the asshole the three hundred dollars today, he can call back a few days later, and demand *another* three hundred! And this can go on and on and on. This can be a *very* long relationship indeed. A relationship of Mike working for this asshole. Of course, if he did call Gallagher about Mike, it would be his word against Mike's. If he shows Gallagher the wallet as proof of - what? Not prostitution, which is illegal in Hollywood, not even homosexuality, which is quite legal.. This guy could simply be a thief, for all intended purposes, stealing people's wallets and then trying to extort money with bullshit inventions of his sociopathic mind. That sounds better. And luckily, Mike has no record with the police on either homosexuality or prostitution, or anything but traffic violations.. A model citizen. That's even better. So, it's the asshole's word against Mike's. And the asshole probably *does* have a criminal record, so why believe *him*? And yet, ... *just the allegation...*

The asshole may actually convince Gallagher that he is telling him the truth. Mike feels a chill when he brings to mind Gallagher's past efforts to bond with him as a straight man with another, trying to talk to him about chicks and marriage and Ruthie and the kids...asking him with mock-reprimand when he will finally stop dating and get serious and settle down with a good woman and have kids before it's way too late, and blah, blah, blah. And Mike being evasive during these conversations, referring to his affairs with women, but adding that he just fears commitment and happily prefers the life of a confirmed bachelor. A phone call from the asshole could endanger the precarious bond that Mike has constructed through the years with Jake Gallagher. Because he knows that he's not a good liar. He's always at a loss for words when it's time to lie, and his skin blushes a little too obviously. If confronted, would Mike find the courage and the acting talent necessary to pull an angry denial and make light of it? First admit the loss of his wallet, then show a certain shock at the lie, and even joke about it? That's what has to be done, doesn't it? Survival theater, baby. This is it. He will finally get over his inability to lie. He will write his lines, rehearse his lines, and, if he has to do it, he's just gonna walk up to him and just *do it*.

when the phone rings again fifteen minutes later, he knows it's Hadrian. He disconnects the answering machine, prepares himself some black coffee, settles at his desk, takes a deep breath, and starts writing the lines he needs to rehearse. *Yes, as a matter of fact, I did drop my wallet somewhere, I think I dropped it at a gas station. In fact, I was planning to drive there today to ask them if they found it. - What? I can't believe this. - That's the most disgusting thing I ever heard. - This homo must be out of his mind. - Yeah, right, can you see me handing my hard-earned money to homeless perverts? - Come to think of it, Jake, there was a homeless pervert at that gas station making kissing faces at me. - I bet you it was him. - He looked mighty pissed at me when I gave him a nasty look. - I better call the police and alert them about him. - Unbelievable - wait till I tell Deb -she was in the car when I stopped at the gas station - Amazing.* The only problem with the Deb part was that Jake might then invite her to his barbeque along with Mike. In that case the imaginary Deb would have to get sick at the very last moment. Or Deb could be a hired female escort answering to the name Deb during the whole happy afternoon. whatever. Mike's head is spinning, and there is no question of trying to catch any more sleep. He decides to drink some more coffee, and stay up to correct essays instead. But first he feels the need to light a stick of incense for Cookie and Kirim. He knows that incense will certainly calm his nerves. As the smell of cedar fills the room, he catches sight of a holographic glimpse of Kirim holding Cookie the cat. Is this a sign of some sort? Mike can recall seeing this same image in the dream that he just had when he fell asleep, but try as he may, this is the only part of the dream that he is capable of bringing back to memory.

Mike looks at his watch. It's now six thirty. The city is beginning to wake up. He thinks of Sean Perkins and his husband Robert waking up. Making coffee, preparing the cereal that Sean has bought at Albertson's supermarket, since buying groceries is designated as one of Sean's duties. Does Robert pat Sean Perkins on the butt? Do they call each other "babe" or "honey"? Do they mount each other regularly? Did they mount each other last night? Did they enhance their copulation by drinking a fair amount of brandy? well, one thing is for certain: nobody took *their* wallets last night, nobody charged four hundred and sixty five dollars on *their* credit cards. Suddenly Mike feels a rush of warmth for Sean and Robert. It's a hard motherfucking world out there, and these two have managed to protect themselves somehow. What does *Mike* have to show for himself? Hadrian? Juan? Or Louis?

Monday 10:30 a. m.

Mike brushes his teeth and dresses for work. He needs to be particularly well-dressed today. Clean shirt, his favorite pair of cufflinks, a tie, even a tie tack. The color coordination of it all is rather stunning. Light purple tie, and a black jacket over a tan pair of slacks and tan shoes. A little dirt on the shoes is easily corrected with a liberal amount of spit. He places the essays in his briefcase, and adds the folder with all his writing on the Berdache story - something to go over while the students take the test. Then he tidies up his bedroom, and looks around to make sure that everything is in its place. His eyes rest on Cookie and Kirim. Without thinking about it, he grabs the jewel box and shoves it in his pocket. On his way to work, and since he's not due to teach until 1:00, it wouldn't hurt to spend a little time with his buddies Pookie and Shnookie. As it turns out, they still have a little catfood left, but their water bowl is way too dirty. He cleans the bowl, gives them some fresh water, and as he does, he tells two pairs of grateful eyes that he will pull the best dramatic stunt today, if necessary, to save his job. He promises to always be there. For both of them. With the catfood.

Monday 11:00 a. m.

After Mike finishes with the cats, he walks back to his car, and, prior to starting his way to work, he rehearses the lines once again. It is now 11:00 on the dot, and Hadrian is waiting for his money at the coffee shop. Still sitting in his car, Mike reaches for the recent notes that he made on the Hopi village, and takes a few moments to savor the scene of the moon goddess appearing in the boy's dream. It really is fantastic. Mike imagines a younger audience reading or watching Berdache, and the refreshing possibilities it can suggest, the breaking away from the box, the creative questioning, the crumbling away of gay isolationism. And on the other side of the fence he sees the red and furious face of Jake Gallagher. In his head, Mike assumes the voice of an attorney at court, clearly articulating the closing argument of this case, "Here we've got Mike Andreotti, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the *only* neighbor who keeps Pookie and Shnookie still alive; Mike the writer, who brings the blessings of the wise moon goddess to thousands of starving souls. And this same Mike is *ashamed* (yes, *ashamed*) of Jake Gallagher, some small-time educational bureaucrat. Isn't that a shame, ladies and gentlemen? Isn't that a shame?"

Mike smiles and begins to drive to work. He attempts six additional rehearsals of his lines. The results are not bad at all. His memorization successfully completed, Mike parks his car and walks swiftly up the stairs of Fairview School,

slides through the various noisy and overcrowded hallways, still repeating his mantra, "...Come to think of it, Jake, there *was* a pervert at that gas station making kissing faces at me. He looked mighty pissed when I gave him a nasty look..." until he finally arrives at the faculty room, and heads for his mailbox.

Monday 12:30 p. m.

Two brochures on student summer travel and a carefully folded note from the receptionist: *Can he please drop by the principal's office as soon as possible.* Giselle, the French teacher, bumps into him, asking him if he is satisfied with the new insurance plan that Mr. Gallagher proposed at last month's faculty meeting. Thomas, the librarian, reminds him with a smile about some overdue book that he has borrowed six months ago. Yes, he knows about the book, and no, he prefers the old plan because it covers acupuncture. But what about the dental coverage - isn't that an improvement? The conversation in French with Giselle is very welcome, and especially now, because he has to think about the gender of the French nouns, and not about what he is holding in his hands. Mike's French is rusty, but Giselle is forgiving. Eventually she has to leave, and he is left alone, staring at the note. Is this *it* then? Has the asshole already called Gallagher? Of course it *could* be something totally irrelevant: a test calendar conflict, some urgent parental meeting, a change in his schedule of classes for the upcoming semester. Remaining rather convinced that this note is about Hadrian's call, he starts walking to the bathroom, with a sudden desire to defecate. He hears the muffled sounds of students talking around him, manages a faint smile to the familiar faces, and keeps repeating the same mantra in his head: *I don't even know this fruitcake, Jake. I don't even know this fruitcake. Deb saw him too, it was the pervert at the gas station. . .*

Only when he opens the door of the bathroom stall and locks it behind him does the disturbing thought that he's been trying to ignore finally forces its way, and bursts into his memory: There was that *other* note, you see. As he was leaving Hadrian's room, and not wanting to disturb him because he was talking to his girlfriend on the phone, he wrote him a note that read, *Hadrian, I got to go. Call me in a couple of weeks, OK? Mike 692-5527.*

Mike lowers his pants and sits on the toilet. He is stunned at his stupidity, numb and almost paralyzed. He takes Cookie's jewel box out of his pocket and holds it up, as if trying to ask her for help. He wonders if a confirmed atheist like himself, could ever hope to invoke the power of some protective magic on demand. Probably not. As for the gas station story he's been working on, well, it simply

won't work at all if Hadrian decides to hand this note of Mike's to Jake Gallagher. And he definitely *could*, if he got pissed enough, and realized that Mike was playing hard ball against his cute little extortion idea. If this asshole got pissed, he wouldn't just be pissed, *he would be pissed on crystal fucking meth!* Why, why was he so stupid as to write it all down for the whole world to see? Has he forgotten that he lives on planet earth? . . . Damn! How is he going to change the fucking story now? *JESUS!* As if it were not enough that he wasted all that money on these three stupid idiots during the whole weekend. As if it were not enough he lost four hundred and sixty five goddamn dollars off his credit cards, now he has to invent *another story* to stay on the good side of this aging-jock-family-man clown in order to save a bullshit job paying fucking peanuts and leading to a happy retirement in an old second-hand car surrounded by dumpsters. Terrific. And all of that because he never made it in a world of mediocre writers that he could not emulate or imitate successfully and make a buck. Mike feels his brain totally cluttered and incapable of concocting an alternative story. He must be way too furious or too exhausted from the bullshit to think clearly. What a sad, stupid life he is stuck with. Anywhere you touch it, it stinks to high heaven. Perhaps it's time to off himself, just do the old sleeping-pill-and-plastic-bag-over-your-head number, then just go, "Bye bye all of you, assholes. I never signed up for *this* piece of shit. I'm getting off this fucking bus right now, ladies and gentlemen. So, thank you for the beautiful tour, thanks for all the help, and all the sight seeing, because, hey, even the masochists have their limits - you know?" . . . But then, what about Pookie and Shnookie? Who will feed the two little shits? Who will clean their water? He can't just pick up and leave like that... And what about the little Indian boy whose story will never materialize on paper? A stab of guilt. And anger at the guilt: *Nobody's going to control my life, damn it. Nobody. Or my death for that matter.* Then shame for being selfish. Then irritation at his feeling of shame for being selfish, and so on ad infinitum.

Still sitting on the toilet but unable to take a dump, Mike brings out a piece of paper and his pen, and prepares to scribble down a few ideas for an alternative to the gas station story. Perhaps if he could write it down first, and then rehearse it. . . Except his head is buzzing with all kinds of thoughts. Whining victims. Unrecognized geniuses. Principled prudes. Flaming furies. Then thoughts about the thoughts. . . He feels way too drained to even try and work it out. Instead he sits smack in the middle of the mess, and watches the parade of single thoughts or double thoughts or triple thoughts bubbling up like atoms, or molecules, or forming tangled webs and bizarre strings of beads. Just sitting there and resting for a while like a happy idiot, he feels a welcome sense of relief, while a happy turd of

considerable size squeezes successfully through his anus and plops into the water underneath. Mike wipes himself in slow motion, realizing that something weird has just occurred: along with the plopping of the turd, it is as if a thread that held his thoughts together in his head, has simply... snapped. A gray-white fog is rushing in, as if to fill the space. This is way too strange. Is Mike losing it at last? That'd be a trip! "Hey, Cookie, what's going on? Are we losing it, sweetheart?" he asks the box with a conspiratorial grin. When the box does not respond, he lies there in the fog, unable to move, until a screaming thought arises in his pelvis, then pierces through his spinal cord and hisses with spits of green fire: Jake is waiting! Jake is waiting! Jake is waiting! And it is at this very moment that Mike experiences a brief hallucination, contemporary to the sound of the flushing water: the apparition of Kirim throws the door of the bathroom stall wide open and stands in front of Mike, his ochre robes blowing in the wind, the big white towel still hanging from his shoulder. His eyes sparkle as he smiles, "Come on, old boy. Wash your hands. And fix your tie a little bit. It's time to go, you know. But don't worry about a thing. Just follow me up the stairs. We're going in together." And now, as if hypnotized, Mike follows the shining robes up the stairs to the principal's office. He has no plan for Jake Gallagher, no story memorized, nothing whatsoever. And yet he feels protected. It must be something in the light that emanates not only from the ochre robes of his friend, but also, increasingly, from his own chest, his own abdomen, his whole body...

As he approaches the principal's door, he feels larger, much larger than Mike Andreotti and Jake Gallagher and the Fairview School of West Hollywood, California. And as he grows larger, he feels rich. Not rich in money. But rich...in space. And it is with the calm elegance of the rich that his right hand taps on the office door, while his left continues to hold onto Cookie's blue jewel box.

"Yes?" he hears Fogg's voice from inside. "Come in." He is all by himself. "Oh, Mike, yes. Come, have a seat," Fogg says rather nervously, rearranging the folders lying on his desk.

"I just saw the note."

"Ah, yes... Jake is not on campus today, so it was *I* who told the receptionist to write you. What time is your next class?"

"In about ten minutes."

Fogg looks up at him. He is flushed and hesitant. "Good," he says, but he immediately averts his eyes, and instead catches sight of the jewel box in Mike's hand. It is obvious that Fogg would rather talk about anything but the subject of that note. So he turns his attention to Cookie's box. "Have you bought someone a gift?"

"What - this? No, no, I just keep a piece of fur in here. You see, I had a cat and she died. It's a piece of her fur. I keep it in the car for good luck. I don't know how it ended up in my pocket."

Suddenly Fogg's nervousness relaxes into a smile, "You must have loved your cat." Mike nods.

"I understand. I have cats, too. I don't suppose I have ever shown you the pictures." He opens his top drawer and produces four pictures. "Isis is dead. wasn't she adorable? And this is Max, about fourteen, Rupert, his brother, also fourteen, and Venus, much older, pushing twenty, but very healthy for her age." Mike smiles as he watches Fogg, the proud mother cat exhibiting her cute babies for the world to see. "What was *your* late cat's name?" he asks Mike.

"Cookie."

"And now?"

"Now I'm not allowed to have pets in my new apartment, but I feed two ferals in the neighborhood, named after my original cat." He proceeds to explain about Pookie and Shnookie behind the abandoned house, the death of the original feeder, how Mike trapped them, fixed them, vaccinated them and brought them back to the same spot, where he's been providing them with food and water ever since.

"And what happens when somebody buys the property to build-god knows what?" asks Fogg with genuine concern.

"We'll have to cross that bridge when the time comes, I guess," answers Mike. "Possibly relocate them if he won't have them."

The bell rings, and Fogg's face turns bright red. "And now you need to go to class," he says.

"Uh... you wanted something...?" Mike asks as he gets up to leave.

"Oh yes," says Fogg, standing up, his voice slightly shaking, his eyes averted, almost tearing, "Someone just called a little while ago. Since Jake isn't here, I took the call. He said some... terrible things about you. He thought I was the principal. Obviously a nutcase... And I'm not even going to take up any of Jake's valuable time talking to him about preposterous things like that. But you better run to class right now. I don't want you to be late."

Mike's eyes widen. He is too shocked to even thank him. He turns around to thank Kirim, but, not surprisingly, the apparition has disappeared. He only manages to say "Yes" to the smiling Mr. Fogg, who stands there like a big fat golden baby emanating a pink aura.

Monday 1:00 p. m.

Mike walks over to his classroom upstairs. "Flies over" would be more accurate. The gray color of his room is somehow brighter. The blue Formica of his rectangular table is the surface of a deep, pristine mountain lake in Tanzania. He looks around the room. Some of the students'

faces are sullen, others are huffing and puffing with anxiety. Suddenly Mike has a brilliant idea, "As you know, today's test is about Greek and Latin derivatives. I can see that some of you have had trouble with this subject. We do need to move on to the Reading Comprehension component of our seminar, but we can spare one more day on derivatives.. So, if the majority agrees, I will give you half of the test today, just on Latin derivatives, and the rest tomorrow, on *Greek* derivatives. That will also mean that both today and tomorrow our testing time will only take the second half of the period, while the first half of the period can be devoted to review. Who is in favor?" All hands go up, even Lucas's, along with interjections such as "wow," "dude," "cool," "right on," and culminating in a round of applause. During the review session, the atmosphere is friendlier than usual. Mike walks around and helps some students with final preparations. And when Lucas asks him for details regarding the stems of Latin nouns found in English words, and he has to explain to him the difference between the nominative and the genitive stem, Mike and Lucas beam together like twin geeks. *Of course I love this stuff*, Mike thinks to himself, as he sits at his desk and students begin to take the test. *So, why have I been pretending that I hate it for months? Well, granted, literature is more interesting, but a better pay is also more interesting. So why do I see only half of the story? Because my mind is addicted to bitching. That's why. Because if my mind doesn't bitch, it is afraid it may have to file for bankruptcy. And isn't this also the reason for keeping that ridiculously idealized picture of Eric in my head for all these years? To create more bitching, more of a sense that my life has been a failure by comparison? Eric may well be bald and fat right now, pathetic-looking and unsuccessful, wrinkled like a dry prune, bickering with a chronically depressed wife, and bitterly disappointed at his ungrateful children. Who knows. I don't really know. And yet I have placed him on the altar of the successful straight marriage handed down by the media, and the conspiratorial white-wash that culture has imposed on day-to-day reality.*

Suddenly Eric, his wife and children disappear, and now another thought, another movie is coming into focus: It's Mike's own parents, the *original* successful straight marriage. Mike's father on his death bed in the cancer ward. Mike's mother is attending him. She is much younger than he, and very beautiful. He is older and extremely jealous. He knows that he is dying. He can see her opportunities to remarry. She belongs to him no more. He sulks and makes nasty comments about the immodesty of her dress. She is patient and tries to gently deflect his anger. But he doesn't want her pity. A sardonic smile appears on his face. His beautiful, well-mannered wife has no idea whatsoever that he has purchased a top-of-the-line revolver which he is hiding under his mattress, a revolver

which he plans to turn first against his wife and then against himself.

Mike stands up and begins to walk around the classroom. The hospital scene dissolves into a crowded bus that features Hadrian grabbing onto the handrail. He is returning home after his long wait for Mike at the coffee shop and the subsequent call to Fairview School; he's feeling certain that Mike Andreotti will be taught a mighty good lesson for snubbing him like that, now that the principal knows everything in detail - yeah! Too bad the money didn't work out as well as he'd hoped, but at least he bought some cool clothes online using the punk's credit cards.

Then Juanita appears in a flash, running like a crazy woman after her stolen CDs, and Louis shooting up heroin in that miserable hotel room. And then Ophelia and Cordelia, crawling up the green wall.

As Mike stands there, overseeing the test, with all these thoughts and scenes and movies coming and going, he feels like a bottomless sapphire ocean. And all these little thoughts and things are like his waves, just undulating - forming, swaying and dissolving - on his surface.

One by one the students turn in their tests. There must have been a smile on Mike's face, because he sees it clearly reflected on theirs. He advises them to study well for the second part of the test, and make notes on their closing questions during tomorrow's review session.

On the way back home, he decides to avoid the freeway, and instead takes the longer, scenic route. Listening to the tunes of pleasant classical music, he watches the old stately homes with the oaks and the palms, the willows and the poplars, the cypresses and the cedars, and . . . those other trees whose name he has totally forgotten - but it's okay, really, the name doesn't matter, there are too many names in this world, and too little mystery. The voice on the radio announces Chopin, and the memory of Friday's conversation with Fogg about languages and types of music is now replayed in vivid colors. Mike's sarcastic tone is embarrassing. More than embarrassing - it's plain mean. The remark is delivered with a raised eyebrow, as the smile is dripping with contempt for Fogg's deplorable lack of basic education. "And so *what*, if he's uneducated? When push came to shove, he *did* show kindness, didn't he?" shouts another thought. The old sarcastic face of Michael Andreotti begins to disappear, raised eyebrow and bitterness included. And in its place emerges the face of a wide-eyed eight year-old boy with half-open mouth, who marvels at the dancing trees, and drinks up the sweetness of the jasmine, the narcissus, and the honey-suckle.

Monday 3:00 p. m.

Back at home, among the bills and the promotional garbage that he finds in his mailbox, Mike discovers a letter from Rocky, posted from Wisconsin. *I'll be damned!* He opens the letter at once:

Dear Mike,

How are you? As you probably have figured out by now, I was in jail for drug sales. I was there for five years, and did not have your correct address to drop you a line. I came out four months ago, and found it in my old stuff that I had left behind. I hope you are doing well.

When I came out, I was tempted to come back to Hollywood, but I was afraid I would start selling again, and go right back to jail. So, I have moved to Great Falls, Wisconsin. It's a small town, about three thousand people. I was invited here by an old girlfriend. She has a son, and he needed a father. I clean offices at night. It doesn't pay very much, but my girlfriend works, too. So we manage most of the time. I don't do drugs no more, and I don't sell them neither. I just drink my beer and watch TV. It was hard in the beginning, and I often thought of coming back to Hollywood, staying off the dope and the sales, and just do the hustling, but it's kind of hard. I am thirty-seven now, and all of my old customers prefer the youngsters. So I decided to stay here. It gets boring at times, not much to do in Great Falls, so I watch a lot of TV. But I think I'm getting fat, and I need to lose some weight.

I hope you are doing fine. I miss beating you up and bossing you around with my big dick, then taking your money - just joking. Drop me a line when you get a chance.

Your friend,
Rocky

P. S. How are the kitties?

Mike reads the letter a second time, and then a third. His eyes are brimming with tears, partly because the time has come to say goodbye, but mainly because he can picture the once glamorous and arrogant young Hollywood hustler being reduced to an aging fat custodian somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Great falls indeed. Poor Rocky. At their last encounter, he had made a feeble overture to Mike to see if he wanted him to finally move in and be his official bona fide husband - his clock was ticking, as the saying goes. But Mike had quickly changed the subject...

He now drops his briefcase, walks into his bedroom, puts Cookie's box in front of Kirim, and proceeds to light a stick of incense, then folds the letter from Rocky and places it under the incense burner. He thanks all three of

them - Cookie, Rocky and Kirim - for all the company. The kindness. And the pleasure.

And now the gratitude for Fogg is rushing in; the golden pink fat baby face still smiling at the office. And then the gratitude for being able to keep a solid job, albeit underpaid, to have a home, a full refrigerator. And then more waves and waves of gratitude. For Anna. For his writing gift. For being where he is in spite of all the blunders. Or, rather. . . *because* of them.

Monday 6:30 p.m.

Mike unloads a bunch of porno magazines from his closet, and prepares to masturbate in bed. The boys jump out of the pages, start talking to him in foul language, exhibiting their body parts, bragging to their friends about stealing his wallet and charging four hundred and sixty five dollars on his credit cards; and then how he came back crawling with more money in his hand, pleading to be taken advantage of once again, and again, and again by the fat straight penis.

But Mike's eyes now turn to Kirim. Is he really just flying from one hustler to another, as Mike had originally imagined? Or is he also flying from being a wave on the ocean surface to being the whole, total and entire ocean *itself*, surface waves and abyssal depths included? Mike's eyes close, to savor the ocean feeling just one more time. A few thoughts here and there make a weak attempt to shape themselves into recognizable entities, but they melt away of their own volition at the embryonic stage, before ever actually being born. Mike stays like that for about an hour. Then the bell of a nearby church brings the bedroom back into focus. Mike opens his eyes and sees the porno magazines spread out on his bed. The boys, disappointed at his lack of participation, have reentered their respective magazine pages. But Mike feels content. As he collects the magazines and puts them in a pile on the floor right next to his bed, he smiles affectionately at the pictures. Then he lies back on his pillow, and sinks below the surface of the water once again. Perhaps the masturbation can wait till tomorrow.