

In the Valley of the Nest of Spiders

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DAD'S floor lamp slid a gleam down along—and back up—the Bowflex bar.

Then, at eight-forty, Eric finished his workout. Beyond the second-floor Atlanta apartment screens, out by the streetlight, crickets scritch. “Okay—I’m done.” In green gym pants Eric swung his leg from over the bench. “It’s all yours.” He stepped off the carpet swatch they’d used since the rubber mat split. Mike (Eric’s stepdad) had bought the machine off Jake, at work, for eighty bucks.

Walking in, Mike said, “You goin’ down to your place?”

“I’m takin’ a shower.” Eric explained, “then I’m goin’ to bed.”

“You wanna use mine up here?”

“Naw. I’ll use the one in the garage.” Three months back, Mr Condotti had said Eric could have the empty room off the garage, with its phone booth of a shower and commode—a *big* improvement over Mike’s living room fold-out.

Mike began unbuttoning his denim shirt. “Well, just remember, *take* one. We’re goin’ to your mama’s, tomorrow. You’re gonna be seventeen in twelve days, and she’s gonna want to see how much you grew up.”

Actually Eric’s move was particularly convenient, because of two women, neither of whom Eric knew about. One, Doneesha, about to return to nursing school, Mike was thinking of moving in once Eric had been gone two weeks and he was sure Barbara wouldn’t phone hysterically to take him back. Until then he could have some fun here with the other, Kelly Anne, Jake’s new intern. “You get to Diamond Harbor smellu’ like a goat, and Barbara ain’t gonna be happy.” For the first three days. Mike—was sure, Barbara would be ridiculously strict, then, after her and Eric’s fourth or fifth blow-up, she’d give in and let him run wild. Not that he was likely to do anything terrible. Eric was a good kid—and had a brain. But Barbara was excitable.

“Don’t worry!” Eric picked up his T-shirt from the couch’s arm.

“I told you, I’ll *take* one.” Both Eric and Mike had noticed how much faster Eric’s arms were defining themselves than Mike’s—the difference between the speed at which a sixteen-year-old and a thirty-nine-year-old developed.

Mike asked: “You got another one. downstairs in the clean clothes in your chest of-drawers?” He meant T-shirts.

“Yeah—probably.”

“Then—*please*—leave that one here. I’m doin’ a laundry tonight. I know you love it—you ain’t had it off all week.”

“I don’t have a thing for this one particularly.” Eric tossed the yellowish shirt back on the couch; it slid to the floor. Mike stepped over for it. but Eric said: “Naw. I dropped it. I’ll get it.” He swiped it up and returned it to the couch arm.

When Eric was four, Mike had spent ten months in jail—his third arrest, his single conviction (coke)—and done lots of lifting. As he had told several people, and now believed, it had knocked some sense into him. That had been in Maryland. Having lived in Atlanta for the last four years, he still looked like someone who’d once been pumped.

With his shaved head, Mike was a dark-skinned black man from West Texas, a welder ten years, now.

Eric was blond (buzz cut for summer), with steel—bluc-cycs. the issue of his mother (Barbara was Dutch and Swedish) from a two-week affair when she was seventeen, with a long-vanished Atlantic City blackjack grifter—a large-jawed, tow-headed fellow of Scots—Polish parentage—before, at twenty, she’d become an exotic dancer in Baltimore, where she’d met Mike.

Eric asked: “You really want me to have the machine?”

“Soon as I finish tonight, while the laundry’s workin’. I’m takin’ it apart and puttin’ it back in the box. so I can stick it in the trunk tomorrow. It’ll give you somethin’ to do down there.” Mike finished taking off his work shirt. “If I really want to keep it up, I can always get another one. Or some weights.” Mike gripped the exercise bar’s handle, then mounted the bench.

They’d been good for each other. Mike and Barbara. Even now, five years after the divorce, they were ... well, friends, which was good for Eric. Each had helped the other over a certain self-destructive wildness. Only she was fucking impossible to live with—that’s all!

Sitting on the object that looked like a cross between a time machine and a bicycle. Mike smiled. “I don’t know why I keep remembcrn’ this.”

At the change in his father’s voice. Eric looked back.

“One time or another, I’ve thought about this every blessed day for the two years you been here. Maybe I ‘m rellin’ it now cause you’re goin’ off”

Eric was pretty sure what Mike was going to say. Actually Mike had come out with the story every month or so,

“When I got home *on* the bus—• that time I come back Iroin the pokey—the door was open, so I left my suitcase on the porch and walked in. You was standiu’ in the hall, and you seen me. And your eyes got so *big* I thought at first you was scared. But then you opened your arms and got this ... smile! And I realized you recognized me. So I grabbed you up and hugged you. and you laughed, and laughed. You was *so* happy! I started callin’ out for Barbara. She was in the back, and came in. I’d been really scared you wasn’t gonna know who I was. You hadn’t seen me in almost a year Then we’re sittin’ in the kitchen, all three of us. you in my lap. And you reached up and started pattin’ my head—I didn’t shave it back then. At first I didn’t know what you was doin’. So I sat there—and so did Barbara. You turned to your mama, and you said. Daddy’s got puff) hair. Mommy, I want puffy hair. Like Daddy’s. I want puffy hair. Mommy. Why can’t I have puffy hair?” And we all started laughin’”. and I hugged you so hard. I mean. I’d always wondered how that was for you: a white kid with a black dad. But right then. I realized, you was my kid. I mean, completely and *absolutely* mine.”

Eric still believed black hair was more sensible and better looking. But it was interesting to hear how long he’d felt that way. “I still think nappy hair is better than the straight white ... *stuff* I got.” Eric looked at his father’s shaved head. Three weeks ago. when Mike had last cut it for him. Eric’s had been almost as short.

“Well, next time I sec you. if you’re wearin’ some fool whiteboy dreadlocks or got yourself all cornrowed or anything else stupid lookin’, I’m gonna tell you right out you look like an asshole.”

“Yeah. yeah. Don’t worn: Hey, it’s my head, ain’t it?”

Mike grunted. Then they both grinned.

In the kitchen, the foil trays from the four TV dinners they’d eaten earlier leaned in the sink, streaked with tomato sauce, like legitimate dirty dishes. Beside the stove, Eric went through the back stairwell’s blue door—while the repeating s^urcc-clink from what would be Mike’s last session followed him down the shabby runner, lacked indifferently to I he steps.

By the tin mailboxes. Eric went into the dark garage. skirted Mike’s Chevy, pushed open the door and loped up the four wooden steps to his room.

In only the light through the leaves outside the window. Eric pulled off his gym pants—he did *not* shower—and collapsed on the iron frame daybed with its rumpled army blanket and old sheet. The last time

UP’ !•(—!?” k he’d talked to his mom on the phone, Barbara had said something about a side porch being his room in Diamond Harbor. It didn’t sound very private. But she’d also said they were off in the woods somewhere. She was between boyfriends, which is probably why she wanted him now. With trepidation he wondered how long that would last. between the bed and the wall, a bench was his night table. When his breathing slowed to sleep’s rhythm, the digital clock there said nine-oh-four.

When it said four-fifteen, Eric woke, sat, stood—

Because of the street light outside the screen, you couldn’t see the blue behind the leaves, nudging Atlanta toward dawn. Eric moved the porn magazine on the bench, cover uppermost: CHICHS (in case

Mike came in) WHO LOVE 'EM BIG & BLACK.!

Picking up the lubricant tube from beneath, he went into the tiny bathroom, foreknuckled up the switch, then, under the unfrosted bulb, sat on the wooden ring, his knees brushing the board wall below the mirror. While pissing, he didn't push—just relaxed, growled out lots of gas, and dropped a firm one. It splashed loudly. Pulling some paper from the roll on the upright dowel Mike had screwed to the shelf, and getting one bare foot up on the ring to lift his butt, Erik reached under and wiped.

He checked the paper It was clean.

When he pushed it into the water, his fingers got wet. Then, picking the tube up from the shell, he Hipped the KY's top back and, with one hand, squeezed. A clear worm twisted across three of his fingers, left to right and back, four or five times. Putting the tube down, again he stuck his hand under his buttocks. Taking a breath, he relaxed, as if for another big one, and thrust all his fingers, as quick and as deep as he could, into his tectum, turning his hand left and right. He spread his fingers, trying to thumb into himself as much jelly as possible, tightening and expanding his butt muscles.

Heavily his cock lifted.

I could stay here and do it. (A dozen times over the summer he had.) Because this was his last morning in Atlanta, though, after a minute he pulled his hand free—the water in the commode wet the back—took his fingers out and looked at them, still glistening, but also, now, shit-smearred. I should suck that off, Eric thought. Really, it wasn't any worse than eating your snot—to which, though he did it (mostly) in private. Eric was addicted. On more toilet paper though, he wiped his hand.

Over the wall, about a third on the mirror bottom and two thirds on the gray paint below it, was a stain just larger than a dinner plate, made of smaller splats and drabs and drips, much of it now yellow-orange—with a sweet—ish smelt Eric liked—from the one-our-of-three times he didn't eat it He was proud of the size and thought of it as something to be added to a couple of times a day. (He was a five-to-nine-time-a-day shooter, which left a lot for himself.) Mike never mentioned it. Of course the last time he'd been in, it had been much smaller. (Maybe Mike hadn't known what it was.) In the first month, Mr. Condotti had come in twice to check the room out But he'd never gone into the pill-box John.

Eric got up, flushed, and, while the toilet gur—gled. went into his room. Sitting on his bed, he pulled on some jeans, his runners, found a short-sleeved shirt wedged behind the bed.

He left the garage, KY in his hip pocket.

The Condottis' lawn chairs were turned up against the table for a rain that hadn't come in two weeks. Eric crossed the concrete of the tenants' half of the yard to walk up by the building—a one-time private house, with six bay windows, divided into six apartments. Two were in the basement.

Eric looked at Bill Bottom's window in the foundation, then down the cement steps at the Dutch doors. Though he was not Jewish, Bottom had put the Hebrew words (in English letters) "*emel yeshalom yasood lublidiis*" on the upper door and the Latin "*iugirum imus nocic ei consum—imurigni*" on the lower. Once Bill had explained that the Hebrew meant "peace and truth form the foundation of the world," and that they had something to do with Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam and a man named Spinoza—though Spinoza hadn't written either. I le'd forgotten what Bill had said the Latin meant, other than that it read the same backward and forward. Once he'd overheard Mr. Condotti, in his green Bermudas, white sunhat, and thick cataract lenses that did odd things to the sun, say to Bill, "I don't mind. But I must be sure it will upset no one who speaks the language. That's all." When Eric asked Bill to explain the Latin again. Bill told him to Google it. But Eric had not yet written it down to take up to the computer in Mike's bedroom, which, unlike the ones in school, was still dial-up .. and so fucking slow!

Eric glanced at the second floor, where, on the building's lar side, Mike had his upstairs kitchen and two rooms. As he walked out under the street's wide maples and tall hickories, toward the block's end among telephone wires crows cawed.

Between trees and houses east. Eric could see—pale orange. Behind the lots and trellises west, it was still night. He headed toward the next streetlight, as he'd done every second or third morning all summer (often three or four mornings in a row), for the over—grown lot that ran back under the highway, behind the orange CINGULAR signboard, where the homeless guys camped out. Christ, he

thought, I hope I get some—thing. quick.

I helped with some spit, the KY in him would get Eric through three homeless hillbilly fucks. (“Okay—I’m done ... Now. get on. son.”) The tube in his pocket was in case things got complicated.

Eric preferred it complicated.

For the last ten days, “complicated” had homeless black guys, one of whom. Rig Frack. who was forty-two and had the largest cock Eric had ever seen or. until last week when Frack had turned up sleeping on the mattress there, even imagined. Soft, it was just under—and hard, it was easily two-and-a-half inches over—a foot I lis cock size was pretty much all Frack talked about, to the point where, after Eric’s first three times with it, he wondered if Track’s obsession with what this nigger bitch or that white cocksucker had done for him back in Frisco or down in Houston or up in Denver to get a hold of it. might have *caused* his homelessness. As a topic of conversation, after half an hour it was .. boring. Besides his cock Frack had no other prepos—sessing features. He was not smart. He was built like a six-foot bowling pin. with no front teeth. Fortunately those heavy legs were hard. But that’s not what you saw first: Frack looked like a shambling black Shmoo. Still. it was fun to watch him play with himself in his pocket or through the outside of his worn pants, which he did nonstop: “I’m ‘bout half-hard a//de time—an’ I’m pretty much half jerkin’ off on it all de time. too. An’ you *leve* to watch dis big-dicked nigger play wid it. doncha, white—boy? And so do de ol’ fart.” The ‘fart’ was Bill. On the far side of sixty. Frack’s partner Bill had a healthy seven inches—i.e., the same as Eric’s—and seemed able to put up with Frack’s phallocentric filibuster. The two took turns fucking Eric a couple of times in tandem. each morning he showed up. or letting Eric see how far he could take them down his throat. He was getting pretty good at relaxing his throat muscles and killing his gag reflex. Frack had no trouble coming in Eric’s mouth or ass. even when Eric only got in the first nine or ten inches. Bill had to work up a sweat to get off in Eric’s mouth. (In the boy’s butt he did better) But he always had a pocket full of condoms, and when Eric once sug—gested Frack use one too. Frack chuckled. “Where? On mall lil finger? Don’t worry—ain’t nothin’ been *upnuih* hole ccptin’ your fuckin’ whiteboy tongue.” Both men were really into “tongue-wrastlin’ wid dis fine white bitch,” which Eric had gotten used to and even liked, teeth or no teeth. And for the last three days a younger white fellow, kind of retarded, called Tickle, had hung around to watch and get a blowjob. after Eric finished with Frack and Bill.

When Pickle got excited he peed in his pants.

If Bill had a coffee, he’d let Eric—even Pickle—have a swallow or two. though Frack would say. “Don’t let dem whiteboys drink out dat cup. nigger! Day gonna give us sonic damned diseases or somethin’. If my black stallion starts dribblin’ some of dat gonorrhoea shit an’ I gotta get my black ass stuck full o’ needles, or I conic down wid dat HIV, I’m go’n” bus’ some white *an’* black ass both wid sumpin’

‘sides my dick!’”

Bill would chuckle and say. “If de scumbags got diseases. Frack, we’re a little late for dat now,” and pass Pickle and Eric the blue cardboard container that smelled so good and tasted so bitter under the sweetness.

Often Pickle would rub his wet pants, then suck his blunt, thick fingers. When Pickle saw Eric looking. he said. “The salt tastes good.”

Once a hopeful Eric said: “hike eatin’ your snot ... huh?” He dug a forefinger in one nostril, put it in his mouth and sucked it clean.

Pickle frowned. “Why you doin’ dat? Dat’s nasty. Pec’s better, ain’t it?”

Which is when Frack—ready to go again—called: “*Gel* yo’ scrawny white ass ova’ hcah. cocksucker!”

A train whistle cut apart the morning. Eric pushed into the grass and sumac under the elevated highway to giant-step through, arms out to the side, stepping over Styrofoam cups and mushy cardboard and shiny condom wrappers, till, behind the CINGULAR sign, the growth got shorter. By now the whole sky was blue-gray.

The men under the highway had changed all sum—mer. Back in April during his spring break, a couple had even run Eric off. Once he’d come and found a hirsute German in a sleeping bag. who’d sat

up. naked, pulled out a knife and. in a heavy accent, told Eric to get his faggot ass out of there. Eric had stayed away five days. When he chanced coming back. there were six hillbillies and a couple of niggers lounging or sleeping or sharing their Gypsy

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Rose. Finally two • a nigger and one of the hillbillies

— took him to the side and let Eric blow them. Then the nigger said he wanted to suck out *all* the guys, and did

— including Eric. It was one of the times when Eric was most surprised, because, complete to the gold wedding ring on his thick, cracked hand, the muscular guy acted so masculine. What each had to call him to get off was instructive. Two called him *a* nigger cocksucker. One—called him a nigger bitch. And time, without even closing his eyes, called him his pretty blond baby. Eric thought about all the cum in the black guy's mouth already, which made him shoot his own load. With all the various comments and jokes—Eric, the other black guy, and two of the white guys went twice—that spring Friday had probably been the most fun Eric had had back there, it not the most sexually exciting. But, then, the guys who used the place were pretty friendly. By summer vacation, Eric had decided the friendly ones—which, because of Bill, he stretched to include Lrack—trumped the unfriendly ones. And the single knife puller. Apparently, among them, the place had a reputation.

Eric reached the old mattress.

Besides two used rubbers, no one was on it.

Or around it.

More than a couple of drunks had fallen over and pissed all over it. Lots of the guys wouldn't use it though three had slept on it together the morning of the marathon cocksucking. In the last two weeks Eric had lucked or been lucked, on it or beside it. twenty-three times. (Lrack. eleven; seven, Bill ... Who *were* the others—?) He was getting into the smell. As he looked around, overhead on the highway beams, between nests pigeons preened, strutted, and cooed.

With a breeze, from the corner came the stench of shit and ammonia. Most of the time, that's where the guys relieved themselves.

You got used to it.

Eric walked back to the wall, then picked his way to the highway stanchion's end. Maybe he *should* have done it back in his room. If he waited around, someone might come. But he did best when they'd slept there and Eric got to them as they were waking. He thought about going to sit on the mattress, opening his jeans, and jerking off. Of the three times he'd done that, once he'd gotten a blowjob from a nervous but friendly man who'd wandered by. From his clothes, the man hadn't been homeless. From his smell, he'd been drinking all night. It had been all right.

It just wasn't ... complicated.

The other two times Eric had finished up by himself—licked off what was on his hand, buttoned his pants closed over his wet belly, and gone home. Stepping over a smashed carriage, Eric walked to the stanchion's far end.

At the world's edge, sun through high weeds to hit his eyes. Eric closed them, pulling back.

No. it was a morning when no one was out. He walked around another five minutes, took a long breath. then made his way from under the highway, starting back.

A slant of sun crossed the concrete yard

As Eric came up beside the house, through a basement window he saw the TV's flicker on a back wall. A step further, and he saw that the top Dutch door down at Bottom's stood open.

Because the door was half in, the foundation of the world was invisible.

As Eric passed, Bill stepped into the frame and looked up. "Hi. Eric." Bill wore his black leather jacket, open, its zippers gleaming, and no shirt. "Isn't it a little early for you to be up?" Also he wore a full gorilla head mask, which muted his voice.

Eric blinked. Bill reached up and tilted off the ape face, to show curly auburn

Bill was grinning. "I thought during the summer all teenagers slept till noon." He had on his tight jeans with many patches all over, where you could see his skin through the threads.

“I got up early,” Eric said. “So I took a walk. What are you watching? The news? I thought everything was off.”

“DVD.” Bill explained. “*King Kong*.” He looked at the mask in his hands. “I think that is a *brilliant* tucking film. Did you see it?” Turning, he tossed the gorilla head to a couch or table behind the doorframe. Eric couldn’t see. “The new one. I mean.”

“Yeah. I saw it last year, with Mike—at a mall, when we were driving back to Atlanta. Mike liked it a lot. I thought it was okay .. *some* of it. But the end was stupid—I mean, when she falls in love. I low’s a woman gonna fall in love with a gorilla? She could *tike* him, maybe. But not fall in love with him.” Now that the mask was gone, Eric chanced, “Where’d you get the gorilla ... thing?”

“My personal theory,” Bill went on, not answer—ing, “is that IVter Jackson was not really trying to remake the original. He knew it too well and loved it too much. What he was actually trying to do was remake the 1976 Dino IX” Laurentiis version, with Jessica Lange and Jeff Bridges—with homages to the older one all through it. That’s the film he decided he was going to remake the way it should have been made in the first place. And while he was at it, he worked the reconstruction of one of the scenes that had been cut from the original back into it.” Hill opened the bottom door and stepped to the crum—bling stair. “I’ve watched (that Lost Spider-pit sequence twenty-five times, both the one he did in his own ver—sion and the black and white one he made so that it fits into the original. Hey, you want to come in and look at it?”

Hill was a thirty-one year old accountant with a downtown Atlanta firm. He’d grown up in New York. “It’s totally awesome. I was going to make some hot chocolate, before I watched it again. The milk’s already—heating. If you’d like I can make some for us both.”

“Mike don’t want me even to go into your apart—ment.” Eric remained up on the concrete. Then he said, “I le’s asleep now. So he wouldn’t know.” Eric wondered if the gorilla mask was worth examining. It had covered Hill’s whole head. Was there fur on it? He had seen it only seconds

“It sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself. But I have a better idea. I’ll lend you the DVD and you can watch it later with your dad. I’m going to bring up a little table and set it out. Then I’m going to bring up a chair—I only have one. But you can go around and talk to Mr. Condotti’s. He won’t mind as long as we put it back when we’re finished. Then I’m going to bring up two cups of hot chocolate. We can sit right out here and enjoy a morning of each other’s company, and Mike doesn’t have to get his knickers in a twist. Want me to bring up the monkey mask?”

“Why? It’s just a King Kong head.”

“Oh, you kids are so cool, today—you’re gonna cool yourself out of everything interesting. I low many people live upstairs from somebody who can say the magic word and change into a donkey, a phoenix, an ape, or a cockatrice? Hey, I like you guys—you and Mike. You’re good neighbors. Go on get that chair, now.”

As Eric carried over one of Mr. Condotti’s metal lawn chairs, he wondered if he should *ask* to see the mask, but Hill had already come up again and was setting the three-legged table with its pebbled glass top in front of his wire-backed seat. The table’s legs complained on the cement.

Speaking more softly, Eric said, “My dad don’t want me to go inside your place cause you’re gay.” He put his chair down.

Hill released the table to look at it. “Now *how* in the *world*—” he raised a hand to his unshaven chin and rubbed—“did I manage to figure *that one* out for myself? I hold on a second. I’ll be back.” He turned to hurry down his steps.

A minute later, Bill came up again with two black mugs, one with a white skull and bones, the other with a red nose. Eric put them on the table. The contents of both looked like heavily creamed coffee, though slightly tanner, with a purplish cast. “Sit. sit. sit. sit. sit now” Hill pulled back his chair and dropped onto it, knees wide. (More slowly, Eric stepped around him and lowered himself, to lean his forearms on his jeans’ thighs, then mesh his hands between.) “And while in no *way* am I suggest—ing that *you* bring the subject up with Mike, should your dad ever mention it again, you can tell him I *don’t* shit where I eat.”

Eric looked puzzled, unsure what the phrase meant.

Hill went on: "I *live* here. Eric. I would no more think of putting a hand on you than I would cut off my left nut. I'm *not* a stupid man. And doing something like that would be unbelievably stupid." Lifting the nearest mug—with the noose—he raised it toward Eric. "Cheers."

Eric said. "I bet Bottom's gotta be a rough name to have if you're gay. I mean people are probably always making jokes about you and stuff."

Hill raised his eyes to the overhead clouds. "*Tell* me about it. But that's what you get if you're beloved of the fairies, the bottom of the dream of God, the great spool from which all tales are woven. That's what a 'bot—tom' was, in Elizabethan English, by the way: a big spool at the bottom of a loom from which they took the thread for the brocades they were crafting." Over his mug, he looked directly at Eric. "The thing about the jokes is that everyone who makes one always thinks he's the first person ever to come up with it—that's the part I never understood" A drop of chocolate rolled to the lower rim, hung, and quivered.

Eric could see the red rayon lining in three zipper pockets, open in scuffed black.

"Hut you learn to ignore it." Some pumpkin-colored hairs curled on Bill's chest.

For seconds Eric looked as if he was holding his breath. At once he blurted: "If I went inside with you,

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Mike wouldn't know 'cause he's asleep. Besides, it's my last morning in Atlanta. Soon as he gets up, we're gonna drive down to Diamond Harbor. My mom says she's got a good waitress job, and I'm gonna stay with her for the next six months, a year maybe. If we go in now, I'll suck your dick. You can fuck my ass—I got a third of a tube of KY up my butt already. You let me eat out your ass while you suck me off, and I'll shoot you a load that'll gag you. I don't got the biggest dick in the world. Hut it ain't the smallest you ever seen, either."

Hill's mug clacked the glass. "*Wooooa*, fella!" Sitting back, he frowned. "I thought your dad said something about you being on your high school football team ... ?"

"I'm a guard." In the white enameled seat, Eric sat back too. "I'm the team cocksucker. Me and Scotty. We do about a third of the guys. The rest don't even wanna *know* about no shit like that. They pretend it don't happen—at least they do with me."

"You mean like back in *my* high school ... ?"

"I told my mom I was gay when I was twelve. That was when we were up in Maryland. She'd left the TV going and one of those 11 ISO shows was on. I jerked off three times that night and the next day I told her. Her and Mike had just broken up. She said that was cool—my being gay, and how she would always love me who—ever I wanted to go to bed with, but that I should wait to tell Mike. So I did. I mean, I ain't told him anything yet."

"Dads being dads, probably she knew what she was talking about."

"After all this time, I hope she remembers I told *her*—"

"When your kid says he's gay, Eric, that's *not* some—thing you forget."

"I mean I don't even *like* gay guys."

"Hey, now—you're gay ..." Bill's puzzlement held disapproval. "How can you not like gay men? Unless you don't like yourself. Let me add, / always thought you were likable "

"Sometimes—" Eric looked at the lines of morning sun on the mug nearest; he didn't pick it up—"I don't think I'm nviiffygay."

"Oh, come on. You suck off half the football team—"

"A couple of the guys fuck me I fuck one of them back."

"Right—then, because you occasionally masturbate thinking of a threesome with a faceless young lady so that the quarterback of your dreams will be a little more turned on, you decide you're straight—"

"I *ain't* straight!"

"Okay, bisexual."

"That's not what I mean. I mean I ain't gay for the same reason I ain't straight."

Bill raised a reddish brow. Along the yard's edge a breeze moiled the leaves.

"Like you said, gay guys are guys who ... *what* did you say? Won't eat their shit." Eric shrugged, as

il the connection were sell evident.

Bill said, "You're going to have to tell me more than that."

"Scotry's gay—the other cocksucker on the toot—ball team. He actually likes those 11 BO shows. The one I watched didn't have *no* black guys on it. At all. And everybody's hookin' up and gettin' all upset il anybody screws anybody else who ain't him. Scotty sucks I loggy—one of the black guys on our team. But he says he'd rather not.' Damn, I told him I'd trade him Hoggy for any two ot the white guys I do in a minute! Hoggy's a halfback. I sucked off two Chinese guys three weeks ago. Then one ol them turned around and gave *me* a tuckin'^rra/ blowjob, while his friend stood and watched. I ain't even interested in havin' no friend if he don't wanna watch me and other guys. I want him to go out and find niggers to bring back and fuck me. Or that'll let me luck them. Last term in school, Scotty said we should spend some time hangin' out together So I hg—ured maybe we should at least try to be friends. Saturday, he took me to this place and we had a ... fuckin' *brunch*l. And he spent the whole time ogling these stuck—up little gay high school kids and saying how he wanted this one or that one, and how the person who loved him should never love anybody else except him. Then he read me out this article in a gay paper that was in there about gay marriage and how important it was for gays to realize how necessary the right to be married was And be sexu—ally and psychologically responsible, because we'd been through AI DS already. And I'm sittn' there thinkin', I don't wanna get married. I don't want one guy I want maybe nine or ten. And I want each of them to bring home another nine or ten, and we'll all fuck together. Little guys, big guys, black guys, white guys, Chinese guys. Over in the library bathroom, a month ago, I had a guy who only had one leg He was l'hilippino or something. He didn't speak ho English. But he was *really* good! We practically tore down the fuckin' stall. I thought they were gonna come in and lind us. I been lookin' lor that mother-fucker ever since, but I ain't tound him again. I like old guys, fat guys, hairy guys—and I wouldn't mind somebody like inc. too Rut Scotty wants to be safe and happy and ... monogamous. He doesn't even like the guys he sucks off on the team."

"Do you?"

"Yeah, they're okay. Only most of them are straight. But that's the problem. Straight guys, gay guys, to mc it looks like the same fuckin' thing. Love me. and don't let mc catch you looking at nobody else. / wanna hang out with somebody who wants to go to weird places and beat off together and suck each other and watch each other do nasty shit with other people. Stand around with our flics open and our dicks hangin' out and see how long the two of you can do that before somebody says somthin'. Go to the movies and beat off in the back row and sec how many people come sit there to watch. I did that once and a woman came. She was okay! She gave mc some of her popcorn, and when I was finished she said she hoped I had fun. Hey. what's this guy—Scotty s boyfriend—gonna *do* with himself? Change the curtains every week?"

"Probably the most important thing for Scotty will be that lie pays his half of the rent on time. Which I suppose is about in the same line, actually"

"Rut that's why I don't think I'm cither one. Mc. I want about a yard of dick every day. know what I mean"

"Actually." Dill said. "I *do* know Lord, the boy is *nattmWy* queer!" He shook his head, miming disbelief.

"Rut that's why I don't want nobody calling mc gay. I'd rather they called mc a fuckin' cocksuckin' piss—drinkin' shit-catin' scumbag, than fuckin' *gaf*. At least that gets my dick hard. I don't wanna grow up like .. Lric looked down, then up. Well, it *was* his last day—"like you. I mean. I don't wanna *sound* like you."

Bill bunched his brows together, lowering them. "My northern accent ...?"

"I don't mean *that*'. I mean you and Scott)' Like you're half a bitchy girl and half a guy." In his chair. Eric blinked three times, then took in a breath. "But I prob—ably will, huh?"

"Only ifyou start hanging out with a lot of other people who talk like .. me. And Scotty. And who you start to think arc particularly cool. Also, the girl has retains to be a bitch." Again Bill lowered both brows.

"Remember that."

"I wanna sound like my dad .. when he's all relaxed and stuff" Lric managed now to drop his

shoul—ders. “I wanna sound like the guys whose dicks ! wanna suck and whose asses I wanna cat. and who I want to suck my dick and eat out my asshole.”

“Dear God in heaven, he’s *actually* a homosexual! Lie’s interested in his *own* sex—and that alone. You know, there’re not a lot of you fellows left. Once more: Cheers.” Bill settled back in the chair, mug in both hands now. under his chin. “Aren’t you going to drink your chocolate? It’s Swiss.”

“Oh.” Eric leaned forward to take up his mug. “I’m sorry.” He sipped, then put it down. “It’s good.”

“So much in life is. Eric.” Bill sighed. “You don’t *have* to drink it. I won’t be offended. But I still don’t see what this has to do with shitting where you eat. Or is that because you’re horny and I’m not? I’m not. inci—dentally. because I had a very nice night three miles from here with some guys I hope will be my friends, though for job-related reasons they had to bring me home early. But if it doesn’t workout ...” Bill shrugged. “There’s always King Kong to climb to the top of the Empire State Building with, and gaze out on the city sunrise I love you ever thought that maybe our big black gorilla was giving Christine Daac or whatever her name was—some really good head, off-screen. with the tip of his big. wet. expert tongue? I mean, all those virgins he’d been practicing on ..? That’s why she loved him. One—reason the first version is so good is because all the lovey—dovey stuff is left implied. Tut it out there, and you *can*) keep people’s minds off the sordid mechanics “

“Lickin’ out her pussy?” Eric grinned again—then remembered himself. His expression became serious. “I could get behind that. Especially if some guy was fucking her at the same time I was lickin’”. Hey .. when s the last time *you* ate out a homeless nigger’s ass who hadn’t had any toilet paper for three weeks?” as. indeed. Frack had not. three days ago. when Eric had last messed with him. “I mean that nigger had a (iff ass. too. and his hole was so funky I didn’t think I was gonna get to the other side of all the shit caked in there.”

“Not.” Bill said pensively, “so recently I can call it to mind.”

“Well, I did. three *days* back.”

“To be sure, the Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom, even when it takes you through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders. You really *wouldn’t* suck off Peter Jackson’s gorilla—wouldn’t let it bone your butt? You don’t want it to lick your balls, or stick your pecker in its ass and hump it till you shoot? Big as he is. I bet you’d make him cum all over himself, champ. My. my. my . you *are* choosy about who you fuck!”

“And I *ate* my own shit—off guys’ dicks. A lot of times. And drunk my piss. too. So I ... do eat shit or blocUClocU

whatever the fuck you said. Kight?” Eric was annoyed at the way Bottom turned aside all his attempts to shock; at the same time, on some level, it reassured him. “But that’s just another reason why I don’t think I’m gay”

Bill looked at his mug, blew across its surface, and sipped again. “Since I ‘in not going to take you inside and fuck you, I’m going to tell you a quick story—||•—instead.”

“About vvhath> King Kong?”

“No, about inc. Something I did a long time ago •—well, maybe not that long. It was in New York. I was nineteen—I think. You’re what—eighteen now?”

“I’ll be seventeen in two weeks.”

“*JatuT* Again Bill’s eyes raised to the cloud wisps, then came down.

“Well, possibly I was twenty. I’m not as precocious as you are But it was about this time of the morning .. , maybe a little earlier. I’d been up all night, walking around Central Park, trying to get laid and couldn’t, to save myself. Lots of homeless guys sleep there and it was pretty warm that September. I was in the Rambles, and coining up to where some rocks made this kind of wall.

“Beside it, I saw a guy, on some cardboard, asleep.

“He was curled up. back to the stones, this middle—aged black man, maybe in his late thirties. He didn’t have any shirt—and no belt. He was real dark. He was barefoot. His pants were ripped completely apart in two places, waist to cuff, and his genitals were out, rough—skinned. uncut—and large. Not huge. Just large. They hung down over his thigh.

“I walked around him awhile, went away, came back, went away, and came back again. Finally I sat

cross—legged on the edge of his cardboard.

“I—lifted him. In my hand, it was heavy, thick, soft ... Then I slid my other hand under his testicles. They felt wonderfully warm. My body was completely electrified—the only way to describe that tingle. The air was cool, and I was quiveringly sensitive to how much warmer his nuts were than the atmosphere. Their heat worked all into me. I wanted to suck him in the worst way. The guy was really out of it. and I was getting up my nerve, when he began to pee.

“This glimmering arc just ... expanded, spar—kling. one end fixed inside his foreskin’s nozzle sticking out my fist.

“He wet one side of my shirt, the knee and thigh of my jeans, my cheek, my arm.

“I thought about letting him go. but I didn’t—wouldn’t. It was so warm and because it was getting all over me anyway. I leaned over and drank. I bent way down, and put the first three, then four spurting inches into my mouth—about half of it. It was salty, rough, and hot. A lot ran over my hand. When his piss was running out. he moved a little and said, ‘Da’s nice .. nice.’ I lis big hand came down to pat my head. I jumped a little. I’m surprised I didn’t bite him. The guy said, ‘Suck de nigga, whireboy. Keep suckin’ on it. real deep. now. Ah’m gonna cum in yo’ uiouf Jus’ like you wan’.’ Really, that’s what he talked like.”

“Mike’s got cousins who talk like that, in Texas

— some of em. Like the niggers under the highway. We visited them—Mike’s cousins. They were nice. But they call each other ‘nigger’ more than the hiphop kids.”

“Now you know where it comes from. This *is* the South.” Again Bill’s voice dropped into black burlesque: “‘So you keep suckin’, now. ya’ hear? Don’ spit it out. You swaller dis nigga’s load, whiteboy. Just like you drunk dat piss. You go’n’ swaller it all down. Don’ spill none, now ... ‘

“I sucked.

“He hardened—and came.

“I swallowed.

“Yeah, da’s good. Make dis nigger feel *real* good. Okay. Ah’m goin’ back to sleep.’ I swear, that’s the way he sounded. ‘You go on to sleep, too, if’n you want.’ Obviously he’d come from down here. I lis hand was wood-rough and bounced on my face, and I stretched out, half on the cardboard, half on the grass, that big, heavy penis still in my mouth, getting softer, shrinking.

“Through my nose. I got a breath, and hugged the guy’s thigh. He hugged my head back, I remember — just with one hand—and, after maybe three breaths. clearly he’d gone to sleep. So after eight, nine more—” Bill shrugged—“I did too.

“Another half-an-hour or so, and I woke. His cock wasn’t in my mouth. I thought he’d gone But I looked up. *Someone* was sitting next to me, hip right against my head. I raised up on an elbow.

“He was sitting with his back to the stone. From somewhere, he’d gotten a cardboard container of coffee. Though unless it had been delivered to him by some meals-on-wheels group, rolling through the park while I was asleep, I couldn’t imagine him, in those pants, leav—ing the place, getting to a coffee stand, and getting back. When I sat up, he was looking down into his cup.

“I got up on my knees, then stood. With his kind of foggy eyes he blinked at me and held up the cotlee.

Of I ANY

‘You wan some’

“The thing I remember, he was one of those guys whose hands were completely black. I mean, his palms. the under the sides of his fingers, his nails. To this day. I have no idea if that was weeks of dirt, or pigmentation, or if it was from being out in the sun for so long. I do know it was ... incrcdiblybeautiful.

“He said. ‘I got some fren’s. Dey gonna like you. Dcy love to fuck a li’l redheaded whitcboy’ My hair was redder then. Dcy love to have you suck on em A cou—ple of cm is even white—like you. You get mc some pants, an’ I could really make same money off you. boy. I give you some. too. No bitch o’ mine ever complained I didn’t treat her right. I ain’t a rough daddy: I be a *good* daddy. I ain’t got time to be mean and nasty You gonna like hangin’ out wid mc—if you got some damned pants I can wear. An’ maybe some shoes or sneakers. I’d be real good at scllin’ yo’ ass. I got a lotta experience at it. too. An’

whenever you don't be workin' you can suck dis nigger till you can' suck no mo'. You can drink my piss Cat my cum. An' I'll make love to you too. lil'boy. I like to lick my lil' fellas' noses out when I make love to em. You ever had anyone do dat to ya'?" Rill chuckled.

Eric said, "He said that!" Trie felt himself swell to half hardness. He let his legs fall wide, then brought them together.

Rill said. "Um hm.~ and nodded. "I mean I *turn*—seen roll from rime to time when you didn't think any one was looking."

"Oh ..." Eric glanced down and tightened his hands, with an embarrassment that had hounded him since a playschool teacher had first yelled at him about his habit.

"Rut over the next five seconds. Eric. I went from thinking he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. with the most mouth-filling cock I'd ever sucked—and I d sucked a fair amount, by then, too to *tot.ill*]—terrified. You have to understand. I had a 14th floor apartment on I12th Street. My lowest dresser drawer was hill of old jeans, some of which, yes. had holes in the crotch. bin even they were better thai) what lie had to clutch together, just walking around And he's sitting there, saying. 'Come on. sit down. Help mc drink dis coffee.'

"When I didn't sit. he held it higher. 'Goon. Have some. It's good.'

"So I took the cup. and tasted it—*Cod*, it was sweet! It must have been a quarter sugar! I gave it to him. stepped back, and said. "No No, I'm sorry ...!" Then I turned and ... *ran* through the park, the trees.

the paths, everything!

"And you know. I've often thought that was the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life. Eric—or one of the stupidest. I mean. I figured that out by eleven o'clock the same morning, once I'd had some real sleep. I.atcr that day, I put some old pants and some shoes in a paper bag and spent another fourteen hours walking in the park, looking for him. But New York is such a big city, people get lost from you. like (((<<! Even in Atlanta. you have a better chance of finding somebody after you think you've misplaced them. I never saw him again. But regularly I think: Suppose I 'd sat down with him and said. 'Okay' and stayed.

"You know I .. might have been happy—for what? Half an hour? Ten hours? Until he brought the first guy to fuck me5 Or the fifth? Or rhc fiftieth? Suppose I'd given him the pants that would have been nowhere near as difficult for me to get as it was for him to wander, all but naked, to panhandle up some coffee and get back. Three days maybe? Or three weeks, or. who knows, partnered around with him for a couple of years? And done ... a hundred and fifty maybe .I thousand of his 'friends'? Of course. I could have got—ten my head bashed in. Rut given the few thousand-odd I've done on my own. since. I don't think so. Resides. that can happen in any situation. And like I ran away then, I could have run away in five hours, or live d.ivs. or live months, R111 ma\hc 111.11 extra happiness I miglu have had would have helped 10 make all the hours, when I was miserable over what. yes. I his guy or thai guv had done like not even notice I was alive more bearable So. HOW we're prepared lor llie cold, naked moral that ends the tale. Are you ready?" Eric shrugged "Sure."

"Good Because I'm going to tell it to you Eric: Sometime in your life. 11 may be in twenty minutes, or two months, or six wars, or iwtMltv live ve.us. von .in1 Coinc. to find voutsell in .I situation lli.it. Mtnplv Kv.uim' of all the things you fciiiY done, you will rvalue holds the possibility of ... happiness. Now it won't be like mine. Hut il in'/ be something lots fewer people could under stand than could have understood ... well, what I just told you. But when it happens, *don't* be like mc. Eric. You make sure you say. 'Yes.'

'Cause if you don't, it all gets bottled up inside, and you end up smashing rifle butts into the bellies of pregnant women or strafing perfectly nice gorillas off the Empire State Building, or chang—ing the curtains every week—straight or gay. because someone doesn't want you to look at anyone else—or biou>a'<-k jamming the handles of toilet plungers up the assholes ol prisoners and attaching generators to their serotinus with alligator clips because you think that somehow *tlitir* will make you feel better—make you happy."

"Wow ..."Eric said. "You think it's like *that* ... ? Man! You think *that's* how it works?"

“And remember. If it doesn’t pan out, you can always change your mind. You can run away later, but when it happens, even though you’re scared, say, ‘Yes’ Okay?”

Eric frowned.

“I’m serious, Eric.” Bill tilted his mug from the table and sipped.

“Yeah.” Eric shrugged. “Maybe, lley. I gotta catch a shower—then go up and get some breakfast at my dad’s. Look, don’t tell Mike about none of this after I’m gone, okay?”

“Of course, not only is he queer *and* a homosexual. but he’s *totally* closeted—as *who* wouldn’t have guessed. My lips, Eric, are sealed—”

“I ain’t in no closet. At least not with my mom. That’s why I wanna go down to Diamond Harbor and stay with her. ‘Cause she already knows.”

“Eric—?” Eric stood up. “I lull—?”

“Some more advice from your gay Uncle Bill. You know how your mom told you that you shouldn’t tell your dad about it?”

“Yeah ...?”

“You know he *has* to find out, someday ..

“Yeah, I’m gonna tell him—someday.”

“Good. I’m glad you know that. Well, for much the same reasons. Uncle Bill suggests that you *not* tell your mother about the piss and shit and homeless niggers and ...” Bill waved a hand back and forth. “And the stuff that goes with them. Just go down to Diamond Harbor and be a nice gay son who helps his single mother and keeps the details to himself She’s not ... black—like Mike? Is she?”

“Naw. She’s my real mom ... she’s white. But yeah. That’s pretty much how I figured to do it.”

Again Bill nodded. “No matter what they say. the closet has its uses.”

Eric looked around at the cement behind the house. The slant of sun had widened over more than half of it. “lley, Mike’s gonna wake up around seven. So I should go on and get my shower.” An image struck Eric of Mike circling his Norelco on his smooth skull in the lamplight. Probably, though. Mike had done that last night. “I’m gonna make some oatmeal—• before we leave *That’s* pretty luckin’ gay. huh?” He gave Bill a conciliatory grin. “Makin’ breakfast for you and your dad ... ?” But he didn’t start for the garage. Over his mug. Bill asked: “Have you ever seen the original *King Kong*? I mean the loj? Merian C. Cooper version—with the uncredited Harry Redmond effects—and lay W’ray and Bruce Cabot? A Mrs. Fischer did the actual screaming for Wiay They dubbed her in because lay wasn’t too good at it herself I’m not even sure Peter Jackson knows that. When my dad knew her in the ‘fifties. Mrs. Fischer was a librarian in his elementary school up in New York City.”

“I seen some of it, a few times on TV. I never watched the whole thing, though.”

Through the basement window, no TV flicker played on the back wall. Bill must have turned it off when he’d gone in for the chocolate.

“That reconstructed Spider-pit sequence, though. That’s such a beautiful example of how you can have a childhood dream and, when you grow up—if you’re lucky enough—make it real.”

With a carton in his arms Eric was coming from the garage, when, now shaven and in jacket, slacks, and loaf—ers, Bill walked over. “The trouble with having a gay uncle. Eric, is that once we start giving advice, we never stop. Here. Read this .. , when you get to Diamond Harbor.”

“Sure.” Reaching up and almost dropping his crate, Eric got the tolded paper Bill handed him “Is this somethin’ Mike—or my mom—can see?” (Mike was out at the curb, trying to fit duffle bags, boxes, and Bowfex into the Chevy.)

Bill smiled. “Absolutely.” Then, laptop case strapped over his shoulder, he turned up beside the house toward the Qj44 stop, for work.

Shoving the paper down beside the KY, Eric glanced at the sunlight over Bill’s steps. It lit half the foundation of the world.

There Eric read: ... *ci consumimur igni.*

It was just after eight

The moon’s upright crescent hung high on the day. Beneath two-o’clock sun and clouds like crushed steel, the ocean blazed. Beside the sea the highway hummed. In the air-conditioned Chevy. Mike drove

south. Eric sat beside him.

DEIANY

Right then. Mike was wondering could Doneesha cook If Jake would keep his mouth shut. Kelly Ann need never know. Kelly had a curious nature and a movie-star perfect ass—as Jake himself, something of a doofus. had many times whispered to him. But Doneesha had one closer to Mike’s own ideal, fuller and firmer. And she was more relaxed about letting you do what you wanted with it. Yeah, after a couple of weeks with Kelly Ann ..

Right then. Eric was pondering what the com—ing months held for sex—not that he was worried. I led tripped over it in Maryland, bedded down with it in West Texas—even found it over the three months he’d been left with his mom’s mother in Hagerstown, though it was only jerking off while, through a crack in a bathroom window next door, he’d watched a twenty—seven-year-old Greek plumber do the same. Costas had papered the place, even the ceiling, with pictures of women from porn magazines Naked and barefoot. or in a ripped T-shirt, hunched on the commode or leaning back on the sink, he’d mutter. “*Mallakas ... ! Cack-Suckin’ bitch .. ! Mallakas ... !*” and shoot five to seven times a session, feeding a couple into some ecstatic mouth pasted on the wall. Costas had a session before going into work, one right after coming home. one before turning in: and he did it non-stop Saturdays and Sundays, leaving the John only to eat. often bringing in his sandwich. Trench fries, beer, and parking them on the tub’s edge while, check, knees, knuckles, and chest bcsplattered. he labored to loose another load. Till then. Uric had thought *he’d* held the record, but it was no con—test. Trie had left I lagerstown feeling a lot better about his own frequency ...

A green and white sign on the highway’s right said TRUCK STOP’2 MILL

Eric said. “Wc gotta stop there.”

“What in the world for?”

“Cause I gotta shit—*that’s* why.”

“Oh ...”

So Mike slowed and. forty seconds later, pulled off into Turpens Truck Stop. (“A Georgia Institution!”) Me parked with some pickups, Further down stood a few big rigs. “You know. Diamond Harbor’s only twelve miles away. You’d think you could hold it fifteen more minutes till wc got to Barbara’s.”

“You wanna hold it lor mc?” Eric grinned. “Cup your hands. Look. I’ll be out in a minute!”

To the right was the window for Turpens Parts & Notions, filled with boards of gaskets, towers of batteries, racks ol calipers, rows ol ratchets and wrenches, spark—plug testers. CR sets, pressure gages, and radar “cheaters.” along with bandanas, mugs, snap button shirts, (lags—American, Irish. Hells’ Angels. Confederate, one flag with horizontal rainbow stripes and a bear claw printed in the upper left (which Eric recognized and Mike did not; disdainfully Scott)—had pointed it out to Eric that Saturday, in a gay shop window), and one that said only *Turpens*—and caps (*Turpens.* with an eagle flying off left above the visor), dashboard raccoons, fuzzy dice, and I loola dolls, black and white. Left of the recessed glass entrance, another long window looked in on the wooden walls, blue booths, and slowly turning ceiling fans of Turpens I lomcsryle Eatery.

Around the car, embedded mica glittered in con—crete.

“Don’t get all caught up looking at junk in the store.”

“Don’t *worry*” Eric spoke with a sixteen-year-olds impatience. “I’ll be out in fen. fifteen minutes.” He opened the door to climb out. and hot air exchanged with the air in the car over the next seconds |—“And I may go into the store when I’m finished. I need a cap—before he grinned back at Mike, then slammed it.

Jesus. Mike thought, looking out at his bronzed stepson, in his blue tanktop. the young body-builder shoulders and arms already sheened with sweat from seconds in the sun. That’s one good looking kid. Remembering their Bowflex workouts, he thought: He keeps me young.

Kelly Anne was only two-and-a-half years older.

Heat like stones on his shoulders, his head. Eric walked toward the three glass doors across Turpens’ entrance. From between the pickups, in beige slacks, closing a cell phone and puffing it in a

yellow shirt pocket in which a purple handkerchief showed, a thin man ambled up. To Eric, the handkerchief said “faggot.”

At the same time, behind glass layers, someone walked forward, about to leave:

Through the doors, *this* man was a head-and-a-half taller than Eric (who was five-seven) and stocky. Behind the glare, Eric saw the beard, the curly hair, and—as far as Eric could tell a long-sleeved shirt.

Well, if I follow the gay one. I'll find the right John fast. Eric paused, stood straight and rubbed his hands up his sweating face, to let the slender man reach the doors first, so that, once inside, Eric could follow a few steps behind.

The gay guy pulled open the outer door and went in—which is when Eric saw that the bearded man inside had stopped.

Eric followed the gay guy through one door, through a second into frigid air conditioning. In moments it was painful along the trickle behind Eric's ear, beneath his jaw.

When he lifted them, someone slid cold slabs under Eric's arms. He did not look directly at the bearded man, though it was decided. It was what caught at the corner of his eye, the man wore not a shirt but a jacket, with darkly gleaming sleeves. And—like Bill that morning—no shirt under it. Between the jacket's edges, over a brazenly furred chest and belly, thick hair swirled the navel's sink ...

Then he was behind Eric.

Inside, to the right another plate glass window was filled with automotive junk, case knives, cowboy shirts, and belt buckles. By it was the inside entrance to Turpous Parts & Notions. Oh! to the left, the indoor entrance to the Eatery was beyond the motel-style counter.

No one was behind it.

In the back wall stood an arch: Eric watched the gay guy cross the lobby's wooden floor. Silhouetted on the right was a small man and, on the left, a woman. The gay guy—if he *was* gay—walked up and turned right.

Well, that was easy—Eric took two steps after him

And slowed.

Then he turned ... but the bearded man had not gone. (He wore a cap that said *Turpens*, visor point—ing left.) Rather, he'd stopped to look around the lobby—maybe even at Eric and the guy who'd gone into the men's room.

Nor was he wearing a jacket.

At the shoulders the sleeves were torn from his red-and-black plaid, which hung unbuttoned and wide. He had a beer gut. Thick arms were cut into heavy muscle groups—surely having reached their bulk from labor, not a Bowflex. Shoulder to wrist, under the hair, both bore full-sleeve tattoos. A snake's head with bared fangs lapped one hirsute hand, a thumb as thick as a D-cell hooked in his jeans pocket. Save skulls roped through the eye-sockets with black barbed wire, dolphins breaching from a blue-gray wave, a knife through flesh, dripping red, and spiraling dragons diving among yellow lightning bolts, hair blurred the smaller pictures, even under the fluorescent lights. As were chest and gut, his arms were so hairy they looked like hempen bales.

Eric glanced not quite at the man—but turned anyway as the big guy started forward, not toward the John, but toward the hall running off beside Turpens Parts & Notions.

As he was about to disappear, the fellow looked at Eric—and smiled. Within his brazen beard, his upper gum was all gap, teeth either side like Track's. The man reached down and gave his crotch ... not a scratch, but a thick-lingered squeeze. Then, glancing at himself, he tilted his basket, pushing his hips forward. Eric swallowed. And started after him.

As Eric fell in beside him, the man smiled again. “Where you runnin' off to, li'l feller? Damn, I gotta take me n wicked piss. It's backed up to where I can *taste* it.” As they walked, his grip became perfunctory scratching. “See, the old head's in the back, here—the one all the guys use who been comin' to Turpens since ‘tore they built the single-room motel and peepshow stalls. Once this was the last place on the highway with dormitory style sleepin’. Used to be down at the end, here.” He shook his head, chuckling. “They closed the dormitory back twenty, twenty-five years ago, in eighty-one, eighty—two.

Guys used to bring me in here when I was a kid hitch-hiking around—probably I was your age, maybe—seventeen, eighteen.” He grinned, self-consciously. “Didn’t have no trout teeth then, neither. But it could get fuckin’ wild in there.”

Eric’s throat felt blocked. So he angled nearer the tattooed fellow, put one hand between his own legs, and gripped himself, in imitation. No one else was in the hall.

Such imitation over the last five years was how Eric had learned all he knew about sex.

The big guy glanced down. “Looks like your nuts is as itchy as mine.”

Eric got his breath. “We can ... do stull in there?”

Mockingly, the man looked at Eric. “They got a stainless steel piss trough where we can spring a leak. Or, if you can find one that still flushes, you can climb up on the rim, squat on one of them shitters—none of ’em got no doors no more—and drop a *big ol’* turd. That what you mean?” He winked: His eyes glistened like amber under rainwater. “My partner’s in there now. Probably that’s what he’s doin’ ... if he ain’t suckin’ of some nigger what come in to relieve hisself. My partner he’s a Mex—only he don’t talk. Spanish *or* English. He says, ‘We beei coinin’ down here every couple weeks for ... more’n ten years now. It’s a nice place. We get a lot of black fellas. Indians, plane ol’ redneck trash ... truckers and boat fellas—me and Mex work the boat, out to Gilcad Island. Everybody gets along, tries to be sociable. Know what I’m savin’?”

Eric asked. “Can I suck your dick? I do it good.”

“Shit ...” The man laughed, stepped closer, and dropped his wide hand on Eric’s far shoulder, where he began repeatedly squeezing as they walked down the worn carpet. Eric smelted him. The smell had a lot of old sweat in it, some diesel fuel, and underarm funk. “You sound pretty hot to trot.” He raised his foreknuckle against Eric’s far jaw, and rubbed. Not sure why. Eric turned his head and took the forefinger in his mouth. It was salty. The man flexed it over Eric’s tongue. Otherwise he gave no sign someone was sucking his finger. “We can probably do sumpin’ like that. But I got to tell you, now, ain’t me or Mex what you’d call clean dudes. When’s the last time you took a shower?”

“Lift ... this ... mornin’.” The man’s hand muffled Eric’s voice,

“Yeah? Well, with me—” the man moved closer. Without getting stronger, the smell became disorienting, as though, at Eric’s next breath, it penetrated another level—“it’s more like a couple o’ weeks. And I wouldn’t even waste time speculating about Mex.” Then he was closer, hip, thigh, and flank moving against Eric. Like the finger in his mouth, the hand remaining on Eric’s shoulder, either side Eric’s blue tanktop strap, was as hard as wood, as rough as rock. “Sec. spies and Indians and guys like me from Gilcad, we ain’t cut and skinned like you fellas up there in the city. We still got everything we come with, and inside that skin, boy, the fuckin’ cheese can build up sumpin’ terrible. Me, I don’t over hardly remember to stick a finger in and scrape that stuff out. Most of the time, I don’t have to, cause Mex’ll do *it for* me ... with his *tongue*.” He grinned again.

Eric came off the man’s finger long enough to say, “I like cock cheese. It’s good. Sure, with some guys who smoke a lot, it tastes pretty hot!”

“Yeah?” The man chuckled again. “Well, at six-lift) a pack, that’s one thing you don’t have to worry about with me” (The finger was up and waiting for Eric’s mouth when he turned back for it.) “It makes you smell funnier than you already do, gives you cancer, *and* runs all the good cocksuckers off. Naw, that’s a habit me and ol’ Mex ain’t even thinkin’ about.” The man’s hand came further around Eric’s face, pushing his fingers into Eric’s mouth. Out in front of him he held his other hand.

Sucking, Eric looked down.

Bronze hair grew thickly on the first two joints. The nubs ballooned forward of the nails on the wide fingers, outlined in black as with a ballpoint and all bit—ten well behind the quick—nails as broad as quarters (except the little, a nickel across) but, front to back as narrow as half a dime, till cuticle shelves swallowed them. “Bitin’ on em the way we do, me and Mex—the both of us—is bad enough.” He lifted his hand to his own mouth and began to chip at what remained half-an-inch back from his cracked and callused nubs, while Eric understood more about the hardness and history of the flesh his tongue moved on.

Along both walls glass cases showed posters for a multiplex in some mall. Others showed pocket

T-shirts. red, black, and blue: *Turpens Truck Slop*. But more and more were empty.

The hall turned right.

The cases ceased.

Here the wall was weathered plank, as though once the outside of an older building. "This used to be the dormitory. Now it's for storage. But they keep the John open." In the upper corner of a door frame, the joists had come apart an inch. The doors themselves were saloon-style, on cylindrical spring hinges. Under them. Eric saw uneven white-and-black tile. Above, a green wall ran with pipes and cracks

Eric pulled his mouth from the fingers to look down. While they'd walked, the man had dropped his other hand, opened his jeans zipper, and tugged loose his genitals. His cock's base was thick. Already he arched forward in a downward curve. Bronze hair grew a third of the way along it. From the end, in front of his testicles. at each step his wide cuff shook. I lis nuts had their own cloud of hair. "Now that's a genuine cocksuckers' dick—'cause it bends down 'stead o' up. You get on your knees and that thing slides right *down* into your head."

Eric said. "You're goin'in there like ... //till?"

"This is one of them places where it's better to go on in with it all hangin' out. Besides, ain't you got some—body waitin' in the car? I figured you didn't have all day." The big guy pushed the door and guided Eric in, coming behind.

Twelve minutes and forty-eight seconds later, through the John's swinging doors Jay MacAmon (the bearded

BiocUO'vk man with the gut and the tattoos) came out, jeans closed. Eric following. MacAmon s *Turpcus* cap was shoved into his back pocket

"Jesus!" Uric said. "Wow ... ! That was lucking amazing. I never been in a place like that. I mean, J fucked around in Johns, before, but not ..."

In the hall, Jay chuckled. "Looks like you found yourself a booger buddy. I almost forgot about Morgan likiu' that stuff but I guess you gotta run, now."

"Yeah, only I need .

(but let's look—briefly—ahead:

(At four in the morning that Thursday in Diamond I larbor, Trie began working lor Dynamite 1 lasted), a job he kept and enjoyed lor twenty-nine fairly complicated years, fourteen months alter Eric's arrival, however. Barbara moved, with her new boyfriend, another black fellow, named Joe. up to Runcible, where Joe managed a software operation: and Lric moved in permanently—instead of three or four nights a week—with his boss and his Boss's helper and "nephew," Morgan. Prompted by some things only whispered about in town. Barbara. who herself had left school at fourteen, had several con—versations with Mr. Haskell, who basically said, "Eric works real hard and don't get into no trouble. And he's a good influence on my boy—teachin'

'im to read and stuff I could never do it. So il you don't mind him sta—yin' there, me and Morgan both'd be obliged." And, as Lric said, it was what *he* wanted, more than anything. So. with only some misgivings. Barbara agreed. Her friend and regular morning coffee customer at the Lighthouse. Jay MacAmon. who ran the Gilead boat with the mute Mex, both ot whom were clearly fond of Eric, said he thought it would be a good idea. She knew thai Eric and I laskell's illiterate part-black nineteen-year-old nephew—| his boy. Morgan [some said he was Haskell's son]—shared a bed in Dynamite's cabin: the clutter, which the Bowflcx had joined, was epic. But how much. as MacAmon said, *could* be going on? It was the same room Dynamite slept in.

(At twenty four, Eric told his dad. Mike had recently been paroled atter another two years in jail: more coke. Mike said, "I think you're crazy. I think you're an asshole—but, then, it's your ass. Yeah, I done it a couple'a times when I was in the pokey—the first stretch. Not this last one. though. But *you*, well ... they ain't put you in jail yet."

(One reason lor all ol this was because, during the twelve or so minutes he'd first been in the Tarpons rear John. Eric had .sucked off four guys—including

MacAmon. lie had come oil Jay's dick long enough to look up and ask. "You pack that staff in there with a *ipooii*?"

(Jay drawled. "I ley, I thought you liked it.")

("I *do*." and again Eric swallowed cock till the zip—per cut at his mouth. Five other guys laughed

(A sixth had said, "My kinda coeksuckcr." Then Eric sucked off another big unshaven guy in bib overalls and work shoes the aforementioned Dynamite I laskell Ai the same linn lied taken I wo loads up his ass. one from one of a pair of black truckers who had been happily joking around inside, had fooled with another large black man whose dick rivaled Track's, and finally been sucked off, along with the bearded Jay himself, by Jay's partner, Mex. who'd sat barefoot on a seatless com—mode. Jay had made Eric come by urinating in Mex's mouth while Mex was sucking them both, Dynamite hugging Eric from behind and Jay pressed against him on one side while Eric gripped the thickly veined cock of the other barefooted kid who'd stood, holding Eric. on his other. Grinning, shirtless, with gray-green eyes and feet as big and as grubby as Mex's. his cock a rod against his jeans, Morgan had been the first person who'd reached out to hug Eric when he'd entered: he was the last to hug him. when, with Jay. he'd left. Boiling around Eric's dick. running down the barrel-solid Mexican's chin and chest between Mex's own sleeveless denim, Jay's urine had felt fucking incredible! Cricket.s, fish, frogs. shells, shooting stars, leaves, waves, exploding atoms, spewing octopi, Haines, webs hanunocking elbows gnarled like pine knots, scorpions, moths, and spiders—now. through the hair, Eric saw all the smaller pictures.)

"That kid, in there ..." Eric checked to make sure his tanktop wasn't caught in his jeans. "When we were tongue wrestlin'. he reached up and dug in his nose And I ... " Eric shrugged. "It just happened." He grinned, actually embarrassed. "He's bigger and older than me, huh? I really like him."

"I think he likes you, too. The way you guys was takin' turns suckin' on each other, it sure looked like it. Yeah, that's Morgan. Everybody who conies in there calls him Shit, though. The first time me and Dynamite brought Shit down here to Turpens, he was younger'n you."

"He's a little funny. But he's nice—

"Shit don't read or write none. But he's got a sense of humor." Again Jay chuckled. "I can't, either. But Mex —and Dynamite, sometimes—dues my readin' for me. They read, both of'em. like motherfuckers—even books and things."

"I really like him." Eric repeated.

"Good." Jay said. "'Cause I got a feeliu" he gonna be after you a lot, lookin' for somebody to beat off with—" he snorted—"and trade boogers like you two was doin'. Maybe you guys gonna end up each other's cum rags, like mc and Mex. since you both cat most of it. anyway. If I hadn't been his dad's suck buddy when I was your age—" again grinning, he pointed at his missing teeth with his thumb—"I might think the boy was a mite excessive in his beatin'-off. Rut Dynamite was always one of them ten-times-a-day fellers. They still pull over on them back roads and park a lot Look through the cab window and one of 'em's always got it out. Shit comes by it hon—estly. And it don't worry his pop."

"I do it *about* that much—"

"Good." Jay snorted again. "Then he won't worry about you. neither. Looks like everybody wanted a taste of you—everybody got one, too. They know not to hog ya' on your first visit. Kinda pass you around—truck stop manners. I guess."

"The big guy, your friend—the one who said he'd give me the job. after I finished blowin' him ...?"

"Dynamite—like I say. he's my oldest suck-buddy here. I knowed that bastard longer than I knowed Mex. He's checsier'n I am."

"Yeah—I know. What's he do?"

"lie's Diamond I [arbor's garbage man. Shit—Morgan—works with him. on the truck, collectin' folks' junk. Mostly from the niggers, down around the Dump Keeps 'cm both in as good shape as you. They come over here together. He seen how you and Shit was getting' along. That's probably why he offered you work. Me looks out for that kid."

"Your partner really *likes* that stuff? I mean you and guys ... pissin' in his mouth and all?"

"Fuckin' loves it."

"How do you know?"

"'Cause we done slept rolled up in the same blan—ket for ten years, my big smelly feet all up in his face and his big hard ones up in mine ... you learn. He likes the salt." Jay pulled back one side of his plaid

shirt, to show Uric some honey-colored hair, flattened and stuck to his flank. The patch went below his low-slung garrison belt. "That's where Mex cum all over mc, this mornin'. I can't bring myself to wash it off. It's a ... gay pride thing." He dropped the red and black cloth.

"Shit and Dynamite work together?"

"You seen how Mex and me do our nails, there Well, didn't you sec theirs? Shit and Dynamite do theirs just as bad—or worse." He paused. "Shits Dynamite's son."

"Son ...?" Eric stopped walking. "You mean ... the guy whose ass Morgan—Shit—was fuckin' when we came in was ... his <W? The one that black trucker—

"Bobby—"

"Yeah. Bobby—started fuckin' as soon as Shit pulled his dick out the big guy's—his dad's—ass and came over to me?"

"Yeah." The bearded man nodded. "But you ain't supposed to talk about that. It's just for guys in here to know."

"And they fool around together, in a public John? Oh. man ... that's fuckin' weird!"

Jay shrugged and raised his hand to his face. "Well, the one in front's public. The one back here's *kinda* private ..." With a forefinger closing one nostril, then his thumb against the other, he snorted into his hand. "Here you go." Then the hard palm was against Eric's mouth. Eric thrust out his tongue for the mucasoid and crusty slurr. "Now you start blabbcrin' an' I ain't gonna give you no more." He grinned, all gap-toothed. "Me and Mex is always snortin' out handfuls for Shit, when—ever we sec him eatin' his own. It's that salt thing again. That's what you snot-jockics always tell mc. It makes his daddy laugh—and keeps Shit happy Dynamite started that—he'll give you some, too, once he's sure you want it. And all the dick you can handle. But he don't force nothin' on nobody. That's *his* pride thing. So will Shit. They ain't jealous—they like to share. Like mc and Mex."

Finished licking. Eric looked up, with his own grin. "I gotta hardon ... again. Even though I came before." Reaching down, he adjusted himself.

"Me too." Again the big man chuckled. "Probably so docs Shit right now ... by osmosis or somthin'."

"I won't say nothin'. Hey—the black fellow said I could unload his truck for him. when he had deliveries to make at the I larbor."

"Yeah ... well." Bearded Jay nodded. "Dynamite'll do what he says. But I wouldn't pay too much attention to Al. there. He means well. But you get down on your hands and knees, and let him plow your butt hole, like you was doin' for that nigger, and he'll promise you the moon. He can't help it. We all used to load for him years back. But him and Bobby—his partner there, the other black fella you was blowin' after he finished with

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Shir's dad—don't hardly make deliveries to the Harbor no more—unless they're gonna start in again ... 'cause *you're* there!"

Eric took a big breath. "What about ... Shit's mom?" He was thinking of Barbara.

"Aw, she run off six weeks after he was born. The three of us—her, Dynamite, and me—used to whore in Turpens' back lot here. She come lor about a year—she was twenty-six, twenty-seven. We was eighteen, nine—teen. She was around long enough lor us both to hick her a few times and decide we didn't corton to it. Till he come out. it was a toss-up whether the little bastard was gonna be mine or Dynamite's, 'cause we usually had her at the same time. She dropped Morgan three days before Thanksgiving—and took oil with a I'olack trucker she met in the parkin' lot on New Years Day. Nobody ain't seen her since. Dynamite—well, me and Dynamire, with a lotta help from Mex—raised that little fuck."

"Is Shit part ... you know, black? His eyes are ... gray, and he's ... light—his mouth looks white. But his nose—and his hair is aJI ... nappy."

"Well, his ma sure was—about a quarter, I guess. So I guess he is, too. Hut you seen the dick him and his pa both have—pair oi damned mules." (Eric *had* noticed, and held, and mouthed.) "Every goddam vein, it's clear those is the same as Dynamite's," something else Eric had learned with both eyes

and mouth.

“Oh ...” Eric said.

“Dynamite’s my good buddy. You can probably forget what Al said. He gave you his load tied up in one of his supper-sized rubbers—”

“Yeah, I got it in my pocket.” MacAmon licked his brass moustache. “Mex likes to save that stuff, too, for later. But that’s all you gonna get out that nigger—where them horse-hung guys get those things, I wonder. They should sell em in the Notions store, along with the normal-size ones Only if it got out. probably the Klail or somethm’ would come after this place. Hey, you check out that job Dynamite offered you, though. I le sticks by his word. You’ll have fun with him and Shit. I do.”

“I hope , .. so. I low come everyone is so ... friendly?”

“I guess ... cause it’s the South. Besides, you say you’re gonna be a local boy awhile. There ain’t that many of us around. When sumpin’ like you comes along, and says he’s staying—” Jay shrugged—“we get friendly.”

Ahead was the window—and the inside door—of Turpens Parts & Notions.

“Hey, I gotta go,” Eric said. “This was great. I hope I see you again. But I need to get a cap real quick. *Um ...* my name’s Eric. But I told you that. And you’re ... ? I’m sorry—I forgot ...”

“I’m still Jay MacAmon. Like I told you inside. I run the boat our to Gilead Island, with Mex. I’ll see you in the Harbor Look for me or a barefoot spic. We’re pretty easy to find. Or the garbage men—the one with no shoes is Shit.” Again he winked an amber eye. “Morgan. But I guess you know that.”

“*Um ...*” Eric said. “Okay. Yes! But I need to get a cap.”

Jay nodded—and Eric turned, ran up the hall to the door, and pushed inside.

Stealers, Braves, Marlins, Senators, Yankees. Pirates. Red Sox—baseball caps hung on backboard hooks. Eric got down a tan one that said *Turpens* with its departing eagle, then walked toward the counter. The unshaven man behind it wore a cowboy shirt.

Eric passed a dummy in a camouflage cap. “I low much is this?”

“Baseball caps are seven-fitty. That’s just five. Not many guys get those.” On his long arms, bony hands flattened over the masonite.

Eric reached in his pocket—and for a heart—thudding moment thought his wallet was gone. He felt the folded paper Bill Bottom had given to him when he’d been carrying his stuff to the car. Then, with a further poke, his fingers stubbed leather.

Someone said, “What took you so long?” Eric turned to see Mike. “Hey—I was as quick as I could.”

Mike said. “Actually, you did pretty well. You said ten or fifteen—and it’s not quite twenty. I came in to try the AC—cause I don’t like to leave it on in the car when I’m notdrivin’. Uses up the battery.”

“Now that’s God’s truth,” the counter man said. “You with the kid, here?”

Without looking at Mike, Eric said: “*lie’s* my dad.”

“His stepdad,” Mike corrected (Why did he *do* that. Eric wondered, glancing at Mike’s dark face He wished Mike would let *them* figure it out.) “I’m taking the boy to stay with his mom. at Diamond I larbor.”

“Oh,” the man said. “The Harbor’s a nice place—in the summer Five dollars and thirty-two cents—with tax. Hell, cause you’re gettin’ a *Turpens* one. I’ll forget the thirty cents. Just gimme five.”

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He smiled at Mike, then at Eric.

Eric peeled the bill with Lincoln’s picture from his wallet. “*Urn ...* thanks.”

Someone else said, “Hello, there.”

Eric and Mike looked over

The guy in the yellow shirt—and the handker—chief—strolled up. As Eric took the cap, the register man said. “Hi. Ted. What can I do for you?”

“Nothin”—I’m good. I conic in to use the facili—ties and say hello, that’s all. This is a scorcher, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.” The rangy clerk looked at Eric. “You want that in a bag, son?”

"Thanks." Eric said, "No. That's okay."

The gay guy said to Mike and Eric. "You fellas picked a hot day to travel."

Mike said. "*Mmm.*" and turned away. "Bye." Eric followed.

Mike stopping to look at piles of radios and racks of manuals and sparkplug boxes, they walked to the door. then pushed out into sweltering day. "Eric—the car's over/if *re ...*'

Getting in was like climbing into warm cotton. Mike turned the ignition. As they rolled forward, he switched on the air conditioning. From under the dashboard cold air hit Eric's knees.

Right, they passed an old pickup parked in line. On its sagging tailgate silver gaffers' tape spelled; DYNAMITE REFUSE.

A-slant the "D." with a black marker, someone had scrawled "*Shit of.*" It passed fast enough that Eric wasn't sure if it was someone's joke. (Maybe Morgan's ...?)

Mike asked: "That guy wasn't bothcrin' you. was he?"

More sharply than he'd intended. Eric turned back. "\Vho>"

"I mean in the men's room or anything. Lookin' at you funny."

Eric made himself relax. "What guy?" The Chevy rolled onto the highway feed. "In the store."

"The guy behind the counter? He wasn't even *in* the bathroom."

"Not him. The other one—he went in the same time you did. The one who stopped to talk to us when we came out ... ?"

"*Mm?*" Eric asked. "He could have been—I was in the stall, with the door closed. So I didn't see him.

Which probably means he didn't see me unless he was looking funny at my sneakers."

"Oh." Mike said. "Okay."

Eric lifted his butt to dig in his pocket. I lis mid—dle fingers passed something splodgcy. (Haifa memory of when the KY cap had come open, lubricant mess—ing his pants ...) Glancing to make sure Mike was looking at the road. Eric jerked his hand free to slip the fingers in his mouth. Rut they were dry. So the condom hadn't ruptured. With the same hand. Eric reached in his pocket again to push the KY down. It had almost slipped loose. And there was his wallet—and the paper. He worked its folds out, then opened it. His ass was vaguely sore, but in what he'd long ago learned to think of as a good way And damp

"What's that?" Mike asked.

"Something Hill said I should read when I got to the I larbor."

"What's it say?"

Eric unloldd it again, to sec Gothic letters. "He—must have printed it out on his computer." Eric read it. haltingly, aloud:

"TIE WHO MAKES A BEASTOF HIMSELF GETS RID OF Til E PAIN OF BEING A MAN.'
—Dr. Samuel Johnson."

Mike said. "I heard that before." In ordinary type, more was below. Eric went on: "But notice the good doctor said "beast," not "animal." For he who forgets the animal he is. has taken the first step toward becoming a beast.'" Eric looked up, frowning.

"That's some funny stuff." Mike jockeyed the wheel. "Bottom's a funny guy" I Ic was thinking about Kelly Anne, who *could* be an animal ..."He's okay ... but he's strange. You know, you gotta stay away from guys like that—like the one who was talkin' to us in the store, hear me? I met a couple of em in the pokey Most guys ain't even polite to cm It just encourages cm. And they're never gonna do you no real good."

Eric nodded, turning the paper over. On the back. in pencil, in blocky letters, green eyed Dynamite in the John (whose nails, like Shits, *were* bitten worse than Jay's or Mcx's, which was an accomplishment) had written: SHITiv. DYNAMITE Show Up Gilead Boat Dock, GARBAGE 4:30 a.m. Thurs—Sun

Eric refolded it and pushed it back in his pocket past Al's pliant clam. "I'm gonna get a job while I'm here. lb give mama a hand."

"Now *that's* an idea," Mike said. "It's good to hear you talkin' like that."

I lad he actually said "Yes" ro Dynamite? Or had he just stood there grinning? I le'd said *I*

ley—*Thank you!* enthusiastically a few times. But either way he was going *to* find where the lilead boat dock was.

“After you get to Barbara’s, see if you can find some regular fellas to hang our with and make friends. guys who drink beer and throw a basketball around and talk about women, know what I mean?”

“Jesus ...” Eric looked back out the window. “*That* sounds like fun! Can I maybe hang out with some that do a little *more* than talk?”

Mike said nothing. But he smiled. In the car the cool air stabilized.

When they passed the green-and-white sign, “Diamond Harbor, Exit 3 Miles,” wearing his *Turpem* cap. visor to left, Eric asked: “Dad?”

“What?”

“You think somebody, a human being, I mean. could fall in love with a giant gorilla?” He looked at his father. “I mean actually in love—with a *real* one?”

As he drove by the sea, Mike’s smile became puzzled. He frowned at his stepson.