

MONOTONY

A Novella

BY

John Danakas

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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MONOTONY

A NOVELLA

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba
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ABSTRACT

My Master's thesis, a work of creative writing, is a novella that narrates the story of a twenty-one year-old Greek-Canadian youth living in Winnipeg who becomes attracted to his girlfriend's cousin, a thirty year-old gay man visiting from Chicago.

A coming of age narrative, the novella examines the question of sexual preference, attempting to reflect the often blurred nature of human sexuality, with particular focus on male heterosexuality.

As well, the novella attempts to speak specifically to the experience of those ethnic groups who immigrated to Canada after the Sixties (when multiculturalism became official government policy) and who settled in the larger urban centres. These are groups who often, for whatever reasons, would rather not have left their home countries and for whom Canada is, or is initially perceived to be, something of a way station.

Narratively, the work attempts to exploit the possibilities of a first-person narrator-protagonist and of the novella form.

That was the first really hot day of the spring, the kind of day that makes you forget the long winter just past. It seemed the whole city was outside enjoying the sun in shorts and tank tops. I was stuck indoors all afternoon, shopping in the mall with Maria. She was looking for an outfit to wear to the dinner party her parents were putting on that night for all the out-of-town guests; Maria's brother Tony was getting married on Saturday. I waited outside the row of changing rooms at the rear of the clothing store, while Maria slipped into another outfit. The muzak and the bright lights inside the store made my head buzz. The saleswoman smiled at me consolingly. She could tell, I was sure, that I was bored.

I waited. The stall next to Maria's was occupied, and I found myself peeking that way. I made sure the saleswoman was no longer looking at me and changed my position to afford a better view. Thrown over the side of the stall were a blue cotton blouse, to my mind still warm from the occupant's body, and a long brown leather belt, which seemed to weave itself into the folds of the blouse. In the tiny rectangular space below the stall door, I could see the calves of the woman, thin and tanned. She lifted one bare foot and rubbed it against the other, and I felt a strange sensation flutter through my stomach. I wanted terribly to see this woman.

The woman walked out then with a quick, squeaky push of the stall door, and twirled in front of the full-length mirror on the outside of the door, like a square dancer greeting her partner, smoothing her skirt down with the heels of her hands. I

was disappointed. She was not at all attractive, with a mousy face and thinning hair, and she was older, somewhere in her forties, I guessed. When she walked back into her stall, I tried looking her way again, but it wasn't the same, the blouse and belt thrown over her stall were now just discarded pieces of apparel, and I took a few steps back and absently checked out a rack of glittering evening dresses.

Maria came out finally, not even wearing the dress she'd taken with her inside the stall. She took hold of my hand and led me out the front door.

"Didn't like it?" I asked, when we were outside in the mall walkway.

"No. It didn't look good on me. Brought out my wide ass too much."

I looked at her from behind then, and tried to decide whether or not her ass really was wide. She always complained that it was, no matter how long she exercised at the campus gym, thanks to her genes. "We're Greek," she would joke. "Your ass will always be hairy, and mine'll always be wide." I actually liked the awkward way her ass filled her jeans, without the calculated flawlessness you noticed on some girls. She was the first girl I'd gone out with who, like me, was the child of Greek immigrants, and I had to admit I kind of liked the feeling of familiarity I got with her. We both often used a Greek word when the English one didn't seem sufficient, and I think we shared, perhaps unwittingly, the common-sense, even suspicious, view of life our Greek immigrant parents had imparted to us. I wrapped my arm around her waist now and she responded by leaning her head closer to me. She smelled of soap and shampoo. I closed my eyes and inhaled.

"Shouldn't we get going soon?" I asked. "What time is your cousin coming in anyhow?"

Maria looked at her watch. "It's only one-thirty, Peter," she said. "Steve's flight isn't scheduled to arrive till two-fifteen. We have plenty of time."

"We don't want to be late. Didn't you say it was this guy's first time in Winnipeg? You don't want to leave him stranded at the airport."

Maria shook her head. "I'm sure he'll be OK. He's travelled around the world and lives in downtown Chicago. I don't think Winnipeg will give him a hard time."

We strolled through the mall. It wasn't very busy. There were mostly older women, mothers with over-tired children asleep in strollers, and female store employees in smart outfits hurrying back from lunch breaks. We came to the atrium at the centre of the mall and rays of sunlight fell on us in heavy waves through the refracting glass.

"How old is this Steve, anyhow?" I asked.

"I think he's about thirty," Maria answered.

"That's not too old," I said. "Maybe I'll take him out with the guys."

"I hope you do," Maria said. "You two have something in common. He's really into music, too. He works in the advertising department for some rock magazine, you know. He probably wouldn't mind a bar like the Spectrum."

"If he's anything like my cousin from Portland who visited my family a few years back, once he sees the strip-bars we have here, he won't want to go anywhere else."

Maria giggled. She looked like a schoolgirl, which she was, I suppose; we were both on summer vacation before our last year of university.

"I don't think you'll have that problem with Steve." Her eyes glinted mischievously.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, nobody else in the family really knows for sure, but one of my cousins in Greece, Vassoula, she told me that Steve is gay. They got really close last time Steve was there, and he confessed to her. Apparently, he's quite open about it in Chicago; he just kind of keeps it under wraps when he's visiting relatives." She frowned and her eyebrows touched across her forehead. "So keep your mouth shut."

"Of course," I said, showing I was offended at her admonishment by clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth. "Why would I say anything, anyhow?"

"Good."

We approached another trendy clothing store and Maria darted inside. I followed.

"What's he like?" I asked.

"I don't really know." Maria hustled from rack to rack, her hands, with a practiced dexterity, pushing back hangers to get a better look at outfits. I was reminded of myself rifling through rows of records at the used record stores downtown. "I've never really gotten to know him. The only time we met was one summer when our families were both spending the summer in Greece. I was only

nine years old, and I guess he was eighteen or so. I remember he was really nice, and knew all these neat card tricks, but that's about it."

"I think it'll be interesting to meet him," I said.

Maria pulled out an outfit from the rack and held it flush against her body. It was a sleeveless red dress with big round gold buttons down the front and a short skirt.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, 'I don't know.'? You either like it or you don't."

I took a good look. I hated when Maria asked me for fashion advice. I could never decide for sure whether or not I liked something she showed me. Sometimes I'd say I didn't like it, and then if she wore it I'd think it looked great on her. I wished she didn't put me on the spot this way.

"I like it," I decided. I had been struck with the way the gold buttons shone in the overhead fluorescent lights of the store; it was thin ice, I knew, but I had to go on something.

She moved to a mirror, keeping the dress against her. She pushed out one leg from beneath the dress and then the other and twisted from side to side.

"It's kind of fun, isn't it?"

"I say you should buy it."

"You're just saying that because you want us to get going."

"No, I mean it. I like the buttons." A detail like that could always save me.

"Really?"

"Really."

"OK. Let me just try it on."

Maria flagged down a saleswoman and asked to use a changing room. She went inside and came out with the red dress on and a huge smile I could tell she was trying to hold back. She looked stunning.

"You look so good in that," the saleswoman said.

"Gorgeous," I added.

"Let me turn around." She did a little pirouette in her white-stockinged feet, and she twisted her head back to check her ass in the mirror, taking tiny, mincing steps to reposition herself for a series of different angles. She nodded her head up and down in approval.

"It's perfect," she said. "I'll take it."

"Great," I said. "While you pay, let me go get the car and I'll pick you up at the entrance by the movie theatre." I took hold of her wrist and checked her watch. "It's exactly two o'clock. We should get a move on."

At the airport, Maria strode to a monitor that showed the flight arrivals and departures. Steve's flight was on time. We found the gate he was expected at and waited. I grabbed a luggage cart and leaned against it. Maria fixed my collar.

I stared across the airport at the Fifties-style tableau decorating the south wall. Pastel-colored, three-dimensional blocks were arranged into a kind of mosaic. The idea, I think, was to suggest the space age -- movement and progress -- but in its

outdatedness the tableau seemed to me now eternally motionless. I felt suddenly sad, and alone, and against my will I found myself thinking once again of my mother, who had died that past October after a short bout with cancer.

I remembered the spring I was seven years old and had fallen ill with a kind of asthma. All night in bed my breath wheezed in and out of my lungs. My mother spent nightly vigils at my bedside -- my father would be at work at the pizza place -- feeding me Greek mountain tea with honey and rubbing my chest with Vicks. My whole being concentrated on the bringing in and letting out of oxygen. As young as I was, I was sure I was going to die. Finally, my mother concluded that the Canadian climate was to blame for my condition and against my father's protestations she decided to take me back to Greece (of course, I'd never been there before). We departed from this same airport, my mother fussing over my frail body, comforting me, assuring me that the pure air of Greece would be my salvation. And she was right. I still wonder if there was actually something present in the Greek air that spring that had cured me, or if, in fact, my mother's powers of suggestion were the sole cause of my turnaround. I don't know. I've never been bothered by anything similar again, and I have read since that asthma can often be psychosomatic. But I do remember keenly stepping out onto the tarmac at the airport in Athens under that overwhelming Mediterranean sun, waves of heat shimmering off the pavement, the other passengers sweaty and smelly in their best outfits, shoving and pushing their way to the airport gate, a scent of the salt from the sea saturating the air, an array of huge mountains looming red in the background, my mother crossing herself and bending

down to kiss the earth at her feet, and me suddenly lifted of my ailment, the breath moving into my chest freely, like a window opened in the sky to let an everlasting current of air into my lungs.

"There's Steve," shouted Maria then, pointing to the top of the escalator. She did a tiny jig in her spot, and I found myself pulling away from my remembrance, my last fragmentary thought a regret that I couldn't have somehow saved my mother from death by returning her to her home in Greece.

Before me now, I saw a handsome man, about six feet tall, slim and muscular, floating down the escalator. He was wearing a white T-shirt and stone-washed blue jeans. As the escalator descended I made out his face more clearly. His hair was black and curly and cropped close to his head, and was receding in two little oval indentations above his temples. His nose was long and downturned at the end, and he had a thick, bushy moustache just outside and around his upper lip, which I thought was very Greek, but at the same time somehow movie-star elegant.

Maria moved forward to greet him and I stayed clumsily in back.

Steve kissed Maria on both cheeks, the way Greeks do when they greet or congratulate one another, and then she led him to me.

"This is my boyfriend Peter. Peter, this is Steve."

We shook hands, and he beat me at saying "Pleased to meet you." He had just a hint of an accent, very American to my ears, and I found myself wanting to hear it again.

"Did you have a good flight?" I asked.

"Great," he said. "Thanks for asking. The city looks really impressive from up there. Those winding rivers are like snakes, and the ground is so green . I'm looking forward to this." He looked at Maria and Maria squeezed his chest tight against her cheek.

"My cousin from Chicago," she exclaimed.

Steve was carrying a small suitcase and a duty-free plastic bag. I asked him if he had any other luggage and he said no, so I left the cart behind and motioned Maria and him to follow me to the front of the airport. At the automatic doors, I turned to Maria and asked, "Should I bring up the car while you two wait here?"

"No, that's all right," Steve said. "It's a beautiful day."

"Are you sure?" I asked. I looked straight at him. His eyes were round and small, but spaced widely on his face.

"Of course," he said. "Let's walk and enjoy the sun."

There was that Chicago accent again. Very cool, I thought. If only he weren't gay -- the fun we could have at the bars with that accent.

I was late arriving at the dinner party because I'd had to work the supper rush at the pizza place. That was my job over the break from university: taking orders over the phone, while my father and my older brother, Mike, stood over the counter in the back making pizzas. I might have found something else, I suppose, but working for my father I was free to come and go pretty much as I pleased, as long as I showed up for the busy hours. I think my father's idea was to keep my mind off my mother's death. As a result, Maria and I spent a lot of time together, going to movies, to bars, to parties, or just out for ice cream at a gelatto and capuccino spot we both liked, and I had found my grief slowly retreating from my consciousness like a snowdrift eroding in the spring sun.

Maria's family lived in a small bungalow in the west end of the city. The street in front of her house was packed now with parked cars, so I circled the block looking for an empty spot, relieved to be able to stall a few more minutes before having to go inside. I wasn't nervous, exactly, about meeting even more of Maria's relatives than I'd already had, just disinterested. There'd be the usual questions about where in Greece my parents were from (south of Sparta), the test of my fluency in Greek (very good, on account of several trips to Greece over summer holidays), and the demand for my entire academic resume (three years, Faculty of Arts). I'd play the part of the nice little Greek-Canadian boy with a bright future (little did they know I

didn't have the slightest idea in what direction I was headed) and Maria's parents would get -- I liked to think -- furtive expressions of approval from their relatives.

In order not to have to make a grand entrance, I used the back door. Maria was waiting there for me. She was wearing the red dress she'd bought that afternoon and she looked fabulous. I put my arms around her waist, feeling beneath my fingers the smooth, silky fabric of the dress, and we kissed.

"I was looking out for you," she said. "I had a feeling you 'd be too shy to use the front door."

"Thanks," I said.

"Thank you for showing up."

I followed Maria up the few steps leading from the landing at the back door up through the kitchen and to the living room and dining room. I was right about the party: it was the usual affair I'd seen countless times growing up. The adults were upstairs, in the living room and dining room, drinking and talking, the men amongst themselves mostly and the women amongst themselves. The dining room table was covered with platters of food: roast beef and potatoes, roast chicken, rice, little squares of spanakopita, triangles of tyropita, broad beans and artichokes, an assortment of olives with distinctions only Greeks could identify (tsakistes, haraktes, lathoelies), crusty, homemade bread. The kitchen table held the desserts: baklava, galaktobouriko, kourabiedes, jellos, a fruit platter. Maria's mother was bustling about with an apron tied over the waist of her dress, making sure everybody was eating well. Maria's father was mixing drinks for the guests from a makeshift bar set up on two

collapsible TV trays beneath the panel of wood shelving, decorated with knickknacks from Greece, that separated the living room from the front foyer.

Standing in the living room next to Maria, I felt cramped. The room wasn't meant for so many people. The television in the corner was shut off and a large knitted white doily was thrown over the grey-green screen like a shawl. About six women were crammed onto the couch, with a row of kitchen chairs set up against the front window for some of the other women, and most of the men congregated around the dining room table. I noticed that the framed photographs of Maria and Tony that dominated the living room walls had been dusted and wiped; they shone as if to remind everyone of how successfully the two siblings had attained each station of their young lives.

Maria took me around and introduced me to her aunts and uncles who had come from out of town. I shook hands and answered the requisite questions. The women seemed more interested in me than the men, and one aunt was particularly zealous, planting a wet, lipsticked kiss on my face, which she then tried to wipe off with her nail-painted thumb, and, after once more examining me from head to toe, exclaiming to Maria, "Bravo! Bravo!" Then Maria took off to help her mother, promising to visit with me as much as she could.

I knew I had to spend at least some token time upstairs before I left for the basement, so I took a seat next to the face that seemed least intimidating, that of Dino Palamas, a friend of my father's, a quiet man who worked most of the year in the nickel mines up north and didn't usually say too much, just kind of sighed to himself

as if the weight of the world were threatening at any moment to batter his soul. He was sitting on a dining room chair situated noncommittally between the dining room and living room.

I asked Dino how long he was in town and he asked after my father -- they played cards together often at the Greek coffeehouse on Arlington. I tried looking Dino in the eyes, but that seemed to make him uncomfortable, so I focused on his hands, which were rough and knobby, like the gnarled grey vines I remembered from my grandfather's vineyard in Greece. Whenever I saw someone like Dino, who didn't seem particularly content with his lot in life here in Canada, whose eyes seemed perennially concentrated on some distant land, I wondered why the hell they'd ever left the old country in the first place. My mother, I noted, had often had that same preoccupied glaze about her eyes.

At the first pause in our conversation I lifted my head and scanned the living room. I was wondering then where Steve would be, up here with the adults or downstairs in the basement, where all the young people usually congregated. Probably in the basement, I thought, where he'd feel more comfortable, but I looked around for him upstairs anyhow, and just as I caught sight of him, discussing some matter with Maria's brother, his hands playing in front of him like some sort of conjurer's, his face turned to me and our eyes met and we smiled at each other. I don't know why, but -- well, actually, probably because he was gay, and that seemed like such a tremendous act of rebellion to me -- I was really drawn to him. I made a point to track him down later and talk to him, which I was sure Maria would appreciate.

As Dino excused himself to go to the bathroom, Maria's father brought me a drink -- rye and seven -- and I sat staring at the ice melt and fizz inside the glass and listening to snatches of the conversations going on around me. It was the usual stuff. The restaurant owners talked business; there were reminiscences about rural life in Greece during the katohi, the period during and just after the second world war when so much as a scrap of bread -- to hear these oldtimers remember it -- was hard to come by; a spirited argument about the Greek civil war in the late forties; Greek and Canadian politics; the relative academic progress of their children; the falling price of housing.

I wondered suddenly how these men and women had managed to fashion some semblance of purpose and order to their lives in a land that had no connection whatsoever to the place they'd come from, out of two such disparate worlds, out of Greece and Canada. Who are they fooling? I thought: the moment these men and women from the mountain villages of Greece, with their stumpy bodies and hairy faces and dark eyes, step outside these souvenir-bedecked walls and into the flat prairie land just now once again breathing after being pinned under the winter's mantle of snow, they won't belong. They'll be out of place.

When Maria came by again, I whispered in her ear that if it was OK with her I would go downstairs now. It felt good to be so close to her amidst all these people. Her long hair fell over my face and I smelled the perfume sprinkled on her neck. I bit the lobe of her ear playfully, and she pulled back, but smiling.

"Sure," she said. "I'll be down just as soon as dessert's served."

As I lifted myself off the chair, I nodded vaguely to Dino and he asked me to make sure to say hello to my father for him.

I made my way down the carpeted stairs to the basement, which was done in dark plywood and wall-to-wall trackless mustard-colored carpeting. A few heads turned to see who was coming and I recognized three or four guys I hung out at the bars with. I said hello and sat down on the couch, a now-rejected mid-Seventies French Provincial piece, where the older group was gathered, collapsible TV trays set up in front of them with heaping plates of food. The younger kids were sprawled on the carpet in front of the television, playing Super Mario on the video screen, their hands scrambling for control of the joystick. There were also some teenaged boys dressed in loose-fitting low-slung jeans and grunge-style plaid shirts trading trick shots at the pool table; about four girls huddled together in a corner in what I figured was probably a circle gossip, right in front of the imitation brick fireplace, with a simulated log fire in the inner hearth; and two toddlers crawling around on all fours and playing with what were obviously old toys of Maria's and her brother's somebody must have pulled out of some dusty box in the storeroom.

"Didja get the score on the Blue Jays game?" Nick Tsoulas asked me. He was my age and was completing his business degree next year.

"No," I replied. "I wasn't listening."

"The Red Sox are closing in on them," Nick continued. "It's a big game tonight."

I hadn't looked at a baseball box score all season and wasn't even in the mood to fake it. I took a sip from my drink and sunk deeper into the cushion of the couch.

"Are you guys gonna start talking sports?" one of the girls in the corner complained. "Can't you ever talk about anything else?"

"Yeah," another girl cut in. She was younger, maybe twelve or thirteen, but she had breasts and an ass that were bursting out of her little-girl clothes. "Let's do something. Why don't we play Pictionary?"

When I was younger, I recalled, a lot of these parties, for us children, would turn into nightlong board games, Monopoly or Risk, usually. We'd go on and on until our parents hollered to us from upstairs that it was time to leave. That was always a lot of fun, but we never seemed to do it anymore.

"Nah," Nick said. "I think we're going out later. You guys can start a game," -- he waved to the younger group -- "but we'll probably be out of here pretty soon." He turned to the guys seated next to him on the couch. "If we wanna beat the lineup at Rascals, we'll have to get out of here by ten."

Maria came down then, and she sat next to me, on the armrest of the couch. Most of the people in the basement knew both of us fairly well since we were kids, but separately. With Maria close to me now, I felt slightly embarrassed, as if the picture of us together, I felt, must have been somewhat disconcerting for everyone, and I wanted, strangely, to apologize to them all.

"Are you OK?" she asked me.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "Don't I look it?"

"You look -- I don't know -- kind of sad."

"No, I'm fine."

Maria and I sat and talked and drank. Every once in a while one of the adults would come downstairs to stretch, and the younger kids would make a face, as if insulted by the intrusion, and whoever the intruder's son or daughter was would pout "Dad," or "Mom," and the parent would say something like "I'm young too, you know," with their thick Greek accent, and then head back upstairs, and the kids would return to whatever they were doing.

I drank a few more ryes-and-seven and was getting a real buzz. I found myself having to try hard to listen to conversations and I could feel the clanky noises and bright colors of the video games on the television screen bouncing around inside my head.

After about a half hour, Steve came downstairs. He moved with an easy grace, without the forced friendliness with which the other adults armed themselves. His arms hung loose at his sides and his body swayed in rhythmic waves out from his middle, like a boxer in a light workout. He seemed to me ready to take on any situation that came his way and tame it into something he could handle. I felt he was sure of himself, and I admired that about him.

He wore a wool sweater that had a kind of Aztec pattern on it -- long strips alternating between bright orange, red, yellow and black -- and pleated corduroy pants cinched with a thick black, silver-buckled belt. Everybody in the basement turned to look at him, and their eyes stayed on him. I wondered whether they could tell he was

gay. I didn't think so. There was something different about his look, certainly, but you'd be more likely to attribute it to a fondness for style than to an excess of effeminacy.

He moved in beside Maria and me on the couch. I tried to compose myself. I asked him what he thought of Winnipeg. I wondered, as I waited for his answer, whether he could tell I was pretty much drunk.

"I like it here so far," he said. "But not that I've done much anyhow yet except spend time with all the relatives."

I couldn't be sure but I thought he made this last statement without resentment, as if he'd quite enjoyed himself, and that struck me as odd, that he'd have a stomach for relatives and such.

Maria's mother called her from upstairs and she excused herself.

"These parties can be a real bore," I said. In my mind I cut off the rest of the basement rec room and there was just Steve and me.

I was trying to come off as rebellious. I wanted him to know I wasn't just another nice little Greek-Canadian boy with a bright future. I thought that would appeal to him, and I wanted very much to, as if that would really be an accomplishment, somehow show how broad I was, to be able to impress a gay man. I even envisioned a little scene where he'd tell Maria how cool he thought I was and I'd win extra favor with her.

"I don't know," he said. "I think these parties can be kind of nice. You don't see families tight like this anymore nowadays."

"They're too tight," I said. "You can hardly breathe." In my drunkenness, I thought that line was particularly witty.

Steve laughed. He had white, squarish teeth with the tiniest gap between the two front top teeth.

"How old are you, Peter?"

As he spoke, I watched his moustache move up and down with the movement of his lips.

"Twenty-one."

"That's about right. Or actually, you might be a little late. I think I was about seventeen when I said things like that."

"Don't you think I'm right?" I was in the mood to press the point. I had a feeling he wasn't as mild-mannered as he was trying to come off.

"About not being able to breathe?"

"Yeah."

He sat back and took a sip from his drink. His forearms were muscular and hairy, the hair growing thicker as it approached his wrist.

"Of course, you're right," he said. He made a face. "It's sick, isn't it?"

"Totally."

"But it's great, too. You have to see the whole picture. Listen, you see things differently at my age. All this family stuff, I kind of like it now. It's always there and it's always the same, and you can't say that about a lot of things in life. But, hey, I don't want to get too heavy with you."

"That's OK," I said. I felt the urge to open up to him. I didn't know what was driving me. I think I wanted him eventually to reciprocate my frankness and confess his gayness to me himself; something like that would make me feel good about myself, would be a real feather in my cap. I was playing a game with him, I realized, using him to prove to myself that I was somehow special.

"I don't know," I continued. "I'm just in this mood lately where I want to take off from everything that's always there and always the same."

Immediately, I felt I'd gone too far, that maybe I'd given away in the things I was saying that Maria had told me he was gay.

"You'll get over it," he said.

"As you get older, you see yourself differently," Steve continued. I looked in his eyes and decided that he couldn't have known that I was setting something of a trap for him, trying to get him to come out with his gayness for me personally. "You realize how much you need other people, including your family." And as if to emphasize his point, he threw in some Greek, pronounced perfectly, even better, I was surprised, than my own: "Etsi eenai ee zoe, that's the way life is."

With that he smiled, that gap in his teeth showing wet and dark, and he broke my defenses, and I smiled back. I got the same odd thrill of communion now, with him, hearing him say those Greek words, that I did whenever Maria spoke Greek to me.

"What are you doing with yourself over the summer, Peter?" he asked me.

"Nothing much," I answered. I wished I could tell him I was doing something exciting. "Working at my dad's pizza joint."

"I hear you can find some really good pizza up here."

"I think it's pretty good. You should try ours." I was honestly proud of the pizza my father made. "Maria loves our crust. Whenever we share a large pizza I've made she races me for all the corner pieces. I'll bring one over before you leave." I sat back, relaxed. "By the way, when are you leaving?"

"Day after the wedding. I have to be back at work."

"Which is ... exactly what? Maria mentioned you're in advertising."

"I work for a weekly music publication called Vibes. I don't think you get it up here. It's kind of a trade paper -- industry news, reviews. I sell ads."

"Must be fun."

"It is."

Just then the girls at the fireplace broke into a wild fit of giggling and everyone in the basement turned to look at them and try to figure out what was so funny. They were covering their mouths with their hands and rolling around on the carpet. The first thing I thought was that one of them had maybe figured out Steve was gay and had made a crack about it. The older guys on the couch screwed up their faces in annoyance. One of the pool players threatened to chuck a pool ball at them. Steve laughed, and I just followed his lead, figuring maybe it would have been better -- I wasn't sure exactly why -- if Maria hadn't already told me Steve was gay.

"What do you think of the Lemonheads?" I asked, resuming our conversation.

"Love 'em."

"Black Crowes?"

"Great groove. Lead singer could put on a few pounds."

"Divinyls?"

"Divine."

We laughed. I think I might have spilled some of my drink.

"Did I pass?" Steve asked me.

"With flying colors." I replied.

"Good. When you're over thirty, it's always nice to hear you're still with it."

Maria came back. She was munching on a piece of sliced apple.

"You two seem to be getting along nicely."

"Your cousin's a cool guy," I said.

"I know," Maria said, and rubbed Steve's shoulder.

Steve straightened up. His clothes still hung on his body tightly and neatly. "I think I'm going to head back upstairs. That fruit looks appetizing."

Maria scooted into his spot as Steve got up off the couch.

"Hold on, Steve," she said. "I was just going to ask Peter if he wouldn't mind taking you out to see the city tomorrow afternoon. Tony's going to be racing all over town running last-minute wedding errands and I've got a dress fitting with the bridesmaids at one-thirty. What do you say, Peter?"

"Don't put the poor kid on the spot like that, Maria," Steve said. "He's probably busy."

I thought I detected something in his tone that undercut his words, that was meant to let me know he'd like very much to have me show him around the city.

"No, actually, I'll be free by about one. I don't mind at all. I love showing the city to out-of-towners." I felt the need to make sure he actually wanted me to show him the city. "But are you sure that's something you'd like to do?"

"For sure."

Maria broke in. "Well then it's a date."

"No problem."

"See you tomorrow," Steve said.

"See you."

I watched Steve move up the stairs and carefully lifted myself off the couch to mix myself another drink at the downstairs bar.

Maria wanted to help her mother clean up so she wasn't going out to Rascals later with everyone else; I passed on that, too, and decided to leave the party at about midnight. I said goodnight to everyone and firmed up the time with Steve that I'd pick him up. Maria showed me to the door and even walked outside to the front stoop with me. It was drizzling, and I made out thick black clouds hovering low in the night sky and promising a heavier downpour. We snuck behind the door and started necking. I stuck my tongue deep inside her mouth.

"I love it when you've got booze breath," she said.

We detached ourselves after a few seconds and I smoothed out my shirt.

"Goodnight, Maria."

"Goodnight, Peter."

I got into the car feeling high. It wasn't only the rye, but everything that had happened that night: my conversation with Steve, my front stoop groping with Maria. I was feeling excited, truly excited, for the first time since my mother had died, as if everything that was going to happen to me over the next while was not already known and settled. There was a glorious freedom about that, a sense of escape and renewal.

The rain started falling hard, slapping against the windshield in barrages. I rolled down my window and let the drops splatter onto my face. The wetness was cool and clinging. I licked my lips.

I popped in the cassette I'd been listening to a lot over the last few weeks: Dirty by Sonic Youth. There was one cut, "Creme Brule," that I still hadn't been able to get enough of. I had no idea what it meant, just that I really felt mesmerized by it. It started off with a bunch of crazy noise that sounded like a combination of feedback and night shrieks, out of which emerged a few simple chord progressions, built over an insistent bass line. The music gathered momentum until it came to a crashing crescendo. The chorus was the line, "You and me burnin' in the summertime," and there was this totally obscure couplet somewhere in the middle of the song that I heard as "Last night I dreamed I kissed Neil Young, if I was a boy, yes it would be fun." It made no sense to me whatsoever, and yet something about it was just right. I played the song over and over until it merged in my mind with the drumming of the rain against the windshield.

The road was slick with a sheen of rain and reflected lights. I was crossing the Norwood Bridge and looked to my side where the water level was rising on the banks. Under the streetlights you could see where the rain met in a kind of firing line with the river and how the crest of the river had already overflowed to cover the small trees slanting outwards along the side of the banks. I felt suddenly connected to everything around me, to the music coming from the stereo speakers, to the river, to the black sky, and I let out a loud, wild, unbidden shriek into the night air.

The next day at work over the lunch hour I couldn't concentrate. I was nervous about taking Steve out to see the city. It wasn't just that he was gay. He was also nine years older than me, and from what Maria had told me he'd travelled a lot. It would be a challenge to show him a good time. I kept thinking about what we should do and where we should go.

My brother caught an adding mistake I'd made on a bill and cracked a smart remark about my sorry lack of math skills, considering, he added, I was past my third year of university. I knew he resented that I was still going to school, while he worked at the pizza place all day. He had a chip on his shoulder, especially since he had married Sheila, who wasn't Greek, against my parents' wishes. My mother never treated him the same after that, and he held her snub not just against her but against my father and me, as well.

When the rush died down, I spent some time in the kitchen rolling pizza dough with my father. We spread the dough he mixed that morning into round stainless steel pans spread with olive oil and stacked the pans up in the cooler. I kept up with my father, which wasn't easy, and I thought, wouldn't it be nice if I could list "pizza dough rolling" as a skill on a resume one day?

I arrived at Maria's house to pick up Steve at one o'clock sharp, as we'd arranged. The afternoon was sunny and breezeless and around me as I walked to the side door I sniffed a faint musty trace of rainwater drying on cement. I started getting

cold feet. Who did I think I was anyhow? What was I doing? Would this work? At the door, I actually considered for a moment turning back and making up some sort of excuse about being held up at the pizza place, but figured I'd better not because someone had surely already seen my car parked out front.

Steve answered the door himself, dressed in a white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the middle of the bicep and a pair of Madras-patterned walking shorts. There was an eager look to his eyes, which I now noticed were light green, a kind of sparkle, that seemed consciously intended to ease my reservations.

We walked to the car, making small-talk about the weather and the upcoming wedding. I trotted around to the driver's side and opened my door and then reached over to unlock the passenger door for Steve. As he lowered himself into the seat, I thought how weird it was to see someone other than Maria there. For the last four months, she was pretty much a permanent fixture beside me in that seat as we went on our dates or parked to make out alongside the garage in back of her house. That was her seat. Now Steve was bending forward to readjust it, pushing it back a few inches to lend him more leg room.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked Steve as we drove off.

"I don't know," Steve replied. "You know the city better than I do. Where do you want to go?"

"There are a lot of places we could see. What kind of things do you like?"

I felt like somebody on a first or second date, when neither the guy nor the girl wants to take the initiative and choose the night's destination for fear of revealing an interest the other might find undesirable.

Steve grinned. "This is silly," he said. He turned to me then and his eyebrows lifted impishly. "I know what we'll do."

"Let's hear it," I said.

"This won't be easy for you, but if you go along with it I'm sure we'll have a great time."

"I'm game," I said. I was curious to find out what he had in mind.

"OK, here's the deal. Imagine this was the last, the very last day, you could spend in Winnipeg. You have to move tomorrow for some crazy reason and you'll never be able to come back."

He paused and looked into my eyes.

"Are you with me?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm there."

"Good. Well, whatever you'd do and see on that last day, let's do today."

I laughed. "That's crazy."

"I know. And you have to be totally honest. Close your eyes at the next red light and think about what you'd do and whatever you see flashing through your mind in those few seconds, we'll do this afternoon. I bet I could never get a better tour of the city."

"You sound like you've done this before."

"Never. The idea just came to me. But damn, it's good."

I smiled.

"OK," I said. "Get ready. I'll be racing all over the place because there's a dozen things, at least, I'll want to fit in."

"That's exactly the idea."

"Let's get started then."

"Let's."

At the first light, as Steve had requested, I closed my eyes and tried to think of places I'd want to visit if I could never see Winnipeg again. Images from my past raced through my mind in a frenzied free association.

I surprised myself and chose as our first stop an historical site, the remnants of the gatehouse to Upper Fort Garry, still standing in the shadow of the highrises of Broadway Avenue. There's just one little square section left, which can't be more than twenty feet on each side and always reminds me of a stumpy piece of Leggo.

We parked the car and stepped outside. The two of us stood and gazed at the fort's crenelated parapets and arched gateway. Steve walked up and touched the soil-covered stone that made up the front wall.

"Why here?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "When I was a kid, my parents used to bring my brother and me here to play. We'd climb all over and hide inside the ramparts, acting like we were in a battle. It was like a playground to us, only it was real. And it was older than anything else I'd seen until then, and everything that was old when I was a

kid, just from what my mother had told me, I used to connect in my imagination with Greece. So I thought it was Greek and Canadian at the same time."

"I like it," Steve said, standing back and taking in the whole gatehouse. "Let's go inside."

The wood-railed gate was open and we advanced inside. It was so quiet you could hardly hear the traffic passing on the nearby streets. I was reminded of the utter stillness I'd felt when my family had visited the subterranean caves of Diro in Greece. I pressed my hands against the stone of the inside wall and I felt the coolness and accumulation of dirt there passing through to me as if the stone were somehow alive.

Steve walked back outside and put his right foot out to rest on a piece of stone that stuck out a few inches. I noticed the muscles in his calves were tight and round underneath the skin, like hard white onions. He shifted his balance onto the same foot and reached up with his right arm to take hold of another stone. He hiked himself up and climbed even further until he made it to a square loophole about ten feet off the ground. Then he used both hands to shove his bottom half up to the loophole. From there he waved down to me.

"It's not that far to the top from here. I want to sit in one of those crenels. Coming?"

"Sure." In a few seconds I was right behind him. It was easy to climb the twenty feet or so to the top using loopholes and protruding pieces of stone for footing. We seated ourselves each in the tight space provided by an adjoining crenel and let our feet dangle over the side of the fort.

"It's great up here, Peter."

"I don't think my brother and I ever came up this far."

I pointed out various buildings and his eyes followed my outstretched finger carefully. Then we fell silent and sat still, soaking in the sun's rays.

I lifted my head to the blue sky and closed my eyes and my head was filled with a wonderful spinning sensation.

I started wondering about Steve, about his gayness. I wanted to know what it meant. He had a lean, hard body that was obviously exercised, and I tried now to envision that body in the act of homosexual love.

I'd never looked at a man in that way before, but I couldn't help myself now. I was curious. As Steve sat beside me contemplating the city around us, I looked at his lips and wondered how they kissed another man's. I looked at his hands and wondered how they sought out a man's body. I looked at his ass and wondered how it received another man.

I was scared of what I was thinking, but at the same time I kept telling myself that I had nothing to be scared of, that if I wanted to be free and true -- and I wanted at that time in my life nothing more -- I had to let whatever thought occurred to me play itself out.

I was drawn to him. It was part admiration, part envy, and part -- I admitted to myself -- physical attraction. I had no idea what that meant, or if it meant anything at all. I just thought it, admitted to thinking it, and let the thought develop itself

inside my mind until I'd seen it fully and openly, like a painting one gazes at in a gallery, in search of some elusive overall meaning.

"What are you studying in school, Peter?" Steve asked then.

"Literature."

"What do you plan to do when when you're done?"

"I don't know," I said.

"It's a difficult thing to figure out, isn't it?"

"Very. And then there's always the pizza place. My father and brother want to open another location, and they'd like to see me join them. But I'm not too sure about that. Sometimes I wish I was getting a professional degree: a teacher, a lawyer, something like that. That way I'd know exactly where I was going."

"Well, is there anything you really want to do? If you're studying literature, I bet you want to be a writer."

"You bet right," I said. I turned to him. He was rubbing the short hairs of his moustache with the fingers of his right hand. I felt as if the sun's rays were trained like a heating lamp on my forehead. "But I wouldn't know where to begin."

"What do you mean?"

"How does it happen? Do I just say I'm a writer now, and then start making a living writing? I don't think it works that easy."

Steve was looking straight at me now, his eyes boring into mine.

"I assume you're talking about writing fiction" he said. "Novels, short stories."

"Right."

"Well, do you write? I mean right now do you spend time each day writing?"

"Sometimes I write. But not every day. A lot of the time I'll start putting something down and stop when I realize that's not what I wanted to say. I figure I'll be able to say it better some other time."

"What kinds of things do you write?"

"All kinds." The sunlight made my eyes squint. "Now that I think about it, maybe it's all kind of silly."

"I doubt it." He shook his head from side to side. His face was beginning to shadow with bristles. I noticed a trickle of sweat forming inside the line where his hair was receding. "Tell me more."

"OK, but don't laugh."

As I said that, I knew Steve would not laugh. I realized that even though I'd only known him a few hours, with nobody else did I have the same feeling that I could say anything I wanted, and that anything I said would be understood deeply, at the root. It was something I felt instinctively, not because of anything in particular about him, but just because of the whole person he was.

I looked at him next to me then, his arms holding onto the stone crenels on either side of him, letting his upper body fall gently forward, and I saw the ten years or so that he had over me in the way the corner of his eyes showed little lines like a child's drawing of fishtails, but at the same time I felt keenly that we were the same age someplace else, someplace outside of time.

"Go ahead," Steve said, "tell me about your writing." His green eyes glinted.
"I promise I won't laugh.

"Well," I began, "I have an idea for just this one chapter in a novel where all there'll be are the words 'Fuck you, God,' repeated about one hundred times. 'Fuck you, God. Fuck you, God. Fuck you, God.' Everything's been said and done before by now. But I don't think that's ever been said before, or at least written down. And I think it has to be."

Steve closed his eyes and took a deep breath. I could see him mulling over my words.

"You're probably right," he said. "That should be said. In fact, I've known a lot of friends in the last few years who've said just that, probably more than a hundred times each."

"Don't you say it, too? I mean, isn't everything stacked up against everybody so there's just no way to win?"

"I'm not so sure. While you're alive, you're alive, and that's something. Maybe the chapter right after the 'Fuck you, God,' chapter should be 'Thank you, God?' "

"Maybe," I admitted. I looked back up at the sun-washed sky. The light was intense but invisible, the only evidence of it the sharp tightness in my eyes and the short shadows on the ground.

"How'd you start thinking this way, anyhow?"

"When my mother died, seven months ago."

"I'm sorry. Maria didn't say anything to me."

"It's more than that, though." I said. I wasn't sure if I was ready to talk about my mother. "Lately, I just feel trapped, like there's no place to move, and I don't think it's my fault. I think that's the way things are set up."

"I felt exactly the same way as you for the longest time, maybe even worse than you."

"How do you mean?"

Steve's green eyes seemed to draw color from the sun and he turned to look straight at me.

"I'm gay, Peter," he said, matter-of-factly, "and I don't think anyone can understand just what that has meant for me unless they're gay, too, although I think you've come pretty close in your own way."

I felt saddened for him, for whatever problems his gayness might have brought to his life, but at the same time I was secretly, perversely, elated, pleased with myself that Steve had confessed his gayness to me, that he had chosen me to confide in, that our relationship had crossed to a new level.

"I didn't come out of the closet until three years ago," Steve continued. He was looking blankly out in front of him. "My parents knew nothing. My sister suspected, but I'd never told her. I was living two lives. But it's not like one life was a lie. My life with my family wasn't a lie. It was real, as real as my life with my friends and my lovers. It meant -- and means -- a great deal to me. The problem was there was no room in it for my other life, my gay life."

We fell silent again as a plane boomed overhead, trailing a thin streak of white smoke, as if etching a hairline scratch across the sky's blue surface.

I resented the interruption. I looked at Steve and thought I noticed his face wince. I hoped I wasn't somehow making him uncomfortable. I appreciated his openness and didn't want him to stop. I found what he had to say moving, but even more, thrilling, exciting.

"What happened?" I asked.

"For the longest time, I tried to convince myself I wasn't gay, that it was only a phase, that it would pass," Steve said. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat and then relaxed. The trickle of sweat against his hairline had begun to run down his temple. "You see, I really wanted to get married and start a family. I was even engaged, five years ago, and to a beautiful, sweet girl."

"How was that?"

"Better than you might think, but not good enough, not for me. Her name was Tassia. We had great times together, but I couldn't approach her physically. I never felt the desire to. I think she believed I was just being overly cautious with her because I was old-fashioned. I'd go home at night after we'd been on a date, and I'd cry into my pillow, knock my head against the mattress, wishing I was straight, wishing I could have desired her, wishing I could feel the excitement to drive me on top of her and inside her. I couldn't tell you how many times I prayed at night that I could wake up the next morning never longing to touch another man, to kiss another

man. Or how many times I promised myself that I'd never even look at another man again. But it never worked. It could never have worked. That's just not who I am."

He turned to me. I could see the fire just going out in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You probably didn't need to hear all that. I hope you're not bothered by it."

His eyes softened, and I sensed from them that he was genuinely concerned that I might think less of him now. I was disappointed that he'd even considered I might take offense at his gayness.

"No," I said, "Of course not. I think I understand what you went through."

In my mind I was trying to make sense of my own life in terms of what Steve had just told me. His gayness suddenly didn't seem at all foreign to me. In that moment I regretted my initial desire to peep into his inner life simply because he was gay.

"A lot of times," I said, "with my life, I feel that my true self, whatever's really deep down inside and is really who I am, can never come out, for whatever reason." My words struck me as trite next to his, but I continued anyhow, compelled by a need to let Steve know, as best I could, exactly who I was. "I mean, I want to break free, I want to be a writer, I don't want to work alongside my father and brother all my life at the pizza place. At the same time, I do want to work alongside them, that makes all the sense in the world to me, and I'm even maybe better at that, at being the good son or whatever, than I am at anything else."

My shirt was sticking to my back from all the sweat and I lifted the back of it and fanned myself. The cool air felt good against my skin.

"I feel the same way about being Greek, or Greek-Canadian, or whatever the hell I am," I continued. "I mean, even this fort here, what's it to me? It was built a hundred years before my parents ever stepped foot in this country. It doesn't belong to me, but I'm supposed to believe it does. But then again maybe it's more mine than some two-thousand-year-old temple in Greece."

I loosened a hard, oblong piece of stone from the crenel next to me and pitched it towards the stand of bushes surrounding the fort, thoroughly and intensely occupied with the mere act of throwing, of cocking and extending my arm with real force. The stone pinged against the bark of a bush and made a scurrying sound as it ruffled some leaves and landed in a low mound of gravel which looked like it had been left behind by a now-melted snowdrift. I decided to tell Steve more about my mother.

"Come to think of it," I said, "I think my mother felt trapped like that most of her life, too. She never did want to come to Canada, you know. She just wanted to get away from her family. My grandfather had remarried and she hated her stepmother. One summer my father came along and she married him just to escape. I'm not sure she ever really loved my father. She loved my brother and me much more."

"It must have been difficult losing her."

"It was. I couldn't get over the fact that there was nothing anybody could do for her, that it happened so fast. I thought I'd go psycho."

Until this week, I hadn't thought about my mother, other than passingly, probably since I'd been going out with Maria. My body felt weary now from the effort.

"You know what was really crazy?" I continued. I wanted Steve to understand, to help me understand. "When my mother was being dropped into the grave, inside the coffin, our friends and relatives gathered around, crying, pulling up their parkas against the blowing snow, I half-believed that the Canadian earth might actually reject her body, spew her right back at us as retaliation for her never having taken it to her heart." Steve didn't say anything. His eyes were closed.

"It's tough thinking about that," I said.

"It must be," Steve said. "But if you do, I think it's easier for you to pull yourself together."

Suddenly, hands clasped, he threw his arms out above his head and stretched his body upwards, his shoulder blades fanning out his T-shirt. His chest curved out like a bird's and moved perilously far, I thought, over the edge of the fort.

"I thank God I finally found the courage to come out." he said then, drawing in a deep breath, his body folding back into itself. "It was hell at the beginning with my parents -- I don't want to get into it -- but we talk now and I know they still love me. And my sister, she's been great about it, and I've introduced her to my friends and that's kind of brought my two lives together for me."

I bit my lower lip and shook my head. His coming out seemed to me an heroic action. "I don't know how you did it. Telling your parents, I mean. I'm afraid

to tell my father I want to be a writer. That I won't eventually come into the business with him and my brother. I can't imagine telling him I was gay."

"For a while I hated my parents, because I couldn't tell them. I resented them for being Greek and thinking backwards all the time. I took a trip to Greece one year. I was about your age, actually. And I was an absolute slut. I slept with as many older Greek men as I could find, which was more than I want to remember, and I hated each and every one of them as I slept with them, but somehow I felt I was sticking it to my father by sleeping with them, and that made me feel good, in a bad way though, the way you feel good when you've gotten revenge on somebody or when somebody you don't like suffers."

The sun had moved in the sky. The fort threw a corrugated shadow in front of us. I felt my back stiffen and wanted to rise up to stretch.

"Let's get going," I said suddenly. "There are still a lot of places I need to see and we've only got two hours or so left."

Steve smiled. "You're right. We've been sitting around baring our souls while the clock's been ticking on your last day in Winnipeg."

I drove madly and showed Steve my idea of the city. Most of the time I'd stop the car and we'd get out for only a few minutes to stare at whatever I pointed out. There was the Precious Blood Roman Catholic Church with its roof spiralling into the sky like a shingled corkscrew; the Legislative Building crowned with its nude Golden Boy poised towards the promise of the west; the steel-girded Arlington Bridge from atop which you could view the north end of the city, dotted with onion-domed

Ukrainian churches; the turn-of-the-century mansions along Wellington Crescent; the confectionary in the basement of Eaton's, where my mother worked before my father bought the pizza place; the Bank of Montreal building at the corner of Portage Avenue and Main Street, with its Greek-columned facade, where my mother and my brother and I used to wait for the bus home from downtown; my family's first home, on Carlton Street, a huge old apartment block with enclosed porches and a courtyard.

"You really know this city, don't you?" Steve commented to me in the car at one point.

"I'm not so sure," I said. "The more I think I know it, the more mixed up I feel about it."

"Maybe," Steve said. "But still, there's something to be said for knowing, really knowing, a city. I feel that way about Chicago. I feel like I can never get lost there -- in life, I mean, not just in the street."

"If only it were that easy," I said.

Then I took Steve to one of my favorite places in the whole city, where I'd been going a lot lately to just kill time: a used books and records store in an abandoned warehouse in the exchange district downtown. There were books and records everywhere, in the racks and shelves, but also tossed recklessly in the aisles. You had to pick your way carefully through heaps of books or records to get where you wanted, and while you did your eye would catch something appealing and you'd bend to pick it up and take a closer look. Whenever I came here, I lost all track of

time, so that when I finally emerged out the door and returned to my car I'd be shocked at how much time had passed.

"This place looks like fun," Steve said. Immediately, he made his way for a shelf of books and started perusing the titles overhead. I thought of following him but noticed a boxful of old science fiction paperbacks next to the till and headed straight there.

We spent about twenty minutes like that, me in whatever section attracted my attention, Steve wherever his eye was drawn, both of us once in a while looking up to glance at the other and smile to show our excitement over whatever we'd found, and I thought of how even though we weren't side by side here, we were together somehow, experiencing the store as one, and that if I were with Maria she'd want to stay next to me and hold my hand all through the store, and how that wouldn't be the same at all.

Finally, Steve ran to me with a stack of books . He held the books up one by one. "Have you ever read Sylvia Plath?" he asked me. "Or Constantine Cavafy? Or Nikos Kazantzakis?"

"No."

"You must." He twirled a paperback edition of Christ Recrucified by Kazantzakis in front of him. "I've never seen this edition. I love the cover." On it there was a stylized Byzantine painting in pastel colors of a crucified Christ surrounded by a crowd of peasant Greeks, flames scorching Christ's blood-spotted body. "I'm adding it to my collection. The rest of these are for you."

I flipped through the two books. I'd never heard of these writers. I felt like I really did have a lot to learn.

Steve and I waited in line at the till as a seedy-looking middle-aged man with a frizzy grey beard assessed the trade-in value of two overflowing boxes of magazines and books the woman in front of us had brought in. We were standing close to each other and our shoulders were touching. I could feel the heat from Steve's arm through his sleeve and mine, and it flowed through my body.

I didn't know what to do. I thought maybe I should pull away, but then I thought that that would be too obvious, like I was admitting I was afraid of the attraction I was feeling for him. I wondered if Steve was aware of our touching shoulders. Probably, I told myself, he hadn't even noticed, it was no big deal, I was being silly, I was thinking too much about something I wasn't supposed to be thinking about at all. But I didn't move, and I grew accustomed to the warmth of his body beside mine, enough that when it was Steve's turn to show his purchase on the counter and he stepped away from me, I felt a sudden coldness dart through my stomach.

Finally, Steve paid for the books and we walked outside.

"Are you getting hungry?" I asked when we were back in the car.

"I am hungry," Steve said.

"Good. For our last stop, I'll take you to Atlas Pizza and make you up one of my special pizzas."

"I can hardly wait," Steve said.

We drove to the pizza place and I introduced Steve to my father. My brother was out running an errand. I went back to the kitchen to prepare the pizza and my father sat with Steve at the table set up out front for customers waiting on their pick-up orders. In his broken English, my father asked Steve about Chicago, about the Greeks there, about the pizza business there. Steve answered the questions in Greek, and I knew he had won my father's respect when my father switched to Greek too. Steve, I decided, was as good as I was at playing the part of the nice little Greek boy.

We sat down and ate and my father produced three bottles of beer from the case in the back fridge he kept in case one of his buddies came by to visit him. The conversation flowed easily, but I kept wondering if my father could tell Steve was gay.

I called Maria at her place to make sure she was home so I could drop Steve off. She said I should take Steve over to her aunt's place in Charleswood because her whole family was there. She was tired and had stayed behind to nap. She told me to visit her after I'd dropped Steve off because she was all alone. I said I'd try to and hung up.

We left the pizza place and I drove Steve to Maria's aunt's place. I let the car idle as he gathered his things to leave. I waited, wanting to tell him I'd had a great time, but holding back because I wanted even more to hear him tell me the same first.

Steve leaned back into the car through the passenger window before he left and smiled. His green eyes were clear and bright. His face had reddened from the sun over the course of the afternoon.

"I'm glad you took the time to show me the city, Peter," he said. "I had a fantastic time."

"I did my best," I said.

"Well, it was great, and I thank you." He pushed out his hand to shake mine.

"I guess I'll see you now at the wedding," I said.

"Yeah, that'll be fun. They've got me shooting the video." he said. "I can't wait."

"Have a good time tonight."

"You too."

"I will. See you."

"See you."

Steve turned away and I watched the muscles in the back of his legs rhythmically flex and slacken as he took long, even strides up the sidewalk to the house. Maria's aunt opened the front door for him and waved at me. I sped off, my mind and body floating on a sweet thrilling feeling I couldn't quite peg down.

I drove directly to Maria's house. The streets and buildings and people around me seemed novel and vibrant. The sun gleamed off the front end of my car. I thought over the afternoon's events, with no need to unravel or take meaning from them, but just a desire to relive the emotions they'd elicited, in their barest form. I was like a child looking over a puzzle he's just put together, contemplating it, admiring it, in its wholeness, with no desire to break it apart and start all over again. I couldn't wait to tell Maria all about my afternoon with Steve.

The door to Maria's house was locked and she wasn't answering the doorbell. I knocked a few times and waited, but still no response. I figured she must have been sleeping. Usually, her family kept a spare key in a vase in the backyard next to her father's greenhouse. I checked there and found it and opened the door.

I found Maria in her room, sleeping in her bed. She had no sheet or blanket over her and her body was wound in a quarter-moon shape. She was wearing a faded blue sweatshirt and a pair of white jockey briefs. Her loose black hair spilled over her pillow and heat-flushed face like a clump of sea vegetation stranded on the shoreline. Her breasts bunched together against her sweatshirt.

I reached out to push back the hair from her face, to wake her. She stirred, and her eyes fluttered open. When she saw me, her face lit up. She turned up to me and smiled, and before I could say a word she'd lifted her face to mine by wrapping her arms around my shoulders and kissed me. The skin on her face was hot as from a

fever. I held her close and eased my whole body onto the bed. We kissed again and I slipped my right hand under the elastic of her briefs to feel her wetness on my fingers.

"I'm so glad you came," Maria said. She spread her legs slightly and squirmed at my touch. "I'm so sick of all this wedding stuff and just want to close my mind to it for a while."

I started to say something, but Maria brought a finger up to her mouth and shushed me.

She ran her hands through my hair and kissed my forehead. She undid the buttons at the front of my shirt and I arched my back to slip off my pants. I noted the precise moment my cock stirred for her and it seemed, after my afternoon's musings on Steve's gayness, somehow reassuring, but at the same time ridiculously so. She fondled me through my shorts with her soft hand and I surged upwards to her.

We continued necking and kissing, our tongues battling inside our mouths, our lips crushed together. I lifted the sweatshirt up and around her shoulders and as the elastic of the collar moved above her mouth I leaned in to kiss her again and Maria fell back with her sweatshirt dangling from above her eyes like some sort of headdress. I pulled off the sweater completely, her hair spreading out in a tangle of frizzed strands against the mattress, and nuzzled my head between her breasts. With her big toe she pulled down my shorts and cupped her hand beneath me.

I entered her from above, moving rapidly at first, but slowing down when the thought occurred to me that Maria and I rarely enjoyed the opportunity to make love in

a bed and as long as we liked. Her body was soft and plush beneath mine. As I pushed into her, she would move up to me hard, and soon I was holding her from under her ass to bring her up in time with my thrusts.

With her upper body lying flat on the bed, her tits seemed to be floating over her chest. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open wide.

"More," Maria said. "More."

Her words drove me wild. I thrashed into her with all the power I could bring to my hips. Her brown legs wove around me like rivers of hot-spring water. The bush of hair below her waist swallowed me in its tangle.

I could feel all the excitement of the afternoon with Steve swell up inside me and ready to burst.

I pulled out just in time and Maria took hold of me with her left hand and I shot out over her, my ejaculate landing in a thick pool inside her navel. The sense of release was overwhelming, like nothing I'd ever felt before, a great emptying of everything inside me.

"Thanks, Maria," I panted.

Maria smiled. Her face was flushed and the hair matted against her cheeks. She sat up and with the sleeve of her sweatshirt scooped out the white liquid from her navel.

I wrapped my arms around her and held her close. We remained embraced as the light from the sun moved across her bedroom window.

The morning of the wedding I woke up at dawn and stepped outside for a jog. There was a sprinkling of dew on the grass and the air smelled particularly sweet. I ran with a fierce intensity, my feet pounding the pavement with each stride. I ran my usual route, down our street about a mile to my old high school, a few laps around the track there, and then back home. When I got back to the house, I was tired, but I didn't want to stop. My legs were carried away with their own propulsion. I had the sense that if I stopped at any time I wouldn't be able to start again, but that as long as I continued I could go on as long and far as I liked. I decided to keep on running. I ran on the grading next to the railway line behind our house halfway to the pizza place and back.

I ended up jogging for almost ninety minutes. After that I showered and lolled around the house in my bathrobe. My father was at the pizza place, so I was alone and stayed in the living room to watch television. There was an old movie on I'd never seen before with Sidney Poitier as the new teacher in a rough London high school. I missed the beginning but as I was switching through the channels I caught a scene where Poitier takes on one of the rowdier students in a boxing match. I was hooked. I sat back and really enjoyed the movie, not even thinking about the wedding coming up, and I even cried at the end when one of the girl students sings the title song to Poitier as a going-away gift.

Maria called early in the afternoon to see how I was doing. I think she felt bad that she'd be so busy as a bridesmaid that she wouldn't be able to spend too much time with me at the wedding. She told me she thought her partner in the wedding party was a jerk and that her brother's bride was looking stunning. She asked me what I was going to wear and she recommended a tie. We agreed to make an effort to sit with each other once the dinner and first few dances were over.

My father came home at about two to get dressed for the wedding; my brother was looking after the pizza place for the night. I dressed while he was in the shower, and then I knotted his tie for him and he promised to finally learn how to do it himself by the next wedding we had to attend. I felt sorry for my father; he really was trying hard to somehow make up for my mother's absence.

We decided to take one car; if my father wanted to leave earlier than I, he could probably find a ride with somebody else. The church was in the west end of town, not too far from Maria's house, and the reception was being held in a hotel downtown.

When we walked into the church my father and I both crossed ourselves and lit two candles -- one for ourselves and, as we'd been doing since she died, one for the soul of my mother -- which we placed in the gold candelabra at the rear of the church. I followed my father then as he leaned down to kiss the icon of St. Demetrios, and I gazed at him, trying to make out some sign of how the death of my mother had worked through his body and soul.

We made our ways to a seat on the groom's side of the church. There was a rustle of people whispering to one another in the pews and the smell of incense sweetened the air, and I caught sight of a few friends and nodded to them.

The bridesmaids and groomsmen were fanned out in a V formation on the church dais, Maria among them, resplendent in a strapless sky-blue dress, her dark hair tumbling past her shoulders, her hands holding in front of her a bouquet of colorful flowers. When she caught sight of me, she waved.

Steve, in a tailor-cut charcoal glen plaid suit, stood opposite her, with a video camera perched on his shoulder. He appeared to be concentrating intently on his role as official video man, but, when he spotted me in the crowd, he turned the lens of the camera my way for a moment and smiled. I felt good inside that he'd noticed me.

As the service progressed, I found myself lost in the dramatic ritual of the ceremony, the sheer gravity of it all. For the first time that I could remember, the traditional Greek Orthodox wedding made sense to me. As the priest chanted his blessing three times -- "The servant of God Antonios is betrothed to the handmaiden of God Christina in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" -- and then repeated it in reverse order, and the koubaro exchanged the rings on the bride's and groom's fingers and the crowns of white cloth shaped in the form of orange blossoms over their heads, I felt that the bride and groom could not have helped but been impressed with the fact that yes, they were married, something had happened, something of consequence, before witnesses, something not to be taken lightly. I

wished suddenly that someone could make a similar pronouncement upon my life, in as final and definite a manner.

I turned my attention once again to Maria, standing close to the bride, her eyes set towards her brother. I wondered whether I would ever stand in front of the altar with her at my side, and then I wondered what was running through her mind at the exact same moment. In that instant, as the priest chanted his final blessings, I noticed that Maria was crying, and for the second time that day, as I watched her eyes misting with tears, I found myself crying.

At the hotel ballroom, after the dinner and speeches, I stepped out into the lobby and spotted Nick Tsoulas huddled near the escalator with Harry Mihelakos, another friend of mine, who worked full-time at his father's restaurant, a real money-maker near the stadium called the Empire Steakhouse. I approached them and we started picking apart everything that had happened at the wedding so far.

"Did you see that babe in the wedding party, the one with the red hair and the nice tits?" Harry asked. "Who is she?" He looked to me for an answer, figuring that as Maria's boyfriend I had the inside track on information about the family.

"I think she's a cousin of Christina's from Regina or something," I said.

"Saskatoon," Nick corrected me. "She's fourteen."

"Fourteen!" Harry exclaimed. "You've got to be kidding."

"Her name's Dina," Nick added. "My parents are from the same town in Greece as hers. If she weren't so young, I think I'd ask them to set something up."

"I don't care how young she is. Those tits are amazing. I'm asking her to dance," Harry stated.

"Her father'll probably kill you," I said.

"It might be worth it," Harry responded, laughing. He was biting his lower lip and holding his hands horizontally against his chest, palms open and up, to indicate once again, this time visually, how much he had appreciated Dina's breasts.

"All the other bridesmaids are dogs," Nick said. "Except Maria, of course."

"Thanks," I said, and rolled my eyes.

"When are we going to be seeing you up there, Peter?" Nick joked. "Give me a break, man," I said.

"Watch yourself, Peter" Harry cut in. "I think I see wedding bells in Maria's eyes."

"Really?" I asked sarcastically.

"Damn rights. Last thing you want right now is to get tied down."

"I know," I said. "But Maria's fun."

"When you're twenty-one years old," Harry asked, "how much fun can you have with just one girl?"

"A lot," I answered, holding my ground. "I know what you mean, Harry, but, hey, I don't see you with a different babe every night. One's better than nothing."

"I'm not too sure about that," Harry said. "Maybe not. One's trouble."

Just then another guy joined us, Frank Glikouzis. He was a little older than all of us and owned his own business, a submarine place on Portage Avenue. He liked to

play the role of a mafioso. He was wearing a dark suit and his hair was tied in a tight knot at the back of his head. He lighted a cigarette and inhaled slowly.

"Doing a little gossiping, eh, boys?"

"You know how it is," Harry said, winking. He seemed to me always to be trying to impress Frank -- not that Frank was really a big wheel or anything, but at least he had the connections to get you into bars without having to stand in line or pay the cover charge.

"Let me put in my two cents," Frank began. "That cousin of Maria's who was doing the video? I say one-hundred per cent guaranteed, he's a fag."

"I don't know," I said. "I wouldn't be so sure."

I couldn't say I was offended -- I'd made similar remarks myself in the past, I'm sure -- but I was curious to know what exactly had given Steve away, and what the others made of Frank's accusation.

"Just look at the way he walks," Frank replied. "There's something about it."

"What?" Nick asked.

"He takes tiny steps, and real fast, and that ass, man, he holds it tight." Frank said. He winced, and shook his head, the thought of a fag's ass apparently too repugnant for him to consider.

"Big deal," Nick said. "Last night at the supper party I sat and talked with him for quite a while. He's a real Cubs fan, knew the whole team roster up and down. He sounded pretty normal to me."

I wondered when Steve and Nick had talked last night, and figured it must have been during the meal, before I arrived. I tried to think of what else they might have discussed.

"No, I'd say he's a fudge-packer, too," Harry said. "Come on, it's obvious. The way he was fixing the groomsmen's corsages, and when he kissed the bridesmaids, you could tell he wasn't interested, that he was just being friendly. I knew right then."

"What if he is?" I said, looking to stir up more conversation on the topic. "I don't have a problem with that."

"Take it easy," Frank said. He nodded to someone standing behind us that he'd be with them in a second. "I was just saying."

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's no big deal. Except with a certain virus around these days, he'd better watch his ass, if you know what I mean."

We all cracked up. Then Frank left to speak with his other friend and all of us split up.

After the bride and groom and the wedding party had finished with their waltzes and kalamatiana, Maria came to my table and we sat together. She was flushed and excited, and I could tell that she was tired by the hints of circles that were beginning to color the skin beneath her eyes.

"You looked beautiful in church this afternoon," I told her.

"Really?" She slipped her high heel shoes off with her big toe and rested her feet on my chair, between my legs.

"Absolutely," I said. "I'll have you know, I just got through rating the girls here tonight with Nick and Harry and you came up a close second."

"Second?" Maria made a pouty face. "Who came in first?"

"Dina," I said. "That fourteen-year-old with the red hair."

"And big tits," Maria added. "They're a joke."

"I agree," I said. "My vote was with you for number one all the way."

"Thanks," Maria said. She leaned over and kissed me behind the ear and whispered that my suit turned her on. I clutched her feet closer to my crotch to make sure she could feel the hardness there.

"Is that yours?" she asked, pointing to the glass of red wine in front of me.

"Yes."

"Can I have some?"

"Of course." I brought the glass to her lips and she took a sip. Her lipsticked lips were stained even redder by the wine.

"That's nice wine, isn't it?" Maria said.

"I'll say," I said. "I've had about seven glasses already."

"Don't get drunk on me. I want a few dances with you before the night's through."

"Don't worry, I'll be here."

We sat and watched the guests move in jumpy circles, hands clasped, to the rhythm of the bouzouki and accordion music. Steve was in front of one circle, waving a handkerchief, his feet lifting and kicking around the parquet dance floor.

"Look at Steve," Maria said. "He's really something."

"He certainly knows his Greek dances. I wish I could dance like that."

"Did you have fun with him yesterday?" Maria asked.

"Yeah," I said. "He's really a neat guy."

"Isn't he?" Maria said. "I wish I had had more time to spend with him. Now I probably won't see him until I get married, and who knows when that'll be?"

Her lips rose at the corners and curled into the hint of a smile.

"Who knows?" I said, teasing her, and then as soon as I'd said the words I thought perhaps I'd inadvertently laced them with too much doubt.

In the next moment, the band took a break and the music man cut in with a slow song, Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You."

"Oh, Peter, let's dance. You know how much I love this song."

"Let's," I said. I took her hand and we moved to the dance floor.

Her body under mine was hot and resilient. I wrapped my arms tighter around her and pressed my cheek against hers. I thrust my pelvis closer and Maria responded by churning her waist into me. I could hardly hear the song anymore. I felt incredibly horny.

"I'd love to fuck you right here on the dance floor," I said, not knowing exactly why.

"So would I," Maria said, and she bit the lobe of my ear.

I felt a tap then on my shoulder, and I turned around frantically, as if awakened abruptly from a dream. It was Steve. He was smiling coyly and his eyes seemed to tease me.

"I would say you two are getting a little too hot and bothered for all these provincial Greeks," he said. "Do you mind if I cut in?"

"No," I said, moving away from Maria and handing her wrist to Steve.

I returned to my table. My father was sitting there and he poured us some more wine. I watched Maria and Steve glide together over the dance floor and wondered if what Steve had just done meant anything, was somehow directed at me.

"Maria's a wonderful girl," my father said to me, in Greek.

I nodded. I wasn't in the mood to get any deeper into the subject.

"You know, you might want to start thinking about getting married yourself now," my father continued. "Why wait? You've got the pizza place there for you. You and Mike can run it together. That's all you'll ever need."

"Please, dad," I cut in, making my displeasure visible with a sour face. "I have other dreams."

"Other dreams," he said dismissingly, slicing a small circle in the air with the palm of his right hand. "You don't need other dreams. I've talked with Maria's father. He's all for you and Maria getting married as soon as you graduate."

In that moment I resented my father for trying to tell me what to do, and I equated his meddling in my life now with his having taken advantage of my mother,

twenty-nine years ago, when he brought her to Canada at a time when she had no other real choice.

"Leave me alone right now, dad," I said. I waved my hand in front of me, as if shoving him away.

My father sat back and made what seemed to be an involuntary motion, his hand covering his mouth. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm being pushy." His eyes grew moist and he took a shot of wine.

"It's OK," I said. I suddenly wished I hadn't been so harsh with him.

"Remember," he said, looking back at Tony and Christina, who were having their photo taken next to the wedding cake, "how when you were a child your mother always used to make you promise that you'd marry her one day?"

"I remember," I said. It was true. Until I was five years old I used to pad into my parents' bedroom mornings after my father had left for the pizza place and slip into the curve of the mattress next to my mother. I tried always not to wake her because I cherished most those few stolen minutes before she realized I was next to her. When she would finally embrace me, she'd ask me to tell her again that I planned to marry her when I grew up.

I always used to picture my family as a unit, as a whole, but now I was beginning to see that at the same time we were all somehow apart, and that within that apartness my mother and I had shared a unique connection.

"God rest her soul," my father said. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Let's not start," I said, patting my father lightly on the shoulder to let him know I forgave him his lecture of a few minutes ago. I was blaming him for too many of my own problems.

"I know, I know."

I stood up to leave. "I think I need some fresh air," I said.

I walked off towards the lobby, hoping to find some of my friends there.

As the night neared its close, the Greek band kept the stage and mixed up their fare, adding tsamika, hasapika, and several zebekika to the kalamatiana. A crowd gathered in a circle around the dance floor, and my friends and I stood behind them drinking and watching the proceedings. Steve, all of us remarked, was an excellent dancer. I envied the ease with which he performed all the steps and twirls that make up most of the Greek dances. I found myself once again fascinated with his body, with the apparently effortless control he had over it, the way he seemed to move as if he knew precisely what his capabilities were. A part of me yearned to be able to break that circle of onlookers and dancers, to cut in and kick my feet and jump and slap my heel with my fingertips the way Steve could, but I stayed on the fringe with the others my age.

Steve came to stand with me at one point, after having spent about fifteen minutes on the dance floor. He mopped his brow with a handkerchief, and I noticed his moustache was wet with perspiration. His green eyes were soft again.

"I'm having a great time," he said. He loosened his tie a notch. "I love weddings."

"Yes, this is great." I said. "And you're a pretty good dancer."

"You noticed?" He said. "I hope it didn't look like I was showing off."

I laughed. "Maybe a little."

"That's all right," he said. "I was enjoying myself."

I was at ease again. Something about Steve managed to relax my mind, to slow me down, to make me want to be as much myself as possible: he made me feel as if he wanted nothing more and nothing less from me.

"Let's go get a drink," I said.

At the bar, Steve ordered a screwdriver and I did the same. As an afterthought I realized that I shouldn't be mixing vodka with the wine but by then the drinks were already in front of us, so I reached out and brought the glass to my mouth for a sip.

"I can't get over how wonderful a time I had yesterday afternoon," Steve said. "I really appreciate you literally going the extra miles for me like that."

Steve reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pen. "I should give you my address and phone number in Chicago," he said. "If you're ever there, you can look me up."

On the back of the little pamphlet explaining the Greek Orthodox wedding service that had been handed out to each guest at the church Steve wrote his address and phone number. His letters were smooth and elegant and I noticed he crossed his sevens European-style.

"Here," he said, tearing off the piece of the pamphlet with the information on it. "Come to Chicago and I promise you the time of your life."

"I just might take you up on that sooner than you think," I said.

"That'd be just fine with me," Steve replied.

We were toying with each other, I felt, testing the boundaries between us, not necessarily in order to cross them, but just for the fun of discovering them. Our game seemed to me like a mockery of the wedding ceremony and reception just passed.

"You're coming to the bar later with all of us, aren't you?" I asked. "Rascals is open till four and Maria and I and a lot of the others are planning to head out there when we're finished here."

"Of course," he said. "Maria already mentioned it to me."

The final song of the night, after the bride and groom had danced their last waltz and left for their hotel room, was a bouzouki solo, slow, winding, relentless. Everybody gathered round the dance floor and watched as a few of the older men and women spun around in tight circles, alone, dancing the zebekiko. Steve was one of the only younger men attempting the dance.

Maria moved onto the dance floor, crouching down beneath Steve, and urged him on with her clapping hands, and soon she motioned to me to join her. I bent down beside her and brought my hands together in rhythm with the beat. Steve was spinning in front of us, his arms fully extended, his fingers snapping like expertly-worked chopsticks. Then he took a few halting steps forward in a kind of stylized drunkenness and cracked the floor with the back of his hand and sprang immediately upward to slap his right foot with his left hand. He looked to me beautifully, incomprehensibly, entranced.

Most of the eyes in the surrounding crowd were on Steve. He was the best of the dancers, easily the most expressive. Maria took a glass of wine and slid it over the floor to the area in front of Steve. He bent down and clenched the rim of the glass in his teeth and then stood up, drinking the contents of the glass as he straightened out his upper body, driblets of wine spilling down and staining his shirt.

Then Steve swayed towards me, still keeping time with the beat, his shoulders and elbows swinging, a wide smile on his face, and, as I sat crouched in front of him, now pounding the floor in support of his performance, he pressed his hand against my back and swung his leg over me. The crowd hollered -- they saw Steve now as the essence of magkia, of Greek cool, and he repeated the stunt, this time coming from the opposite side. His touch on my back sent a quiver through my body. I could actually smell the leather of his shoe. I felt connected to his dance. He flung his head back then and touched the floor behind him with his outstretched hand. For a moment I wished Steve would pull me onto the dance floor so I could join him in the mad dance.

I remembered then the few times I had witnessed my mother dancing the zebekiko. She'd take short, mincing steps, and then suddenly lift a leg and swing it up and around her opposite leg in a sweeping arch. Her eyes would close to mere slits, and her mouth would open wide, showing even, white teeth. She'd seem to me entirely transformed, at once alluring and frightening, and, watching her, I would realize, more and more sharply as I grew older, that I didn't really know her, that there were parts of her that were hidden from me, that I might never see.

Finally, it was all over. The lights went on. The band stopped and people turned to get their things and leave. Steve moved to his table and slumped in a chair. Maria kissed him proudly and congratulated him on his dancing. I followed her and slumped in the chair next to Steve's.

"Let's get going for Rascals," I told Maria.

"Not right now, Peter," she said. "I've got to help my mother get everything together here and load up the car. I'll come by myself in a half hour or so. You can go down now with Steve and I'll meet you guys there."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah. Why should you have to wait around for me? I'll see you at Rascals."

Maria made a motion with her head for me to follow her now, so she could say a few more things to me alone. Right then I didn't want to move an inch away from Steve. I felt as if there were a power and excitement about him that I wanted to be a part of. I stood up and took a few reluctant steps towards Maria.

"Be careful," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, with an attitude: to me, in that moment, Maria was somehow in the way. The crowning of this night, I thought, was not to be with her, but with Steve.

"I think you're drunk and so's Steve."

"So?" I looked in Maria's eyes for any sign of insinuation, but saw only earnestness and hardness.

"So drive carefully." She kissed me on the cheek. "I love you both."

"Me too," I said and returned to Steve. I put out a hand to help him off the chair and we left the ballroom.

When we were out of the cement-walled hotel parking lot, I nosed the car out into the street in the direction of Rascals. The sky was clear and a full moon floated above us like a crystal ball. I rolled down my window and could feel a breeze coming from the river. Suddenly an idea came to me.

"There's one place I didn't show you yesterday, that I just have to." I turned to Steve to see if he shared my enthusiasm, and his eyes lighted up. "It's right by the river and there's no better view anywhere of the city's skyline."

"Let's go right now, Peter," Steve said, leaning forward in his seat. "I don't want to miss this."

We parked on Tache Street below the St. Boniface Cathedral. The cathedral, only one wall of which has survived a fire few decades back, loomed tall and seemed to glow in the black night. It was built of white stone and there was a huge circle cut into the centre of the wall where the night sky showed through. A square white cross crowned the monolithic structure.

"That's beautiful," Steve said, gazing at the ruins of the cathedral. "It's so big."

"It must have really been something," I said.

We turned to the river across from the cathedral. We heard it before we saw it, a slow murmur of waves gently grazing the banks, like an animal soundly sleeping. Yellow streetlights along the road reflected in spots on the surface of the water, and

the moon laid down a white strip like a highway crew painting on a centre dividing line. There was a muggy smell in the air of soaking tree bark. We stood on the riverbank and looked across at the city skyline rising opposite us. Our feet sunk into the grass beneath us.

I pointed out several landmarks -- the TD Building, the Richardson Building, the Hotel Fort Garry. The city appeared impressive and modern from here, I felt, almost like a floating metropolis in a science fiction film. We were side by side and something I could not identify pulled us closer together until our shoulders were touching again, as they had been when we waited in line at the bookstore. Both of us were silent, with our heads turned forward and our hands hanging tamely at our sides. I closed my eyes to smell the river and feel Steve's warmth more keenly.

I pressed against Steve with more strength and I thought I detected a response in kind from him but couldn't be sure. My stomach seemed to lift and my breath quickened. Our every movement, no matter how minute, seemed to me to hold the possibility of great meaning. My hand brushed against the side of his pant leg. I sensed his leg move toward me. I felt the heat there, my hand transfixed. Then Steve jerked his leg back. Seconds later I could still sense the soft material of his pants on the back of my fingers, as much a physical presence there as the buzzing sensation you get after your hand has been held in one position too long and grows numb.

"We'd better get going to the bar," Steve said. I looked at his green eyes, and his gaze seemed to me to be turned inward.

"OK." I struggled to put together even that much of a response. My heart was beating out of control. I brought my hand to my forehead and wiped off a trickle of sweat. I felt like jumping into the river to wake up and cool down.

We turned back to walk to the car. Steve walked in front of me. I watched his ass move in his pants and I wanted to touch him. I wanted to put my hand there and squeeze him and hold him close to my body. As these thoughts flashed through my mind I felt a stirring below my waist. I couldn't believe myself.

We drove to the bar, which was located downtown, almost directly across from where we'd just been standing, nestled close to the river, behind the Grain Exchange Building. There were hardly any cars on the street except for those parked in front of the bar. I steered around to an alley in the back where I knew I could find a parking spot. There were no street lights there and suddenly the night seemed a deeper black, except for the white moon, which appeared closer now and fuller.

I cut the ignition, and for a few seconds both of us sat motionless. Steve turned to me as if he was waiting for me to say something. His green eyes seemed to me endlessly open. I reached out my hand then and set it on his thigh. I didn't know if I was toying with him, or toying with myself, or if I just needed more than anything else at that moment to touch, to feel close to Steve.

I felt him tense beneath my touch so then I opened my hand wide and moved further up and inside his leg. I knew I was going too far, that I was sending Steve a message I wasn't sure I could back up, but I felt perversely driven. Steve sat

motionless. I continued up his leg and looked up at him as if to let him know I knew what I was doing.

Steve twisted towards me then, and almost against my will, or with my will -- I couldn't say, I was so out of touch with my true self -- I edged even closer to him. Steve wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I was conscious of my breathing growing fitful. I leaned back and closed my eyes. I felt Steve's breath fall over my face and then his skin touched mine and the hairs of his moustache brushed against my nose. I smelled the traces of his cologne on his skin and tasted the wine on his breath. He kissed me on the lips. His lips were warm but hard, and something about his breath overwhelmed me. There was a familiarity and a strangeness about him. I felt repulsed and aroused at the same time.

Steve undid my shirt. His hands began to explore my chest and rested at my nipples. He brushed them to stiffness and then brought his lips around them and moistened them with his tongue and pulled on them with his teeth. My heart and mind floated as if in a dream. I didn't know if I was going to stop or go on.

In the next moment, there was a rapping knock at the passenger window. I frantically pushed Steve away and did up my shirt. I heard the clicking of shoes on pavement. I wiped the wetness from my mouth with the back of my hand.

Steve straightened up. The windows of the car were fogged with moisture so I cleared open a small circle on the front windshield to peer outside. I saw someone -- I couldn't be sure who, maybe a friend, maybe just a smart-assed passerby -- running

into the bar. I wondered what they had seen. If it was somebody who'd recognized my car, I hoped they'd thought I was with Maria.

Neither of us spoke a word. We smoothed out our clothes and patted down our hair. I started the car and the fog on the windows started to condense into tiny droplets that streaked down the panes of glass like tears.

Suddenly, a colossal sadness overtook me. It was as if that knocking had woken me up to a hideous reality. I don't know why, but I felt exposed. And betrayed. By Steve and by a part of myself. A terrible fatigue weighed down my mind and the muscles of my body. A cold chill slithered down my spine. Steve reached out and rubbed my shoulder. I found myself now horrified by what had just transpired. The thought of my friends, and perhaps Maria, dancing and laughing casually at the bar seemed to mock me. I knew I couldn't go inside.

"The bar's just around the corner," I said. "You go. I want to go home."

"I'm sorry," Steve said. I knew he sensed my regret. "I'm sorry. I should have known better."

I didn't say anything. I revved the gas pedal. I couldn't believe I'd just kissed another man, that I'd just desired another man. I didn't even want to think about how far I might have gone if we hadn't been interrupted. The only way not to deal with what had just happened, I figured, was to get the hell out of there.

Steve closed his eyes and took a series of deep, resigned breaths. I kept my hands gripped on the steering wheel, making a show of being poised to leave.

"It's my fault," he said. "What the hell did I think I was doing?"

I knew it was my fault, too. I knew I'd made a game out of something dead serious. But I couldn't admit that. The only way out, in my mind, was to keep up the game.

"Fuck you," I said, not looking at Steve but at the alley in front of me.

"What?"

I don't think Steve could believe what I'd just said. Or maybe he could, but wanted to see if I had the heart to repeat the words.

I did.

"Fuck you," I said. Fuck you for coming here, I thought, fuck you for kissing me, fuck you for letting me kiss you, fuck you for being a fag, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.

Steve must have known exactly what I had been thinking.

"I'm not God," he said.

I hated him for knowing me so well, better, maybe, than I knew myself. I hated him for bringing up that line of mine. I hated myself for what I'd just done. I hated myself for not knowing who the hell I was.

Steve stepped out of the car and into the night. He started walking towards the street in front of the bar. I sat there hunched over the steering wheel, crying against the hard plastic, the wheel cold on my face.

I considered jumping out of the car and running up to Steve to apologize. I considered parking the car and stepping into the bar after Steve as if nothing had happened.

Instead, I cranked the gear shift into drive and fled the scene as quickly as I could, afraid even to look back.

The next morning I stayed in bed late, forcing myself back to a kind of half-sleep at least three times over the course of the morning. I heard my father work out on his exercise bike and then run water for a bath, but I just pressed my face deeper into my pillow and tried to drown out all the noise.

I wasn't sick, I just didn't want to get up. I didn't want to get up because I didn't want to face anything. Not what had happened last night, not what I felt for Maria, not what I felt for Steve, not who I was, not even how much orange juice might be left in the fridge for me to pour down my parched throat. Everything seemed like a responsibility, like a weight, like something that was in the way. Everything in the universe. I wanted it all obliterated, lifted from me somehow, so that I could be free, totally free, and alone, finally and totally alone because maybe that was the only way to be truly free.

Even so, I found myself asking again and again: What exactly did happen last night? I replayed the scene in the car countless times and I couldn't stop myself from feeling once again the thrill of the moment, the tense excitement of Steve next to me and his lips on mine. And yet that was the image I most wanted to rid from my mind, that I tried to escape like a rat lost and bumping against walls in a maze.

I had no idea where I stood. There was no way I was gay, I told myself. I had never before felt attracted to another man.

But how could I explain Steve to myself?

A little past noon, my father called me from the living room.

"Get the phone, it's Maria."

I tossed in bed and pulled the sheet over my head. But I knew I had no excuse for avoiding Maria. I picked up the phone next to my bed. Through my father's open line, I could hear the football game he was watching.

"OK, I got it," I said.

My father's line clicked shut.

"Hi, Peter," Maria said. Her voice was bright and purposeful. I knew right away that whoever knocked at my window last night either didn't recognize Steve or hadn't said anything.

"Hi, Maria. I'm sorry. I was still sleeping."

"I just woke up myself. I wanted to remind you of the brunch we're having at my place today. Steve and a lot of the other out-of-town guests are leaving."

"I'm not sure I'm up to it."

"I know you're tired," she said. "So am I. I really want you there, though. It'll be fun."

Maria was too pushy, I decided then. I felt confined with her.

"I'll do my best," I said.

"It's in an hour, so you'd better hurry up."

"I'll be there," I said. I didn't want to see Steve again, I didn't want to face him, but I knew there was no way out of this, without raising a fuss with Maria.

There was a pause and the hiss of the phone line filled the dead air.

"What happened to you last night? Why didn't you come to the bar?"

I remained silent, trying to come up with something to say.

"Steve says you got sick," Maria offered. "I told you you drank too much."

I wanted to thank Steve for covering for me, and at the same time I resented him for being presumptuous enough to think he could speak for me.

"Yeah," I said. "I got sick. I mixed the wine with vodka and my stomach just couldn't take it. How was it at the bar, anyhow?"

"Not bad. I was pretty tired, though."

"How was Steve?" I don't know why, but I had to ask.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Just how was he, did he say he had a good time?"

"He was fine, I guess. But he seemed upset that you weren't feeling well. You guys really hit it off, huh? I'm glad."

"Yeah, we hit it off," I said. I felt like adding: "And you know what else? Your cousin and I made out in the car last night." It wasn't just a perverse thought, either. I really wished I could tell her about what had happened last night, I wished we could try to unravel it all together. But I knew we never could.

"So I'm seeing you in about an hour, right?"

"Sure," I said. "Just don't expect me to be Mr. Happy. I'm not in the greatest mood."

"That's OK. I like having you around, and I'm sure you and Steve'll want to say goodbye."

After that I slowly got up from bed. I stuck the Dirty cassette in the stereo and blasted it loud while I brushed my teeth and washed my face. Then I took a long hot shower, the pounding music reaching me through the roar of the pouring water. I tried to wash away the memory of last night.

My father made a breakfast of fried eggs and potatoes. We sat in the kitchen together and ate and talked about the wedding. For some crazy reason I felt like doing my father a favor and I promised him I'd work till closing tonight so he could take off early. Since my mother died he liked going to the coffehouse, not so much to play cards as just to hang out with some of his old friends. I thought I'd give him the night off. And I wanted to be as busy as possible, to keep my mind off Steve.

Finally, I left for Maria's. I was dreading the visit. The sun was bright and hot but I kept the windows rolled up and turned on the air conditioning full blast. The rivers were brown and muddy. I saw a long-haired guy in black sweats hauling beer empties back to the liquor vendor. I just about ran over a senior who was crossing the street at a snail's pace with a shopping cart full of groceries rolling ahead of her.

There were about thirty people at Maria's place. You could tell the last few days had taken their toll on everyone, because they looked worn out and didn't seem to care as much as they had at the dinner party about how they looked.

I found Maria in the basement, sitting on the couch with a bunch of her cousins. She was eating a plate of lalagides dipped in honey and offered me one as I squeezed in beside her. I thought I might feel comforted sitting next to her but

immediately I wished I could get up and leave. The touch of her arm on mine almost made me cringe.

Steve was in a corner next to the bar talking with some older men. I tried to avoid looking at him, but every so often I'd lift my eyes towards him to see if he was looking my way. As far as I could tell, he wasn't. He was wearing a brown denim shirt with brown corduroys. His hair was still wet and he hadn't shaved so his face looked dark and brooding.

One of Maria's cousins had already developed the photos he'd taken himself at the church and the hotel and he was passing them around. Maria and her cousins pored over them, all the time making comments or breaking into little fits of laughter. I tried to look interested but simply could not concentrate. I could feel Steve's presence, and it made me terribly uncomfortable. As far as I was concerned I was screwed up enough without him making things even worse.

"Look at this one, Steve," Maria called out, "it's you doing the limbo."

Steve reached over to grab the photo from Maria and as he did so he looked at me and caught my gaze. I tried to look as stiff and hard as possible. At the same time I tried to identify the expression on Steve's face. He looked surprisingly spry, but there was something in his eyes that seemed to tell me he could come down to my level readily enough, if that's what I wanted.

I broke away my gaze before Steve did, and turned my attention -- or whatever attention I could feign -- back to the wedding photos. There was one of Maria and me dancing, and Maria stared at it a long time. She handed the photo over to me and I

stared at it, too, but my mind was elsewhere and as soon as I had handed it back to her I realized I hadn't really seen it, couldn't even remember the precise configuration of our pose.

The whole brunch passed in the same way. I avoided Steve, kept as far away from him as possible, and he, I'm sure, got the hint well enough to know not to approach me, even though, somewhere, I knew, I wished he'd done just that. He went upstairs finally without either of us exchanging a word.

Maria sensed my lousy mood. "Something's wrong with you," she said.

"It's just my hangover," I said. The last thing I wanted was for Maria to even suspect anything of what had transpired last night between Steve and me. "I shouldn't have even come. I'm a mess."

Maria looked up from the photos in front of her. "Listen, you can leave anytime you want to. I'm sorry. I thought it would be nice for you to be here this morning with all my relatives."

"I know," I said. "I'm not blaming you for how I feel. I just better get going, that's all." I was hoping she wouldn't want to come up with me, so that I could just make a quick exit.

"OK." Maria turned her face up to mine to kiss me goodbye and continued separating the photos she wanted copies of for herself. "Call me."

"I will."

As I made my way up the stairs, I thought that I should at least wish Steve a safe trip back to Chicago. I'd had a great time with him, there was no denying that.

And I knew I wanted to say so much more to him, to share so much more of myself with him.

But I was afraid. I was afraid of the person I would show myself to be if I pursued my attraction to Steve. I was afraid of losing my bearings. I was afraid of so many things I couldn't even begin to try to make sense of them all. I slipped out the back door and hurried to my car, hoping nobody had noticed me leave.

Over the course of the next week, I kept to myself as much as possible. I worked long hours at the pizza place and made up excuses to keep from having to see Maria. The skies continued to bring rain and the rivers were overflowing. On my way to work each morning I'd mark the progress of the Assiniboine River against the newly paved walkway that stretched from the Forks to the Legislative Building. In a few days the river had swallowed much of the bank and had crept halfway up the lampposts that dotted the walkway. I wondered where it was going to end.

The pizza place was my only point of intersection with the real world. I resigned myself totally to my job and offered almost every night to fill in for either my father or my brother. My father took advantage of my new-found work ethic and would steal away whenever possible to the coffeehouse for a few hours. As for Mike, he did end up taking a few opportunities to visit his wife and son at home, but, even though he didn't say anything, I could tell he was somehow suspicious of my motives.

Some nights I worked ten- or twelve-hour shifts. I answered the phone and made pizzas until even my dreams at night were filled with images culled from my narrowly confined existence at the pizza place: the metal rack above the pizza counter filled with bills, the spice-flecked red tomato sauce splashing over the pasty-white dough, mounds of grimy mushrooms to be chopped and boiled.

At home I'd lock myself in my room and sit slumped next to my bed listening to music over the headphones while I read from the books Steve had bought for me.

At first, I hadn't wanted to even touch the books, but then I relented, and soon I spent much of my time poring over their contents.

The Cavafy collection in particular I found interesting, and I read poems from the book one after another, until they melded in my mind with the lyrics of the songs I happened to be listening to. Some of the poems were about love between two men (was this why Steve had chosen the book for me?), some about growing old, and some simply about the boredom of life.

I grew fond of one poem especially, titled "Monotony," which ended with the line: "And finally even tomorrow no longer appears to be tomorrow." I could really understand that kind of feeling, that kind of rut. The whole universe seemed to me to be running out of gas before the next turn. I wondered what Steve thought about the poem. I wished I could pick up the phone and call to ask him.

I didn't care to share anything with Maria. I felt that what was troubling me was something far beyond her understanding. When she'd call, I'd be abrupt with her and try to start a fight. I didn't hate her, but I wanted her to hate me. But she was patient with me -- I think she believed I was depressed again over the loss of my mother -- and kept from pestering me too much. I did think a lot about my mother, but it was different now, not so much a grief as a sense of discovery, of trying to figure out who she was and what that meant to who I was or was going to be.

Something else was happening over the course of that first week after the wedding night, with increasing frequency as the days rolled by: just about wherever I went, I started seeing, or thinking I'd seen, Steve.

The first time, I was at the cheese supplier picking up some mozzarella for the pizza place and at the rear of the store I noticed a man unloading a crate who, just from the set of his shoulders, very much resembled Steve. Even though I knew it couldn't be him, some force drove me to walk over to this man to make sure. It was pitiful. Then, a few days later, as I was driving to work one afternoon, scanning a throng of people waiting at a corner on Portage Avenue to cross the street, I felt, without any physical evidence whatsoever, just felt, that Steve was in there somewhere among them. I hesitated in making my turn and examined everyone in the group carefully. The car behind me almost knocked into mine. No Steve, of course. But as I sped away, my heart was still beating fast, and I knew, at the very least, that I needed somehow to see Steve again.

That night, alone at the pizza place after closing up, I decided to call Steve. All the lights were off and the only sound was the persistent hum from the walk-in cooler in the back of the kitchen. My hands actually trembled as I took out the piece of paper on which Steve had written out his number. On the scrap I noticed for the first time that the squiggles on the upper left corner were in fact part of the graphic of two joined hands that had graced the wedding ceremony program.

I dialed the number. The phone rang once, twice, three times. My hand on the phone was sweating. A voice on the other end of the line began to answer. I hung up frantically. I couldn't even be sure if the voice had been Steve's. I stuffed the piece of paper into my pocket and rushed out the back door.

I hadn't known what I was going to say.

When I finally met with Maria, about two weeks later, we went out to see a movie together and then stopped for coffee at the capuccino spot we frequented. I'd been silent almost the whole time in the car to and from the movie and I could sense that Maria was about to start asking questions.

We ordered our capuccinos and took a table by the window overlooking the street. The owner of the store was watching a baseball game on a raised television set sitting on a thick wood plank in the corner opposite him. Men and women were strolling down the sidewalk licking ice creams. Traffic was backed up because most cars were trying to find a parking spot on the street.

I slurped the whipped cream at the top of my cup and took a sip of coffee. I didn't feel like talking. I sat back and stared absently out the window.

"What are you thinking?" Maria asked.

"I was just thinking."

"What about?"

"Nothing, really. Just thinking."

"You can't just think, you have to think about something. Why can't you tell me?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There's some things I can't tell you."

"Like what?"

"Like some things."

"Likewise for me. I can't tell you everything. But I don't think that's the end of the world."

I knew Maria wanted me to ask her what sorts of things she couldn't tell me, but I wasn't about to play her game.

"I'm a little depressed, that's all. Isn't that OK with you?"

"It's OK with me, but I wish you'd let me help."

"You can't."

"What do you suddenly have against me, Peter? What? Have I done something wrong? I thought everything was going so well with us."

"I don't know, Maria. Don't ask me too much because I don't know anything myself." I couldn't look her in the eyes. "This is my problem."

After the capuccinos we got back in the car and I drove Maria home. It wasn't the same anymore. I knew that, but Maria didn't, and I didn't have the heart to tell her.

Out of habit more than anything else, I parked in the spot alongside her garage where we used to make out after our dates. I turned to Maria and told her I was sorry I hadn't been more fun tonight.

In the next moment Maria was on top of me and we were necking. Before long we had our pants off and had pushed Maria's seat all the way back so I could lie next to her in it. Maria pulled at me and I sank my face into her breasts. I got on top

of her and began pumping, fiercely, trying to close off my mind to all thoughts, but not succeeding, not at all, the thoughts rushing through my mind like a throng of bats through a cave.

Maria pressed closer to me and told me that she loved me and in response I told her I loved her, but in a passing flash I knew that I did not, that I could not have been in love with her since I'd never felt as free with her as I'd felt with Steve the few days I had spent with him.

Maria guided me inside her again. I moved mechanically within her, trying halfheartedly to at least put on a show of ardor. All of a sudden then my cock gave way and I felt myself losing control. The rush was a strange one, somehow stolen from me, beyond my control, the moment of climax dim and unmarked. I pulled out to keep from spilling inside her and wrapped myself in my undershirt as I came.

Maria clutched me to her breasts.

"I'm sorry," I said, pulling away. "I couldn't stop myself."

"It's OK," Maria said. "You could have come on me."

"I didn't want to get you dirty."

I stared outside the front windshield at the night sky.

"Don't look so sad," Maria said.

I saw a tiny bubble of a tear break free from the corner of her eye. She moved up to me and kissed me and I sensed the fire gone from her mouth.

"I'd better go," I said.

"Call me when you feel better," she said.

I figured that would be a long time. I wasn't sure if I would ever feel better.

Maria stepped out of the car. I drove off.

I decided to drive back to the pizza place to work the last hour or so before closing. Mike had been working all day and I thought I'd give him a break. I needed to somehow clear my mind.

The delivery driver's car was parked alongside the front entrance, and as I entered the store I saw one boxed king-size pizza sitting on top of the oven waiting to be delivered and Mike using the metal shovel to pull out another pizza. He looked tired, in the way he held the shovel, his shoulder muscles slack, his head lolling on his neck. There were sauce stains on his apron, and his shoes were grimy with grease and dirt.

"Busy night?" I asked.

"Not too bad," Mike answered. His wrists worked the pizza into a cardboard box and with his right hand he stapled on the bill, all in one swift and smooth motion. "It's really slow now. I think we're going to close up."

"Great!" the delivery driver exclaimed. He was about seventeen years old and always dressed in neat, stylish clothes. "I'll just pay for these two orders out of my own pocket and cash out then. There's a social I want to catch in Crescentwood."

"That's fine," Mike mumbled. He stretched out his hand to take the money from the driver. "Peter'll lock the door on your way out."

When the driver was gone, I slipped around to the back and took off my jacket and set it down on top of one of the white freezers at the back of the kitchen, where

we stored the pizza meats. When we were younger Mike and I used to sit on top of those freezers and read comic books together, waiting for my father to pull himself away from the pizza ovens and take us home.

Mike was twenty-five years old, though to me now he looked almost ten years older than that. He was larger-framed than I, with my father's muscular neck and square shoulders. His eyebrows were thick and almost joined above the bridge of his nose and his round ears flapped out from his head, like a newborn baby's hands. When we used to play-wrestle (he had never beat me up for real), he could pin me down with one hand held behind his back.

I sniffed the familiar odor of baked pizza dough and tomato sauce and considered making myself a pizza. Mike shut off the outside lights.

"You want to share a pizza?" I asked Mike.

"Nah," he said. He was wiping off the front counter. "I made myself a sub a few hours ago."

"Well, if you want to take off right now, you can. I'll cash out and close up."

"Is that right, little brother?" Mike made a face, his lips curling into a sneer. I could see in the way his brown eyes flashed that what he was about to say he'd rehearsed for some time. "And what makes you so helpful lately, anyhow?"

I spun the pan holding my pizza into the oven and turned to face Mike. He was pulling out the cash from the till and sorting it into piles.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

Mike looked up at me, but continued sorting the bills. "Something's up with you all of a sudden, that's all. You're coming around here all the time, trying to help out, sucking up to Dad." His words seemed to me to come not only from his lips but from his entire body, each word a twitch across his face, a jerking of his chest. "I thought you were too good for this place."

"Give me a break," I said.

"No," Mike continued, "because I know what's going on."

"What's going on?" I said. I started putting away the pizza toppings, just to have something to do, to not have to face Mike's accusations.

"You found yourself a Greek girl and now you're going to settle down and live happily ever after and you'd like a bigger piece of the action from here. That's what gets me, that you think you can just move in on the business without paying your dues. I busted my ass here since junior high school while you whined yourself out of working except on weekends because you always had to study for some test or other."

The only other sound now in the store was the hum from the freezers and walk-in cooler and the whirring of the overhead exhaust system. A few cars drove by on the street outside and as their headlights gleamed into the store I felt momentarily exposed.

"That's not true," I said. "I've put in my hours here."

"Bullshit," Mike said. His face was pink and his eyes had clouded over. The veins worked in his neck like the roots of a tree clinging to soil. "You were always Mom's favorite, you know that. She was crazy about you. She didn't want you

working here too long. She was afraid you might get sick or tired. Well, I'll tell you, I got sick and tired. And now Dad doesn't seem to mind you doing whatever the hell you want because he thinks making you happy can somehow make up for losing Mom."

"Come on, Mike, you can't believe that." I hated the pleading I detected in my voice, hearing it as an admission of my complicity, my guilt.

"And then when I married Sheila and Mom put up such a fuss, it all just got worse. You were Mom's sweetheart, her little kanakari."

"Don't say that." I knew suddenly that Mike was right. My mother had done wrong by him, she had always taken my side, pinned her dreams on me. I would never be able to deal fully with her loss until I accepted that.

"Face it, Peter, you had it easy, and now you want it even easier. You want to just prance in here and make yourself comfortable. I have a family to take care of, you know. I've slaved long hours in this place. I'm not just going to sit around and let you take it all."

I moved close to Mike. I held my hand out to his shoulder.

"You make it sound like I'm pushing you out of here," I said. "No way, Mike. I'm not sure I even want a piece of this place."

Mike pulled away, grabbing a dishcloth and wiping his hands. Then he moved the dishcloth up to his face and wiped there quickly, trying to hide the fact that he was wiping away tears.

"Get out of here," he shouted. He was crying openly. "You don't know what the hell you want, and you go around sleepwalking trying to figure it out because you have nothing better to do, no care in the world. You know the pizza place is always going to be here for you."

"You don't know shit about me," I shouted back, and stormed out of the restaurant. My head was pounding and I rubbed my eyes hard with the heels of my hands.

Driving home, the headache worsened. My eyeballs pulsed inside my head like a time-bomb, to the point where I wished I could just scratch them out with my hand and fling them as far away as possible.

The skies started pouring rain. I put on my wipers and watched them slash the drops away.

Everything was crumbling around me. Mike had been right. I was leaning on everyone, biding my time until I figured out who the hell I was.

With Maria, I realized now, I had been able to forget about my mother's death, ignore it, push it as far away as possible from my consciousness. Maybe that was why I sought her out in the first place. Going out with her had been a kind of progress for me, at least in the terms of the community within which I moved, a kind of blind forward movement. But after meeting Steve I now felt a need for confrontation -- with Maria, with my father, with my dead mother, with myself.

The absurd wish occurred to me suddenly that my father had never come to this city, had never brought my mother here. I don't know how I traced it all -- the root of my sense of displacement -- back to that, but I did.

I made the decision in that instant that one day soon I would return to Greece and somehow lay my mother to rest there.

Steve entered my mind again. One of the things I admired most about him was how he seemed to have built his American self without compromising his basic

Greek nature. I knew I did not balance my Canadian and Greek backgrounds in the same way. Steve was at once both. I felt at once not-both, neither.

By the time I was back home it must have been past two in the morning. That didn't matter, I told myself; I had to call Steve.

I hoped that whatever it was that gave him his sense of purpose -- the way he seemed to know exactly who he was, what he was doing and how to do it -- somehow could rub off on me.

I'd already committed his phone number to memory. I picked up the phone nervously and dialed the number.

His line rang a few times and then Steve answered. I recognized his hello immediately. I didn't say a word, just kept the phone pressed against my sweating face. Steve hung up. Then I called again, and again I couldn't say anything. I was too afraid, too unsure of what I had to say. I almost wanted Steve to call my name over the phone line, to let me know he knew who it was.

In the next second, he did.

"Peter?" he called out tentatively.

"Yes, it's me," I said.

There was silence on the line for the span of a few beats. I didn't know who was supposed to speak next.

"How are you?" I asked. "I was thinking about you and thought I'd call." My voice showed none of the cool control my words tried to evince.

"Thanks," Steve said. His voice was strong and even but I could detect a trace of hesitation, too. "I'm fine."

"What's new?" I almost laughed at the inanity of my question. "I'm sorry," I continued. "I just really wanted to talk to you."

"I'm glad you called," Steve said.

"I'm really messed up here, man," I said. I was almost crying. "I need to get away. I was thinking of driving down to see you."

"That's what you want?" Steve asked.

"That's all I want," I said. His voice had actually soothed me. "I need to get my head together."

"Are you sure you want to come here, though, Peter?" My heart skipped a beat. I didn't want him to go on. "After what happened after the wedding, maybe it's not such a good idea."

"Let's not talk about that," I said.

"Peter, I don't know. I don't want to mess you up any worse, or mess myself up."

"We'll be OK."

There was a tense silence over the phone line. I closed my eyes tight waiting for Steve's response.

"We're adults, damn it," he said finally. His usual self-assurance was back. "If it'll make you feel better, come on down. Why not? I'll show you the best time of your life."

"Thanks," I said.

"Just keep your hands off me," Steve said.

I wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

"I will," I said. I wasn't laughing. "This'll be just friends."

Before dawn the next morning I woke up my father and told him I'd be gone for a while, and that I didn't know for how long, I just needed to get away. He didn't give me a hassle. He told me to drive carefully and call whenever I could.

Less than two hours later I'd crossed the border into North Dakota. I set the cruise control at sixty-five miles per hour, listened to my tapes, and didn't stop except to fill up with gas and stock up on junk food. I hardly even noticed the landscape in front of me, my mind was so focused on eating up the highway beneath the car as fast as possible. One highway sign blurred into the next. My back was so sore I knew that if I stopped to stretch I'd never be able to get back behind the wheel.

At exactly eight o' clock that evening I took an exit ramp into the city of Chicago. The downtown highrises loomed in the murky distance like some enchanted city. Cars barrelled by me on the expressway, making me feel like some sort of intruder in their midst. I tried to keep my cool as best I could. Twenty minutes later I was knocking on Steve's apartment door.

I couldn't believe that it had been so easy, that only that morning I had still been in Winnipeg, and now here I was driving into Chicago, and yet when Steve had first appeared at the airport he had seemed to me to have arrived from some far-off land.

Steve answered the door in shorts and a sweatshirt. We shook hands like old friends and he took my bag and showed me inside.

"It's good to see you," he said. His green eyes were sharp and brilliant. I tried to read his face and body for any sign of how he felt about my being there, but couldn't.

"Thanks for having me," I said.

"What are friends for?" Steve asked. His lips curled at the corners beneath his moustache and he ran his hand over his head. I noticed again the little coves over his forehead formed by his receding hairline. "Not that it's much, but let me show you around the apartment."

His apartment was small but neat, with tons of books and CDs packed in upright shelves. Old movie posters filled the leftover wall space. The whole apartment consisted only of one bedroom, a narrow kitchen, and the living room. There were hardwood floors everywhere except the kitchen, with a Persian area rug laid out in the centre of the living room beneath a glass-topped coffee table. A desk with a computer on it was set up in one corner of the living room. A huge replica of an Ancient Greek amphora, black with an earth-colored design on it depicting a singing youth, dominated a little nook between the kitchen and living room.

"I have a chicken roasting in the oven that should be ready about now," Steve said. "Take a look at whatever you want while I take it out."

I started milling around the apartment, reading off the titles of the books and CDs on the shelves. He had an amazing collection of both. I wished I could stop time and just sit down for as long as I liked and read and listen to whatever I found interesting.

As Steve tended to the chicken, the redolent odors of olive oil, lemon and oregano filled the apartment. Immediately, I thought of my mother and the meals she cooked in our house, for my father, brother and me.

"How long are you staying, anyhow?" Steve poked his head back into the living room. He was wiping his strong, bony hands on a white dishcloth.

"I'm not sure," I said, turning from the shelves on the wall. "But don't worry, I promise not to become the house guest from hell."

"Good. To tell you the truth, I was a little concerned about that."

We both laughed.

Steve started putting out the roast chicken on the dinner table at the end of the kitchen.

"I hope you're hungry," he said. "There's a lot here."

"As a matter of fact, I am," I said. "And it smells great."

I continued perusing the contents of the apartment. There were quite a few photos placed about the living room. The frame that drew my interest most was one showing a young man with round, brooding eyes and a wide smile, each tooth separated from the next by twice the normal spacing. He looked kind of like a forties movie star -- especially in pose and attitude and dress -- but his face betrayed a more recent decade.

"An old boyfriend?" I asked, nodding towards the frame.

Steve moved towards the photo and picked it up in his hands. "No," he said, not looking at me but at the photo. "He was just a good friend. His name was Landon. He died of AIDS two years ago."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Steve gazed a few seconds at the photo of Landon, as if searching the eyes for some sort of indication of the young man's terrible fate.

We ate the roast chicken and drank a bottle of white wine. I felt much more comfortable with Steve than I had expected. We talked and joked and the hours passed without my noticing them. It wasn't like before, in Winnipeg, when I had felt driven by a need simply to open up, to bare my soul for the sake of baring it, to see if anybody -- perhaps Steve -- cared. This time I felt genuinely at ease with Steve, as if letting him know how I felt wasn't so much a declaration of who I was as it was a kind of ongoing questioning, a way of trying to reach a deeper understanding of myself.

"I'm glad you came, Peter," Steve said, as we moved back into the living room and flopped down on the couch.

"Thanks," I said, and felt bad, again, for letting Steve leave Winnipeg without my telling him goodbye.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I made a mistake." I knew Steve would understand what I was talking about.

Steve shrugged his shoulders. "It's OK," he said. "I've made worse mistakes in my time."

It was the perfect thing to say, and for the first time since I met him I wondered why Steve was not attached to another man in an intimate relationship.

"How come you live alone?" I asked.

"I had a partner," Steve began. "For three years. We broke up three months ago. I guess that's one of the reasons I came up for the wedding. I wanted to get away, forget a few things, come back for a fresh start."

"Why'd the two of you break up?"

"We got along, you know, we really did, but then I got the idea that I wanted a family, to raise children, and Ned, he didn't want any part of that. I thought we might be able to adopt, do something. I wasn't going to give up on my dream for a family. So Ned split."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I."

"Now what?"

"I wish I knew. I'm over thirty years old. I feel like being a father. I want to raise children. I just don't know how or when it'll happen."

"And I thought you had everything figured out," I said.

"It's not that simple, believe me. It never is."

I couldn't say for sure why Steve had taken to me, why he seemed to treat me like an old friend, or a younger brother who showed potential but needed the right guidance, but I knew now clearly why I was so attracted to him: he seemed to know instinctively how to deal with me, how to care for me, as only my mother had.

I realized that I had come to visit Steve not because -- or not solely because -- I was physically attracted to him, but because over the few days we had spent together in Winnipeg we had formed a unique bond of friendship. I saw that my feelings for Steve were something beyond sexual preference, but no less powerful. That realization now assuaged me, comforted me, relaxed me.

After a few more minutes of conversation, I knew I could no longer fight off sleep. A yawn came to me and I threw out my arms as it worked through my body.

"You know what?" I said. "Right now I could really use some sleep. Is that OK, or am I going to be putting you out? Maybe you want to watch TV or something?"

As much as I wanted to stay up with Steve and talk through the night, my body was aching for sleep. My eyes were heavy and my bones were weary. The stiffness in my back coiled and uncoiled like a rusted steel spring.

"Don't worry about me," Steve said. "I'll be fine. I've got my bed set up with clean sheets for you. Follow me."

"No way, Steve. I'll sleep out here on the sofa."

"Please," Steve said. "I've got this all planned out. You'll sleep in my room and I'll take the sofa. You're my guest." "Are you sure?" "Of course." Steve showed me the room. I could smell the fabric softener on the sheets. The pillows were fluffed and the quilt was folded up at the top of the bed. I set my bag down at the foot of the bed and sat down on the mattress.

Steve shut the blinds over the window and showed me what part of the closet and dresser he'd cleared for me.

"Listen," he said. "If there's anything in particular you want to do tomorrow -- Sears Tower, the Art Institute -- just let me know. Anything at all."

I took off my shoes and started unbuttoning my shirt.

"Don't laugh," I said, "but I'd really like to go to one of those Greek nightclubs with a live bouzouki band and a belly dancer and all that stuff. I've never seen anything like that before, and I think it's about time."

"You got it. I know just the place. We'll do the whole Greek thing."

"Exactly," I said.

I stood up to thank him. We embraced, our joined bodies free, I thought, of any tension.

"Goodnight," he said.

"Goodnight," I said.

I was fast asleep in under a minute.

The next night Steve made good on his promise to take me to a Greek nightclub. The place was called Apollo's Lyre and was located in Greek Town on South Halsted.

There was a doorman in an Evzona outfit -- billowy shirt, pleated white skirt and curled shoes with red pom-poms on the tips -- standing outside the entrance trying to persuade prospective customers to choose Apollo's Lyre over the other competing Greek nightclubs on the street. As we approached him, he mumbled a good evening to us in Greek and waved us inside imperiously as if he had been kept waiting for us all night long.

It was Saturday night, so the place was packed. There were two levels to the dining area and the man behind the cash register directed us to a table in the upstairs level. The place was done up with plenty of plaster columns, framed posters of Greece, bunches of plastic grapes hanging from a wooden trellis attached to the ceiling, and a statue of Apollo, fig leaf covering his private parts, that centred a marble fountain.

We picked our way upstairs through the army of waiters who circulated throughout the room, plates of Greek food lofted high over their heads on round silver platters, their perspiring bodies wrapped in tight black pants and frilly white shirts open to the breastbone. Scanning the room, I saw all sorts of Greek faces, a wider variety than I was used to seeing in Winnipeg. There were a tiny stage and dance

floor, empty now, in the far corner of the club, and the theme from Never on A Sunday was piping tinnily through the speakers. The place had a palpable atmosphere of sleaziness about it.

Steve ordered a bottle of retsina and some barbecued octopus, speaking Greek to the waiter, a fortyish Lothario type with jet-black hair coiffed into a perfect ducktail. At the sound of Steve's well-pronounced Greek, the waiter immediately loosened up and started affectionately calling us "pedia," boys. We asked him about the entertainment and he winked and told us the belly dancer should take the stage in about a half hour.

The octopus, seasoned with lemon and vinegar, was juicy and chewy, still smelling of the sea. It worked as an appetizer, and Steve and I decided to go ahead and order full meals. As we waited for our plates, the band walked onto the stage and picked up their instruments. Soon the jangly beat of the bouzouki filled the room.

"Maria doesn't know you're in Chicago, does she?" Steve asked.

"No," I answered. I wasn't put off by his question. I figured he had a right to know what I was doing there.

Steve jabbed a square piece of bread with his fork and soaked it into the oils on his salad plate. He washed down the bread with another swallow of retsina. A glimmer of the resin-laden drink clung to a few hairs on his moustache.

"Do you think you're giving her a fair shake?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe not. We have had a lot of fun together. But she seems to have everything set out in front of her in a straight line, and I don't, not yet, at least."

"Maybe you can work something out?" "That's not the point. The point is I don't want to work it out. I have too many other things -- myself -- to work out first."

"You're probably right," Steve said. "I just did -- to tell you the truth -- think you two made a cute couple." He smiled.

"You've got to be kidding."

"No, I'm serious. I know it sounds corny, but you two were cute together."

"Well," I said. "It's not a picture you're likely to ever see again."

I poured us both some more retsina and brought up my glass for a toast.

"To two single guys," I proclaimed, "together in a sleazy Greek nightclub in downtown Chicago waiting for a belly dancer to take the stage."

"To us," Steve said, and we clinked glasses.

"Eviva."

"Eviva."

As if in response to our half-drunken invocation, just then the belly dancer appeared on the stage. She was holding a glass of wine which she carefully rested on one of the speakers behind the guitarist, and she mouthed something to the bouzouki player, her thick, purple lips opening and closing wetly.

I couldn't get over how sexy she was. She had curly black hair all the way down to her ass, a long, eagle nose, high, erect breasts, wide hips and thick but

muscular legs. She was a Greek beauty like I hadn't seen since the last time I'd been to Greece. I desired her, and as I noted my desire, I endeavoured to make sense of it within my attraction to Steve. Nagging me still, I suppose, was the fact that some part of my attraction to Steve, undeniably, had been from the beginning physical.

"Is she an Aphrodite or what?" Steve said, admiring her with a wide smile.

The band started into a tsiftedeli, the bouzouki releasing a flurry of notes like a machine gun firing bullets, and the belly dancer slithered across the dance floor like a snake, her feet shuffling on the floor, her stomach and shoulders rotating to and fro, her hands clanging the castanets in her palms. She was wearing a blue and gold sequin-covered two-piece outfit. The men in the crowd hollered and clapped and she strutted over to them and performed tiny little hip movements in front of them in time with the beat as they stuffed paper bills inside her bustier and bottom piece.

In her high-heeled gold pumps, she stepped off the stage and started working her way through the tight aisle space between tables. As she approached our table, I let out a piercing whistle. She came right up to our table then, almost touching Steve, and teasingly swayed her hips sidewise towards us. She arched her back in front of us, her breasts almost falling out of her bustier, her arms brushing the floor behind her head, her long black hair mopping the ground in a Medusa's tangle. Then she stood back up and started undulating her stomach, in perfect control of every last muscle in her abdomen, one ridge of muscle rolling into action after the other, so that her stomach moved like waves on the sea.

Steve took out a five-dollar bill and tucked it into the top of her skirt. Then she moved to me. I was drunk, crazy, wild. I took out the first bill I could find, a fifty, and waved it in front of her face. Her mouth opened wide and her nostrils flared. She leaned towards me and her breasts were right at my nose. I took the bill and tucked it into her bustier. Her flesh was soft and hot. The rest of the crowd roared in appreciation. The belly dancer returned to the stage and made an elaborate show of shedding her body of all the bills in a heap on the stage next to the drum set. The music stopped suddenly, the belly dancer took a bow, and the crowd clapped with delight.

The band played on and you could feel the kefi, the wild excitement, the high of good food, good drink and good time, overtake the room, including Steve and me. I could see Steve rocking with the music, itching to get up and dance.

When the band played a zebekiko, Steve rose in time with the music, snapping his fingers, and turned towards the dance floor.

"Come on," he said. "Let's dance." He grabbed me by the shoulders and guided me to the dance floor.

The floor was packed with people, mostly men, each dancing alone, in the Greek style, spinning and dropping to the floor in side splits, or jumping in the air. A few others were formed in a circle around the dancers clapping to the beat.

I'd never danced the zebekiko before. I kind of always figured you had to know what you were doing to pull it off. But Steve yanked me to the centre of the floor, and left me there to fend for myself. I pushed out my arms and threw back my

head, and all of a sudden I felt the music fill me and become a part of me as though it always had been a part of me. I contorted my body and turned around and slapped the floor beneath me. In my drunkenness I struggled to keep my balance. I closed my eyes and flung out my arms as if somehow working out my accumulated frustrations. I bit my lower lip, stepped forward, then retreated, following the lead of the music, which encompassed, it seemed to me, the breadth of life: joy and sorrow, pain and endurance.

I lost myself to the dance entirely. I wasn't even sure if Steve was beside me any longer.

When the song ended, Steve patted me on the back. "You were great," he said.

"That was fun" I admitted. "I've been missing a lot."

As we returned to our table, two women approached us. They were fresh off the boat from Greece, I figured, in their mid-thirties, with hair dyed red and lots of cleavage showing up front. One was wearing a red silk blouse and tight black skirt and the other was squeezed into a white jumpsuit.

"Na katsoume, can we sit down?" the one in the blouse asked, her long, red-nailed fingers wrapped around the back of one of the two empty chairs at our table.

"Yiati ohi, why not?" Steve said, offering a sly smile. We scooted our chairs to make room for the two women.

The women sat down and we started talking, in Greek mostly, with the odd English word thrown in. Steve ordered more retsina. They were flirting with us, and

Steve and I played along. We were probably the youngest men in the nightclub and they'd obviously homed in on us.

I kind of liked the one in the jumpsuit. Her name was Stella. She had a brown mole snug against the inside of the bridge of her nose and huge, dark eyes. Her tits shimmered under the overhead lights like mounds of sand in the noonday sun.

Steve threw an embarrassed look my way as the other woman, Noula, started stroking his leg. I kicked him under the table and we both howled. I had no idea where this was going. All I knew was I was having a hell of a lot of fun.

We danced some more, Stella and Noula joining us on the dance floor. Noula's legs showed long and hard through the slit in her skirt, and Stella caressed my palm as we circled the dance floor hand in hand. I kept looking at Steve for a signal to slow things down, but he was teasing Noula right along, urging her around the dance floor with a string of "Opas," and leering at her legs.

The thought occurred to me that we could take the two women back to Steve's apartment. I wondered if Steve was thinking the same. I wondered if he really wanted that, or if he was just doing all this for me, for my amusement, offering me what he figured would be my perfect night out in Chicago. I wondered if I really wanted that.

Finally, the band left the stage and the house lights came on. By now, Stella and Noula were hanging all over us. Steve had his arm wrapped around Noula's shoulders and she was fingering the buttons of his shirt with her fingers.

"It's closing time." Stella said. She blew a strand of hair that had fallen over her eyes off her face. "Where are we going now?"

I looked at Steve for some sort of indication of what to do. His eyes went suddenly blank, as if waiting for me to make the next move. Part of me wouldn't have minded taking Stella back to Steve's apartment, but I certainly didn't want to do anything to offend Steve and, even more, I was sure that I preferred to continue the night alone with him.

"Ladies, I think we're going to call it a night," I said in Greek.

Steve followed my lead. "We had a lot of fun," he said, "but we're travelling back home first thing in the morning." He was very gracious about it all, gently undraping himself from beneath Noula's arm.

The women made pouty faces and tried to snuggle in closer to us.

"I'm sure we'll see you again," Steve said.

"It was fun," Stella said. She got the hint. She kissed me on the cheek with her warm lips and I felt my face flush. "Maybe some other time."

"Yes," I said.

The women wished us goodnight and walked back to their table, where they'd left their jackets. Steve swigged the last of his retsina and took a deep breath.

"That was a close call," he said. For the first time since I'd met him his clothes looked considerably rumpled.

"I kind of feel sorry for them," I said. "They were sweet in their own way."

"They were, weren't they?"

We both broke out in a fit of laughter.

In the car driving back to the apartment, Steve plugged in a Greek cassette and we sang along. I surprised myself, knowing more of the lyrics than I ever would have thought possible. The city streets seemed to swirl around us like viewing a strip of film run through the projector at double speed.

In the apartment the lights were out and from the balcony I could see the stars in the sky. Steve fumbled with the coffeemaker and put on a pot. I washed my face in the bathroom and sank into the couch.

Steve sat down next to me and handed me the coffee. I took a sip and felt immediately warmed. I undid the top few buttons on my shirt and spread my feet out over the coffee table. Steve did the same. That same disheveled look was about him that I'd noticed as we were leaving the nightclub. I realized then that his cool demeanour was partly a kind of armour he wore to deal with the world and that I was probably seeing him truly uninhibited for the first time.

We drank our coffee and Steve switched on the the stereo. I couldn't identify the CD he chose but it was hard and electric.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Lou Reed," Steve answered. "It's great stuff. Just listen."

Suddenly I felt the urge again to touch Steve. It was just something I had to do, in order to break the monotony, not the montony of the moment, because there was none, but the monotony of just being alive. If I didn't follow through now with

my urge to touch Steve, I told myself, I would be betraying whatever there was that had grown between us, that had opened my life to new possibilities.

I reached out and brushed my hand against Steve's shoulder, trying in my mind to erase all aversion to the act. He didn't move, just sat there with a strange look in his eyes.

"Don't," Steve said, pushing my hand away softly.

"Why not?" I asked.

"It'll just cause trouble."

"How can you be so sure?" I leaned even closer to him. I wasn't sure why I was being so forward, whether it was a natural advance or a forced one.

"You're not gay, Peter. It won't be easy for you." His eyes looked deep into mine.

"How do you know?" I found myself falling away from Steve, almost involuntarily

"I just know." Steve nodded his head.

I placed the back of my hand against Steve's face. He remained frozen, save for a barely perceptible fluttering beneath the skin of his cheek.

"I wish I were gay, though," I said, caressing him. "Then maybe I could be the one you raise a family with and we could live happily ever after."

Steve took my hand and held it close to my neck. I felt the heat there and his pulse, beating hard and fast.

"So do I," he said.

"Can I kiss you," I asked.

His lids drooped over his eyes and I could see him working to speak over a lump in his throat.

I had no idea how he might answer.

"Of course," he said.

We kissed then, and this time our tongues darted inside each other's mouths and I felt Steve's warmth and wetness and pressed harder against his lips.

"It's OK, this time" I said. "I really want to."

Nothing could have altered my resolve. I wanted to make love to Steve.

I could see Steve hesitating and I moved to him and embraced him, my arms around his shoulders. The scent that came from him was breathy and hot, almost palpable. I was afraid Steve might not be willing to let me continue. My hands raced across his torso, feeling its sharp contours. The music pulsed through the room. The green light from the stereo console was like a presence undefinably beyond us, looking on.

In the next moment, Steve fell back onto the couch and pulled my shoulders over top him. "I've wanted you so bad ever since you picked me up at the airport," he said. "I don't know how I held back."

I pressed my mouth again to Steve's. I ran my tongue over his teeth and his tongue probed deep inside my mouth. I kissed his ears and his nose and the back of his neck. I massaged my hands over his scalp, in and around where his hair receded from his skull.

There was a part of me, whoever I had been yesterday, or a few weeks ago maybe, that told me what I was doing was unnatural, but another part drove me on, abiding only to the attraction I felt.

I took hold of Steve's wrist then and plunged it to my crotch. He rubbed me through my pants and eagerly unzipped me. I lifted my hips madly, a horse fighting its bridle, and Steve slipped his hand under the elastic of my briefs and pulled them down. I felt that precious thrill of a new hand, novel skin, reaching for my cock, and before I knew what had happened next Steve's mouth was wrapped around it and I closed my eyes and felt the delicious teasing and licking of his tongue.

"Don't be afraid," Steve whispered to me. "I wouldn't do this to you if I wasn't sure I was fine."

It took a moment for the meaning of his words to register with me. I had been so lost in my need for Steve that the virus hadn't even occurred to me. Fuck you, God, I thought.

I laid back then and Steve moved fully over me. His tongue lapped around my cock like waves over sand when there's a round indentation in the sand and the rushing water froths and gurgles over and inside it. I wanted nothing more than to come -- except not to come, but to prolong this feeling, this flying over and falling into the world, over the edge, down and down as if in a dream where there is no bottom except waking up.

Steve moved up and down my cock and around and his tongue worked down to the base and then flickered back to the tip as if rushing alongside the blood

pounding inside. I braced my hands against his back and felt the muscles there ridged and hard.

I felt my whole being sucked to my cock and as I lost control I let out a high-pitched scream from the gut that echoed inside my head and the orgasm left me like a river flooding over its embankment.

I collapsed into Steve's arms and he held me hard and close. I was sweating and panting. Neither of us said a word.

Steve continued to caress me and I nuzzled closer to him, my head against his chest. My hand travelled across his body and I felt his hardness and I wanted very much to see him naked and for him to see me naked.

We moved to the bedroom, taking our clothes off on the way. Steve's stomach was hard and straight under a thin fuzz of black hair that grew thicker and curlier as it dropped down around his cock. The muscles and bones around his shoulders formed tiny hollows that I wanted to touch and kiss.

We fell to the bed and wildly explored each other's bodies. His cock brushed against my thigh, and I took hold of it and started massaging it. Steve let out a deep, throaty sigh and rocked closer to me. We were kissing and grabbing and pushing everywhere. His cock was alive in my hand. I moved my hand faster up and down its length. It squirmed like a lizard. Steve started to move rhythmically inside my palm. Finally, he let out a soft moan and his body surged forward and gave out and he ejaculated over my hand and onto the sheets.

I buried my head into Steve's chest and together we caught our breaths. I held him tight and close. It was the last chance for whatever was inside of him to come over to me through our bound bodies.

That night we slept in each other's arms.