

I've seen your picture
Your name in lights above it
This is your big debut
It's like a dream come true
So won't you smile for the camera?
I know they're gonna love it

- "Peg," Steely Dan, 1977

1

Eric

"You are not going to the party with me tomorrow night, and that is final!"

Ah, yes, the picture-perfect end to yet another picture-perfect day in the carefree, glamorous life of "Hollywood Stud" Eric Baker.

Ha.

Fade in on Greg flipping me out of bed in his usual attempt to wake me before leaving for the brokerage house. I like to open my eyes and see all the blood rushing into his face—it gives me the illusion I have something on him. Besides, how can anyone hope to have a great day without somebody else growling, "Get up twit," at them first thing in the impossibly early morning? As soon as he left, I crawled back under the covers and slept until about seven o'clock, when I had to jump out of bed and make a mad dash for the studio. I barely had time to brush my teeth.

Gregory says I purposely oversleep every morning just to spite him. What a ridiculous idea! Suki says I do it to throw my weight around—also totally absurd. The simple truth is, I like to sleep.

The other stuff is just frosting on the cake.

Even starting out semi-late, I still got to Doug's studio in time to get the first cup of hot coffee from the giant urn in the corner of the dressing room. I cradled it in my hands and let the steam rise in my face, which allowed me to ignore the other people filtering in. More importantly, the mist gave me a great excuse to close my eyes again. I was almost totally out when I was body-slammed by a blast of cheerfulness.

“Eric Baker, right? Howard Gordon. We met in Suki’s office once, right after I’d signed with her? I’d grayed for a gig? You said too much around the crown? Course, it’s mostly videos these days, though I’ve been looking forward to this shoot somewhat. I’ve always wanted to work with you. Didn’t think you did this kind of gig anymore. Usually don’t, myself.”

I cracked one eye. The overly energetic voice belonged to a black-haired man whose promo just had to read “honest brown eyes” and “well-packed muscles under a rich, smooth tan, sub-category Native American.” I let the eye slink back down—I had absolutely no desire to talk to this clown who I knew from Suki’s purposely indiscreet hints was well on his way into “real” show biz, i.e., TV. Besides, he was taller than me.

“It’ll be good working with all pros this time,” he went on, apparently unaware of the plan brewing in the back of my head to rip off his eyebrows. “I did a gig last week just short of ‘Star Search.’ Not to mention names, but the lady being shot did the directing, choreography, star bit, ad nauseam. ‘I cannot work with all these (pant, pant) long-limbed, long-haired looonng ... bodies around.’ She must have changed signals half a dozen times, like that was helping, finally put a Bic lighter to the script. You’ve got to wonder how many times she’s pulled that act, I remember reading about the same play in some rag last year. The producer decided to start over, already had substitutes handy. Had to have all new faces, butts, a whole new line-up. She took me aside, wanted to, uh, well, you know. I’m still waiting for my check, I guess she didn’t buy the line that I was married. You know the bit. You should hear her without all the effects. She sounds like Minnie Mouse.”

By now I had both eyes open. He was such an eager little puppy, I had to suppress the urge to pat his head so I didn’t tell him that, no, I didn’t “know the bit.” I think the idea of my showing up in a music video would send Suki into heart failure, and as for waiting for my check! Suffice to say, my contracts always state I get paid whether the shoot gets finished or not, whether the product is any good or not, or whether the final stuff—print, video, film, voice-over, personal appearance, guest shot, whatever—goes public or not. All money is paid up front and held in escrow to assure that I show, which is essentially the full extent of what I’m contracted to do, especially in a non-speaking role, certainly in a bunch of stills. No, I didn’t think all that up; I’ve got a good lawyer, a greedy agent, and a highly protective business manager.

I'm not much into dirty talk—I only do it with Greg, because it gets him mad and that gets him yelling and that means we have to make up and that means ... well, anyway, even so I was a bit amused by the blush that went along with the end of Gordon's story. How had this guy lasted in the business so long? Still, I had to admit to a grudging amount of respect for the man, who was still talking as if I were listening. He did a damn good imitation of the rock star in question. The problem was, he wasn't supposed to be here. I knew better than to mention that, though. All I said was, "Hopefully, this will be a better day for you."

It always amazes me how little I have to do to get a positive reaction from some people. This innocuous remark had earned me a massive grin and a friendly punch on the shoulder. I gave him half a smile and closed my eyes. His teeth were too white—the glare was blinding.

Cut to door slamming open, enter one hulking, muscles-stuffed-into-clothes ape strongly reminiscent of King Kong, only stupider-looking and just a little smaller. His name was Jeff Portman with the emphasis on the "man" as in "Shit, man, I dunno what ya mean, man." This may not be brain surgery we do, but I've never met anybody before who was this dumb and actually managed to get work anyway. He looked more like a prop than a model—not for me, God forbid! I tried not to think about it. As Greg says, these things are really none of my business—quote, You are not responsible, Ricky, for the physical and emotional security of every individual you encounter in this business, end quote.

(He talks like that. I stay with him anyway. He never complains when I try to fluff his shoulder.)

As it was, Portman turned out to be too obnoxious to describe. He monopolized the airspace for a few minutes by directing a recital of his physical, sexual, and professional attributes toward one of the more attractive design assistants, who reacted with perfectly reasonable disgust at his offer to "pose any way ya want, honey, right down to shavin' my bush, if it turns ya on."

Contrary to TV opinion, most people I've run across aren't usually so blatant with their repulsive behavior—not even actors, although I have run into one or two similar idiots, mostly before I allegedly moved up out of that league. Ha! I especially remember being confined with one crude, lewd asshole on another such stupid, meaningless gig, long ago. He was as full of piss-and-

vinegar as they come, cocksure that Hollywood—it's always "Hollywood," as if the town were an entity in-and-of itself—had fine things in store for him. He didn't need any advice from some "fuckin' throwback from the eighties, dude." I guess they all only have the one script to work off—they might even all work through the same agency for all I know, Scum Incorporated, I suppose. Anyway, "Asshole A" had spent the entire day bragging about an upcoming video with some big-shot producer whose name he didn't know, and how it was going to make him a star, whereby he'd pass me up as if—excuse me, "like as if"—I were standing still. I told him to get a new writer. Much to my regret, I ran into him again a few days later, as I was making my way down Hollywood Boulevard toward my favorite newsstand. He was totally strung out, covered with raw, oozing sores—or were they welts? He clutched at me, spouting some kind of gibberish about claws and cameras and drugs. I got the idea. He offered me his body—or what was left of it—if I'd just not tell his mother. I got away as fast as I could. Of course when I brought it up to Suki, she said she had no idea what he was talking about, that he wasn't even her client, she'd never heard of him. She sounded very sincere.

I almost believed her.

In my attempt to put such grisly images out of my mind, I re-focused on what was going on in the dressing room, since this was obviously not going to be the gig I'd thought it was. A dozen or more people had come in shortly after Jeff's flamboyant entrance, and none of whom had anything to do with the lousy movie I'd just finished and I thought I was shooting stills for, even though it would probably never get released. They were all standing around transfixed as ad-man-from-hell Elliott Biddley gave one of his famous, incomprehensible pep talks.

" ... and I do mean an entire campaign to skyrocket Mr. Deane and his new concepts of men's body coverings smack into the world-renowned position he rightfully should have had years ago, if he'd have come to us first, although then, of course, we weren't part of Hankwith and Forsette even though we didn't need to be and besides, this, (sweeping gesture) this initial spread is just the very beginning, only the strictly first step toward developing public excitement over the new and innovative manly styles which will catapult the modern man out of the dreary twentieth century he's been stuck in all these years and into the truly Masculine era of today and tomorrow, which hasn't even begun yet but is just around the corner, we can't very well sit and wait for it! I mean we're talking a

whole new way of life for most of the ordinary, man-on-the-street-type-nobodies, who might almost be somebodies when they can finally secure their sexuality and thrust their force upon the world when they see not only the usual book spreads, naturally, but still, we're going to do a brilliant TV blitz, and I do mean TV as in Oprah—don't think S&M has no effect!—and soap opera, we're talking game show, we're talking sitcom, we're talking"

Five minutes later he was still talking. I know, because I roused myself long enough to glance at my watch, catch Gordon's face with its appropriately attentive expression complete with sheet-of-glass-behind-the-iris glaze, and check out Portman looking stupefied, not a tough stance for him. Exactly how long Biddley talked altogether I don't know, because twenty seconds or so later, I turned my auditory sense off again, rearranged my own facade of interest, and surreptitiously went back to sleep. Designer schlock, for God's sake! Damn that bitch, she'd suckered me again.

Fade out, fade in to Portman, meatball extraordinaire, deciding to gum up what I'd come to hope would be an old-fashioned CPX3L day—change and pose times three and leave. With a modesty unheard of in a professional hired body, he first refused to get undressed, and then, with a perverse kind of logic, to get RE-dressed. What's more, the child had opinions, many opinions, all of which he apparently thought the rest of us were simply dying to hear. Most of his pearls of thought, at least initially, had to do with Mr. Deane's clothing, which, as he put it, was "already made outta the wrong kinda stuff to start with, ya know, for really bitchin' dudes, ya know what I'm talkin 'bout?" Mr. Deane apparently neither knew nor cared, but his bevy of assistants did. They sniffed and tittered around Portman until he agreed to disrobe and climb into costume just to get them away. After all, as he so delicately put it, "Hey, I don't want no fuckin' homos puttin' their gemy paws on me."

Having finally condescended to be "prepped"—a term that made me feel I was being readied for surgery—Portman allowed his delightful personality to expand on the set. This was an error. I hadn't quite figured out yet what was really going on, but I did know that none of us—Gordon, Doug Wilson, whose studio we were in, or me—normally did this kind of tacky, penny-ante gig anymore. Besides, there were at least twenty people too many milling about to make sense. I also knew the bitch had all three of us under some kind of contract. The name on the door says "Management," but she still keeps her license—God forbid somebody else should take that extra five percent. She was in that never-

never land of having not totally cut off the one enterprise yet because she wasn't fully established enough in the other, and I, as usual, was caught somehow in-between. Either she had personally put money behind Deane—give me a break—or something stupid (read “makes-money-for-Suki”) was going on. Considering the two possibilities, there was only one possibility, and since I'd long ago figured out there's always more going down than I know about—even when I'm sure I know exactly what is going down—I wasn't about to waste any energy trying to figure out what the hell was really going down. It was just one more reason to give serious consideration to that career move Greg wants me to make, especially since the guy from MCA must have “dropped around” the set of my last stinko flick about a dozen times. “He's just being friendly,” I told Suki the one time she bothered to show up. I hope she's worried.

Yeah, right.

Cut to the set, where Doug was trying to maneuver around too many people to get a few simple shots. I like Doug. He's a total professional, which means he'll make the pix work no matter how ludicrous the gig, or how little the pay. He doesn't take any shit, though—definitely not someone to fool around with. Either no one had informed Portman of this fact, or he was just too stupid to comprehend it.

My money was on the stupid.

Obviously intent on perfecting his boorish technique, Portman simply wouldn't stand still, much less shut up. At one point, I considered taping his lips together to see if it would stall his motor, but he was bigger than me—everybody's bigger than me—and I don't get paid extra to get beaten up. By eleven forty-five Doug's jaw was so tight, his ears were white.

“Mr. Portman,” he menaced, “I realize my short experience of only thirty-two years in the photography business cannot compensate for your overwhelming youthful knowledge, but I must point out that I have a schedule. All these good people have schedules. Even you, believe it or not, have to perform on schedule, if you wish to be reimbursed for your time today. Therefore, please put your right hand on Mr. Gordon's shoulder, like so, your left hand on the top of your thigh, like this, lean back slightly, and smile.”

Cut to comic interlude, keystone-cop style. Portman starts to protest. Doug tells him to shut up. Portman spins around to relay this command to the multitudes. Doug starts for Portman's throat. Portman sidesteps him neatly, calls for everyone to let the photographer through. Close-up on Doug's face turning purple.

By this time, most of us were doubled up laughing, always the last straw for Mr. On-The-Clock Wilson. Throwing his hands into the air—maybe to keep them off Portman's neck, I don't know—he bellowed, "Lunch!" What followed was like a stone dropping into a pool. The waves of humanity spread outward from the center toward the various doors until, in less than a minute, all that was left was the stone. I, of course, was part of that stone, as were the other two models, we being the only toys sold separately. The rest had melted away into the sunlight to find liquid, powder, or chocolate fortification, depending on their wont. It was just me on my own with Mr. Teeth and the walking lobotomy.

(I realize I could avoid this if I would just gather together my own entourage—and I would, too, if I could ever figure out what other use a bunch of goof balls slobbering over me all the time could possibly be.)

In any event, Gordon and I retired to the dressing room, he to read some book, me to sack out, while Portman stood in the middle of the set looking confused—and trust me, he's got the look down. At that point, I probably should have latched the door behind me and left him safely locked in the studio, but the thought hadn't occurred to me.

Yet.

Just as I settled my weary body onto the softness of Doug's wonderfully luxurious feather lounge and was about to drift off, Portman loped through the door and set up a racket with a large paper bag he'd hidden in his duffel. I propped myself up on one elbow to witness him pull out two corned-beef sandwiches, a full-size bag of potato chips, a liter of Coke, and a sackful of Famous Amos chocolate-chip cookies. Before I could even find my voice, Gordon piped up. His eyes were as wide as Frisbees.

"You're not gonna down all that, are you?" he asked in an awed whisper. "You do realize you can't possibly go back to work with so much crap in your gut?"

“Fuck off,” came the well-thought-out reply.

Cut to dream sequence. Doug walks onto set, sees Portman blown up into a Macy’s parade balloon, seams straining, chocolate dripping down one corner of his mouth. As Mr. Deane faints at the sight and his gaggle cluster around him cutting off all air, Doug throttles Portman, then produces an Uzi and sprays the crowd. Every time one asst.’s ass goes down, two more spring up, until there’s blood everywhere and Gordon sits laughing hysterically in the corner. In the background, Biddley’s voice drones ever on: “accessory to murder, I saw the whole thing, Officer, he never once tried to stop him, he was the star, he makes movies, it’s all his fault, he’s sucking all the money out of all of us, all of us, there he is, it was all that actor’s fault!”

Cut back to dressing room. I decided to speak up in Gordon’s defense.

“Jeff,” I started. “Uh, it is Jeff, isn’t it? What Howard’s trying to say is, with your build, the suits are already kind of snug. If you down all that food, there’s no way you’re going to squeeze back into that jacket—and the pants aren’t going to hang too well, either.”

“It’s like eating during the fifth inning,” Gordon picked up. “You gotta go into the game pretty empty, sport, and eat after the wrap. You know, when the fat lady sings?”

“Fuck off, asshole. You too, fruitcake. Only in California could either one of you assholes have a chance. Back home my boys woulda cut you two fags up in pieces and brung me the livers. I ain’t stupid, ya know, I’ve been doin’ this kinda shit for years, fuckin’ years, and I get all the fuckin’ trades, so it ain’t like I gotta listen to anything either one of you fuckheads got to say.”

“Really?” I countered, although why, I’ll never know. “Exactly what fucking trades do you read?”

“Well, shit, man, if you don’t know, it just goes to show ya.”

Gordon and I exchanged looks as I considered Portman’s point, or lack thereof. Gordon was beginning to disturb me; he’d been watching me so closely all morning, I felt like I was under a microscope. It couldn’t be sex—the vibes were wrong. Was he a spy for Suki? I shook the thought out of my head and

turned back to the brainless brute. “You know,” I said, “I follow the trades myself—Billboard, Variety, Hollywood Reporter and such. And I read the advertising rags, most of the photo trades, weeklies like Opportunities for Actors & Models, that sort of thing, and the fashion and salon monthlies like GQ and M and the rest. Any of those sound familiar?”

Portman’s eyes looked rather glassy at the end of the list; I’d hoped the length would have given him an out without having to cry uncle, but, obviously, I “didn’t know nothing, man.”

“Yeah, well, like that ain’t the fuckin’ kinda stuff I’m talkin’ about,” he spat at me, “cause I don’t read no California shit.”

I turned to Gordon. “That ain’t the fucking kinda stuff he’s talking about, Mr. Gordon. He don’t read no California shit. What kind of fucking shit do you suppose he is talking about?”

Gordon didn’t answer, because Gordon was laughing so hard he couldn’t talk. I hadn’t thought the line was quite that funny, but as they say, when life gives you lemons Besides, it was a refreshing change from his dissecting stare, and good audiences are hard to find in the trenches. Since I couldn’t talk any sense into Portman, I decided to keep Gordon in stitches. “I’ll bet I know what kind of fucking stuff it is—he must read beyond me to the more sophisticated stuff, like Teen Beat.”

I had another semi-hilarious line I was going to use to keep Gordon howling, but I didn’t get the chance. Portman, it seemed, had apparently had all he was about to take from us “homo slimepits.” He plunged into a tirade on the “fuckin’ facts of life,” to wit: doing this spread was just pocket money “onaccounta” he was “inked in” to do the “TV strip” which would so “fuckin’ dazzle” the “Hollywood power Jews” that soon after, evidently without prompting, he’d be offered—that is, “fuckin’ covered”—with “more than hundreds” of highly lucrative—excuse me, “mondo buck”—roles in either TV, motion pictures, or that apex of all aspirations, MTV. Furthermore, he knew all this to be true, “onaccounta” he had “what it takes and lots more, too,” and besides, he had his “she-agent” wrapped around his cock to make him a star, so just what the fuck did we think of that?

Frankly, I didn't think much of it, and as Gordon seemed to be speechless himself, Portman, in what I know in my heart had to be his version of utter disdain, tromped deliberately over and shredded one of his corned-beef sandwiches on my chest, turned on his heel and walked out. I looked at Gordon, he looked at me, and it was all over.

By the time the rest of the bozos came back from lunch, Gordon and I were so weak from laughing neither of us could stand up. It was worth the dressing down Doug gave us, it was even worth missing my nap. We were both so totally out of control that when Biddley demanded to know where Portman was, we lost it again.

The shoot never really got going again—as if it had ever started. Not only were we (mercifully) one body short, one of the techs had gotten so wasted at lunch that he knocked over the scrim as he zigzagged toward the john. I wasn't sure if he was looking to hide out or puke, but it didn't matter, because by then Gordon was literally on his knees laughing and the tears were rolling down my face, screwing up all the new makeup I'd just had plastered on. Doug eventually declared the whole day hopeless, hissed at Gordon and me to “Get out, goddammit!” and “Get a hold, goddammit!” and “Be on time for once tomorrow, goddammit!” and stomped off toward his office, muttering something that sounded like a death plot against Suki. Within micromoments, the place was deserted again save for one tech who stayed at least another three or four nanoseconds to secure the set, and some girl who was “helping” the guy who'd tossed his cookies out to her car—to drive him home, she said. Uh huh.

Cut to the dressing room, where Gordon and I were supervised by one of Deane's creatures until we'd relinquished possession of his master's creations—incredibly ordinary dark-blue worsted suits, to tell the truth—and then left alone to “handle” ourselves. I didn't need to be anywhere in particular and since Gordon didn't seem to be in a hurry either, the two of us took our time pulling on our own pants and washing our faces. As I was lounging against the far wall waiting for him to tie his Reeboks, who should appear in the outer doorway but Mr. Jeffrey Portman himself, back from wherever he'd gone and sporting the same glower as before.

“Too fuckin' lazy to get back on the set?” he sneered. “Fuckin' lazyass California faggots!”

"Yup, that's right," I said with a straight face, interrupting Howard, who I could see was itching to tell the cretin off. "Out here, our motto is 'surf and sand over sweat and slave any time, every time.'"

"Actually," Howard added quickly, "since you weren't here, they called the game. What else was there to do?"

Nicely phrased, I thought, and not entirely untrue. Portman, of course, took it exactly as expected.

"Assholes," he gloated. "Fucking California homo fag dickheads!" With that, he strode across to the studio door, threw it open, and presented himself—to a dark, empty studio. At that precise moment, Howard, his shoes finally tied, lost his balance as he straightened, thereby accidentally throwing his full weight against the closing door.

"Oops!"

"You ought to be more careful," I said as I helped him lean against the door. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, no, I'm fine, thanks," he said. Somewhere—it might have been from inside the studio, I'm not certain—a voice was yelling and a fist pounding.

"Do you hear ... what's that?" Howard said, making his eyes go wide. "Sheesh, it sounds dangerous, maybe even violent."

"This can be a bad neighborhood," I countered with a straight face. "We'd better get out of here and make sure everything is locked." I reached down and flipped the deadbolt, securing the door from bulging outward as it had been attempting to do. "That should do it, don't you think?"

"Won't Doug be proud," Howard said. "Every time I work with him, he gets on my case about being responsible. Maybe he'll treat us to a ballgame tomorrow."

"Even better—maybe he'll fire us."

"Even better."

As I watched Howard jog around the corner toward the back parking lot, I climbed into my own car right out front with a feeling of great relief and contentment. I'd gotten the primo parking spot. The stupid gig had been canceled. There was still plenty of time to get in a decent workout before Greg got home. All in all, this was turning out to be one fine, Baker-comes-out-on-top-for-once day.

Ha.

2

Howard

"So what's he like?"

"Who, the kid? He's an idiot."

"No, Eric Baker."

"Just a guy, I guess."

Actually, I'd memorized about half a dozen of his expressions and reactions for my own use later, but I wasn't about to tell that to my star-struck wife.

"He wasn't funny, like on the talk shows? I always figured he'd be even more gorgeous in person than on TV."

I thought about the way the day had ended, both of us laughing so hard Doug had called the shoot. I thought about what he'd looked like when I first walked in the door, eyes closed, leaning against the wall, every female in the place watching, watching. I thought about the way Mr. Biddley, who I think is gay, had almost drooled when he took his shirt off.

"Nah, nothing special, just like the rest of us. Puts his pants on one leg at a time."

"You saw him without his pants on?!"

I looked at my wife dolefully. I had my own mixed emotions about Baker, a guy who hadn't really made the big time, but that every man, woman and child in America had seen. A lot of people had seen me, too, but I never got stopped

on the street by women trying to tear my clothes off. I'd probably done more straight acting than him, plays, walk-ons, that two-week soap part, but I'd never been nominated for a Best Actor in a Mini-Series Emmy. I'd done my share of provocative poses in ads and commercials, too, but I'd never gained instant national recognition by doing nothing more than staring into the lens. What did he have that I didn't, as if I didn't know. His eyes were blue, his skin tanned but white, not red. I couldn't think of any other answer. Well, I was going to change all that.

"Oh, yeah, there is one thing about him I didn't expect."

"Yeah? Yeah?"

"He's short."

Sharon made a face at me, turned back to cleaning carrots. I don't know why she makes cooked carrots all the time. None of us likes them. I moved across the kitchen, slid my hands up her shoulders.

"Umm, right there, rub. A little harder. Umm, that feels good." She stopped with the carrots to luxuriate in my backrub. I let my hands wander down her chest for a little nipple rub. She leaned back into me, tilted her face back to be kissed. I picked her up, was just about to carry her to the bedroom for some long-overdue privacy time when our oldest came crashing in from outside.

"Mom, can we have some cookies?"

"Go outside and play; your mother and I are busy."

"I was asking Mom. Just two apiece, okay?"

"No, not okay. Put those back. Howard, please."

I put my wife down on her feet.

"No cookies, I'm making dinner, it'll be ready in a little while."

"What's for dinner?"

"Turkey burgers, carrots, and mashed potatoes."

“Ugh! Carrots! I hate carrots. Do I have to eat the carrots?”

“Go outside, Neil. You’re supposed to be watching your brother.”

“I am watching him. He’s not going anywhere. I tied him to the back fence with the dog chain.”

I didn’t wait to hear Sharon’s answer to that one. I ran out to the fence to find Jake on his hands and knees, scampering back and forth in a little circle, barking. Around his neck was the choker collar we use for our big German Shephard. The dog, freed from his tether, was nowhere to be found, of course. With every turn, the line got more twisted, the collar a bit tighter. Thank God he has a small neck. “What’s going on, sport? How come you’re in the dog house?” I kept my voice calm, fumbled with the links, finally managed to slip the collar off my smiling three-year-old’s throat.

“Neil’s gonna get me a dog cookie if I’m good and stay in the yard.”

“Neil’s gonna get a whopping if he chains you up again. Where’s Mutt?”

“He went to visit his girlfriend.”

“Great.”

I carried Jake to the house thinking how much lighter he was than the last person I’d just had in my arms, it felt an eternity ago. I set him down in the kitchen. “Tell your brother to help you get cleaned up for dinner.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Turkey burgers and mashed potatoes. You don’t have to eat the carrots.”

“Oh boy!” He took off chanting, “I don’t hafta eat the carrots!” at the top of his lungs all the way upstairs. Sharon’s sigh drowned him out.

“Why did you tell him that?”

“Neil had him in the choker collar, couple more times around the yard and he would’ve choked himself. What did you do to Neil?”

"I told him you'd be up in a minute to give him a beating."

"Great."

I didn't beat my son, I never beat my son. That may be his biggest problem, he probably needs it. I know Sharon thinks I'm not really helping because I don't ever clobber him, but I wasn't brought up with it, I wouldn't know how to do it. I suppose she was, but I can't put that on her. She's carrying enough weight on her shoulders already. Instead of tanning his bottom, I had a heart-to-heart with Neil about the dangers of what he did, and how precious his little brother is to us, and how bad he'd feel if anything ever really happened to Jake. Neil was five. Long ago he had figured out how to let me go on and on without ever being affected by what I say. By the time Sharon called out that dinner was ready, I'd gotten a promise that he wouldn't chain Jake up again, but I could see the wheels going around in the back of his head, already planning what to do to his dutiful little brother next. Maybe I ought to get Jake karate lessons, I mused. Or maybe I ought to just leave. I've always known, deep down, that one day I'd take a walk and not come back. All this family stuff's probably what's holding back my career, keeping me from making the mark people like Baker and Stava and all those others are doing. Maybe I've gotten to that day, maybe it's time to leave. Or teach Jake how to kick his brother in the balls. One or the other.

I'll bet Baker doesn't have these kinds of problems. I'll bet he lives all alone in complete peace and solitude, gets any woman any time he wants her, goes back to blissful quiet and calm. If I had all that, I probably could be up for an Emmy, too. It's all this stress, the kids, the lack of sex, the depression that's constantly draped around my wife like a shroud. If I changed my life, my career would probably take off. I'd be the one in constant demand, the one dictating where and how much and when. I'm better looking than him, and taller. A lot taller. He's not such a big deal. I'll bet half of Neil's problem is that he's half-breed, never really knowing who he is, where he belongs. He'd be better off among all whites. Besides, Sharon'd handle Jake better without me hanging around anyway, I'm probably a lousy role model. That's it, then. After everybody goes to bed tonight, I'm out of here.

I sprang out of my daydream at Jake's blood-curdling scream. Coarse white muck was dripping out of his nose, hanging off his fingers. His face was contorted to go along with his howling as Sharon squatted by his side to help.

"I said I wonder what it would taste like, I didn't tell him to do it!" Neil managed to yell his protest loud enough to be heard even over Jake's wailing.

"What would taste like what?"

"What it would taste like to stick mashed potatoes up your nose. But I didn't tell him to do it, I just said I wonder."

"Go to your room!" my wife and I said almost in unison.

"All-in-all, that was a pretty quiet dinner, better than most." It was later, the kitchen was a battlefield of dishes, pans and cutlery. Jake and Neil were both upstairs, pounding and jumping around, making the house shake, nothing to worry about, Neil does his worst under cover of whispers. Sharon was hunched over the table muttering inaudibly to herself, her head in her hands. She'd been doing a lot of that lately, too much stress from the kids, her job. Maybe it would be better if I took Jesus' offer after I passed the bar exam. I wrapped myself around her from behind, trying to recapture the mood we'd lost light-years ago. We were almost there when Jake's voice rose again.

"Mommy, Neil's making me jump off your dresser and it's too high!"

There went that massive sigh again. I started for the stairs but Sharon called me back, said she'd go. The set of her face made it pretty plain we'd just lost our last chance for the night. I started rinsing dishes. I'll leave a note, I decided. "Goodbye. We had a good run, but all gigs end. I'll send money when I can." In the middle of the kitchen table, on top of all those law books. I never really wanted to be a lawyer anyway, not now, not with my career just about to break wide open.

I sneaked one last peak at the boys before I left. It was late, after ten, the house was incredibly quiet. Neil looked almost angelic, arms and legs flung everywhere, his soft cheeks round with innocence, his rosebud mouth so calm. I worked the crumpled sheet and comforter from under one leg, got them up over both legs and half his chest before he flipped in his sleep to uncover again. His cheek pressed against the pillow, pushing his lips into a wondrous "O." I pushed the lump in my throat down with a hard swallow, knelt to kiss the top of Jake's head poking out from under mounds of blankets. His tightly curled body made a little round lump in the precise middle of the bed. He answered a dream with a

murmur, curled a little tighter, smiled into his fist. An ache started in my throat, made its way down into my chest, over my heart.

I saw Jake's eyes wide, staring at Sharon in the morning as she explained that no, Daddy wasn't home for breakfast, and he wouldn't be home for dinner either, not today, not tomorrow, not the day after that. I saw Neil's face twist to stop the tears, saw him start throwing things around the living room, pummeling his brother to get out his fury.

He's really a good kid, I reasoned, he's just got too much of my grandfather's spirit. He needs more guidance, a firmer hand. It's the father that makes the difference dad had said when I'd called him for advice once.

I crawled into bed next to Sharon. She was on her side, facing the other way. I squirmed under her like a spoon, stroked her breasts, kissed her neck. Her body came alive, nipples up, skin warm, soft heavy breathing, little murmurs, just like Jake. She squeezed my balls at just the right time, gave a wonderful sigh, settled back into her pillow, heart-melting smile, so snug. Waves of guilt rolled over me. She worked so hard, had such a tough time with the kids. I wasn't helping enough. It's the father that makes the difference, it's the father that makes the difference. I'd have to do more, take a firmer hand.

I fell asleep looking out over a sea of faces, hundreds of people standing and applauding, a golden statue heavy in my hand. Suddenly, the statue exploded, the people ran from the hall in every direction screaming, screaming, drowned out only by the blaring sirens. I opened my eyes. My hand was sticky and gooped up. Sharon was still asleep, the house still quiet. It was four o'clock, I knew without looking. I always woke up at four o'clock, if I woke up at all, ever since that night. I could leave now, I realized, just like then. Sneak out just like I'd done that four o'clock in the morning with Monty.

Monty. Talk about going from one extreme to the other. I met him during my last vacation as an undergrad. I had a part-time job in Newport Beach, down in Orange County, standing around the men's section of a Fashion Island store twenty hours a week, helping rich executives decide what shirt to buy. It covered the rent. Three other guys and I had a tiny apartment right on the beach, white sand, blue skies, bikini heaven directly out the front door. It was supposed to be my last shot at having the ultimate good-time summer.

A female executive came in the second Thursday I was on the job. She had lots of cash to spend on her rich hubby, just about my size. "Try on a few things for me, young man, I'll make it worth your while." She fingered a twenty dollar bill. I stripped down in the changing room, turned around to find her standing there. She smelled like "Charley," tasted like champagne, laughed at how far down I blushed. I tried on four suits, she bought them all. My boss came strolling by just as I rang up the final sale.

"Kevin, you've got quite a find in this young man. I'd keep my eye on him if I were you. He's been a ... marvelous help."

At the end of my shift, Mr. Crupp took me aside. "I've decided to have you represent the department in our next fashion show, a week from tomorrow. You'll get time-and-a-half. The audience is usually top-heavy with women. Keep up the good work." He slapped me on the back. It wasn't until I got home that I realized I never gotten that twenty dollar bill.

The audience wasn't top-heavy with women, it was all women. Only one man besides my boss showed up. Half-way through the show, Mr. Crupp took me aside again, told me to be careful afterwards. I didn't know what he meant, then found a three-pack of condoms in my hip pocket. The show ended at three, I couldn't get out of the store fast enough, but this guy, Montham Weitzer from the audience, caught up with me. "I've been shopping for some new material, I think you can help me." He offered to take me to dinner. It was a free meal and I needed food, badly.

"Kid, I've been in this business a long time, and I know talent when I see it. And I saw it today." He winked a lot. Later I found out it was nervous, not symbolic.

"Listen, kid, you've got a great future ahead of you, a great future. Legit, yeah, don't worry about a thing. Especially with me, kid, I know the ropes. All you gotta do is put in some time, that's all, just trust me. Hey, you start by doing a little modeling here, a little posing there, then it's on to the big stuff, acting, Hollywood, all that stuff. Only one in a million's got it, kid, and you're that one, not too ethnic, but what a build, what cheekbones! The girls are gonna eat you up. I'm always looking for new talent, kid, what's your name?"

Monty offered to keep me busy all summer long. "You only have to take it as far as you want, kid. We'll know within a few months if you've really got what it takes. In the meantime, we're talking a hell of a lot better deal than the, what, five-sixty-five an hour you're making now?"

"I'm not interested in anything risqué."

"No problem! I only do legit stuff. Takes you farther anyway."

"I have to think about it. Is there someplace I can call you in a couple of days?"

"Sure, kid, sure. And while you're thinking, here, mull over this two hundred dollars."

"What's that for?"

"Well, frankly, kid, I already got a job for you. Saw an old friend of mine at the next table today, and I told her I'm your agent. This is just an advance. She needs you to show up at her photographer's studio wearing shorts and a print shirt, you know, a surfer's shirt, flaps open, I can get you one if you don't got one already. All you gotta do is make nice with a surfboard, understand? You're plugging the wax. Do you surf? You don't gotta, of course. All you gotta do is smile at the camera, point at the board, that sort of thing. The job pays four hundred, twenty-five dollars altogether, less my ten percent, less the two hundred I'm fronting you. The shoot's day after tomorrow in Costa Mesa. Here's the address. I can get work for you till you're crying for a break. Whaddaya say?"

In my heart I was sure it was a con, but in my hand he'd counted out two hundred dollars in twenty dollar bills.

"Congratulations, kid, you're an actor."

Monty was true to his word, kept me busy all the time. I did industrial shoots, I filled seats at televised benefits, I did some more floor shows. The surfboard wax people liked me, had me do a local cable spot but it got scrapped. Monty said not to take it personally.

“Listen, kid, you need acting lessons. You’re okay in the stills, but when you gotta say something or move, you stink to high heavens. It’s not worth putting money into now. Take some drama classes next term. We’ll keep you away from video for the rest of the summer. Couple, three, four months, I’ll know if you can cut it. Otherwise, hey, you got plenty of good years in the rags ahead of you. How old are you? Catalogs, business rags, industrial stuff, you can keep it up till you’re old and gray, at least long enough to make some decent cash. Besides, if you age craggy, think of the possibilities! Put your dough away, get your degree, you’ll have a bankroll to start another career. Keep this up on the side even if you never learn to talk. Meanwhile, I got plenty work for you.”

His honesty was a blow. I was used to doing everything easier, faster and better than anyone else around. I resolved to prove him wrong, spent whatever time I wasn’t working reading up on how to act. I must have memorized a dozen books before the end of the summer. Between the two activities I had no chance to catch my breath, no chance to do anything a healthy virile young man thinks about doing during summer vacation spent at the beach, blush or no blush. My roommates were either living off their parents or their own morning jobs. They spent their afternoons lying on the beach laughing, talking, drinking, swapping sun-tan lotion with every girl in sight. I fell asleep nightly to the sound of them making it with one sun-baked bikini after another. As the weeks went on, I was having less and less of a good-time summer.

It all came to a head this one particularly sticky night toward the end of the summer when the photo session for a line of tuxes for the next year’s prom season finished particularly late. Monty offered to let me crash at his place. “Hey, kid, no need to go all the way down to Newport, I got a huge place in Santa Monica. It’ll do you good to get away from all the frustrations of that beach house. It’s gotta be tough getting to sleep surrounded by all those orgasms. I’ve got lots of room.”

All the way out to his place Monty talked about his business. He’d just signed Cynthia Teje, “a real comer. She can move, you know, not like you, she doesn’t go Frankenstein on me. You don’t have to worry about that, though, because you’ve got class, lots more class than her. She’d never have gotten out of the double X’s if I hadn’t stepped in, I’m not even sure now what I can do with her. Her rep’s all smeared at this point. If I’d gotten her earlier, well, who knows! Still, you never can tell, I’m keeping her in work. She wants more money, doesn’t everybody? But what the hell, you do what you can. Not like you, kid,

you got class, I can push that and the face and the teeth and the build for years yet. Keep working out, kid, that's the answer, only don't go rippled on me. I don't do that kind of stuff."

In his living room, Monty showed me a picture of Cynthia. She had long hair, kind of copper blonde, tear-drop eyes, a cartoon-perfect face, shape. "She did a layout for Playboy but it didn't get picked up. This shows you just what I'm talking about. She wasn't being handled right. You need an agent, kid, that's the only way to get anywhere today. No more freelancers left. You'll wind up doing this kind of stuff." He passed over some different pictures of Cynthia, winking all the while. I stared at them, grateful that the intensity of heat I felt was always somewhat dimmed by the color of my skin. My mouth was very dry, though, and the bulge in my pants was getting uncomfortable. When I shifted around in my chair, Monty caught the move.

"You know, kid, this man's efforts have taken you from nowhere and put you into some pretty exciting and profitable situations. I've got plans for you, real plans, big plans, even if you stay worthless when the red light goes on. I can still make you a star of the stills, get you on every cover in the rack! But look at you, you're already starting to look run-down! Run-down gets me worried, kid. Why, it'd make any agent worry. Your health is important to me, now that makes sense, does it? Strictly a matter of dollars and sense. A happy model is money in the bank, but a tired model is like a limp dick at an orgy. What's the point?"

"Now, if you're having trouble obtaining adequate release from the frustrations of young manhood, an obviously important part of maintaining a healthy physique—well, kid! Yours truly can see to it that you are well taken care of, in a most satisfying manner. You just say the word."

He winked at me sideways, gestured with a handful of Teje. I'd gotten this same speech once from a frat brother during my sophomore year. Reading for mid-terms, I'd found out one instructor was testing off his lectures instead of the book. I hadn't gone to any lectures. I completely stressed out. Chuck only laughed, found me somebody's notes and offered his own brand of relaxation therapy, in a cat house. Monty's got to be talking about something along the same lines, I figured, what else? Over some very sweet, very potent wine, he showed me his bedroom. It looked like something straight out of a smut magazine, mirrors over the bed, a blown-up poster of Cynthia Teje at the head.

She was naked with her knees up and open, her breasts hanging between. "Get comfortable, I gotta go make a phone call." I still hadn't realized the truth about his wink. My good-time summer fun is about to begin, I congratulated myself, getting braced to go through with it all, no matter what. It's about time I grew up. I kicked off my clothes, took a timid hit on the joint Monty'd left in the ashtray, crawled under the sheets and waited.

Later, I realized I could have left at any time. I just couldn't believe it was really happening. This kind of stuff only goes on in books, I kept telling myself. What's he doing now? That feels ... should I kick his teeth in? Oh God ... no, not like this, I'm no ... oh, God, oh, oh, God. No, don't tie me up ... God, I can't believe this is happening, I've got to get out of here. No, I've gotta go, oh God, don't do that, that feels ... oh God, I'm going to ... oh God, no, no, oh, no, oh oh, oh God.

My nose was practically on the clock's face when I woke up on my belly. Four a.m. A stray feather flicked and leaped in time to Monty's snoring. I knew I had to get away, get back down to Newport before anyone saw me. I got my clothes together, crept out of the house, hot-wired his car, took off down the freeway at ninety miles an hour. Two blocks away from the beach, I parked his pristine nineteen sixty-three Triumph classic on a side road thinking it would be inconspicuous enough nobody'd notice. I ran to the apartment, locked the door, closed and locked all the windows, flung myself into the shower. I stayed in there scrubbing at my organ until somebody started to bang on the bathroom door. I couldn't feel my dick. This is what happens, I fretted, how could I have let him do that? How could a man's tongue feel so ... ? Oh, God, talk about your mortal sin! Please, Lord, let it come back to life, I'll never stray off the straight and narrow again, I swear, I swear, I swear!

Things got pretty weird after that. I lost my job at the department store. My roommates thought I wanted the time to bikini hunt, I couldn't even look at the sand without throwing up. I got away from them in the shower, ended up taking one long shower after another all day, into the night. It was still two weeks till summer was over. I drove up to see Chuck at his folk's house in Santa Barbara, they were in Europe. I got to his place around noon, he opened the door wearing nothing but pajama bottoms.

"Howard! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I let this guy ... I let this guy"

"Mug you?"

"No."

"Hit you?"

"No, no."

"Uh, fuck you?"

"Well, more like, uh, like ... "

"Suck you off?"

I must have been glowing by then, he knew he'd hit the mark. "Oh yeah? How was it?"

"I ... that is, I ... well, I ... came."

"Oh yeah?"

"Like a volcano."

"Really? How'd he do it?"

By now I was so bright red, I just closed my eyes and said it. "He tied me up with velvet ropes, poured wine on my balls and licked it off."

"Hey, I gotta remember that for tonight with Lila. Thanks for the tip. Anything else?"

"I think I'm queer, I had an orgasm with a man."

"Right. You wanna suck my cock?"

I shook my head.

"Then give me a break."

He closed the door in my face. I drove back to Newport, took a shower.