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THE

HORSE- MAN

OBSESSIONS OF A ZOOPHILE

Mark Matthews

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FOREWORD

Vern L. Bullough

The first recorded instance of bestiality in the United States (usually defined as contact between human and animal genitals) took place in 1642 in a village near Plymouth Colony. Thomas Granger, a sixteen-or seventeen-year-old servant, confessed and was found guilty of having sex with a mare, a cow, two goats, five sheep, two calves, and a turkey. All the animals involved were slaughtered and burned in a great pit, although there was difficulty in identifying the exact five sheep. Granger himself was executed on September 8, 1642.¹

The incident emphasizes the horror and fear traditionally attached to animal-human contact in American and Western society in general. Bestiality in the popular imagination was associated with witchcraft and satanic cults, and-horror of horrors-it was believed that it could result in the birth of monsters. Animal-human sexual contacts have a long history. They were forbidden in the Bible, which stipulates the death penalty both for the human perpetrator (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 20:15-16) and for the animals involved.

Despite the dread and loathing associated with it, folklore about bestiality is ancient, widespread, and enduring. Greek mythology tells of the god Zeus becoming a swan to seduce Leda, a bull to abduct Europa, and an eagle to carry off the beautiful youth Ganymede. A modern myth attributes the death of the empress Catherine the Great of Russia to a mishap resulting from her attempt to have coitus with a bull (or horse). Literary references abound ranging from *Beauty and the Beast*, regarded as suitable for children (and Disney), to the ape as lover in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* and the swans in the ballet *Swan Lake*. The late comedian Lenny Bruce recited, "Psychopathia Sexualis, /I'm in love with a horse which comes from Dallas . . ." while the Woody Allen movie *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* shows a psychiatrist falling in love with a sheep named Daisy, the public discovery of which drives him to the gutter and to attempt suicide.² Artists have also portrayed animal-human contacts, often drawn from classical mythology, such as the frequently depicted meeting of Leda and the Swan. But there are others. In the twentieth century one of Picasso's more famous etchings is a portrayal of sex on a classical theme between a centaur and a woman.

There has, however, been little serious study of actual sexual contacts between animals and humans. We have not even agreed on the terms to use. Among the current terms, each of which represents a different aspect of animal-human sexual contacts, are *zoophilia*, stroking or petting an animal as an erotic stimulus; *bestiality*, defined above; *zooerasty*, direct sexual contact as in bestiality but with a decidedly pathological component; and *mixoscopic zoophilia*, sexual pleasure derived from watching animals copulate. The behavior has in the past also been labeled as *sodomy* and *buggery*.

Alfred Kinsey, who reported on its incidence among his respondents, called it "animal contacts" to avoid any judgmental terms. About 8 percent of the males in the Kinsey sample reported having had sexual experience with animals, but rates among boys raised on farms were considerably higher: about 17 percent of farm boys experienced sexual arousal to the point of orgasm and an equal percentage had animal contacts that did not result in orgasm. Farm boys most frequently used calves and sheep while urban residents turned to household pets, most often dogs.³ Kinsey found that almost all of those who reported animal-human contacts as adolescents had abandoned such practices as adults and that sex with animals was usually not the preferred means of sexual gratification. Perhaps for this reason he considered the laws against animal-human contacts unrealistic, and suggested that the incidence closely paralleled that of

seeking a prostitute or a person of the same sex as a partner. In his mind the phenomenon probably should not even be classed as a paraphilia.

In the *Horseman*, the narrator reports that when he was a teenager, he was discovered having sex with a mare by a neighbor, who consoled him by telling him it was better to have sex with a horse than to violate virgins or go around raping women. This incident rings true and would seem to give support to Kinsey's data about farm boys. Sex with animals was part of growing up for many of them.

Girls, on the other hand, according to Kinsey, had far fewer animal contacts than boys, whether they lived in rural or urban areas. He found that girls on farms were even kept from observing the breeding of animals, and as a result were far less interested in animal sexuality than boys. Still, about 16 percent of the females in the Kinsey group reported that they had experienced an erotic response when observing mating animals,⁴ about half as many as reported in the male sample. Among females who did have such contacts, household pets were usually the source. Only thirteen females in the total sample of 5,793 females had reached orgasm more than three times with animals at the time of the study, although one female had reached orgasm perhaps nine hundred times! In spite of this exceptional woman, the studies on women emphasize how much reality differs from fantasy since much of the fantasy literature deals with women having sex with animals when, in fact, few do. Like so many other forms of variant sexual behavior, it is men who are usually involved or in the case of animal contacts, boys, since few adult males continue sexual liaisons with animals.

This is what makes the *Horseman* such a valuable book. It helps the reader understand that the narrator, who loves and has sex with a pony, is not an ogre, not a monster, but rather a person who struggled to come to terms with what he is. Even though the author engages in sexual behavior that is not socially sanctioned, he eventually comes to live a useful and, in some ways, even a happy life. The pseudonymous Mark Matthews tells us better than any case study can do, how he came to recognize what he is. This confession, from a man who was once a minister, was married, and fathered two children, is somewhat fictionalized in that the dialogue is not recorded but recreated. None-the-less, it has the ring of authenticity.

One of the points the book demonstrates is how, all too often in our society, there is a wide gap between the sexes. I am not certain the author ever came to understand that women are real persons, that they have feelings and thoughts of their own, which are very similar to those of men, and that they are neither saints nor sinners, but simply people. Unfortunately, Mark Matthews' ideas about the opposite sex are common among adolescent boys, and many of them do not change their opinions as adults. This is a tragedy of major proportions in our society and Matthews' solution is perhaps only an extreme variant of what other men have adopted.

I believe that *The Horseman* represents an honest attempt of a man to come to terms with what he is. This is one of the purposes of Prometheus' series on sexual autobiography, of which this book is a part. Matthews portrays the basic thought processes involved in ultimately deciding to take a pony as a sexual partner, and gives us descriptions of animal-human sexual contacts that few of us have ever contemplated before. Moreover, the author's ability to come to terms with himself has led him to try to help others, who want and need help, to form groups of similarly interested people by means of a computer network. Perhaps as some of these previously unknown people come forward, we will come to understand even better the varieties of human sexuality.

I strongly recommend the book to my colleagues in the helping professions; I think it will give them new insights and understanding. I also recommend it to any reader who is trying to

understand some of the greater mysteries of human sexuality.

Notes

1. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth* (Boston: Published by order of the General Court, William White, Printer to the Commonwealth, 1855-61), vol. 2, p. 44, and William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1898), vol. 2, p. 44.

2. I am indebted to Martha Cornog and Timothy Perper, "Bestiality," in *Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 60-63, for many of these references.

3. Alfred Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B.: Saunders, 1948), pp. 667-78.

4. Alfred Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B.: Saunders, 1953), p. 504.

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Special thanks to two little ponies who have made my life worth living. Thanks to local friends who see beyond my oddity.

And last, but certainly not least, my thanks and love go to my mother, who, while she doesn't approve of my lifestyle, still accepts me as her son and loves me as only a mother can.

I am grateful to all of you.

Mark Matthews
September 1992

CHAPTER ONE

April 1987

The question was "why?" It had circulated in the man's mind night and day for almost a year. Why was he the way he was, so different? Why had all these terrible things happened to him? Why? He was a nice man. Why? Whether driving, repairing a piece of electronic gear, eating, or sleeping, it didn't matter. Lately, the question of "why" seemed to be coming to a head; it formed an undercurrent in his mind, flowing more and more strongly, an undertow threatening to pull him down into the depths of the sea of despair. Thus began another lonely night. . . .

He sat in the darkened room at a well-aged oak desk, scarred by heavy usage with cigarette-burn character marks on the edges, a small lamp casting a puddle of light on the left

side. The computer screen centered before him was lit, the modem active, connecting him with others around the United States.

James Falabella chuckled to himself as he read the words flowing across the face of the monitor. MR. MASTER was describing a blind date the previous weekend; he took a woman to a steak and ribs joint, not knowing she was a strict vegetarian-the results were embarrassingly, predictably funny.

These were his friends, although he didn't even know their real names. They went by "handles" or aliases. ROB 37, MR. MASTER, HONEYBUNS, and others came and went in the early morning hours as his online computer service bill ticked up at the rate of six cents per minute. James's handle was POLKA PONY, selected with private irony.

ROB 37 and HONEYBUNS were on their regular topic again, arguing about women's liberation, equal opportunity, and custody rights in American divorce.

This unwelcome reminder of his own status diminished James's good humor. Those two would be going to it for a few minutes, typing their comments in on their own keyboards, hitting the "Return" keys on their Commodore computers, then waiting for QuantumLink's mainframe system in Virginia to acknowledge their inputs and print them to the screens of all those faceless people across the country watching or participating.

James had time. He always had time. He would always make time.

Time for another small dose of forgetfulness.

James's eyes strayed to the left of his keyboard. There, in the pool of light from the lamp, lay a large, stainless steel berry spoon containing a pool of orange liquid with a chalky sediment on the bottom.

He picked up a 1-cc insulin syringe, glancing around to be sure the doors and curtains in his room were closed. He was fairly sure that his elderly parents were fast asleep in the other end of the house, but there was no use taking chances.

This is stupid. I don't want to do this. Why am I doing this when I don't want to? Put it down. Down, damn it! I won't do this! I won't! I won't!

His hands ignored his mind and, with skills earned by long practice, they quickly but carefully removed the cap guarding the needle, pulled a wisp of cotton from a swab, rolled it into a tiny ball and laid it at the edge of the orange puddle.

James's face froze into a mask of concentration as he gently slid the spoon to a position directly in front of him without disturbing the liquid enough to slop over the tiny cotton ball and bring it sliding uselessly into the insoluble trash at the bottom of the pool.

Divorce. Thirty-six years old and divorced, or about to be-as soon as James's estranged wife could afford to pay her attorney the rest of his fee, which he wisely demanded in advance, as soon as she could return to court from the western Kansas town where she and the children had moved.

She just left. Didn't tell me she was thinking of leaving, didn't say anything until she already had another job lined up, and an apartment rented. Almost sneaked away as if afraid of what I would do if I found out too soon. That's stupid! I've never hurt her or the children, although God knows I felt provoked often enough; I never raised a hand to her, much less hit her. Why did she always think the worst of whatever I said, whatever I did, even though her prejudiced view was usually proven wrong?

Why? He had been a good provider, a good father to his children, if sometimes a little distant. It must be her parents, those blue-nosed, self-styled Christians. It had been hate at first

sight between James and the Joneses. "Poseurs," or whatever the French word is-appearance is more important than reality. Snobs who have link except their own illusions.

Why drugs? Why misuse and abuse the legal prescription necessary for him to lead a reasonably normal life? Especially since he didn't even get that big a kick, that much euphoria, from it?

There were easy, pat answers to these questions to be found in any number of magazines, on countless television talk shows, from the "self-help" racks in bookstores; James wasn't confident that they applied to him with any degree of accuracy.

They talk about sharing, about communications. Sweet Christ on a crutch, I tried to communicate, but it was like I was talking a foreign language! If I ran down to the store for a pack of smokes and thoughtfully brought back a bottle of pop and a bag of her favorite potato chips, I was trying to sabotage her diet If I didn't, I was selfish and thoughtless! If I complimented her on her outfit, then I obviously meant to imply that she normally dressed like a slob. If I didn't, then I didn't care enough to notice. I couldn't win.

And the drugs? I've tried meetings, books, counselors-the best I ever got was that I am "trying to run away from my pain." No shit!

These were the easy "whys." There remained one big question, and James somehow knew that when he found the answer to that one, the rest would fall into place.

Why the siren song deep within him, unacknowledged, ignored, denied for ten years, that tried to lure him back to adolescent practices, back to his earliest loves, back to the rustic settings of farm and field, stable and pasture, manes and tails gracefully flowing in the wind?

James picked up the syringe and closely inspected the tip to make sure it was still sharp. He wet a thumbnail and dragged the point lightly across the pink surface, feeling for any hint of drag that would indicate that it had turned a lip, waiting to snag and tear a delicate vein wall.

It couldn't have been drugs that ruined his marriage-after all, he had been sober when the breakup started. James hadn't discovered the temporary peace to be found by injecting his prescription medicine until Sheila first left on "vacation" that previous summer. He became suspicious when he was cleaning the house in her absence and discovered a crumpled sheet of paper containing a list of schools that needed speech therapists, her specialty. They were all in Kansas, closer to her parents.

He already knew that the relationship was in trouble. No sex in over a year-James and Sheila slept in rooms at opposite ends of the house. He had moved himself out of their bedroom to avoid the frustration of the constant rejection of his amorous advances.

That's one thing the books have right Sex isn't everything in a marriage, but it's sure as hell important! At first it was the old standards: "I'm tired." "I have a headache." "Tomorrow." But soon "tomorrow" quit coming, and so did I. I even quit trying. She didn't want to make love; she pretended to be asleep but "awoke," furious, if she felt the bed shake as I masturbated out of sheer frustration. Soon, it was more comfortable to fall asleep in the old recliner beside the bed. Then it was easier still if I kept working late in my shop here at the other end of the house until I knew she really was asleep, easier still if I just came inside and fell asleep on the couch in the family room. What a name for a room. What "family"? Shit!

Sheila told him he was evil, that if he didn't honestly join an acceptable church and promise to raise their children in a "decent Christian environment," then he was no father, no husband, and no good.

The script was set, well-rehearsed, constantly repeated. James remembered it all too well: *"I won't have my children raised in a bad atmosphere. They need church, they need a good*

spiritual background.

When they grow up then they can make the choice to keep their religious training or reject it"

"Really? The same way you did? When they grow up, it's too late! You will have already brainwashed them, and they'll be so deep in some preacher's garbage can they may never have the strength to climb out!"

"It didn't hurt me, and it would do you a lot of good to come back before it's too late! Rejoin the church and maybe we can be a family again."

Bull. Even that didn't work, no matter how hard I bit my tongue and gagged down the lies I heard from the pulpit-the same lies I once told others.

James's hands trembled at the recollection. He took three deep breaths to refocus his attention on the task at hand. Turning the syringe so that the slanted opening in the end of the needle pointed downwards, he lowered it to the saturated cotton and lightly pressed down. With a delicate touch, he withdrew the plunger slowly, slowly, to avoid forming too many tiny bubbles. He filled the barrel with the liquid.

When it was full, James held the syringe upright and tapped it with a fingernail to dislodge those few bubbles which form no matter how much care anyone uses. They floated to the top, and James pulled the plunger back a bit more to create an air gap. A few more gentle taps merged the bubbles into one air space which he could expel without wasting any of the precious drug-laced fluid.

James laid down the ready syringe and reached for the short cord with the loop in the end.

How could Sheila start demanding such a thing? When we married almost ten years ago I made no secret of my pagan beliefs. In fact, she was enthusiastic about them at first joining me in the traditional "skyclad" nude dances within the enchanted circle; she showed no jealousy as I exchanged the ritual kisses and caresses with other women in the group, seemed to enjoy the same with the men there. After all, these were trusted friends, and there wasn't anything sexually unfaithful about the actions. We remained true to each other, reveling in the glories of oneness with a group reaching out to touch the Essence, the Power, the Gods themselves.

The Old Religion, Wicca, the Craft of the Wise, White Witchcraft-call it what you will, it's a loving nature religion based on humanity's ancient ties to the fertility of the earth and the fecundity of the race. Some ignorant fools called it "Devil Worship," but the faith was ancient before the Zoroastrians first formulated the notion of an anti-Creator of nearly equal power. We worship no figure of evil; the fact that our God, slightly subordinate to the Goddess, is often depicted with horns has nothing to do with Satan. But try to get through the stony heads and closed minds of some people.

In the circle, we celebrated our relationship to the earth, the sun, the moon, and the Creative Essence of the universe. It was beautiful, joyful, leaving us closer to each other and all of Creation. We revered the Earth Mother and the feminine creative force.

But now it is "Evil"?

That was the influence of her parents. Perhaps her father could have accepted his paganism under other circumstances, but the old man, a retired minister like James's father, could never forgive or forget the fact that James himself had preached for a year from a pulpit in his own denomination, then turned his back on the church in deliberate apostasy.

Her parents . . . every time she visits them-the constant innuendoes, the sly questions . . . damn their rust-stained, black-hearted, petty souls!

James threaded the end of the cord through the loop, then slid it over his left hand, up to the biceps. He pulled his sleeve up far enough to leave the field clear, then positioned the loop-end on the outside of the arm. He took up the slack in the cord, then pulled tighter. Clenching his left fist, he flexed at the elbow, pumping the veins into distension.

James took the cord between his teeth to maintain the tension, left arm stretched out straight in front of him, the light revealing thin red scars that traced the paths of three veins that passed near the surface inside the elbow. He took a perverse craftsman's pride in the fact that no bruises showed under the skin. He was very good with a needle, never tearing his veins, always using good, sharp, new rigs.

He held the barrel of the syringe between thumb and ring finger as he felt under the skin to confirm the location of a good vein. Finding one, he held his breath to minimize random muscular movement and slipped the needle through the skin.

Feeling the slight resistance lessen as the point penetrated the vein, he then pulled back on the plunger with index and middle fingers. He sighed with pleasure as the thin stream of blood shot into the orange fluid, once more proving his skill.

James relaxed his fist, then let go of the cord with his teeth. A little pull on the plunger and another jet of blood confirmed that the needle hadn't pulled out of the vein during the change from distension to relaxation.

Then the fingertip on the end of the plunger, pushing in, emptying half the contents of the syringe into the bloodstream, pausing, then pulling back out to refill the syringe with blood, pushing halfway back in again, then refilling again.

"Triple-boosted," in the parlance of drug abuse, the injection was finally completed and James withdrew the needle with a flick of his wrist.

The injection was not particularly strong, containing less than one milligram of dextroamphetamine sulfate, brand-name Dexedrine. Speed. Pharmaceutical-grade dope.

James settled back for a moment as the light rush of stimulation came and passed. He was beyond the point of experiencing the drastic boost to heart rate, the slamming impact on his senses and thoughts that came with the first injection of speed. Now, after hundreds-even thousands-of times, the ritual of the injection itself was far more important to him than the direct effect of the drugs.

He knew that even at this diluted rate he was killing himself, but didn't really care. He just wanted to draw the process out as long as possible.

As he rinsed the syringe with fresh water, squirting the contents into his mouth to get the last speck of drugs, James noticed that ROB 37 had addressed a comment to him.

He tapped on his keyboard and, after a moment, his reply appeared on the screen, echoed back through the telephone lines from the remote mainframe computer system.

"POLKA PONY: Yeah, Rob, life's a bitch, and then you marry one!"

There. That would get a chuckle from ROB and further incense HONEYBUNS . . . but not *too* much. She was a good sport.

James enjoyed the contact with his electronic friends. They were as safe in their anonymity as he was in his. The most another user on the system could ever find out without being deliberately told was what town he lived in. No real names, no addresses, no phone numbers. He could, as could they, reveal his innermost feelings and deepest secrets if he wished; no repercussions could fall on him. Truth or lies, it didn't matter. He could become whatever he

wished through his little Commodore computer-or he could remain superficial, letting the merest hint of himself show through.

HONEYBUNS responded, "Oh, yeah, POLKA HORSE'S ASS? Just let me get to Missouri, and I'll show you 'bitch,' you dickless wonder!"

James smiled. He knew she didn't mean it, any more than he did. Probably less. Within the hour they might be in a "private room" on the commercial communications service, typing out their fantasies to each other as they pretended to be together, having wild and tacky sex. One or both might be masturbating as they sat in front of their respective screens, or just enjoying anonymous electronic sexual fantasies at 1200 baud. Maybe HONEYBUNS would play his favorite game again where he was a mighty stallion, she the dainty Flicka, . . .

Lately James found his best friends on the computer. There, nobody laughed at your appearance. They never knew. You were safe. If no one knew you, no one could hate you for what you really were, for your dark, hidden side. It was all just electrons, photon-image ripples flowing across a screen. Those couldn't hurt you, stab you in the back after you made yourself vulnerable. Conflicts could be resolved with the flick of a switch.

It wasn't what James wanted, not really. He craved sex, he had needed orgasm at least daily since before puberty. Computer sex, phone sex, porno movies and books-all provided some measure of relief, relief that was, if not socially ideal, at least socially acceptable. What he really wanted was not . . . not normal, not polite, not . . .

I want sex, a woman. A woman with a great body. Yeah. I want her to keep her mouth shut except when I tell her to open it I want a woman . . . with a good body . . . and rich . . . who owns a pharmacy . . . and will love me whatever I do . . . I-

BULLSHIT! I'm scared to death of any kind of emotional relationship with a woman; Sheila really burned me hard. Dammit. I can't enjoy hookers, what with herpes and AIDS running around! Those news reports, the people wasting away to nothing with smiles on their faces, they terrify me. . . .

*I want sex. I don't want guys, I don't want women. Shit I know what I really want
No!*

I don't want that No. That really would make me what they- those people in the books-say I am. It would justify them. That's not what I want It isn't No.

Baloney. Remember last week when you went to that little pecker-wood country church? All those folks in the dirt-poor village with all those horses and ponies in pens? Some of them must be for sale . . . it's not very far away. . . .

I don't care! That's not what I want! I want to be normal, to be a husband and a father to my kids-to just do what everyone else does, feel like everyone else feels, want what everyone else wants. I want my ranch-style house in the suburbs, a normal forty-hour-a-week job, big color TV, a microwave oven. I want to look forward to football season, enjoy a baseball game, fish, golf, drink beer with the guys.

Crap! TV football's for idiots with jockstraps holding their brains in; I'm no athlete-I'm a thinker. I don't want to be normal, but I wish I did want that-it would make life a lot easier.

What I want is . . . unacceptable. . . .

Seven hours later, James exhausted the contents of the spoon and his drug-ravaged body demanded rest. It was 4:00 A.M. He shut down the power on his computer, turned out the lights, stripped, and staggered to the couch that had served as his bed for two years. He hoped that he was tired enough to go directly to sleep, but such an anodyne was not in store; his mind was still

too stimulated to let go.

In the darkness, with no distractions, the questions returned: How had his life become such a mess? What was so special about him that he seemed to be singled out for God to shit all over? Dammit, he was a nice guy! *Maybe if I had just said . . .*

Is it the narcolepsy? I know she was really pissed when Diane was bom. She was in labor in the hospital, and I kept dropping off to sleep in the chair by her bed. I just felt so weak . . . of course, I didn't know at the time that I had it, and it's accompanying cataplexy. That last little gem makes life hell! Every time I feel a strong emotion, I lose strength in my voluntary muscles, sometimes to the point of helpless collapse.

First, I began going to sleep when talking to customers-I'd stop in the middle of a word and stare into space. I didn't even know I'd done it, sometimes. When the same thing happened while talking to Sheila, she'd get upset, claiming I didn't care what she was saying.

After I was finally diagnosed, it was easy to see that I had a few early symptoms as far back as sixth grade. Whenever I'd get mad enough to fight with another kid, it was as if I was trying to swing my fists and arms through molasses. I just thought it was the adrenalin. But looking forward from there, I realize that I quickly learned to "keep my cool" to avoid those weakness attacks. I don't laugh hard, I don't get mad easily, I feel remote from hurt, from pain whether physical or emotional. Mostly. Oh, I have the emotions, all right! But I keep them buried and far away. I can observe them and think "That's funny," or "I'm mad," but it's an intellectual awareness. I don't dare let myself really feel these things. "Flatline." That's how one of my friends described me. Never too happy, never too sad. Not on the outside. Somewhere deep inside I scream, I cry, I hurt. God, how I hurt! But I can't show it If I do, I collapse, helpless, at the mercy of fate, the mercy of . . . them.

Last time I went along to visit her parents, they were there. One brother and his wife I already knew and detested. The other one I had seen only briefly at our wedding. This time, we were going to stay for a week out in the country. Surrounded by Sheila's family, those miserable, stuck-up bastards! I was nervous, never feeling welcome, never "good enough" to be a pan of their family. Bastards. They were polite, of course. They'd never fail in that! It wouldn't be good for their image.

We got there in the late evening. This was before I knew about cataplexy. The drive had been long, almost ten hours in the van with two infants. Everyone was sitting in the living room looking ultra-respectable. We brought in our suitcases and children, then I sat down in a big easy chair. Conversation turned to me, with little smirks seen from the comers of my eyes as these "beautiful people" looked me over. Jeans and a two-pocket shirt, Wellington boots, belly fat spilling over my belt and stretching buttons, baseball cap on my head. I didn't care. I didn't think I did, anyway.

I don't recall the specific incident, maybe it was just general tension, but I had an attack. Eyes half-closed, I settled back in the chair, limp as a wet noodle. Sheila's brother Bill was the first to notice.

"Hey, James, tuckered out?" He stood and waved a hand in front of my face. I could hear him, I was awake, but I couldn't move a muscle. That scared me. "Let's get some family pictures, whaddaya say?"

Bill got his camera out and squatted near my feet Oh, the picture was funny, all right Shot on a straight line from my kees up to my nose, I looked like King Kong in casual dress, nostrils flaring, jaw slack, mouth open with a little drool leaking out of one comer.

The others laughed as I raged, helpless. I couldn't so much as twitch or make a noise. Bill

took my cap off my head and turned it around, then picked up a child's baby doll. He took my arm and moved it across my belly as Bob, the older brother, joined in the act We picked up a cloth diaper and swaddled the doll in it, then they placed the bundle in my arm and stood back to take more pictures, Bill shooting 35mm, Bob with a movie camera recording the whole scene as sisters-in-law and Sheila's parents (and SHEILA!) giggled delicately. I wanted to kill them all at that moment While they thought I slept I was learning what they really thought of me-a buffoon, an object of scorn and ridicule. But I could do nothing about it The clowning continued for a while until they became bored. Eventually I did doze off long enough for my emotions to come back under control.

That was the first time cataplexy really scared me, because I didn't know what was going on. All I really knew was that I was helpless- and they took advantage of it! I'm sure my cataplexy-inspired emotional calm bugged Sheila, even though she tried her best to understand. Once she said, "I can't make you feel anything!" Maybe that's why she started trying to make me mad-she gave up on making me laugh, or making me show sadness, or pathos, or enthusiasm . . . anger was all that was left

Damn. And I'm so hard to anger, she had to really try! Spending the mortgage payment on chintzy metal shelves for Doug's room that time so I had to borrow money from my sister, simply quitting her part of our audiometer calibration business-without telling me-anything she could think of to get my goat, just to get some sort of rise out of me.

Frustrated by the endless, year-old litany of self-questioning and recrimination, James wrapped the blanket tighter about himself as he turned his face to the sofa back. To escape the repetition, he turned his thoughts to his childhood, seeking some clue to the last, the most puzzling "why."

Why did he have this strange sexual obsession that hadn't loosened its grip in twenty years?

Why am I so weird? Nobody planned it that way. Certainly I didn't!

CHAPTER TWO

March 1951

The Rev. Antonio Falabella stood at the church podium that Sunday evening a nervous man, curly black hair shining with hair cream above a strong face, blue eyes contemplating the people he had served for the past eight months as he strove to conceal his uneasiness behind a calm facade. This was his first Quarterly Conference as a newly ordained minister and his wife was in labor with their fourth child.

The district superintendent, the pastor's immediate superior, would be receiving the reports of the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, the Board of Trustees, the Sunday School superintendent and, it seemed, everyone else in the northeast Kansas town. This would be the first evaluation of his new career as a preacher. A career that was second choice in his dreams.

The worry over his wife compounded his anxiety. Doctors had warned them to stop after the first two girls, and Mrs. Falabella had put on so much weight this time, and it had been over seven years since their last child.

Dad always wanted to be a doctor. He was born on a red-dirt Oklahoma farm, lived were a few years, then grew up in a blacksmith shop in Kansas. He was good-he built his own arc welder,

one of the first in that part of the state-and was soon certified for high-pressure steam and bridge welding. He could design and make almost anything on a lathe or mill, but being the best machinist, welder, or millwright in Kansas City wasn't good enough for him, not a big enough chance. He loved people and loved the mysteries of medicine, but the money for medical school just wasn't available, not with three little girls. And Mom refused to try to support him in his quest. She would, however, scrimp and struggle for him to go through divinity school. She said it was "better to save souls than lives." Dad would have made a good doctor, maybe a better one than a preacher.

That didn't stop Antonio from reading and learning as much medicine as he could. The knowledge he had gained did little to comfort him now, knowing more than most laymen about just how much could go wrong in the delivery room.

The meeting dragged on through the afternoon and evening, the reports had been made, and they were heading for the closing prayer when the doors in the back of the sanctuary opened and one of the local sheriff's deputies stepped inside and waved to Rev. Falabella.

"Preacher, it's a boy! Big 'un! Almost twelve pounds, but everyone's doin' just fine!"

All thoughts of closing prayers vanished as the members and the district superintendent competed for the honor of offering first congratulations to the happy father. A son!

An impromptu collection was quickly gathered, and the D.S. even kicked in ten dollars, a goodly sum at the time. While the crowd would have gladly stayed for another hour, Reverend Tony headed for the door.

Just before he made good his escape toward the hospital, the chairman of the Board of Trustees stopped him and handed him a twenty. The old farmer looked the preacher in the eye with a twinkle in his. "Reckon ya got yuh a little preacher there, Rev'end?"

A quick pause for thought, then a nod. "Just could be, Jasper!" Then he was gone.

May 1960

Church was boring.

Jimmy sat in the front pew, fidgeting between the watchful eyes of his father from behind the pulpit in front and those of his mother from the first bench back.

His best friend, Johnny Mason, sat next to him. They had already played "connect the dots," using up all the blank space on the Sunday bulletin. Neither had brought any small toys; they would have been confiscated.

Johnny was fiddling with his candle lighter/snuffer on the bench beside him, idly running the wick in and out of the shaft. Little Jimmy again reached up and scratched his neck. The starch in the white acolyte's robelet always made him itch.

The sound of the organ brought his attention away from the collar. Good! The sermon was over. One last hymn, then the benediction . . .

The two boys picked up their implements and walked solemnly up onto the chancel, where they stood in all their childish dignity at either side of the altar while the hymn droned on through four verses.

Jimmy liked being a candle-lighter. He would have had to sit in the front with his mother anyway. This way he got to sit with a friend, and bask in the congregation's attention and the envy of other children as they led his father into the sanctuary each Sunday morning then back out again at the end.

While they stood waiting, Jimmy admired the shiny candlesticks again. They were a beautiful bronze, triangular in cross-section, tapered from a small point at the bottom where they rested in mahogany bases to a large top drilled for the candles.

Two years before, when the old church burned down while he and his family were on vacation, Jimmy's father had salvaged the pieces of the mighty bell. After carving a sample shape from wood, Rev. Tony Falabella proceeded to dig a pit in the earth and fill it with charcoal. A pipe led through a trench from the bottom of the pit to an old vacuum cleaner. He put a crucible in the charcoal, lit it off, then started the motor, forcing air from the outlet into the fire.

Jimmy was interested but a bit wary as the flames shot up around the rough black pot, melting the chunks of bronze.

"Okay, son, watch! I'm going to make the mold for the candlesticks now."

Tony took his wooden pattern and pressed it into the damp surface of the sand in a form-box, covered it with the other half, then carefully separated them and removed the pattern.

I remember how the flames and heat frightened me. The vacuum cleaner motor screamed like a siren; it had no casing around it to deaden the noise. The flames shot up around that crucible, blue and white, making me think of images of Hell from Sunday School. But I loved it I loved watching my father work with his hands, even though I had no idea at the time exactly how good, how remarkably skilled, he was. I just believed then that he could build anything he wanted to build, make anything he wanted to make. I was right

Then the time for the pouring approached.

"Stand back a little more, now. If any of this metal splashes you, it'll burn really bad!"

Tony lifted the crucible with long, wooden-handled tongs. Resting the container on the top of a tree stump that immediately smouldered and smoked, he tilted it and slowly the golden-white liquid poured in a thin stream through the air and into the hole in the top of the mold-form.

"A-men, a-men, ahh-ahh-ahh-ahh-men!" The first notes of the choir brought Jimmy out of his reverie and, exchanging eye-signals, the two boys smoothly coordinated the snuffing of the five candles arranged along the back of the altar, then, as the last, drawn-out "amen" finished, the two larger ones in front.

As the organist began playing the postlude they raised their lighter/ snuffers together, turned, and strode with childish dignity down the chancel steps, the Rev. Falabella falling in behind them.

The congregation of well-to-do fanners and businessmen and their families came to their feet in the brand-new rural church building, standing silently until the small procession led by the young boys and trailed by the choir in their purple robes passed through the double doors at the back of the sanctuary.

As soon as they made good their escape from another week's hour of enforced good behavior, Jimmy and Johnny ran to the furnace room, where they hung up their waist-length robelets and leaned the lighters in the corner.

"See ya outside," said Johnny as he made for the door.

"Yeah, soon as everybody is out."

Jimmy wasn't quite free yet. He had to join his parents at the church door to finish the process of visiting with parishioners as they left the service. He took a shortcut around the

outside, and made it just as the congregation began leaving the building.

"Nice service, preacher!"

"Thanks, Bill."

"Oh, I just love the story of Lazarus, and you do it so nicely."

"Thank you, Mrs. Koennikker. I like to think it has a lot to teach us even today."

"Reverend, I wanted to thank you for remembering my mother in the group prayers today."

"Certainly, Mr. Carstairs. I expect to be in town tomorrow, I'll be sure and visit her at the nursing home."

Jimmy stood proudly beside his mother in his hand-me-down blue suit as all the important people paid their respects to his father.

Suddenly a bent and wizened woman stopped in front of Jimmy and reached for his hand, taking it in both of hers.

"You and John Morgan sure look grown-up in your white robes! Are you going to be a preacher like your daddy?"

Little Jimmy swelled with pride. "Yes, Granny Abelsen! I want to be just like him!"

Not really. How could I know at that age? What I wanted was the respect the same admiration I felt for him. I wanted to please him, to hear him say he was proud of me.

Reverend Tony smiled to himself as old Grandma Abelsen exchanged a pleasantry with his wife before stopping to tell him about her latest attack of "the arthur-itis."

Most of the people didn't go far—just out to their cars in the parking lot, where they reached into trunks and back seats and pulled out picnic baskets, paper bags, and cooking dishes wrapped in cozies or dishtowels, then reentered the church and went to the fellowship hall. While the men set up folding tables, the church women unrolled wide white paper for tablecloths and started laying out the food on two tables pushed together nearest the kitchen.

The children ran around underfoot until shooed away. Two girls sat at the piano, enthusiastically if not skillfully banging out a duet of "Heart and Soul."

Jimmy and Johnny went outside to join the rest of the boys. Mark, Randy, Gene, and David were organizing a game of tag.

I hated tag or any other game that involved running or sustained physical effort I was already getting pretty chubby, and couldn't run very fast or for very long. I hoped it wouldn't last; what I really wanted to do was get to the church dinner.

A hand slapped Jimmy. Tag, you're it!"

"Hey," he protested, "no fair! I wasn't looking!"

The protest carried little weight with the others, so Jimmy ran as best he could while the others eluded him. It looked hopeless until Randy's little brother, Steven, wandered into the group.

"Tag!" shouted Jimmy, running for "free base," the old cedar tree between the parsonage and the church.

Randy protested this time: "Stevie's too young to play tag with us!"

"I don't care. Tag's a little kid's game, anyway. Let's go to my treehouse!"

This suggestion met with the approval of the group. They all ran south past the parsonage to the big old elm tree beside the garage where Jimmy's dad had built a fancy treehouse with a ladder up the side of the tree that led through a hole in the floor. The treehouse was unenclosed, just a platform with a railing, but there were big branches spreading out; Jimmy had nailed steps onto them and built smaller platforms where they leveled out. From one of these, you could

climb down onto the corrugated steel roof of the garage, so there was plenty of room "up top" for a large gang of kids.

Jimmy kept a bucket of rocks up there in case of attack by gangs of pirates, Indians, outlaws, Nazis, Japs, Communists, racketeers, or girls. Good thing, too, because three girls were coming toward the tree. The Greene sisters-disaster!

"Piggies coming!" Johnny sounded the alarm. At the warning, all seven boys grabbed for rocks and prepared to defend their inviolate elevated territory.

The Greene sisters! Ugh! They lived on the Missouri River with their father and grandmother, and they always smelled awful. Harley, their father, owned a lot of river-bottom land that he rented out to farmers on shares; he was filthy rich in the truest sense-not crazy, for "eccentric" is the term used if you have enough money-he and his family dressed in cast-off rags and rarely bathed. Their house looked like a sharecropper's reject, with rubbish and garbage piled all around in untidy heaps, bom indoors and out. When I was a kid, I thought they were just more poor people that my father ministered to. It was years later that I found out Harley Greene was a multimillionaire.

Alma Greene, the oldest of the three, stopped before she got to the ladder and looked up. "You'd better not throw rocks at us or we'll tell!"

Although the threat of parental discipline was severe, the boys felt honor-bound to protect their sacred heights from defilement by-ugh- girls! They looked down and raised their arms, ready to hurl litho-destruction at the first girl to set foot on the ladder.

"No girls allowed," shouted Jimmy. "Treehouse rules!"

Alma put her hands on her hips and pouted up at him. "We wouldn't want to come up in any stupid old treehouse, anyway. We just came to tell you that they're almost ready to eat. But stay up there and starve, for all we care!"

With that they flounced off, trailing an almost-visible cloud of musty aroma.

Just as soon as the girls were out of sight (the same unwritten code of honor demanded that boys never let girls think they had influenced them), there was a mad scramble down the ladder. One nice thing about rural church folks was that they always let the children go first in line.

Mr. Mason, Johnny's father, had grabbed a ride home with a neighbor. Mrs. Mason, the organist, was in the church office with Reverend Tony, planning out next Sunday's music. It was about 3:00 P.M.

Everyone else was gone, the afternoon skies had clouded up and begun to drizzle; Jimmy and Johnny sat in the Masons' old Ford, parked by itself in the lot.

Francis Mason was a rarity in this rural community-a poor, struggling farmer. While others in the county brought in record crops of wheat and corn from the incredibly rich loess pushed up twenty to a hundred feet deep ahead of the glacial till some twenty thousand years previously, Francis barely eked out a living for himself and his family raising corn and feeding cattle.

Other farmers had the newest tractors and combines; Francis used prewar machinery. Others had new barns and upright silos; his outbuildings were ramshackle heaps, propped up where necessary, leaky roofs patched with tarpaper and roofing cement. While their neighbors had carpeted living rooms with new color TVs, the Masons still got drinking water from a hand-pump right outside the back door. Mr. Mason's neighbors' neatly maintained farmsteads had good gravel drives and painted board fences, true to their tidy German heritage; he had mud runways and alleys with sagging barbed wire, chunks and pieces of rusting junk machinery scattered here and there.

I thought it was super! Johnny and I both wore hand-me-downs from other, more-prosperous children, and our mothers made the few new shirts we had. Every year we got three new pairs of jeans for school, and maybe a new winter coat We shared a bond of medium poverty, although we weren't really aware of it as children.

This bond of mutual poverty helped them remain best friends, for while the church was prosperous, the preacher was not.

When the church burned down two years earlier, while the debris was cleaned up and a new one built, services were held in the community building of a small, run-down, nearby Missouri River town where the Greene family lived. A little dirt road led to the top of a bluff where you stood in Kansas and could see Missouri, Nebraska, and Iowa on a clear day. James enjoyed the chance to wander the old-fashioned streets, looking into little stores that had hardly changed from paddlewheel riverboat days. The old-fashioned grocery store sold cold 3-V Cola for a nickel a bottle. These were the first sixteen-ounce soda bottles James had ever seen, and the pop was okay.

The community building was brick and stone from Depression times: a large stage at one end with a movie screen that could be cranked up and down, basketball hoops, bleachers along the sides and rows of wooden folding chairs set out in the middle, a projection booth up high on the back wall-it was a Mecca for a young boy. *I'm sure it was also a relief for the contractor building the new church. Cleaning the temporary church with my family on Saturdays kept me off the building site and out of his hair. He was also smart enough to "put me on the payroll" at fifty cents a week, thus converting me from wolf to sheepdog. A wise man.* This lasted less than a year, until the new, cathedral-roofed building with a tall, lighted spire was ready.

I didn't realize at the time what a miracle my father had wrought- building a whole new church without losing a single member. It was an unheard-of feat in almost any church. Internal strife and disagreement over what should be done and how much to spend to do it was and still is the norm. The church was fully paid for before it was finished; the inaugural service and the mortgage burning were held on the same Sunday. The bishop attended and told everyone what a wonderful, dedicated group they were, and what a fine pastor they had.

There was a big dinner that afternoon, too.

In gratitude, the Board of Trustees granted the Falabella family a raise . . . in the small extra wage they were paid for cleaning the church each week . . . a whole \$120 more a year.

Jimmy didn't know it at the time, but something began to change in his father when he realized how empty the words of praise were, how little the church people really cared for others. All Jimmy knew this rainy afternoon was that he was happy to have some extra time with his best friend. They talked of the Important Things Of Life, such as whether Mrs. Blake's apple pie had been as good as usual, and whether or not it was better than Granny Abelsen's devil's food cake with the sticky white icing. They talked about the cartoons on Saturday morning, and the new show that came on after school with Huckleberry Hound and Yogi Bear, and comic books.

When those subjects were settled For Once And For All, the boys moved on to other matters, such as the relative merits of their BB guns. Jimmy had an old Red Ryder Daisy lever-action, while Johnny owned one of the newer pump rifles. They talked about "Gunsmoke," and how they would have caught the outlaws if they'd lived then. They both wished they had horses so they could really play Cowboys and Indians.

Then Johnny asked the almost-unspeakable. "Do you like girls?"

"Great Grunt, NO!"

Jimmy was shocked! His three older sisters were reason enough, let alone the way the girls

in his class liked to torment boys, teasing and hitting them, then running to tell the teacher if they dared strike back. Girls were something God created to make life miserable for boys.

"Girls are different," continued Johnny.

"Shoot, I know that!" Jimmy was scornful. "They wear dresses and play with dolls and do dumb things."

"No, I mean they're put together different from boys."

Jimmy considered. His older sisters were shaped different than their high-school boyfriends, but he supposed that was just because of dresses and the extra clothes they wore beneath them.

"Well, they don't shave, I guess. Except their legs." Jimmy had not thought much on the subject. He supposed that when kids were little, their parents watched how they acted, then decided which ones were girls and which boys, and raised them that way. It made sense to him, because they had one boy in their class who dressed in jeans and stuff, but acted a lot like a girl. His mother was kind of silly, and Jimmy supposed she had just made a mistake when it came time to choose.

Johnny laughed at his idea "Not just that. Haven't you ever seen a girl without clothes on?"

He didn't really remember doing so. Until the new church was built and his father moved his office from an upstairs room over to the fine, new study they built into the church, he shared a bedroom with the younger two of his three sisters, but he was always in bed asleep before they came upstairs. They changed clothes downstairs in the bathroom, and wore pajamas and robes to bed. So did he. Then, when he was just barely nine, he got a room of his own, the former church office.

I honestly believed then that being a girl or a boy was mostly a matter of choice. Once, when my parents were away and I was about six, my sisters talked me into playing a game. "Be a girl," they called it. They dressed me in an old pink pleated shirt with ruffled slips, and seemed to think that the most important part of "being a girl" was going to the bathroom like one. They lifted the skirt and slips up, pulled down my underpants, and made me sit on the toilet until I peed and pooped, then made me spread my legs out like a girl and wipe from back to front the way they did. I didn't think the game was much fun and I didn't like "being a girl," but my sisters seemed to enjoy staring at me (here on the toilet, bare-assed). I never played that game with them again.

Jimmy knew Johnny still had to sleep in a room with his older brother and sister. Bill, the brother, was kind of a hero to Jimmy: thirteen years old, he had no time for playing with "little kids," because he got to run a tractor! Jimmy loved machinery! His favorite toy for years had been a little International FarmAll tractor with pedals and a steering wheel. An old farmer in the town where he was born had been his best grownup friend, sometimes letting Jimmy ride along on his for-real red International Harvester FarmAll tractor. Then, on James's fourth birthday, he came to the door of the parsonage with a big cardboard box. When opened, the wonderful toy tractor was inside! Old Jasper Sargent blushed yet looked pleased when he saw Jimmy's eyes light up, and didn't seem to mind that the boy forgot all about thanking him and immediately took off down the block, pedaling hard and making "brrrrr-r-r-r!" motor noises at the top of his voice.

The family moved to the country church about two months later. Jimmy never saw the old farmer again, but he made sure that his precious tractor was the first thing unloaded from the farm trucks that carried his family's possessions to their new home.

As for Nancy, the oldest of the three Mason children, she was a girl. That about summed it

up for James. He rarely saw her outside Johnny's house, either, since she was usually cooking, cleaning, or sewing new clothes for herself whenever he was there.

"Well, have you? Seen a girl naked?"

"No, I guess not. So?" Jimmy didn't like not knowing something that someone else did.

"Well, you know your peter? Girls don't have one!"

This took him totally by surprise. "You're lying," he accused. "How do they pee?"

Johnny smiled. It wasn't often that he could top his friend. "I've seen my sister! There's a knothole in the outhouse wall, and she just has a kind of crack down where a boy has a peter, and it comes out there."

Well! This explained a lot to Jimmy. No wonder girls were pests. Not being able to pee on an anthill, or write your name in the snow, or just stand up and see how high you could squirt your stream . . . girls were jealous of boys!

He immediately shared this insight.

"I bet that's right!" Johnny once again stood in awe of his friend's superior intellect. That's why they want to get boys' peters!"

Jimmy was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes at night, Nancy gets Bill to come over to her bed. They think I'm asleep, but I've seen them. She has Bill get on top of her, and he rubs his peter against her crack, and sometimes she gets it to go inside."

"Is she trying to take it away from him?"

"Maybe, I dunno. If she is, it doesn't work, 'cause he still has it. Maybe she just kind of borrows it for a little bit."

The thought of losing a part of himself, even temporarily, horrified Jimmy. "Why does he do it?"

"Well, I asked him, and he got mad because then he knew I'd been watching, and made me promise never to say anything to anybody, so keep it a secret!" Jimmy nodded agreement. "He said it feels really good, rubbing his peter on her crack, and sometimes up inside it."

Jimmy still wasn't sure about this, and Johnny noted his skepticism.

"He showed me. He rubbed his peter with his hands, and it got big and stiff, and he started making funny noises like he does when he's with Nancy, and some stuff came out kinda like he was peeing, but different. He said it's the most fun in the world." Johnny paused a moment for dramatic effect, then went on.

"I tried it."

"With your sister?"

"Naw! I tried rubbing mine. Bill helped me and showed me how. He even put it in his mouth and kind of sucked on it."

"Nuts!" Now Jimmy knew he was lying. "Nobody'd ever put their mouth where someone pees!"

"Oh, yeah?" Johnny was determined to prove his veracity. "Here, I'll show you! Take off your pants."

Young James Falabella learned a lot that afternoon; although he never could bring himself to take a penis in his own mouth, he had his first dry, prepubescent orgasm, and learned to masturbate. That skill proved invaluable, alleviating the boredom of living way out in the country.

CHAPTER THREE

April 1987, the next morning

The telephone rang and worked its magic on James.

Without conscious thought he flung off the ratty yellow blanket he liked to sleep in and arose from the broken-down-but-comfortable couch he had used for a bed these past two years.

His mental autopilot noting that his bladder was overfull as usual, James grabbed the cordless handset, pulled out the antenna, took a bracing breath, and flipped the switch.

"Hello?" One of James's more useful talents was an ability to talk as if he had been up for hours even while half-asleep. In response to the pressure of Nature's call, he opened the door into his attached workshop, careful not to let the cat out, then opened the back door, squinting to sharpen his focus as best he could without glasses, scanning the neighbor's back yard. Good. It was empty. With a mental sigh of relief, he let loose a stream, aiming it to one side of the path so he wouldn't have to walk in it later.

"What? I'm sorry, I had some noise. Could you please repeat that?"

"Mr. Falabella?"

"Yes."

"Do you work on organs?" An old woman's voice.

"Yes, ma'am, I do. What's your problem?"

With the pressure relieved, James shook off the last drops, closed the door, and reached for the pad and pencil he kept handy there.

After noting the details of make and model, address and phone number, James looked at his watch and made a hasty estimate.

"Okay, I can see you about three this afternoon, give or take half an hour. Will that be okay?"

"Fine, thank you. See you at three."

It wasn't that Jim got some kind of thrill from peeing outdoors, but he always slept naked. Recently it had come to pass that when he awakened, he knew he only had a moment before he would start dribbling. He suspected that might indicate diabetes, but he didn't want to know it if it did.

Whatever the reason-diabetes, drugs, or the gallon or more of instant tea he drank every day-he knew he didn't have time to get up, get dressed in some fashion, and traipse through the house to one of the bathrooms.

In bygone days, he would have done it naked, carrying the phone along, but now he usually awoke somewhere around noon, which meant his parents would be up and about. Several weeks spent in nudist camps during more youthful, freer days and dancing nude in ritual coven circles had removed James's body modesty, but his mother still didn't like it. Of course, there were a lot of things that he did whether she liked them or not, but casual nudity wasn't important enough to him to make an issue out of it.

In some ways, having his parents live with him was a real pain in the rear, but they were getting a little old to live by themselves, they helped a lot with the house payment, and they weren't bad company once a few ground rules had been established: He did his own cooking and grocery shopping. When he was home, James always answered the phone. James helped them when they needed repairs on their car, or lifting anything too heavy for them. He paid all the utilities. He did his own dishes and laundry.

More importantly, he was thirty-six years old. He didn't tell them where to go and what to

do; they didn't tell him. And no one entered his room without knocking first and receiving permission. Period. Nobody. Not for any reason. No cleaning, no snooping, nothing. This was the most important rule as far as James was concerned. He needed his privacy. Not only for the drugs, but for masturbation, or for (sometimes) crying . . .

James needed a place to be with himself, a refuge.

James tore off the top sheet from the notepad and carried it with him back into his room (still careful not to let his aged Siamese cat out), laid it on the desk, and prepared to meet the world.

Pulling on an old pair of denim shorts, he entered the other part of the house, showered, shaved, went back to his room to finish dressing. Then into the kitchen.

The Right Rev. Antonio Falabella (Associate Member, Kansas East Conference, retired) sat at the maple dining table that crowded the little dinette between the kitchen and the living room, reading the newspaper. His wife, James's mother, listened to a television soap opera while washing up their luncheon dishes.

There they are, part of The World-time to start interacting again, I suppose, but my head hurts, my left arm is sore from all the punctures. As usual, they'll give only short, polite greetings, respecting the fact that even the best of awakenings is pure hell for me. The most I can do is give a nod and a forced grin; they understand it's not their fault I'm so surly. What's in the fridge? Hamburger, eggs, hash-browns in the freezer. Oog. Too complicated. Ah, a pot of leftover chili-Breakfast of Chumps!

Placing the pot on the stove, James extracted a four-ounce tube of saltines from a box on the shelf above, poured a glass of milk, and sat at the table.

Respecting his need for silence and his waking moodiness, Tony merely handed over most of the newspaper and continued reading the obituaries and classifieds. By the time James had finished the editorials, advice column, and the comics, he was starting to feel more human and his chili was warm.

He officially announced the commencement of conversation by asking his father, "Anybody you know?"

Tony looked hard at James. "No, you're not in it. Not yet."

James colored a little and drew a deep breath. It had long been obvious that his parents knew something was wrong, maybe even what he was doing, although he was always careful to wear a long-sleeved shirt or keep his left elbow bent to cover the "tracks" over his veins. After all, his father had been addicted to amphetamines when James was a child; little Jimmy didn't know at the time what that "mouthwash" his dad kept sipping at really was. Not until he entered the world of drugs, first as a user, then as an undercover agent fifteen years before, did he realize that this was Dexedrine elixir supplied by a friendly pharmacist. His father, while never a mainline shooter, obviously knew what to look for in the eyes, the body, the behavior.

James gave his aging father a hard look to indicate "forbidden subject, back off," but refrained from commenting on his father's approaching the line too closely.

The hell of it is, I know they love me, they worry about me.

He knew he was killing himself slowly. That was fine. He wanted to die; he just wasn't in a big hurry about it. He wanted to go out enjoying himself.

Everything I've studied, Christian or Pagan, tells me that suicide is a sure route to big trouble in the Afterworld. And I don't want to use a gun, or poison, or anything obvious; Suicide by Stupidity-there's a likely coroner's report!

Some day he might slip up and get an embolism, whether pneumatic or particulate, or he

would insult his circulatory or nervous systems one too many times, and it would be over. The pain would be gone. The mortgage insurance would pay off the house; he already had the papers drawn up to give his parents lifetime tenancy, with ownership reverting to a trust for his children, a trust that Sheila couldn't break. So his financial woes would be taken care of, his troubles would be gone.

Most importantly, "Why?" would be over with. At least he hoped so. Using drugs was the best thing he could do at the time, the best for his situation.

Drug addicts develop very good rationalization skills.

Damn. It was a shitty thing to do, giving Dad a dirty look just because he cares. I'd better try to make up for it

"I have a service call this afternoon, Dad. Want to ride along?"

His mother said to Tony before he could answer, "Remember, honey, we have a doctor's appointment this afternoon at one o'clock."

Tony's face rose at the invitation, then fell at the reminder. He especially enjoyed getting out and seeing the countryside on a spring day; it was something he rarely got to do anymore. Driving was a real chore for him after the cataract surgery, peering through the thick lenses with the sunglasses over them to protect his eyes from the ultraviolet in the sunshine, and his reaction time wasn't what it used to be.

"What time, son?"

"Well, it's about fifty miles north, and I'm supposed to be there at three, so I need to leave before two. But I could call the lady back and reschedule it for later."

The more I think about it, the more I'd like to have the old fart along.

"I'm sorry, son. By the time I'm through sitting around waiting for the damned doctor, I'll be too tired to make that long a trip. Maybe another day this week." Tony Falabella, frustrated in his dream of being a doctor, was convinced that he knew more than most of those in licensed medical practice; quite often he was right.

"You be careful out on the highway. Don't fall asleep and have a wreck."

"Okay, Mom," replied James with a wry grin. For some reason, he could never bring himself to think of her as anything but "Mom." At times he wondered if he had forgotten her given name. *That's ridiculous! Her name is-no, never mind . . .*

"Oh, I promised Mrs. Wharton down the street that I'd fix her TV antenna cable sometime soon. Maybe I'll get back in time to do that this evening."

"How much are you charging her?"

"Nothing. She's old, doesn't have much money, and she's a good neighbor. Isn't she a friend of yours?"

"Yes, she is. That's nice of you, son. We're in Women's Society together at church and she's had a hard time of it since her husband died."

"Well, I have plenty of wire out in the shop that I don't need, and she might as well get some good out of it."

He finished his lunch, put the pan and dishes in the sink to soak, and reminded her, "Now, leave these here. I'll wash them when I get back tonight." Perhaps it was a matter of clinging to a vestige of independence, insisting on doing his own dishes. Perhaps. Perhaps it was merely a petty cruelty, since James knew the sight or the thought of dirty dishes just laying there unwashed would be a major distraction and irritant for his mother. A minor revenge given the fact that she was a neat-freak. Getting back at her for-what? He couldn't remember, just that he resented his mother. The fact that she was a sweet, gentle, loving woman made him feel guilty

for resenting her, adding that little bit more to his resentment.

James prepared carefully for his trip. Knowing the make and model of the organ he was to repair, and knowing the problem, he didn't bother with a service manual. He knew what to do. After loading his toolkit and some selected parts in the truck, he then made the most important preparations for the lonely trip. He shook half a dozen pills out of the prescription bottle, put them in a white ceramic mortar, and crushed them to a fine powder with the glass pestle.

He opened another desk drawer and removed the stainless steel berry server, a very large spoon. He had washed it, wiped it down with alcohol, and wrapped it in a plastic bag the night before when he was done with it.

Jim poured the powder into the spoon, then took out a small bottle of distilled water. He unsealed a new 3-cc syringe, removed the large-bore needle, and began carefully transferring water from the bottle, squirting it around the edges of the powder at first until it was surrounded, then into the pile itself, keeping it up until he had 12 milliliters of water dissolving the six tablets. When he had finished that part of the process, he took the still-capped needle and gently stirred.

Leaving the mixture alone for a bit to allow the insoluble residue to settle to the bottom, James took a small glass vial from his desk drawer. This would hold his "road supply," the prefiltered drug mix he would use during his trip. James sterilized the bottles himself late at night, first carefully washing them with a strong chlorine bleach solution, then alcohol, then boiling them on the stove for thirty minutes.

It sometimes feels ludicrous for a semisuicidal drug addict like me to take such pains, but it'd be the shits to die from some debilitating disease instead of what's supposed to kill me. I guess I'm kinda particular about my death. James always bought new syringes from the drugstore and never shared needles, an effortless discipline since he didn't hang around with other drug users except at Twelve Step meetings; his was a solitary vice.

James had mixed feelings about the trip alone as he checked his soft leatherette shaving kit, which contained a tie-off cord for his arm, syringes, sterile alcohol swabs in foil packets, and another bottle of sterile, distilled water. He finished the preparation of the small bottle of dissolved, filtered speed, wiped the utensils down with alcohol, and put them away in his desk for later use.

James's mixed feelings came from opposite needs and wants. If his father was with him, he couldn't use the drugs. However, if Tony Falabella *had* come along, he wouldn't necessarily need to take the drugs. Tony was well aware of James's involuntary sleep problem, the narcolepsy for which Dexedrine was the preferred medication, and would keep a lookout for any sign of dozing off at the wheel. More importantly, Tony would be there to talk to. His son could talk with him about sex, dirty jokes, science fiction, God, whatever-Tony was a brilliant old man, capable of conversing about almost anything. Anything, that is, except James's marital woes. *Those* James didn't discuss with *anyone*. On balance, he would have rather had the company of his father than a needle.

James gave himself a quick shot, just to get started, felt the mild rush that was the remnant of nervous system response left for him after months of abuse. The drug itself was now of secondary importance. True, it did some mild chemical alteration of his mood, and kept him from drowsing at inconvenient times, but he was aware that he was now more addicted to the *ritual*, the act of injection itself, than the substance contained therein.

James recognized and accepted this shift in emphasis for the sign of compulsive neurosis that it was.

He zipped up his bag, his "works," and poked his head through the floor-length curtains that covered the wide door between his room and the living room and called, "I'm leaving now. I should be back before six."

His mother smiled at him. "Be careful. If you feel drowsy, pull over for a bit!"

James nodded dutifully and withdrew. Of course, the trouble was that his drowsiness sneaked up on him before he became aware of it; try as he might, he never could make that point well enough with his mother to keep her from giving him the same admonition every time he left. He guessed that meant she cared for him as much as ever. James resented that, too, and he didn't really know why.

He checked his pockets as he stepped out the front door of the shop with his shaving kit. *Keys, electrician's knife with the locking screwdriver blade, wallet, coins, lucky marble, plenty of cigarettes, lighter, pen . . . got 'em all.* Just as he was climbing into the front seat of his pickup and doing a visual inventory to check for tools, parts, and the note he had made that morning, he heard the door of the house to the north open.

"Hey, Jim!" He cringed a little. "Waidaminnut!"

Closing the door and putting his keys into the ignition, he rolled down the window as his neighbor, Tom Sheisskopf, blundered across the lawn toward him. *Brace yourself. Smile. Look at the man. Oog. Wonder what Shithead wants now?*

"Hiya, Tom." The Sheisskopf family was really strange. Tom couldn't read, but was a willing and skilled worker with refrigeration, cars, masonry, and carpentry. He wasn't a bad guy by himself, but his rather dull mind was easily influenced by his parents and his wife. The whole family was constantly feuding with one or another of the neighbors and everyone on the street politely despised them. The local police had a folder two inches thick of complaints that Linda Sheisskopf had filed on various people over the years, all unfounded. They shuddered when they heard her nasal whine on the phone.

Once, when the Sheisskopfs were picking on a family three doors south, Linda called the police and told them that Kurt, the fourteen-year-old boy, had thrown a large rock through her picture window, and demanded they arrest him immediately. With a sigh of resignation, one of the force of eight set out in his patrol car to investigate. Upon arriving, Linda handed him a rugged twenty-pound chunk of limestone and repeated her demand for an immediate arrest, preferably with some police brutality. Patrolman Jim Collins proceeded professionally, taking Linda's report and noting the time frame in which the incident had occurred.

After checking around, Officer Collins discovered that the accused had been in school all day, and was at basketball practice with two coaches and thirty other boys when the window was broken—in fact, he was still there.

Ignoring the counter-evidence, Linda insisted that Kurt must have done it, and pressed for further investigation of the cabal at the school that was providing the boy with a false alibi. Collins tried to explain just how unlikely it was that an entire school district had decided to enter into a criminal conspiracy to break her window, but Linda was having none of that.

"You take this rock and fingerprint it, or I'll have the FBI down on the whole department for violating my civil rights of equal protection!"

Officer Collins briefly considered throwing the rock through Linda's head, then saluted, placed the rock carefully in the front seat of the patrol car, and headed back to the station to add yet another entry in the Sheisskopf Saga.

The cops told me later that they still have that rock down at the PD. It sits on the chief's

desk, an overgrown paperweight. Huh. Sheisskopf. If the name had a "c" inserted as the second letter, it would be perfect German for "shithead." How appropriate.

Tom was now leaning on the truck door, blowing his hot-dogs-and-sauerkraut breath at James. "Hey, y'know that ol' Sony tape machine you worked on fer me? It's messin' up agin."

"Same thing?"

"Yuh. Th'empty reel don't turn right, an' the tape gits messed up."

James sighed. "Okay, bring it around this evening, and I'll see if I can tighten that take-up clutch a little more."

"Maybe you can fix 'er right, this time," Tom said, rather loudly. "I paid a lot of money for that thing, y'know." Over Tom's shoulder, Jim saw Linda standing on the porch, listening; Sheisskopf was obviously trying to make points with his wife.

Oh, hell. It looks like it's about my turn, dammit! They've decided it's time to fight with me again. I wish I could just dynamite their house and be done with it! Fuck 'em!

Just as loudly, but with a polite expression on his face, he replied. "Well, I told you that part needs to be replaced. The trouble is that you bought it at a PX in 'Nam; they never imported that model into the U.S. and Sony won't support it with parts over here. But if you're unhappy about the job I did last time, I'll refund your money. How much did I charge you?"

Tom's face worked as his brain went into low gear for a hard pull through his mud-mired memory. "Uh, nuthin'. . ."

"Right. And I'll gladly give it back. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to make a service call. A paying service call." With that, James started the engine, grabbed reverse, and backed out onto the street, leaving Tom and spouse staring at him, Tom confused, Linda with a pinched expression on her flat, doughy face. He knew she would be thinking of some way to get even for the heinous insult of not being adored and respected.

James felt good.

Damn, I'm glad I stood up to them this time. I should have done that from the start A couple years ago, for instance, when Doug was five. They claimed he sat on their crummy patio table and broke it Sheila got really pissed because I just paid them for a new one to keep the peace. She was right, that time. Turns out that their fat-ass stupid kid, same age as ours, sat on it and broke the thing, not Doug. But that's their style. Anything (hat goes wrong can't possibly be their fault! It has to be someone else doing it to them out of some mysterious, malicious intent

Linda was a part-time mail carrier for a while until her older daughter, a real little slut, bragged one day on the school bus about reading all the teenage girls' magazines as soon as they came out She said her mom brought them home, and then delivered them after she read them. As soon as certain people heard that story, Linda was out of another job. Damned shame they didn't throw the book at her for tampering with the U.S. mail.

At least, this time, I didn't just grin and take it They seem to be getting worse; who knows what'll happen if nobody stops them?

* * *

James's elation from standing up to his neighbors lasted for the first ten miles. He replayed the scene a few times, savoring the memory of the put-down. It irritated him no end to have those people complaining about the work he did for free, and ignoring what he had told them about the situation. James was a damned good technician, but he couldn't work miracles. No parts, no manuals, no in-country tech support- it was nearly a miracle in itself that he had been able to

carefully tweak and bend some flat cams on the take-up clutch and linkage to make the deck work at all.

But people were like that sometimes. Once you got a reputation for doing "the impossible," some folks expected you to do it all the time. Never mind that most "impossible" things were only "impossible" to those who worked By The Book with bags and boxes of original parts; with a little thought and savvy, James had found it possible to modify, mix, and interconnect different parts, assemblies, and whole units in configurations the manufacturers had never thought about until James did it the first time. *You just have to understand how things work, look at them from a fresh viewpoint. That ability stood James in good stead. If only people were as easy to understand . . . and manipulate?*

Emerson, Lake & Palmer's music pounded out of the speakers behind the truck seat, making James's head bob in time with the throbbing rhythm, when his eye was caught by a group of horses grazing beside a riding school about halfway to his destination.

A sharp intake of breath. *Oh-h-h . . .*

With a will of its own his foot came off the gas pedal, letting the truck slow as James turned his head to stare at the animals. He concentrated on the ones turned away from him. *Come on, come on. Are you?* One flicked a tail to show her marehood, the badge of her femininity dimly revealed in the shadow. *Yes!*

Nice ass. A small groan escaped his lips at the sight; he wrenched his eyes away, back to the road.

Why? he wondered. *After all these years, why do horses still turn me on? I haven't touched an animal since I met Sheila. All the books I've read say bestiality is mostly something that young boys do, like homosexual experimentation. That stopped, why not this? I've had good sex with a woman! Why do I have to be a pervert?*

James became painfully aware of a throbbing erection cramping up in his jeans. There was no help for it; experience proved that it would not just go away.

Where's the turnoff, someplace I can park for a few minutes without being disturbed? There! The old cemetery by that abandoned church! It has plenty of trees surrounding it.

After a quick scan for possible observers, James pulled into the weed-choked driveway and drove behind the sagging building.

He opened the door and put his feet on the ground, leaned back against the end of the seat and quickly loosened his pants, fantasizing about women, naked women, *any* women, as he frantically pulled and nibbed his stiff penis. When it started to soften he redoubled his efforts, unwilling to forgo the pleasure of orgasm now that he had taken the trouble of pulling off the road, but it refused to cooperate. In desperation, his subconscious took over, replacing the images of flesh-tones, pubic hair, and bouncing, gigantic breasts with the memory of musky earthen scents, flowing tails, firm equine buttocks, and the feel of horsehair against his naked thighs. His erection returned. *Oh, God, not again! Why not at least a normal jerk-off fantasy? Oh, damn, oh, it feels too gooditfeelstoo-Aaaahh!*

James stiffened as his seed spewed forth upon once-hallowed ground. He chuckled to himself, a taste of manic hysteria in his voice.

Just like Onan. Sorta. His sin was refusing to impregnate his brother's widow by pulling out and "spilling his seed upon the ground." I wonder if God is mad at me because I'm not shooting my semen in a mare, cumming in cayuse cunt?

Since he was already stopped in a place of concealment, James took advantage of the opportunity to shoot up again.

James took a different route coming home from the service call although it meant an extra fifteen miles. He kept his attention firmly directed toward the road ahead, unwilling to risk the sight of any more horses.

Dammit! All the books said animal sex was just something that some teenagers experimented with, and was fairly *normal in a rural context*. *Why am I different? Why didn't sex with women change me, replace this bestial lust? What in the name of all the Gods and Goddesses puts me in that tiny minority of weirdos that continue to crave this . . . this . . . perversion?*

Society said it was something terrible. Most states classified it as a "crime against nature," something to be put in prison for. True, Missouri was no longer one of those states, but Kansas, where he grew up and had done it and done it, again and again, still was. So James was a criminal even though he had never been arrested for it. He was just uncaught by the long arm of the law. *If someone told the authorities over there, would they issue a warrant for my arrest? Would it be safe to ever cross the state line again? Is there a statute of limitations on sodomy?*

Sweet jumpin' Jesus, what's so terrible about this? I never hurt anybody or anything! The horses didn't seem to mind-shit! Mind? They enjoyed it as much as I did. It wasn't like it was rape or anything!

The last thought cooled the defensive outrage that had started to build in James, inspiring a humorous mental image. The idea of raping a horse . . . standing naked behind an animal with powerful legs and hard, sharp hooves, genitals swinging free and vulnerable, trying to do something the animal didn't like. WHACK! Unconsciously he grasped himself as if for reassurance, then laughed when he realized what he was doing.

The humor was a relief. One of the few things that saved James through the years of growing up as a fat boy, then a fat man, always on the outside of society looking in, was an ability to laugh at himself. Even that hurt a little, but it hurt a lot less to tell the fat jokes first, to disarm the situation, than to overhear others tell them and snicker behind his back.

Fat. Just another cosmic joke God played on me. Born almost twice as heavy as most babies, hit a hundred pounds by age nine, big bones, strong, but how can anyone tell that under all the lard? "Jimmy, don't eat so much." "Jimmy, you need to go out and play hard." "Jimmy, quit sneaking food up to your room"-I can still hear my mother. Didn't she realize that Food Was Love? She taught me. She and Dad. A scraped knee, a pinched finger: the prescription for life's little disasters was a cookie, or a piece of candy, or an apple, whatever. Dad would give me little treats when I was a little boy, and I knew that he did it because he loved me. It was simple. Whenever I was hurt, or other kids teased me, or I felt bad about being fat, all I had to do was eat something and I'd feel better. At least for a while . . .

James felt hungry. He shifted his 350-plus pounds on the truck seat, trying to find a position where the steering wheel wouldn't rub his belly. He *wouldn't* stop for food, he *wouldn't*! His thoughts drifted. Divorce. No! He had been through that so many times, and it never made a damned bit of difference.

Think logically about this. What are your troubles? Drugs? Lots of people have drug problems whether they know it or not-your wife is addicted to caffeine-laced soda pop and potato chips. Divorce? Hell, lots of people go through that, too. It hurts, but everyone says the pain lessens with time. What makes you so special, fat boy? What's your unique trouble? Huh?

The answer was obvious. "Shit! You know!"

"Okay, self, let's do an inventory!"

"First off, now we're talking aloud to ourselves, to *myself*! Crazy? Of course we are, of course I am! Doesn't trying to kill yourself with the Death of a Million Needle Punctures, and driving away your family because you don't want to see or talk to them, and wanting to eat because you feel awful and ugly and fat, and getting a hard-on every time you see a horse pussy *make* you crazy? *Damn right it does, you stupid, genius, insane, crazy, perverted son of a bitch!*"

With a scream of anguish James slammed on the brakes and whipped the wheel to the right, bouncing his truck through the broad, shallow ditch to come to rest at the edge of an open field, oblivious to the horns and curses of the drivers behind him.

Sobs wracked his body as tears flowed behind the hands pressed to his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

Same day

"Are you okay?"

With a start, Jim snapped awake. It took a moment to shake off the disorientation, then he saw the state trooper's face peering in at him through the window.

"Uh, yeah, I guess so. Sorry officer, I mean-I'm kind of embarrassed . . ."

"What's the trouble? Have you been drinking? Your eyes are all red. Step out and let me see your driver's license."

James opened the door, climbed out, and produced license, registration, and insurance card.

"I was just driving along, and kept thinking about my divorce. I had to get off the road, I mean-"

"Okay," the trooper interrupted. "I don't smell anything on your breath, but you look like you're in a hell of a shape. Listen, Mr. Falabella, maybe you'd better stay here for a little longer until you're sure you'll be safe out there on the road."

"Thanks, I think I will. I mean, normally I don't do anything like this but it's been months and it just doesn't seem to get better . . ."

The patrolman nodded sympathetically. "Look, I went through the same thing, and I know what you mean. Just hang tough, hang in there. Don't let it kill you or somebody else on the road."

"Go on home if you think you can. Better yet, there's a motel about a mile ahead. Get some coffee, relax a while. You'll feel better. There's a single waitress who should be on her shift about now. She's kind of chubby but really nice, with a good sense of humor and a great personality." He gave James a friendly pat on the back then squeezed his shoulder.

Thanks. I really mean it." James climbed back in and watched the trooper return to his unit and drive away. A few minutes later he did the same.

Boy, even the cops figure I can't get a nice-looking woman and would be willing to "settle for" whatever I can get!

He resumed his conversation, somehow unable, unwilling to avoid it. He had avoided it too long as it was.

"Okay, let's be calm and rational about this. No more crying jags. Overall, you're a reasonably nice guy, right?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose so . . ."

"Shit-can the modesty crap! Be assertive! Be honest with yourself for a change! Hey, this is me talking, right?"

James grinned at himself. "Right! Okay, I'm a reasonably nice guy."

"So. You're smart, you're talented, you can fix things, make things, design things, understand how things work, right?"

"Right!"

"Now, those are *things*. Maybe the trouble is that you're trying to treat people as things, and that doesn't work. Maybe you're trying to treat yourself as a thing, and that doesn't work, either."

"Huh?"

"Lemme chew on it a bit. I'm not too sure about this, but I think we may be onto something here . . ."

As the self-conversation paused, James saw the motel and turned in. He started toward the coffee shop but an impulse made him go to the office instead.

"Got a single with some privacy?"

The clerk looked up from the television behind the desk. "We don't allow no wild parties here."

"No problem. I just want one where there wont be a lot of noise to distract me. I have some work to do."

"Okay, fill out this card, buddy. That'll be twenty-two fifty, and I need some I.D."

James counted out the cash and handed his driver's license to the clerk.

When the clerk saw the address of a nearby city, he looked surprised at first, then knowing. "Oh, a broad! That'll cost ya an extra five bucks for double occupancy!"

James started to protest, then shrugged. He paid the money and left the office.

At a phone on a pedestal outside, he called home. "Mom? Look, I met an old friend, and we're going to have something to eat then go to his place for a while. I may stay there tonight. What? No, he doesn't have a phone. Call the neighbors if you have any problems. No, not *those* neighbors-the Thorndykes. Huh? Yeah, I suppose it's okay if you go ahead and wash my dirty dishes. Enjoy yourself. Hey, look, this is expensive on a pay phone. I'll see you tomorrow if not tonight. Bye."

It was scary. Back there on the highway it hadn't mattered a bit to James what might have been on the side of the road. If there had been a concrete overpass, a gorge, a river, James knew he would have pulled off anyway. Something Had To Be Done.

James didn't know if the motel room was any solution, but there were things he *had* to resolve, answers he *had* to have if he was going to go on living. He couldn't continue hating what he was and survive, but his self-honesty, sadly abused as it had been over the years, still wouldn't let him accept himself without some good reasons.

It was now of overriding importance to find those reasons.

Failing that, he needed to end it before he hurt someone else in his despair.

James opened the toolbox behind the cab of his pickup and took out a yellow legal pad. From the front he took his shaving kit. After a moment of eyes-closed contemplation, he reached under the seat and withdrew a .45 automatic pistol.

With these three items in hand he unlocked the door and went inside to find a reason to live . . . or face his destiny.

* * *

It was the usual cheap, non-chain motel room. A small bathroom with shower in the rear, a

double bed, a nightstand, two rugged "easy" chairs and a "writing desk" built into the wall with a telephone and a bad, ink-blotting, ballpoint pen chained to it.

James double-locked the door, put the pad, kit, and gun on the desk, stripped off his clothes and took a slow shower. The warm water pounding on his overstuffed hide calmed his mind for a little while.

At least the motel is generous with towels, he thought as he emerged wrapped in one. Most towels weren't big enough to go around his waist.

Seating himself at the desk, James reached for the shaving kit, then stopped. *No, not yet Not until I get something down on paper. Otherwise I might well spend the night shooting up and do nothing else. I can't go on like this much longer!*

He took his own pen and, in large block letters, began to write:

"The only way I leave this room alive is if I find a reason, a cause for being what I am."

He stared at the print for a moment, mind blank except for the growing pain. *So, is that really the key question? Maybe.*

More: "There must be a reason for what I am. There must be. Either something caused this, or I am just a sick pervert. If it's the first, maybe I can change. If I can't change, maybe I can learn to live with myself without so much guilt. If there's no reason, if I'm merely a piece of twisted subhuman scum, then the world, my parents, and my children will be better off without me cluttering up their lives; I might just as well finish it off here as drag out my miserable existence."

Yeah. Why should I hang around if all I will ever do is fuck up someone else? Sheila was right to leave. I can barely stand to look at myself. What must it have been like to live with someone so full of self-hatred? GOD, what have I already done to my children?

James's eyes fell on the gun. *So easy. It's plenty powerful; all I have to do is make sure it takes out the brain stem at the back of my neck to make it quick and clean. A little messy, but that's what they pay maids for, right?*

James started to reach for the gun.

No, not yet. Suicide is serious business. Yeah, so I'll reincarnate anyway, but the Cods get pretty pissed off at you for trying to play hooky from the School of Life. Then I'll just have to come back and do it all over again. And in the meantime it won't be pleasant; I'd better be damn sure before I pull that trigger. Don't be in a hurry . . .

With deliberate calm, James again applied pen to paper:

"MY TROUBLES: I thought my attraction for horses had finally been resolved when I met Sheila. Great sex, at least at first, and someone intelligent enough to understand what I was talking about. Not quite as high an I.Q. as me, but she's no slouch. When we met, I was negotiating to rent a small farmhouse and buy a pony. I was resigned to a lonely life.

"Then I saw Sheila. I could talk to her, tell her about my religious odyssey. One night in bed, just a few days after we started sleeping together, I even told her about horses; she cried a bit, but explained that she was crying for the pain I must have felt. I loved her so much at that moment. For four years I never had a sexual thought about an animal. Then she stopped loving me."

I guess that's what happened. She quit telling me about her problems at work, started withdrawing into herself. Our sex life suffered. We started out with three, four, sometimes six times a day before we were married. We kept up at least twice a day until our son was born, right up to a few hours before. Then we averaged once a day for a year and a half until our daughter was born. Then twice a week. Once a week. Once a month. It got so I kept a secret

calendar. The last three years we made love twice! And one of those was just me going down on her. She laid there and got her gonads off, but I was on my own.

Sure, I saw a couple of hookers, but they cost too much and who knew what you might catch from them? I didn't want a lover, still don't; an affair gets too complicated too quickly. Masturbation is a relief, but by SHIT! it's lonely.

"She resented my narcolepsy, the fact that I didn't have to-or couldn't-get up on a regular schedule and go to a job. No matter that she only worked six hours a day, nine months a year, and I still brought in almost as much money as she did, plus big tax breaks for a home-based business, plus being a ready-made babysitter; her background seems to demand some kind of Puritan work-ethic crap!"

Hmmm, maybe it isn't all my fault, nor hers. Aw, hell, I've known that for years. Get back to what's really bothering you and quit sidetracking!

"I first fucked a horse when I was seventeen. My first woman was four years later. And the horse was a better piece of pussy."

Wow, I remember that . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

August 1967

The two teenaged boys enjoyed the breeze as the little motorcycle sang its bumblebee song, zipping down the country blacktop at its top cruising speed of thirty-five miles per hour.

David Hand, Jim's best friend, sat on the back of the seat, reclining a bit to let more air blow between them, relieving the high-nineties heat.

A little earlier Jim had ridden the half block to Dave's house, swimming trunks and towel stuffed under the seat as usual, eager and ready to go to the old coal mine strip pit where two generations of local boys had rigged a raft and a fifteen-foot diving board from the high bank. This had been the summer routine since Jim got the Honda on his fifteenth birthday, except when they had odd jobs such as hauling hay; afterwards, "the pits" were a welcome place to wash off the itchy dust and cool down.

Today, David had a different idea "Let's go west, instead. I haven't seen my grandparents for a while, and we can fool around on the farm."

"Aw, it's hot. I was looking forward to a swim."

"Well, shit, Jim! My mother said I had to go see them today. If we don't take your Honda, I'll have to ride my bicycle, and it's five miles! Besides, they live near the river, and it's cooler there than at the pits."

Jim finally agreed, stopped at home to leave his swimming gear on the porch and inform his father of the change of plans, and they were off.

Dave was right. I liked his grandparents' farm. There were lots of tall oak trees, and even some elms that hadn't yet died from Dutch elm disease. And the old folks were pretty nice. His grandfather had once been superintendent of schools, and he told us some stories about the teachers we had. It was fun. And it was the first time I met "her."

David suggested we go for a ride beside the river, but when I started to walk toward the motorbike, he stopped me.

"That's not what I meant. Look."

What he pointed at was a two-wheeled pony cart, and a little pinto Shetland pony standing

nearby.

That was okay with me. It'd save on gas, and I'd sort of wanted a horse of my own to play cowboy with when I was younger, but could never have one. We hitched up the old mare; David drove, and we found a nice place on the riverbank to sit and talk while the pony grazed.

As usual, the talk turned to sex. Jim and Dave were both still virgins, and both quite unhappy about it.

"Ever see a naked woman?" David stroked the crotch of his jeans.

"Yeah. At the Columbus county fair last year, they had this tent. It cost a dollar to go in, and there was a woman laying in there, you had to put your head through a hole in a canvas wall, but she was right there just a couple of feet away on a blanket on the ground."

David rubbed harder. "Could you see *everything*?"

James felt his own penis stiffening at the memory. "She had a towel between her legs. But if you gave her another dollar, she'd take the towel away."

"Didja?"

"Yeah. It was okay, I guess, but she kept her legs together so you couldn't see nothin'. I shoulda said, 'Hey, lady, if I wanted to look at hair, I can use a mirror.' That's what I shoulda said."

"I saw Debbie Belwin naked."

"No shit? When?"

By unspoken agreement, the boys unzipped their jeans and began to jack off.

"Last spring. I was going to see Randy one night, but when I got near the house I could see the blinds were up in one of the bedrooms, and someone was moving around. It was his sister, Debbie, and she was gettin' ready for a date or something."

James jerked faster. "Tell me more!"

David's voice began to jump in time with his hand. "She was standing naked in front of her dresser mirror. I could see her ass, and in the mirror I could see her tits. They were nice, not big, but she had hard, pink nipples. And she was playing with herself, you know? She kept running her finger up and down her snatch, and I could see it going inside a little. It made her pussy lips stand right out, I could see it, I could see them, uh, all, unh, all clear!"

The description was all it took to finish both boys. They rolled sideways away from each other so the semen wouldn't stain their clothing, then they rinsed off with river water.

"Damn, I wish I could see a pussy."

"See one, hell! I wanna get laid! I'll be a senior this year, an' I gotta get some!"

James agreed with David, but he really didn't want to wait until his senior year. The upcoming junior term would be fine with him. In fact, anytime starting in about ten minutes would be all right!

We drove back to (he barn and unhitched the little pony. Dave gave me a brush and said I should wipe the horse down, then he took the harness into the tack room to clean and oil it I don't remember her name or if she even had one. What I do remember is brushing the sweat out of her coat, working my way back from the head to the tail. And I remember she lifted her tail up for some reason. There, staring right up at me, was a pussy. A horse pussy, to be sure, but it looked a lot like the human ones I had seen in my father's medical books. The hot day, the masturbation and sex talk by the river, being with David, the only boy I knew hornier than I was-it all came together in an irresistible impulse. I touched it

It felt smooth and velvety, soft and warm on the outside, with just a little short, downy hair on the lips. My heart was pounding in my chest I slipped my middle finger inside the tight slit,

the way I had imagined countless times doing to a girl. Oh, lordy, it felt hot and moist and slick and soft and I could just imagine it around my dick, and I was getting another hard-on, and then-THEN she twitched! Her pussy puckered up and tightened around my finger, milking at it, clenching as though she didn't want to let go! I almost came in my pants thinking of a pussy doing that to my dick! Then I heard David returning.

James jerked his finger free and pushed the mare's tail down with his hand. He quickly resumed brushing, standing close to the pony's side to hide his erection.

I said nothing to David about the pony, but on the ride back to town I surreptitiously brought the finger to my nose and sniffed. An earthy, rich, musky aroma filled my nostrils, not at all like I expected. The memory of the smell, the touch, the clenching stayed with me, enriching my masturbatory fantasies for months to come. I figured if horse cunt was that nice on my finger, a real girl on my male member would be more wonderful than I could possibly imagine. It would probably kill me.

CHAPTER SIX

April 1968

Jim was proud of himself. Due to an unexpected allergic reaction to penicillin two months before, he had lost forty pounds. He felt good, and in celebration his mother allowed him to select a pair of fashionable hip-huggers. They were light blue, of a broad corduroy nap, and he bought a wide belt to go with them. Coupled with a blue-gray velour long-sleeved pullover shirt and a careful spit-shine on his cordovan penny loafers, James was *mod!*

I looked good, felt good, and was ready to take on the world. More to the point, I was ready to ask Wendy Grover to the Junior-Senior Prom. Several times that spring I asked her out for a movie or dragging Main Street in Parsons, and though she never actually went with me for one reason or another, she said to try again later every time she refused. I had a serious crush on her; I believed she felt the same way and was as frustrated as I by the circumstances that kept her from accepting. After all, I helped her with her schoolwork in study hall several times a week; she would sit close as I worked her General Math I problems and explained them to her or filled out her biology workbook. When I pointed out parts of the drawings she didn't have quite right, sometimes she would rub her firm, pointy tits on my arm as she reached for the paper. Then she would look at my lap and smile at the erection that was almost a/ways there; it made it even harder and more painful when she did that, but I loved her for it through the ache.

Jim thought Wendy was the cutest girl in the junior class. Small, dark-haired, with a perpetual squint from her contact lenses, she lacked the statuesque beauty of blonde Wanda Pohl, or the massively jutting breasts of Nikki Doolan, but the combination of pixie-ish face, full lips, nicely shaped body, and short stature made her quite attractive. Out of the ten female juniors, she was the obvious top choice as far as Jim was concerned.

He caught up with her at her locker a few minutes before the end-of-lunch bell.

"Uh, Wendy, the prom's in a couple of weeks, y'know . . ."

"Yeah, so?"

"Urn, I was wondering, you know, I've asked you out other times and you couldn't make it, but you said to try again, and-"

"Are you asking me to the *prom*?" Her voice carried and other students stopped to listen, grinning.

Jim blushed. "Well, er, uh, kind of, I guess-I mean, well, yeah . . ."

He reddened further as she laughed, joined by the bystanders.

I wanted to drop dead, or have the old building collapse, or go back five minutes. As Wendy regained her control and started to speak, I wished the sun would go supernova and destroy us all!

"You? You think I'd go to the *prom* with *you*? Why? Ha-ha-ha! *Why*?"

Jim was shattered, confused. He stammered, "B-b-but, but, all those hours in study hall, a-and the way you sat close, and you s-said to, to ask again, and-"

"You fat slob! You idiot!" Contemptuously, "I needed the grades so I wouldn't get grounded at home! So I could go out on dates, but not with *you*! I like to date guys who'll talk about records, or movies, or sports; you'd just bore me with all that stupid talk about science, or books, or politics or something!"

By this time it seemed as if half the eighty members of the high-school student body were standing in the hallway with them. Some of the faculty were there also, including Calvin Schwartz, crew-cut, flap-eared assistant coach, math teacher, and part-time pig farmer. Jim was in a panic, his whole life flashing before his eyes as he drowned in a sea of shame.

"Please, not so loud! D-do you, how do you expect me to help you after this?"

"I dont care! I'll get C's for the semester, and that's good enough for my parents. I dont need you any more, besides I'm tired of you staring down my blouse or up my skirt, and the way you get hard-ons around me! You're just a sick, greasy-grind brainhead, a nobody! You don't even go out for sports!"

Stricken, James felt himself weaken almost to the point of collapse.

I didn't know at the time that I had the early stages of narcolepsy, that strong emotions induced cataplexy, which paralyzes the voluntary muscles to varying degrees. I just attributed the weakness to the humiliation I felt then. But she wasn't done.

Wendy looked around at the crowd, basking in her perception of approval, a perception that wasn't far wrong given the innate cruelty of adolescents. She delivered her final blow.

"If you need a date for the prom, why dont you ask Mr. Schwartz to loan you one of his pigs? That'd be about right for you!"

The laughter of the crowd rang in my ears as she slammed her locker door closed and flounced off down the hall. Thinking back, I'm sure there must have been some who didn't laugh, who maybe even felt some sympathy for me, but at the time it seemed the whole world was laughing at my downfall. And I wasn't popular with the whole student body, not by any means. Many resented the ease with which I did the schoolwork that they struggled with; they hated the freedom of the halls I had as the yearbook photographer; some just hated me for being a preacher's kid, afraid I would spill the beans about their little beer parties or the Playboy magazines hidden in their lockers, little realizing that I was as dirty-minded as any of them. All these reveled in my shame.

I stumbled to chemistry class where I sat in a daze, mercifully surrounded by the three other "nerds" in the school. We made a real set-a tall, gangling guy who everyone called "Joe Queer" even though there was no evidence he was a homosexual, and two girls, one fat, tall, blonde Valkyrie, the other short, skinny, and hairy-armed. None of them made any comment about the scene although I knew they'd seen it; they just looked at me with understanding and sympathy. I hated them, too, hated them for knowing the depths of my hurt.

I stumbled to American history, where I had to sit in the same room with her, enduring the stares, grins, and snickers as the others whispered amongst themselves. I left school a few

minutes early with the principal's permission, rode my little motorcycle home, and went to my room, where I lay face-down for hours, sobbing into my pillow.

I didn't want to go back to school, didn't want to face my peers again, didn't want to spend another day in the little town where my spirit died. But I had no choice in the matter.

"Hey, Fat-boy! The vo-ag teacher wants you in the barn! He says there's a cow about to flunk out, and if you'll help with her homework, maybe she'll go to the dance with you!"

"Watch out, Shirley, don't let Smart-Ass get too close to you. He'll get a hard-on!"

"Gotcher date lined up yet, Jim? Oink-oink!"

Stiff with sullen anger, James endured. He still had some friends, although even they grinned a bit in spite of themselves. Though it seemed forever, the wisecracks, the snide looks, all gradually faded.

"Look, Jim," said David one afternoon, "I've got this cousin who lives in Chanute, she's not real pretty, but not bad, either, and I think she'd love to be your date at the prom."

"No! I'll take care of this myself."

Dave looked hurt. "Hey, I'm just trying to help!"

"Never mind! I'll-aw, shit, what'm I gripin' at you for? I just get so goddamn mad when I think of how Wendy played me for a sucker. Then she had to tell the whole damned school! Bitch! Little goddamn bitch-and the rest of 'em, they're bitches, too!"

James rolled over on his bed to look at David, sitting at the desk.

"So, whattaya gonna do?"

"I dunno."

"Y'know what'd be great? Walk into the gym on prom night with a knockout chick on your arm! That'd show 'em!"

"Ye-eah-h-h! That'd do it all right!"

I could see it all: I'd skip the formal dinner, then wait until the first dance-no, the second one-had started, then, with a dramatic flair, throw the double doors open wide. We'd walk in with dignity, heads held high, then pause right at the edge of the dance floor, standing in the arched trellis with all the roses tied to it. The crepe-paper streamers draping down from the ceiling would form a focal point to lead all eyes to us. The scoffing boys would be stunned, jaws agape as they stared at us; Wendy would be green with envy, maybe even faint or get sick and have to leave early. My date would dance every dance with me and we'd be like Rogers and Astaire-the floor would magically clear around us, the others ashamed to make their clumsy movements anywhere near such obvious grace, beauty, and poise.

"Oh, fuck, where the hell would I find a date like that in my whole life, much less in four days?"

"Yeah. But it would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"Who are you taking, Dave?"

"Nobody. I'm going stag, just like half the guys who'll be there, and half the girls, too. I couldn't find a date, either."

The teenagers shared a mutually sympathetic silence.

"Y'know what my problem is, Dave? I can't talk to girls. I mean, I never know what to say, what they like to talk about. All my sisters ever talked about was boys, or clothes, or makeup, or movie stars, or shit like that."

"Yeah, mine too."

"Even if I knew what to say, I dunno if I could say it. When I see a girl, all I can think

about is how she would look naked, how her tits would hang, what her pussy would look like, how much I'd like to fuck her . . ."

"Yeah, really. It seems like I have a hard-on all the time! Hey, you know Ellie May, the fat girl in your chemistry class? In eighth grade, before you moved here, me and Wayne took her out back of the school one day and we gave her a candy bar and she let us feel her up."

"Really? What was it like?"

"I dunno. It was kind of hard to tell with all the fat and stuff. She was only starting to get tits and pubic hair, and her pussy still felt like a smooth groove. Wayne tried to talk her into letting him stick it in, but she said her older brother Tommy once tried to do that and it hurt, so she wouldn't let him. We only had a few minutes, anyway."

"Huh! I miss all the fun. I'll tell you a secret. . . she sits in front of me in American history, and lots of times I rub my knee on her butt and even my hand sometimes."

"What's she do?"

"Usually not much. Sometimes she turns her head and gives me a funny look, like she kinda likes it but kinda don't. I had to stop it after ol' Drew-Fart, the teacher, saw me one day."

"Maybe you should ask her. At least she's a lot smarter than Wendy, and I think she likes you."

"Aw, shit! Wouldn't *we* make a couple? I can just hear the assholes' wisecracks about 'cows and pigs' starting up again, and it'd hurt her feelings something awful, and I'd feel honor-bound to defend her, and I'd wind up in a big fight, and get the crap beaten out of me by some jock-strap-brained idiot, and probably get thrown out of school to boot!"

"Yeah, you're right. So, what're you gonna do?"

"Stay home, I guess. Look, don't tell anybody yet, but my dad thinks the church is gonna move us to another town just after school's out. If I can tough it out a few more weeks, it'll be over."

"Well, damn! I'll miss you."

"Me, too. You, I mean; I hope I can find another dirty-minded friend wherever I wind up. Speaking of which, I found some old nudist magazines in the back of my dad's desk. Wanna see 'em?"

"Do they show everything? Pubes and all?"

"Yeah! Young girls, women, old ladies-everything!"

The boys got a laugh out of some pot-bellied old man playing volleyball in cowboy hat and boots, his little dick flopping in the air, but they also managed to use up some facial tissues that afternoon.

In the end, I couldn't face the music, so I didn't go to the prom. I was so bitter about girls and myself at the time it probably would have been awful even with a date. I decided that if I couldn't join 'em, I'd lick 'em!

For most of a year when I masturbated to hidden pictures of nude women, I remembered the feel, the smell, of that pony puss. It made my fantasies more real, my orgasms more intense. Gradually at first, but with greater and greater strength after my fumbled attempts to get a date, I became aware of the fact that David's pony had a pussy at about the right height, one that felt very good to my fingers, and she couldn't laugh at me!

Prior to that afternoon in the barn, the thought that humans might have sex with animals hadn't seriously occurred to me, certainly not in a personal context. Sure, I'd heard the jokes a few times, and there was Jackie, a boy a year older than me, and the stories that were whispered about him. Jackie's sister, Sharon, was two years younger than me, but she had an incredible

body! Sometimes during the summer, boys would drive by their farm in hopes of seeing Sharon out on a tractor doing field work-she a/ways wore a skimpy bikini when she did.

Jackie was a short, stocky bully. Not too bright, he was just another jock who took delight in pushing others around, especially me-or so it seemed. Now and then you'd hear a story about him, though. Rumor had it that he tried to rape his sister, once, but she beat the shit out of him. I could believe that Sharon was pretty tough and mean, too.

But the best stories, never repeated in Jackie's presence, were the ones where Sharon caught him in the bam fucking a cow or a horse. Some went so far as to claim that she held the animals still for him so he could get his nuts off and would quit bothering her.

I shared the snickers of my peers, taking vicarious revenge on a boy we feared and hated. But I didn't really believe it, nor do I think my friends did, either. It was in the same class as the ribbing we gave a classmate who had made enough money raising his own pigs on his father's farm to buy a new Mustang, the first in our little town. We teased nearsighted Darrell about having litters of piglets born wearing glasses, and laughed at the way he'd blush.

To us, the idea was so ludicrous that nobody took it seriously, either about Jackie or Darrell. Nor did we believe it really happened with anyone else, unless it might be some crazed, retarded subhuman who drooled and could barely speak.

But I was beginning to take a second, much longer look at it Humanity seemed to want nothing to do with me; sometimes I wondered: Was I really a part of this strange race of near-hairless apes? They didn't seem to want me. Very well. I'd take care of that!

I decided that while my schoolmates were fumbling and stumbling at their juvenile frolic, I was going to get fucked! I didn't care if it was an animal; I just wanted to find out what it felt like to stick my dick in something warm, wet, and alive, something designed for a penis, made to accept hot, spurting semen.

The Friday afternoon of the prom, the school let the juniors and seniors out early so they could go to the neighboring bigger towns to pick up their rented tuxes and collect the corsages held in refrigerated reserve at florist shops.

While other high-school boys prepared to spend the money they'd carefully saved from allowances and after-school farm work, I went home, changed into cutoff jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, packed a few of the small cigars I'd recently started smoking in a pocket along with a carrot, and climbed onto my Honda.

At the farm I explained to David's grandparents that I wanted to work on a wildlife project for scouts, and asked permission to ride around their wooded pasture looking for animal tracks. Being a retired educator, Dave's grandpa agreed, even suggesting parts of the woods where there were game trails. All he asked was that I not frighten the few cows and the pony that were out there.

I motored slowly, hoping the mare wasn't close by the house or barn. I was in luck, spotting her near the back of the property, standing in the shade of a small copse of trees, totally out of sight of likely observers.

I parked the cycle some distance away so as not to spook her. I needn't have worried; the little mare was so old and foot-sore from founder that I probably could have ridden over her without disturbing her. She turned her head to look at me as I nervously approached on foot
"Easy, girl. Look, a nice carrot"

As she munched the treat, I stroked her neck and back. I didn't know if she might kick or something; I sincerely hoped not, but I was willing to risk it anyway. I ran a hand down her near-side hip, then up the back of her leg and under her tail. She lifted it a little bit, further

encouraging me. I looked-yeah, she still had a pussy. A cruel Universe hadn't made it vanish into thin air to further frustrate me. A pinto with a white butt, her pussy was even pink like a girl's. I slid my fingertip inside as before, and it felt every bit as good as my memory of the previous summer. I poked in and out a few times, rewarded by the muscular clasping. Checking again to be sure I wouldn't be seen, I slipped my shorts and underpants off over my sneakers and let my modest erection wave in the open air.

There was yet another reason I hated team sports-the locker room. I hated being teased about having a short penis. How the hell was it my fault that it only measured four inches long? What would a girl say? Maybe I wasn't "hung like a horse,"but at least the mare wouldn't laugh .

..

Breathing in ragged gasps, James stepped behind the pony and lifted her tail high. He poked, gently at first, then harder as he encountered dry resistance at the closed lips of the equine vulva He summoned what spit he could from his excitement-parched mouth and smeared it over the head of his dick.

I finally had to spread her open with my thumbs and just stick the tip inside. With effort, I pushed deeper into her, then drew back a little. I was surprised at how tight it felt Push again, a bit further, back out a little, push again. . . . Eventually her natural juices flowed and spread out making for easy, lubricious movement

God, it was heaven! I didn't manage to screw very long-how many boys do, their first time?-but it was great while it lasted! The velvet lining of her vagina, the strong lips clasped about my member, and the twitching! Oh, Lordy, the twitching! As I reversed direction to pull back, her muscles gripped my penis like a fist; then as I pushed in, they relaxed again until I hit the end of my stroke-then clasped tightly around the base of my penis. In-twitch! Out-twitch! Within a couple of minutes I was pounding away for all I was worth, feeling my orgasm mount As I came, I shoved as hard and deep into her box as I could; she seemed to know what was happening, pushing back so suddenly I almost fell. We locked together in that position as my semen spurted inside at the limit of my reach; I could feel her pussy rapidly twitching around me, milking me of my seed. I moaned and she whinnied. The poor old girl had probably needed and wanted sex as much as I did! I pulled out and sat down on the ground behind her, gasping for breath. Right in front of my face I could see her pussy still puckering under her elevated tail as translucent white fluid oozed out and dripped off.

If animal pussy was so incredibly good, I wondered, what would a woman be like?

CHAPTER SEVEN

April 1987, same night, in the motel

James became aware of his surroundings as he roused from his reverie. He had, again, an erection. His left hand unconsciously rubbed it through the towel as he contemplated that memory.

*What's so significant about that? I've relived that scene more often than "M*A*S*H" has reruns. Causes. Causes-okay, the reason I selected a horse as a sex object was pretty much random chance from circumstance, but I decided to fuck her to make up for my humiliation.*

On another sheet of paper, James wrote, "REASONS WHY:" at the top, then entered below that, "Circumstances, opportunity-humiliated by girl-humiliated by most students." A pause, then, "Horny as a three-balled tomcat."

He drew a line down the middle of the page, making two columns. At the top of the second one, he wrote: "HOW I FEEL ABOUT THESE."

After "Circumstance, opportunity," he wrote, "Okay. It was happenstance and curiosity."

He skipped to the bottom of the first column and drew a line up to his last comment. "What teenage boy isn't?"

Then he stared at the middle entries, the most significant.

How do I feel? I still feel angry, betrayed, taken-advantage-of. I feel like I was targeted. Why me? Because I was different, because they resented my brains? Because they didn't like me? Maybe worse, just because I was there, available? Was I an available target-of-chance for their cruel instincts?

James wrote these down.

Which is better, which am I more comfortable with? Does it matter? I don't know which one speaks worse for the condition of Man. . . .

The distraction had caused James to lose his erection, much to his immediate relief.

I'll never get done if I keep getting horny. Was high school all bad? Didn't I have any fun? Of course. There was that time in my sophomore year. . . .

James, David, and a boy named Lenny from the nearby county seat were committing a crime; criminal trespass, to be exact. They were inside the school building on a Sunday afternoon without permission of the school authorities.

They weren't too worried, because they hadn't come to do harm, and everyone did it now and then. The old combined grade- and high-school buildings had so many windows and doors that the custodians never got them all locked; every kid in town knew this, and took advantage of it to sneak into the gym and play a little scratch basketball when things got too boring. Almost every Sunday, in other words. The school officials weren't too worried since the kids didn't tear anything up, took off their shoes before going out on the gym floor, and were better off there than dreaming up mischief; they always left a few old basketballs out so nobody would be tempted to break into the locker rooms to get one.

Since none of the three boys was athletically inclined, the thrill of illegal entry was the prime appeal that day. They tossed a ball around for a bit, shot a few baskets, then wandered out into the lobby where the pop cooler was.

It was one of those horizontal chest-style machines, where the pop bottles were suspended by their necks on rails. You put your dime in, made your selection, then slid it over to a gate where you could pull it out I chose my favorite, Strawberry Fanta.

They sat on the ticket counter while they sipped at their drinks and swapped dirty jokes until Lenny asked, "What's down there?"

David looked at Lenny, a small-statured boy, who was staring at a folding metal gate stretched across the hallway.

"Aw, that's the grade school part of the building."

"No, between the two gates. What're those doors?"

"Grade-school bathrooms."

"Girls' too?"

" 'Course. Why?"

"I've never been in one. I just wanta know what's different."

Dave and Jim were curious, too. Jim spoke, "How ya gonna do that? The gate's locked."

Lenny grinned. "That's the one good thing about being small. I'll bet I can climb over."

They hopped off the counter and walked over to inspect the gate. Lenny took off his red

shirt, not wanting to snag and tear it on the top of the gate. His blue eyes sparkled as he said, "I can do it."

With that, he grasped the thin bars, stuck the toes of his sneakers into the diamond-shaped gaps, and quickly shinnied up and over, then headed immediately for the forbidden goal and disappeared inside.

In a moment he stuck his head out.

"What's it like?" David asked.

"Mostly like a boy's room, but it's all pots, no pissers."

"That's to be expected," said James, "girls sit down for everything."

"Yeah, well, there's a vending machine in here, too, for combs or hairpins or something.

What does 'Kotex' mean?"

Jim's eyes lit up. "It means we can have some fun!"

"Huh?"

"How much are they?" Lenny vanished inside, then reappeared.

"Five cents."

James searched his pockets with no result. "Dave, got a nickel?"

"Yeah! Here, Lenny!" David threw the coin through the gate. "Get one."

When Lenny was back on the lobby side, he handed James the packet. "What is that?"

James grinned. "The ticket to panic. Girls freak out about these."

"Why?"

"Oh, I forgot you don't have sisters. These, Lenny, are pussy pads, manhole covers, the Red Flag of Womanhood!"

A blank look.

"C'mon, you've had hygiene class, haven't you?" A nod. "Well, when girls get old enough to be interesting, they bleed once a month."

"From the pussy, right?"

"Yeah. Serves 'em right for bein' girls. Anyway, they wear these to soak up the blood and keep it off their clothes. But we can do something better with this! Here, I'll show you . . ."

James opened the package, unfolded the napkin inside, then laid it out on the ticket counter. He then reached for his almost-empty bottle of strawberry soda and carefully poured a short red line down the middle of the pad.

"There. Looks kinda like watery blood, right?" The other two nodded.

They watched as James went to the pop machine, opened the lid, then gently laid the napkin right in the center, "bloody" side up. As the light dawned, both boys began to giggle, then laugh. James caught it, too, dropped the lid closed, and choked out, "J-j-just th-think, Dave! When the third g-graders come up for th-their morning snack break they-they'll see . . . haw-haw-HAW!"

All three roared at the thought, hamming it up by rolling around on the tile floor until David shushed them. "Hey, cool it, guys! I just saw old man Simpson out front on the sidewalk looking this way!"

The other two stopped and quickly checked to make sure they weren't visible through the windows.

"Wow, we'd better get out of here."

"Right, man! If anyone sees us here, they'll know who pulled this trick!"

The boys crept through the gym to the back door, then ran outside, ducking from cover to cover, getting a kick out of the adventure of playing "Commando-Spy-Infiltrator." On reaching

the football field unobserved, they split up, agreeing to rendezvous in front of Lee's Service Station in ten minutes.

It had been a good afternoon.

That trick worked even better than we expected. The third grade- in fact the whole elementary school-was gone on a field trip, so they didn't open the machine first. Instead, four varsity cheerleaders did their usual routine of skipping lunch in the cafeteria and headed for the gym lobby to munch chips, drink pop, and flirt with the football jocks.

About ten minutes after the lunch bell rang, there was an ear-piercing scream that echoed through both buildings. Miss Ligget the English teacher, was the first to run down the steps and the hall. A minute later, one of the cheerleaders ran back up, all the way around the high school's first floor to the high-school girls' room, then ran back out after a moment with a handful of paper towels.

I looked down the hall. Miss Ligget and the other three cheerleaders had formed a cordon, blocking the pop machine from the profane gaze of males. When the fourth cheerleader returned with the towels, Miss Ligget opened the pop-machine lid, reached in with the towels, and reemerged with a wadded mass of paper which she immediately began carrying in my direction, back to the high-school girls' room. I was sorely tempted to ask her what was up, but her eyes were flashing fire toward any male in reach, and I didn't know if I could hold it together well enough to fake her out, so I ducked down the other stairs to the cafeteria.

David and I savored that joke for weeks, and Lenny choked up, too, when we told him about it. The story eventually got around school, and most of the kids thought it was great; we never 'fessed-up to doing it, and the popular consensus blamed Shirley, a precocious eighth-grader. We were content to leave the credit to others; we knew we had done A Great Thing, the stuff of legends.

"Good tricks and good humor made up for a lot. A lot of pain, a lot of hurt could be turned around with laughter," James wrote. "I got pretty good at it; I could smell a putdown coming and make a joke at myself before anyone else had a chance to do it." His pen paused.

"Watch it, or I'll sit on you and you'll never be the same!" I could break up a roomful of kids by stuffing two donuts into my mouth at the same time, then rolling my eyes, wiggling my ears, and doing a dramatic ham-it-up swallow routine. My reputation as a clown began on the third day in that new school: the math teacher/pig farmer had a heavy-duty, extra-wide yardstick he showed every class. He assured us he could and would use it to keep order. That third day I was whispering to another freshman when Cal Schwartz caught me and decided I'd make a prime example. Besides, he didn't like the fact that I'd quit the football team just before school started, after two weeks of practice.

If he'd been satisfied with a self-mobile roadblock, I'd have been happy to stay in the line, but he and the head coach thought all their players should do wind sprints and jack around with all that calisthenics crap. I would have worked out with free weights, pounded the blocking sled, whatever, if I just didn't have to run!

But, no. "Everybody works out, Falabella! You think you're too good for that?" No, I didn't. I just didn't want to run, so I handed in my gear and rode my bicycle home to spend the last weekend before classes in relaxation. Now, six days later, Schwartz saw his chance to teach me a lesson.

"WHACK! The yardstick made a nasty sound as it smacked flat against the desk. Mr. Schwartz was the quintessential stereotypical pig farmer and bully, beer gut lapping over his

narrow belt, stretching his wrinkled white shirt into gaping ovoids between buttons, revealing the grimy undershirt beneath. His ears stood straight out from his neck/ess head, set off by the habitual crew-cut and round face with too-widely-spaced little black eyes flanking an upturned pug nose. I swear, he looked like a cross between Hermann Göring and one of his pigs.

He focused those glittering piggy-eyes on me and gestured me forward with a grin of anticipation.

"Bend over and grab your ankles," he said when I reached the front of the room. No possibility for appeal was in that voice, nor would I give him the satisfaction of asking. I just set my jaw and did as instructed, bracing myself for whatever blow might come.

"Crack!" The sound was much worse than the impact. As I relaxed a little, I heard some un-teacher-like language from Mr. Schwartz, then saw a bright, varnished piece of wood bounce off the wall in front of me.

Maybe it was the preparatory smack on the desk, maybe there was an inherent flaw in the wood. I don't think I had buttocks of steel, but whatever the reason, the first stroke had broken his brand-new yardstick-paddle.

He sent me back to my seat amidst grins of appreciation from the rest of the class, gazing at the pieces of wood, an unfathomable expression on his face. That day I was a minor hero; the new kid who had slain the ogre.

Actually, Mr. Schwartz and I got along pretty well the rest of the years I was in that school-aside from being rude, crude, loud, and sloppy, the man loved mathematics with a passion seldom seen, and he found in me a student who could be led to see the beauty of numbers, who attended class because I liked what he was teaching. My status changed; to him I became an eager pupil ready to accept the offerings of the great thinkers of the past; to the rest of the students I became a teacher's pet, a greasy grind, and a sometime object of ridicule. Most couldn't understand the mixture, thus to them I was someone to be avoided when possible. They liked it when I rigged teachers' chairs with thumbtacks and whoopee cushions, or gassed out the library one day by rigging a bypass in the chemistry lab's exhaust hood, or made minor explosive booby traps and hid them in teachers' desks, but few of them trusted me with the knowledge of their own pranks or minor truanancies. Teachers liked me and rarely suspected that I was the cause of so many disruptions; I was a preacher's kid, I was too different from the rest of them. A few good friends formed the core of my life, perhaps burning brighter for its compact size, its density. But no girls ever reached that center of action; rarely did they even penetrate the outer fringes of the darkness.

James's head swam with memories as he stared at the few words actually written on the paper, words that had triggered so many painful recollections mixed with an odd nostalgia

If I had known then what I know now, I could have done it differently.

"No!" Aloud. "The past is over, you can't change it! You've been trying to do that, or forget it, for most of your life. It's time to learn from it and change what you can about the future!"

He stared at the page again and continued his self-conversation as he let his body go through the familiar motions, preparing and injecting another dose from his shaving kit.

"Okay, now, what have you learned from this? You already knew you had trouble relating to girls. Maybe this means you already had the problem when you went into high school."

"All right, so what?"

"So, dig back earlier, find those bad experiences you've buried before they bury you. You have to do it, or you will die by your own hand- gun or needle, it makes no difference!"

"I'm scared . . ."

"I know. Me too. Do it."

Another sheet of paper. "I first remember getting interested in girls, in maybe dating one, in the eighth grade. Debbie was dark-haired, slender, with budding breasts, soft, pouting lips, and brown eyes you could fall into if you looked long enough. And I had known her since we started kindergarten together."

Eighth grade. Now we lived right in the little Kansas town, the one I rode the school bus to when we lived in the country, the bishop had moved us in the summer before sixth grade. Now I saw Johnny only during school, or the rare times his family came to the small town instead of going shopping in the county seat like most people in the area. Kelly, Mike, and Greg were my main pals now that we lived within easy bicycle distance of each other. Hell, the whole town was only about ten blocks long and eight wide, less than a mile in any dimension.

I would lie in bed at night, fantasizing about Debbie or her best friend Wilma, stroking my still-hairless-but-hard penis. For some reason, they would be in my bedroom talking to me as I lay naked under my blankets. Maybe I was sick, on my deathbed, and whichever one was there felt sorry for me. It was cold in the room, and the girl would express discomfort. Gallantly, I would offer to let her get under the covers with me and warm up, which offer she would gratefully accept. After a few minutes, she would be too warm, and I would then point out that I was naked (for some reason neither one noticed this salient fact until I mentioned it) and that the covers were perfect if you were in that condition. Whichever one occupied my mind at that moment would proceed to disrobe while still under the electric blanket with me and we would... what? I wasn't sure exactly what we would do, or how, but I knew I wanted to do "it," whatever it was.

Funny how I can't even remember their last names. I think I wanted Wilma the most, but she seemed totally unapproachable, a tall girl with a dusky Mediterranean complexion, lissome, with interesting bulges forming under her clothes. She had an air of aristocracy about her, a snobbishness born perhaps of being the daughter of one of the successful farmers and a local schoolteacher. I held no hopes outside fantasy of ever talking to her beyond what was required by school, much less touching her, kissing her the way I wanted.

Debbie, though, was much more down-to-earth, closer to my middle-class status, one imparted not by income, but by being a member of a clergyman's family. Some people back then liked to see their preachers poor, perhaps believing it made them more "godly." The only effect I can remember was that it made my dad take on extra work when someone needed help rewiring a house, or getting the crops harvested on time, or whatever. Even then, they were careful to pay him less than they would have paid a regular electrician or farmhand, lest they cause him to lose his divinely inspired spirituality and become worldly. Righteous bastards.

Having absolutely no idea of how to begin an approach, I foolishly took out my frustrations with a bit of doggerel I learned from an older, big-city cousin, by putting Debbie's name in and passing it around to my friends:

*Down in the valley where the cool wind blows,
There lay Debbie without any clothes.
Along came Kelly, a-swingin' a chain.
He saw Debbie, and out it came!*

Three months passed and all was well.

*Six months passed, and she began to swell.
Nine months passed, and out they came:
Six little bastards, swingin' a chain!*

My male classmates loved it Debbie most definitely didn't! Somehow (I always suspected the little queer in the class) she got hold of the poem. Before I knew anything was wrong, I was in the principal's office, manfully trying to deny my guilt but I was damned by my own sloppy handwriting on the paper. I broke down and tearfully admitted my crime, hoping for mercy.

That word did not exist for Benton Kuch, the slender German administrator/teacher. His rather bulging blue eyes fixed me from under his blond flat-top, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he proceeded to lecture me for the entire duration of lunch hour, "James, I am very disappointed to know that you, of all people, would write something so filthy and nasty as this! Where did you learn this trash! No, don't answer me. It doesn't matter. I just want you to sit there and listen to me without interrupting, then this afternoon you can make a public confession to the class and apologize to Miss-" (what was her last name? I can't remember!)

"You need to clean up your mind, boy! Girls are special, something that real men protect and cherish and nurture. How would you feel if you found someone had written something like this about your mother? But then, it probably wouldn't bother you, would it? Nasty boys like you are so dirty-minded that they think bad thoughts about their mothers! I should take your pants down and stretch you across my lap and spank your bare bottom until you can't walk! People that write things like this and tell dirty jokes are trash! You'd better straighten out or you'll grow up to go to jail or the insane asylum, the kind of places where they put people like you, people who-"

"No!" I wanted to scream, "It's not like that! Really! I love Debbie, but I don't know how to say it! I'm afraid; afraid she'd laugh at me, that my friends would laugh at me, that she wouldn't love me back, that-"

Instead I cowered in the corner of his office, just knowing that everyone in the school could hear him and would revel in my shame. I made the confession, and the apology, and forever gave up hope of Debbie being my girlfriend. I gave up hope of any girl in that school, that town, that county, maybe the world, wanting to have anything to do with me after being publicly branded a sexual deviate.

"Okay, that's another time you were hurt. Why?"

"I deserved it."

"Did you, now?"

James leapt to the defense of those around him, the people who were "better" than he was, members of the "accepted social order."

"Yeah! It was an *awful* thing to do! I was a terrible person for it."

"Oh, really? A silly little poem that you personalized? Do you think it made Debbie turn into a prostitute, or a lesbian, or do you think she even remembers it, now? That closet Nazi they called a principal was a repressed jerkoff, a child abuser, maybe even a pedophile without the guts to do anything more than abuse his power! Your mother thought so."

"Hey, be fair! It was the attitude of the times, the early post-Kennedy times, and that part of the world was still living in the Eisenhower era! Nobody there had even heard of Vietnam, we all watched 'Leave It to Beaver' and 'Donna Reed,' and our greatest ambition was to marry our high-school sweetheart and have kids and a house-go to work in an office every day, play

baseball in the back yard with our sons, and-"

"Bullshit! Maybe you didn't know it then, since you rarely saw anything but books, comics, television cartoons, or westerns, but now you know better! Half those well-to-do churchgoers out in the country had special plans once a month; after church, they'd meet in a house just down the road where they'd have a few drinks, then go home- with each others' spouses. Your own father was screwing half the young women in the congregation, including Johnny's mother. He was probably doing it that afternoon while John showed you something else to use your weenie for besides peeing in gopher holes. You two spent a lot of time in that car by yourselves, didn't you? How long does it take to select a few hymns?"

"Stop it! Just stop!"

"Oh, it hurts, does it? Maybe that fact alone means something! Maybe you've been so willing to see yourself as a culprit that you never realized you might be a victim!"

"Dammit, my parents loved me! Leave them out of this!"

"C'mon. It doesn't mean they didn't love you! But that's what you think, isn't it? Deep down inside, you wonder."

"No! No! If I thought that, I'd *deserve* to die, right now! They were wonderful-I mean, all things considered, they did what they thought was right. If I thought they didn't love me that would mean I don't really love them and that . . . that . . ."

James reached for the shaving kit, desperate for an anodyne, but his emotions betrayed him, his hands shaking so much that he couldn't hold the bottle, much less perform the delicate operation of shooting up. All he could do was to once again bury his face in his hands, sobbing through the muscular paralysis of cataplexy, hating himself more each minute as his denial crumbled under the onslaught of his ruthless side, the one forcing him to confront memories and analyses he'd thought safely buried.

Eventually, as do all things, the crying jag passed. The tears dried up, muscular control tentatively returned, and the catharsis of release brought James up a ways from the depths of gloom and despair into which his soul had descended. He managed a wry grin at himself in the wall mirror at his side.

"God, you look awful! Huh, that desk clerk charged me extra because he thought I had a broad with me. Wonder what he'd think of the kind of fucking I'm really getting in here?"

The mental image brightened his spirits a little more.

"Well, I hear 'no pain, no gain' all the time, now. If its reciprocal is true, then I'm gaining like a sum'bitch tonight!"

He shuffled to the bathroom to relieve his bladder and wipe his face with a cool washcloth, holding it to his sore eyes for a minute, grateful for the balm.

After returning to his seat in front of the damning legal pad, he felt steady enough to inject again. As soon as enough time passed for the latest puncture to clot, he straightened his arm and removed the small wad of blood-stained cotton, cleaning up any traces on his skin with the alcohol swab first used to prepare for the injection. He put all such little pieces of evidence carefully away in the plastic bagette in the shaving kit.

James felt no need to write anything down, and resumed his heart-to-self conversation:

"So, smartass, I hate my parents, huh? Why do you say that?"

"Maybe not *hate*, but they have disappointed you in the past. Every parent does that to a child, but not every child refuses to recall those emotions and deal with them."

"Shit! Where'd you learn to be a shrink?"

"Remember watching all those 'Donahue' and 'Oprah' shows? C'mon, you were there. Dig

back-why do you never call your mother by her first name? Even have trouble remembering it sometimes? Are you hiding more from yourself? You already had pretty warped, distorted ideas about girls before you got near the eighth grade. What else happened?"

"I don't know. Why should I hate my mother? That's sick!"

"Oh, you know all right, you just don't want to remember yet. Let's look at your last question a little more. How about the time she 'abandoned' you? You blamed her for leaving when you were fourteen years old, but was it her fault? Think back . . ."

It was a Sunday afternoon, cold and raining in the late fall of 1965. We were again in a parish where the pastor's office had to be in the parsonage, since the church had no room for one. This one was upstairs, just outside my bedroom, my safe room where I built model cars and dreamed of motorcycles, minibikes, girls, guns-all sorts of things that were important to fourteen-year-old boys in the small-town Kansas of the sixties. I was lying across the bed, reading a comic book that specialized in hot-rod stories when I first heard it from downstairs.

At first, I didn't quite believe my ears. It sounded like my parents were shouting at each other, something I couldn't remember hearing anytime in my life. Then I had to believe it as the door at the bottom of the stairs opened and their angry voices accompanied stomping feet as they climbed to the office. I was so panicked at the sudden disruption of my concept of our family that their words didn't register in my mind; I only heard the hatred and the pain as Mom screamed at Dad, and he replied in that powerfully sarcastic voice he could use when really angry about something. This was the first time I had ever heard its full force directed at my mother.

I jumped up, opened the door, and went out into the office just as Dad pulled a pair of heavy wire cutters out of a desk drawer. In my confusion I first thought he was going to stab Mom with them, or cut his own throat, or something, but he removed his wedding band and began to cut it into pieces, saying that he was going to melt it down into a cross to symbolize the burden of his marriage.

They both stopped and looked at me when they realized I was in the room. Then, in a tight voice, Mom said that she was moving out, going to the not-so-little Kansas town of Pittsburg to live and work, and that I would have to choose whether to come with her or stay with Dad.

I had little time to think it over, but, first of all, I worshiped my father-he was so brilliant I couldn't believe he could do any wrong any appearance of such just had to be a misunderstanding on my part! Then there was the matter of leaving the small-town school, the kind I had gone to all my life, leaving my new friends, and getting buried in the anonymity of a large one. I'd have to go to junior high, not high school. At the time, my choice seemed obvious. I know it hurt Mom.

It took a few weeks to understand the complicated situation.

It seems that Dad had been married before he met my mother, the marriage quickly ended in a strange way. When Lucinda and Dad went on their honeymoon, her hymen was so thick and strong that Dad couldn't consummate the marriage. Once he told me, "I should've finished her off by hand, or eaten her out, or something. She was so eager and I was so horny that I tried for three days to get through her cherry. I didn't realize that a doctor could have cured it with a little, almost-painless slice of a scalpel. Instead, we were frustrated as hell. The fourth day after we were married, I came home and found her in bed with a neighbor. A woman. The pain and futility made her decide to be a lesbian, I guess."

They agreed to annul the marriage since it had never been consummated. Lucinda was to take care of the paperwork They lost contact with each other for many years, until Lucinda

called my father about a year before the big fight

She had never filed the papers, and she thought that Dad should know that they were still legally married!

That meant that my parents weren't . . . I was a bastard.

Dad took advantage of this situation to start regularly seeing a woman in Kansas City. I didn't understand why at first; she was not particularly good-looking-rather ugly, in fact Later, I found out that she was a skilled fellatrix, something my mother refused to do, or did only reluctantly.

The argument that awful Sunday happened because this woman had driven down from Kansas City to attend church services and introduced herself to Mom. Gawd.

Mom moved out, Dad married the woman in K.C., I got my driver's license so I could help out on the three-hundred-mile round trips up there, and I met her daughter, now my step-sister. It was "Ugh at first sight" The girl had her nose elevated so high most of the time that she would have drowned in a rainstorm were it not for umbrellas. Her face was rather sharp, her expression usually cynical, but she had tits and an ass that wouldn't quit! I soon found that her brains stopped at rock music and movies-she was constantly in peril of flunking out of school, yet she had the gall to suggest that I was "stupid" because I cared more about science and math than wearing the latest fashions! I never met my older step-brother because he was usually in jail for serious traffic violations. "That Woman" divorced her first husband because he constantly got drunk and beat her up; once he pulled a pistol and tried to make her have sex with his German shepherd.

Even now, my memories of that period are fragmentary-of course, there was a scandal in my little town as soon as the story came out, as such stories invariably do in small towns. Eventually things sorted themselves out Dad divorced That Woman, confessed to the congregation and the church authorities, received forgiveness, remarried my mother; we again became a happy little family, just me and my parents, since my sisters were all married and gone by this time. Everything was perfect just like it was. Yeah, right . . .

"So?"

"So what?"

"So what do you think?"

James pulled a tissue from the motel-supplied box and wiped his eyes, muscles again weak with emotion.

"Jeeze! I don't know *what* to think! Barbara tried to be nice to me, tried to win my affection, even wanted to give me a car! But all I could see when I looked at her was someone who destroyed my home, suddenly made me an outcast. When the kids at school found out. . . . Aw, shit, MY FATHER LEFT MY MOTHER BECAUSE BARBARA WOULD SUCK HIS DICK! SHE WAS DIRTY, FILTHY, A NASTY WOMAN!"

"Hey, quiet down! You want to get us thrown out of here?"

Again James sobbed into his hands, but continued his conversation in mumbles.

"How does all this add up to you?"

"More women brought me pain. Lucinda, by making me a bastard, a child of unmarried parents. My mother, for forcing me to choose between her or my father-"

"Would you feel better if someone else had made that choice instead of leaving it up to you?"

James's face came up, tears once again stopped by the process of conversation. "I don't

know. No, then I would have resented whoever made the choice, no matter what it was. What I hated was the fact that the choice was *there*, that *someone* had to make it at all."

James sat, voice and thoughts silent for a moment, feeling.

"Besides, I resented Mom before that happened."

"Why? What did she do to you? Do you resent her just because she was a woman?"

"No! It-I don't know. Maybe! I couldn't understand her any better than any other woman. I don't like women, and I don't like men enough to turn queer!"

"So, there has to be a beginning for everything. What is it?"

Where did this pattern start? With Johnny in the car? No, that must not have made much impression on me, or I guess I'd be lusting after men. Debbie in eighth grade? Uh-uh, before that My sisters? Despite that little "be a girl" game that I remember so well, I don't think it was very traumatic, or had a lasting effect. Actually, it was kind of funny, now that I think of it-just kids exploring their differences. No, rival siblings that we were, my sisters were enough older than me that we didn't interact much on any deep level. Not in any mind-bending sense, at least What was the first real screwing over I got from a girl? It had to be . . .

Turning the pad to a fresh sheet, James wrote as he thought, and thought as he wrote.

"When I was ten, our household was turned upside-down. My Uncle Charlie and Aunt Joan were leaving the Air Force and moving to Texas. Charlie was retiring on a medical disability (narcolepsy, just like mine), and Joan had severe rheumatoid arthritis. She was to get extensive surgery on her hips and knees, replacing the joints with metal and plastic. It was very daring surgery for the early sixties.

"They would be unable to care for their three daughters for some time, so they had arranged for the girls to stay with us, paying for their support and care."

I didn't really know Karen, Reagan, and Mary. For most of their young lives and mine they had lived far away-Germany, Florida, Alaska. Karen was nine, Reagan seven, and Mary two. I soon learned to hate them- their parents had been unable to discipline them due to their disabilities, and they were incredible brats! Worse, they got away with it

They got into my comic book collection, colored in my other books, took my Tinkertoys and Lincoln Logs and played dolls with them, losing pieces and breaking others! They'd sneak up and hit me, and I didn't dare retaliate under threat of having five of my precious comic books torn up and burned for each punch I threw. Karen was always sneaking around, coming into the bathroom while I was in the tub, pretending she didn't know I was there then standing and giggling at me. Reagan was a terrible liar, always making up stories to get me or her sisters into trouble. Mary was too young for much planned brattiness, but she screamed, cried, hit, and bit people whenever she didn't get her way.

I wanted to see first-hand what those girl/boy differences were that Johnny kept mentioning. I hated not knowing something that someone else knew. I kept trying to talk one of the two older girls into "playing doctor," or taking a leak or a poop somewhere outside and letting me watch, but they'd promise to do it in exchange for some favor or toy, then back out after I'd paid up. Of course, I couldn't complain to my parents about it

"Then there was that April Saturday morning, just a month or so after my eleventh birthday. It was early. Nobody was awake but me and Karen, who I could hear in the next room, moving around. I went in, and she was in bed, coloring in a Huckleberry Hound coloring book. One of *mine*! I tried to take it back but she said she'd scream and say I was trying to take her clothes off. Then she giggled and said that sounded like a fun idea anyway.

"Karen pulled the sheets back, and I could see she had her little-girl shortie pajamas on; I

was wearing my cowboy pj's with all the western cattle brands printed on the material. She told me to get under the sheets with her and she'd show me what I'd wanted to see all this time. I did, then she told me to take off my bottoms and my undershorts.

"Expecting another one-sided deal, I argued a little, but she promised she'd really do it this time, just like she used to do for her daddy. Once I was naked under the sheets from the waist down, she reached over and started pulling and rubbing my little pecker, making it hard. Then she slid her panties off and let me look at her thing. Although the light coming through the sheet was sufficient, I couldn't really see much, just a tucked-in groove. I laid back down with my head out from under the covers and let her rub me some more. Karen asked me to rub her down there and make her feel good like her daddy did, explaining that we would have to keep this game a big secret, just like she and her daddy kept their game secret. She said if anyone found out, we would be in big trouble and go to jail.

"I don't remember if I really enjoyed much of it after that. Her words about 'jail' made me nervous. I knew that little kids like us didn't really go to jail, but I'd seen enough about reform schools on the 'Our Gang' comedies they ran on television. I certainly didn't want to go there! I followed instructions and rubbed her as she rubbed me, but I couldn't tell much about what I was feeling. Despite my experiences with Johnny, I didn't really think of this as sex. Mostly, I was just curious. I wanted to know how boys and girls were different, to find out myself rather than from what Johnny told me.

"Then Mom walked in-"

Mom, oh God, you didn't know what you were doing to me! You yanked me out of Karen's bed, blistered my bare bottom, and told me I was evil, that I was dirty, that touching girls there was a terrible sin and would make me grow up to be a crazy man who would be locked up in the crazy house, and that girls were special and men ruined them when they tried to do dirty things to them and I should never try to do that to a girl ever again in my life and girls were to be cherished and set upon pedestals above boys and, "As sure as my name is . . ." is . . . what?

James pulled his shaky hands away from the pad. There it was: the memory he had buried for so many years. He had received severe punishment: his toys were taken away for a month, all his comics were destroyed, he had to go to his room and stay there as soon as he got home from school for two weeks except for meals and bathroom time. And Karen, who had started it, got comforting from his own mother about "the nasty things Jimmy was making you do."

Mom! How could you? After that I was terrified of girls-I might ruin them with my dirty mind, my filthy hands! I never knew what to do around them. Obviously, you couldn't take what they said at face value. You had to check, be careful you really understood what they meant, and even then you still couldn't trust them. Dammit, Mom, we were just kids, and kids are curious! It didn't mean all that much until you made it mean the destruction of the rest of my life!

Tears once again flowed down James's cheeks as suppressed emotions of fear, pain, and hatred of the female half of the human race-especially his mother-came forward. So that was why he resented his mother!

His second voice now came in, speaking softly through the sobs. "Is it fair?"

"What?"

"To blame your mother, to hold her responsible for reacting the way she had been trained, the normal reaction for that time and place?"

"Dammit, it wasn't right!" His voice grew louder.

"Maybe not, but what else would you have expected in 1962? Do you think she knew what she was doing to you?"

"She blamed it all on me. She never even asked! She knew Karen was a lying little shit, but me, her own son, had to be the one to blame. She was ready to believe the worst of me, and the best of her."

"Why? Because of the way she was brought up, the experiences in her life, maybe? She could no more avoid the consequences of those things than you can avoid what happened to you. There was something very sick behind the 'Ozzie and Harriet' facade of those times."

"I know. That's what so bad! It's like I'm the butt of some gigantic cosmic *joke*! *Nobody's* to blame for it, *nobody* can fix it, I've just gotta stand on the stage in front of the Universe with pie all over my face and listen to the laughter!"

"Okay. We're getting something, going somewhere. So far what do you have?"

"I distrust women. I fear them. Every one I've known and cared about in my life has hurt me somehow."

"Why?"

The question again. Every way James turned, it still came back to "why?" *Is this the inevitable end of every thread? Was this the same "why?" Maybe not . . .*

"Why did those women hurt you? Did they mean to? Were they evil?"

"Yes! No. Sometimes, maybe . . ."

"Okay, look at each one and decide. What about Wendy, the girl from the prom?"

"Bitch! She used me, then threw me away and laughed about it!"

"Yeah, but why?"

"Ummm, I dunno. Maybe she was just stupid, more foolish than evil. She couldn't see my shining qualities, maybe?"

"Uh-huh. Right. Well, whatever reason, she didn't act much differently than a lot of other high-school girls acted at times, did she?"

"No."

"And Barbara, your stepmother?"

"Damn! I suppose she was just looking for someone when she met Dad. Maybe the challenge of a married man, a preacher, was too much. Tony always had an eye for fresh pussy, anyway. It could be that she needed to prove to herself that she was still attractive, still a woman?"

"Sounds reasonable. So she wasn't evil, just human."

"Yeah."

"How about the others. Were they just human nature?"

"Maybe. I don't know if that helps much, though, if it means I can continue to expect that all the women I meet will be that way!"

"Well, hold that thought. What about Sheila?"

"Oh, God! I trusted her with my secrets, my feelings, my love- I gave her access to every mental button I own, and she shit all over me with her 'God this' and 'God that' and-"

"But did she do it because she was evil? Could she help herself?"

"Huh? Of course! She just had to stay the way she was!"

"Really? Nobody changes, nobody grows?"

"She went backwards!" James pounded the desk hard enough to make the gun bounce, then realized with a start that he was angry at himself. He resented his rational side. It is often easier to hold simple anger toward someone than it is to understand them and give up your anger. *This isn't easy, is it? Maybe that means it's worth doing. I hope so.* He got up, drank another glass of water, gathered himself, and carried on:

"Okay, so it seems, but was she ever really free of her upbringing? How easy was it for *you* to break away from everything that was pounded into you in Sunday School and church, week after week, year after year?"

"Not very. Dammit, it would be so nice to believe that all I have to do is follow a few simple rules, and let God take over all the suffering for my fuckups! But that's bargain-basement religion, salvation on the cheap. I *know* I'm going to have to pay for the hurt, the harm I've done others, deliberately or not, either now or after I'm dead and before I reincarnate again! That's the one thing that's keeping me from just picking up that gun right now!"

His hand closed on the butt, then released it, convulsively.

"All right, take it easy. Sheila led you to believe that she was free, or at least ready to take the same steps you had taken to become free. Maybe she even believed it herself. Right?"

"Yes, that sounds the most likely. Now that you mention it, she joined in the rituals, the holidays, but she never was quite ready to become initiated . . . I guess I deliberately ignored that, figuring she'd come around eventually."

"Uh-huh. But she never did, did she?"

"She tried. She studied, we worked together with her under deep hypnotic trance; she *saw* the Second Road, the other world that underlies the physical; she even created and adopted her own spirit familiar/friend, and used him to get good parking spaces, get warnings of impending danger and trouble."

"She was a good learner when it came to the Craft. That's why, when you separated, you went through all the photographs and made sure there were none of you in those she took with her, right? You know what she could do if she got angry enough . . ."

James shuddered. "Yes."

"But she wasn't such a good un-learner, was she? Is that really her fault? When she had those bad times with her work and quit without telling anyone, when she went through the trauma of remembering her childhood molestation by her brother, the rape by a new friend's older brother, the way her parents failed to support her through any of that and left her feeling like she was at fault, couldn't ever put her life back together again-then you met and maybe she felt finally safe. When you started falling asleep involuntarily and removed yourself from the position of some kind of solid rock she could anchor herself to-is it really so odd that she would regress to those beliefs that had stood up for her as a child?"

"No. Damn. No. When we met, she was drifting, and I must have looked like the Rock of Gibraltar-heh, I was big enough! Or a reasonable facsimile. Then I started to crumble, and the exposed parts were made of clay. I never realized . . ."

"And her parents. Are they truly evil?"

"Oh, that's a tough one! Cant I even keep my prime villains? No?" James now felt rather whimsical, the psychic shock of reevaluating hard-held appraisals of people distancing him from the emotional impact. It was a survival mechanism, a response to emotional overload. Now he could continue more calmly, more objectively, looking into himself from the outside.

"No, not to themselves. Didn't Heinlein say, 'A villain is never evil in his own eyes?' I'm not sure I buy that for everyone, but her parents truly believed in what they did. I think what they did was wrong as hell, and based on a lifetime of self-deception and denial of reality, but they cant help being what they are."

"Like you?"

"Like . . . yeah, like me."

"So, if you can consider forgiving them, do you think you can forgive yourself?"

"Yeah. Maybe you have a point there. . . ."

"Still need that gun?"

James considered.

"Not for myself."

"Good."

James looked out the window, started, then fixed himself once more. It was dawn. It was time to go home.

* * *

James didn't bother unloading his truck when he pulled into the driveway, just grabbed the shaving kit and locked the doors.

Reverend Tony and wife were surprised when James walked into the kitchen where they were preparing their morning insulin injections, gave them big hugs, said, "I love you, Mom and Dad!" then went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and shave.

The two old folks were still exchanging curious looks when he emerged.

"Is-is something wrong?" His mother seemed worried.

"No, Mom. I just spent all night talking with a friend, and he helped me sort through a lot of feelings about Sheila, old hurts, the shit-colored glasses I've been viewing the world through. You know." He kissed her on the cheek, then turned to go to his room. He turned back to face them again at the doorway, "I think things are going to be much better from now on."

James undressed and laid down, but sleep would not come. This time, it was not a matter of tormenting repetition but flashes of possibility. Finally he got up, went over to his computer, and loaded Pocket Writer 64 into the machine.

As soon as the main screen appeared, James began to write stream-of-consciousness:

"SUMMARY of What I am and Why. I am a man who has suffered major traumas from seemingly minor incidents at the hands of women, ones I trusted, bitches-no, just women, normal women, normal, hateful, sacred objects; I don't know how to talk to women. Every time I see them the first thing I do is undress them in my mind; young, old, fat, skinny, attractive, ugly-it doesn't matter. The underlying theme of my thoughts is always sex and this causes a tension in me that I am sure they can sense, since 'Sex is dirty' was ingrained into me from that incident with Karen, and I continually think of women sexually-tits, cunts, and lips with generic brains; that means I *have* to perceive them as less than human, mere sex objects, receptacles fit only to accept my sperm whenever I condescend to squirt it into them. Gawd, what a way for women to know I am seeing them! No wonder they back off from me if they can feel even a fraction of the attitude my deep mind has toward them!"

His writing became more focused, a writer's habits taking over, punctuating, structuring, yet still closely following his thoughts. He edited a couple of extra commas from what he'd already written, changed a semicolon to a long dash, checked it again, then continued:

"I can talk to one if I don't look at her, and the subject is remote from sex or anything personal on my part, but this creates distance between us as though we were on the phone or writing letters, the two ways I have always been able to talk comfortably with a woman; they seem to resent such a feeling of distance when face to face.

"Through a combination of frustration and desperation, I had my first full sexual experience with an animal instead of a human; happenstance and coincidence made this animal a horse-and the same lack of socialization made this my only outlet for almost four years. Kinsey

said that what he referred to as 'animal contacts' were really just a form of extended masturbation; someone having sex with an animal was just using a living body the way someone else might use a nude photo and some baby oil. I guess that's true of me in a way; after I got my rocks off, I didn't really care much what the animal did. I'd just go find a horse when it was convenient, safe, and I was horny enough to make the extra trouble worth it. When I finally did begin an intimate relationship with a woman, it was what I now realize to be a very sick one.

"Pamela was a real whacko-"

After fucking that little mare in the pasture, I still considered it "second-class sex." Even though it was awfully good, it was axiomatic that a woman, created by God to be man's mate, had to be superior. I diddled ponies when I could, but my ultimate desire was a Real Woman. Blind dates, the occasional fumbling attempt to ask one out on my own- nothing worked out Probably I could have had that one fat girl that Mike set me up with-but she wanted to show me her baby boy, and I panicked at the thought that she was just looking for a husband, a meal ticket for herself and her child. Then there was that time on the beach in Galveston . . .

The woman obviously wasn't very bright, nor very pretty in the face, but she had tits and a pussy, and she'd gotten a bad sunburn while wearing a very skimpy bikini. She asked me to put some ointment on her. She pointed out that, somehow, she had managed to get a sunburn up between her legs. Trembling, I carefully spread bum creme on the insides of her thighs, brushing against the thin cloth covering Sexual Paradise. She moaned, and I thought I was hurting her, but she wouldn't let me stop. The crotch of her bottoms was getting damp. I knew I was going to finally get to try a woman, but then . . .

Dad and Mom came back from their walk along the beach, breaking the mood and spoiling the opportunity. The woman later returned; unfortunately she had her husband in tow this time.

Down the beach a couple of hundred yards was a portable corral where a riding concessionaire kept his horses at night. I made friends with the wrangler, and he pointed out a bay mare that he said had "a bad ovary"; she stayed in heat continuously. The owner used her to keep his stud happy, since she'd take one anytime. About midnight I checked it out It was true. Even though I had to stand on an upturned feed tub to mesh our genitals, she fucked me silly.

I was bored, roaming around in Topeka, but it wasn't as boring as it was back home, so I decided to make the best of it. One of the hometown drunks had asked me to drive him to the VA hospital in his car, and then take it back home. Since we got there at seven in the morning and had him checked in by eight I planned to at least poke around some of the gunshops, headshops, and music stores.

It was in one of the latter on Gage Boulevard that I met Pam. She had a crummy, cheap, acoustic guitar, and was arguing with a clerk over the selection of the right strings. Eavesdropping a bit I ascertained that her problem was that she was just learning, and it was hurting her fingers to push the strings down against the frets on the warped neck. One of my best friends was a hot guitarist who had discussed the pros and cons of various instruments with me at length, so I felt like showing off. Bad move.

"Hi! I couldn't help overhearing you. Mind if I take a look?" Pam, a stringy-haired fat woman of about thirty with granny glasses and a shapeless Mama Cass dress, handed me the cheap Korean import. It was obvious that no bra held up her enormous, pendulous breasts, nor interfered with the nipples poking against the thin t-shirt I enjoyed the jiggle surreptitiously as I fingered the strings. They were heavy, tight, and standing free of the frets due to a combination

of neck warpage and the bridge pulling up from the front of the body. I looked at the clerk, "Have you tightened the neck?"

"Yeah, as much as I've dared. See that bridge? Adjust the neck-bar any more, and it'll pop right off of there, leaving nothing."

I nodded. "That's about what I suspected." I handed the guitar back to Pam. "It's difficult to learn on a really bad instrument-the extra difficulty and pain from trying to fret this is likely to stop your guitar playing before you get a fair chance."

Pamela was grateful for the advice, and we began talking. Her prime purpose for coming to the store had been to pick up some tickets for a Rolling Stones concert in Kansas City. She had ordered the limit, and intended to make a few bucks scalping the extra ten tickets outside the gate. She figured it would sell out quick, and she could triple her money. It turned out she lived nearby, collected records, and would love to spend a little more time with someone like me, so we went to her place.

A one-room basement "efficiency" apartment, the place was a dump with records piled and shelved all over the place, a crummy little stereo to play them on, and wine bottles and cigarette butts littering the floor. She had a calico cat named "Princess" who had a nasty attitude. Mellowing out over a little wine and some cold hot dogs, I learned that she had been married, then divorced shortly afterwards when her husband had been committed to the local bughouse; she'd had sex only about a dozen times in her life, had a stillborn baby from the marriage, and wanted to be a rock-music promoter/producer. She had a waterbed, the first one I'd ever seen.

It was a strange romance from the beginning, with Pam firmly in control. A couple of weeks later, she drove down from Topeka in her VW Beetle to visit me. My parents were less than thrilled to meet her. Up in my room, rigged with a homemade stereo and speakers that outclassed hers in every way, we sat in my old office chair-she on my lap, destroying my legs. I had just turned twenty-one, and got to feel my first bare tit I was ecstatic, pinching the nipples, appreciating the velvety heft and rubbery texture.

That first visit, all I got to do was reach into the bra she was wearing and feel. On later visits I worked my way up to where she would take off her bra and let me suck and nibble, then feel between her legs, and finally eat her out Not until I asked her to marry me (at her insistence) did she consent to actual intercourse. She figuratively had me by the dick and led me around like an unsuspecting lamb to slaughter.

By the time matters progressed to this point, my parents had moved to a much larger small city, and I had come along. Pam moved down there, too, changing schools to be near her fiance. Me. Oog.

For the Night of Nights, I had snagged the key to the church basement We drove over in my old '63 Chrysler, carried blankets and pillows into the basement foyer and laid them out on the carpet

I was running over the list of foreplay instructions in my mind, determined to make this a memorable experience. In the meantime, Pam stripped, laid down, and spread her legs. "Are you gonna stick it in or just stand there all night?"

With that, I shrugged, dropped my pants down to my ankles, knelt between her legs, and complied with her request

It felt strange to me-sweaty, flabby thighs rubbing stickily on my hips contrasted with memories of hard-muscled, soft-furred legs against the front of mine. My arms were busy, elbows keeping my weight off of Pam where otherwise I could use them to stroke flanks, hold hips, or caress a soft nose turned back to nuzzle me.

Pam smelled. No, she stank. She talked about how much she douched, and, later, I watched her do so, but there was always a miasma of stale sweat and a sour, fishy odor-I performed oral sex on her because she said she enjoyed it, but she never reciprocated. In fact, she never once actually touched my penis with her hands, and she would always douche immediately after sex.

I couldn't help but contrast the smell and taste of Pam with my erstwhile equine companions . . . in stroke books I'd often read about eating pussy, and how good it was for the woman, and how much men enjoyed doing it, so I tried it when I was about eighteen. This, of course, meant with a horse. It didn't turn me on (hat much, but it didn't bother me nearly as much as I had expected, either. The mares appreciated it. Horse pussy smelled and tasted earthy, musky, but in no way was it repulsive, disgusting or nasty.

Pam's was. No matter if we had just come out of the shower, she still smelled and tasted of stale urine, with a strong fishy odor and a hint of rotten cheese.

Nonetheless, I was looking forward to the actual coitus, convinced that a "real woman" had to be better than any animal, by definition.

The first surprise of the night came when I couldn't tell if I was inside her. The difference between rubbing around on the outside and actually getting inside was minuscule. She was loose-looser than any horse I had ever had before or since, from miniatures whose legs I had to hold off the ground, to large quarterhorse mares that required a ladder, a stump, or a fence to stand on. Pam had no muscle control, certainly nothing to match the convulsive twitching of cayuse cunt The inside of her pussy was smooth and sloppy, it felt son of like screwing a piece of warm, raw liver.

The detailed comparisons are irrelevant-the point is, my first woman was not only not "magnificently better" than a horse, she wasn't nearly as good! I pumped a while, then faked an orgasm and took her back to her apartment

My relationship with Pam lasted just long enough for me to discover that she let me have sex only when she wanted something special from me, like when she wrote hot checks for phonograph records and expected me to cover them-almost a year of "Pain and Misery," my parents' private name for her.

I lost track of Pam about a year after I left her, but heard she was still pursuing her career goals. A mutual girlfriend told me of her gang-banging several rock groups after concerts, handing out blow yobs, drugs, anal sex, or anything else the stars wanted, all things she denied me. I still hold the opinion that without the drugs none of the roadies, much less the stars, would have come near her. You've heard of "Ugly enough to stop a clock"? Pam's mug could stop a fucking sundial!

* * *

James continued to type.

"I was still determined to be 'normal' as far as sex went. There was Claudia from Manhattan-a sweet, intelligent girl, almost totally blind. We had extended visits over a period of a couple of years but didn't have too much in common. She loved to sleep together or dance naked, but we never got beyond oral sex since she was upset about being female and felt that intercourse would fix her sexual identity in a pattern she resented. I'd eat her out, but I felt so unsure of myself that when she offered to lick me off, I turned her down. I guess I still thought it was 'dirty' and didn't want to 'pollute' her. I was still pretty sick, since I thought she was too nice' to do something like that. It hurt when we broke it off for the last time, but it was bittersweet. I

remember her with a sort of romantic poignancy."

James looked at the screen. He was really collecting the memories, on paper and in his head. He reached for the shaving kit, but was distracted by an outside intrusion.

A knock at the door. "Are you all right, son?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm just typing out some dialogue for a short story! Please let me get it down while it's still fresh."

"Well, okay. We're just worried that you're acting kind of strangely."

"I'm all right, Grace."

That did it.

The door opened without invitation and James's mother stood there with a shocked expression, Tony behind her with a quizzical half-smile on his face.

"Grace? You've never called me that before!"

James walked over and embraced his mother. "I know. It's a long story, and some of it isn't very nice, but I want you both to know that I found a lot of buried memories and I understand. I understand a whole lot that I didn't before. I love you both very much and things are going to get better. Okay?"

Mrs. Grace Falabella looked carefully into her son's eyes, and finally seemed to like what she saw there.

"Okay, James. It looks like you can use some sleep."

"Yes, I think so. It's been a long night. It's been a long life. But tomorrow's another day."

James awoke about an hour before sunset, feeling more at peace with himself than he could remember. He dressed in clean work clothes, brushed his teeth, took care of other needs, then came to the kitchen and sat down with a glass of iced tea.

Tony looked at him. "You look pretty good tonight. Feeling okay?"

"Yes, thanks. Where's Mom?"

"She took a walk with Mrs. Windward from next door. She'll be back soon. Something you need with her?"

"Well, I think I need to have some long talks with both of you, but they're not so important they can't wait. Still, I'd like to ask you some things, and I want you to answer as though I was some stranger who came to you as a minister, a counselor, and not your son. Okay?"

Tony grinned. "That might not be easy, but I'll try. Shoot!"

James collected his thoughts for a moment, took a deep breath, then plunged ahead. "Okay. Suppose someone has a habit, or a desire, or a yearning that doesn't really cause any harm, but society takes a dim view of people who act on that desire. Now, remember, I'm just a casual acquaintance, and I'm asking in general. You don't know what specific thing I'm talking about."

Tony looked down at his coffee cup, stirred it for a moment, then took a sip. "I suppose it would depend to some degree on the desire in question. Is it something that really harms no one? Does it harm the person who does it, like drugs or alcohol?"

"Uh, no, nothing like that. Those almost always hurt people around them, even if the user doesn't realize it. Suppose that the person got this habit through a chain of events that were pretty much normal in themselves, but happened with a particular timing and in such a combination that they had the result of imbuing the person with desires that he sees nothing wrong with intellectually, but still bother him emotionally because he knows other people think they are wrong? Is he better off to try to ignore or bury the desires so he can consider himself 'normal' by the standards of the public, even when he knows that he's denying what he is, and the inner conflict is tearing him apart, or should he ignore convention and do what makes him happy?"

Tony looked long at James. "This is you, but I don't know just what you're talking about, right?" James nodded. A longer pause.

"Well, is it something important to you?"

James considered, lips pursed. "I think so. I think I understand a lot more about what and who I am, and why, than I did when I got out of bed yesterday morning."

Tony drummed his fingers on the table a few times. "This is about horses." It was a statement, not a question.

James took a swallow of his tea. "Yes. I know you're not thrilled about it, sometimes I'm not either, but that's the way I am, take it or leave it!"

"Hey, why so hostile? Didn't I try to cover for you, give you a place to 'do your thing' without getting caught?"

"Yeah, later on. But remember when I first told you about it, when I graduated high school, just before I left for the summer with the wheat-cutting crew?"

Tony stared at his coffee cup. "Hmmm. I wasn't very sympathetic then, was I?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't say so. All you could talk about was what might happen to you."

A wry look on his face, Tony said, "I remember. I told you to stop it immediately, because if you got caught it would make me look bad. In retrospect, that wasn't a very supportive way for me to have put it, was it?"

"No, not really. I felt bad because I had a problem, and you seemed more worried about your job than me."

"I suppose maybe I was. I came very close to getting thrown out of the ministry during that crazy business with Barbara, you know."

"Yes, and I understand that was on your mind a lot back then. See? That's what I meant when I said that the things that bent me out of shape might have been mistakes, but they were natural ones. I don't blame you for how you reacted to the news that I was boffing the neighbors' livestock-what should I have expected?"

"Maybe you might have expected some sympathy, some understanding instead of self-centered concerns. I should have talked more to you about it then, found out why."

"Maybe." James paused for another swig of tea. "But remember, I told you the day before I left. That didn't really give you much time to think about it; by the time I got back, you had worked through it, remembered what you did to that milk cow when you were young, and were ready to help me keep from being caught. Since you worked it out in your mind, I suppose it just didn't occur to you that I still had a lot of questions, was doubting myself."

Tony looked down. "I feel bad about that, son. You see, I guess I treated it as sort of a co-conspiracy-you were doing something you shouldn't; I was still sneaking off to see Barbara-we were in cahoots and could watch each others' backs. It was a lousy thing to do to you."

"No!" Tony jumped as James slammed his hand on the table. "That's what I'm trying to say! It's *not* your fault! It's *not* Mom's fault! It's not Sheila's, or Karen's, or my, or anyone else's fault! It's just the way things are, the way *I am!* The only thing important about *why* I am this way is for me to *understand it!*"

"Now I do, at least a lot of it. Now I understand why I don't, why I can't trust women enough to have healthy emotional relationships with them. Now I understand enough to quit blaming myself for being something I *have* to be, something that I can't help. Now I can quit fighting myself because I've been carrying guilt and resentment toward others that make me feel bad for feeling them."

"Sure, I had it rough in spots, but it could have been worse. I had parents who loved me and tried to understand their odd child who would rather read than play with the other kids, who couldn't manage money to save himself, who lived very different public and private lives."

Tony looked thoughtful. "Your mother and I tried our best, but we made some mistakes raising you."

"Yeah, you did. So what? Every parent does that. I've wasted years and years resenting those mistakes, and that's hurt me more than the things themselves ever did. I finally sat down and made a long list, then tried to understand them. You want to know something funny? When I got old enough to understand that you had the skills to have made a very comfortable living in machinist's work, that you could design and build almost anything, but instead chose to work for pennies in a pulpit, I resented being poor. I resented having to grow up in a goldfish bowl with every small-town eye focused directly on me to see if I was setting a good example for the local brats, or trying to find out if I knew the latest details of some local scandal just because I was the preacher's kid.

"But how were you to know what it would be like? You took up a profession that was highly respected and tried your best to raise me and my sisters right. You didn't know that one of the surest prescriptions for growing up warped is to be a preacher's kid, especially a boy! On one side, you're expected to be a little angel and lots of kids your age won't trust you; on the other hand, there are those who consider it a challenge to see if they can lead you astray plus the people who always said that the wildest kids in town were preachers' kids. It's not your fault that I tried my best to fulfill both sides' expectations!"

James stopped and took a few breaths to calm down. "I finally think I understand that I need to accept myself the way I am, and stop beating up on myself for feeling the way I do about certain things. I realize that most of the people who hurt me or shaped me couldn't help themselves for reacting the way they did, any more than I can help myself for being a social misfit. I've forgiven them, or I'm trying really hard to, just as I'm forgiving myself. Instead of trying to be what I'm not, I think it'll work a lot better if I recognize my shortcomings and work to deal with them, rather than try to fool the whole world and, more importantly, myself."

He got up, mixed another glass of instant tea and grabbed a couple of cold hot dogs from the refrigerator, then returned to the table and occupied his mouth with the food.

Tony asked, "Do you regret your marriage?"

James chewed thoughtfully. "I'm not sure, but I don't think so. I never told you this, but just before I met Sheila I was negotiating with a friend at work. He was living on a rented farm outside of Chanute, and planned to move. I was going to rent the farm and move out there from my apartment, and he had a little Shetland mare he was going to sell me. I had already tried her out for compatibility, and she seemed like she'd train okay. I've wondered sometimes what would have happened if I had done that instead of falling into the sack with Sheila and knocking her up. Who knows?"

"Mostly, though, I suppose I'm glad we had a few good years, but I sure regret the pain we gave each other later. I love my kids as best I know how and wish they didn't have to go through this mess, either. But what's done is done, 'The moving finger writes,' and all that crap. What's important is what I decide to do now."

"Are you clear on the choices you have?"

"I think so. I think I can stay miserable and keep slowly killing myself, or I can look for another woman to ruin through trying to live with someone who won't give her what she needs.

"These are the socially acceptable solutions. Or I can be what I am and be happy with

myself regardless of everyone else's opinions. What do you think?"

Tony swallowed the last of his coffee and looked squarely at James. "When I first entered the ministry, most of the answers were very clear to me; if I didn't know them, I thought I knew where to find them. Then I started dealing with people who didn't fit my preconceived ideas of right and wrong, people who were nice people, but had problems I never imagined. Later I discovered that I could be a sinner, too.

"Nowadays the difference between right and wrong seems pretty blurry. Frankly, I can't see how having a sexual partner who won't give you a disease, who won't get pregnant and wind up on welfare, who won't write bad checks, or spend the rent money on new wallpaper, or do the things that people often do to other people-how that is against the public interest, or so terribly wrong.

"What I see as truly evil is tearing yourself up inside so badly that you try to hide from yourself behind a chemical curtain just because somebody else who doesn't know diddly-squat about you or your situation says that anyone who feels the way you do is sick, and should be put away somewhere.

"I think my advice to you is to worry about public opinion only enough to keep your tastes and actions from blatant public knowledge. If you aren't affecting the public good, then it's none of the public's damned business what you do. More people would live longer, healthier, happier lives if they told Mrs. Grundy to go take a flying fuck!"

Father and son grinned at each other over the table.

"Thanks, Dad. I kind of figured that out for myself last night, but I'm glad to hear you say it. I've been pretty screwed up for a long time, and lately not very nice to you and Mom sometimes, and I've hurt other people trying to be something I'm not, and not be something I am. The worst of it has been watching myself treat my kids and family as if they were intruders on my life, trying to stay hidden behind a shield. I think it's time to just be me."

"Son, I believe you're right. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not exactly sure yet, but I'll think of something."

James went outside, unloaded his truck, and pattered away a couple of hours cleaning his shop. He fixed a few small pieces of gear that had been cluttering up the shelves, read, smoked, and injected himself. He used much less that night than usual without noticing the fact. He read an old book on horse care that he found stuck away with other high-school memorabilia in a cardboard box. He went to bed early, easily falling asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

April 1987

It was Sunday, a beautiful spring day; a few fluffy clouds nicely set off a blue sky punctuated by robins busily building their nests in James's trees. He felt rested and refreshed, so much so that he neglected to inject himself. No matter, he could always do so later.

Right now, James had business to attend to. After further amazing his parents by joining them for breakfast, he drove off for the rundown community near Joplin where he remembered seeing all the houses with pony pens in the yards.

Today, only one of the pens had any animals, but there the selection looked promising. Nobody responded to his knocks on the door of the little trailer house, and no vehicles, at least ones in running condition, were parked in the driveway. James respected the locks on the gate,

but saw no harm in looking over the fence.

He spied a white, shaggy mare that brought back memories.

She looks a lot like little Goldie, the pony I used to prefer back home when I was in college. The odd family that owned her lived in a big old house that must have been pretty fancy in its day, but was really run down by then. The man worked in a factory, his wife looked twenty years older than she was, and his kids could have easily graced any backwoods cabin in the Ozarks. Putting aside intellectual prejudice I made friends with them and found out they were nice people, just going to prove again that appearances aren't always reliable. We'd sit around the big kitchen table, rolling cigarettes in an old Bugler machine, or playing cards for matches. Leo would tell stories about his World War II days in the South Pacific, and I'd tell some of the dirty jokes I'd learned from Dad. We had a great time!

His place was less than two blocks from my house, and it had no lawn. What it had was a barbed-wire fence, a shed, and a smaller pen inside the fence. His lot held anywhere from two to six ponies at a time, almost always mares.

I'd sneak down there after dark, and have sex with Goldie, my favorite. I selected her over any of the others because she didn't mind having her tail lifted and her vagina probed. One thing I learned: you have to be careful in choosing your sex partner-it's difficult and dangerous to rape a horse! Goldie wasn't very tall; I had to spread my legs apart and bend my knees to get low enough, but she was quite sexy, enjoying the act along with me, rocking backwards to meet my thrusts, and pushing hard against me when she felt my semen flow. Somehow, I didn't feel as dirty after having sex with her as I later did with most women. I think in a way I loved her, but I would never admit it to myself or anyone else. It was one thing to "outsmart the system" by getting my rocks off without women, but emotional involvement would be "too weird" and perverted.

One night I thought I had bought it! It was cold, and I was wearing my special winter sex outfit a pair of jeans with the zipper and fly cut out, no underwear, and a long, old topcoat; all I had to do was unbutton the lower part of the coat, drape it forward around my partner's rump, and I was ready for warm action.

That night I was inside the board-fenced pen where Leo kept the ponies during the winter. I was just finishing a good session with Little Goldie (as opposed to "Big Goldie," a mean-tempered sorrel Leo also owned) and must have made too much noise in the throes of orgasm, because a dog started barking and Leo's porch light came on. I tried to hide amongst the horses, but the pen was too small and he spotted me with his flashlight

Remembering Dad's admonition about "getting caught," I figured my life was over. I'd go to prison in disgrace where the other cons would treat me like scum, and pass me around for a sex toy. Dad would be thrown out of the ministry, and he and Mom would have to live on welfare, objects of scorn.

I had closed my coat by the time Leo got to the pen, but he still asked, "What are you doing here, Jim?" The flashlight's beam flicked from me to Little Goldie, her tail in the air. Semen glistened in the light as it dribbled and oozed from her black-lipped pussy. Leo repeated the question. His voice didn't sound angry, nor particularly puzzled. In my despair, I didn't even consider trying to lie about it, but I couldn't simply say it aloud.

"Uh, I think you know."

Leo switched off the light "Yeah, I figured it out a long time ago, why you'd borrow a pony or two and keep them in your yard overnight And I'm always finding your billfold where you lose it climbing through the fence. You should leave it at home when you're gonna come over here."

I was surprised. "You're not mad? I mean, you're not going to call the cops?"

"The cops? Hell, no, you're a teenager! I was one once-walking around with a hard-on twenty-three hours out of every twenty-four, wanting pussy so bad I couldn't think of anything else! I'd rather see you with my pets than out attacking some old woman or little girl. You always treat them well, and you're a nice kid. I ain't never tried out an animal in my life, but I've thought about it once in a while, and plenty of my friends when I was growing up screwed anything warm and it never hurt them."

"Does this-mean this mean it's okay with you if I keep on, uh, you know?"

"Sure. Just be more careful. Leave your wallet at home, like I told you. Instead of sneaking over at night when people are gonna wonder what you're up to, I'll tell my wife it's okay for you to visit the ponies in the daytime while I'm at work, and you can take one into the shed where no one can see you. Or you can a/ways take one home with you for a day or two like you been doing."

Leo surprised me, all right He was the first adult outside of Dad who found out about my desires and not only accepted but condoned them.

I had an affair with Little Goldie that lasted almost the whole four years we lived in that town. I was rather disappointed in later years when I came back for a visit and saw that, while Leo and family were still there, his pen and all the animals were gone. I didn't want to boff Goldie again (well, I did, but couldn't have at that particular time) so much as I just wanted to see her once more. I didn't have the heart to ask what had happened to her. I was afraid of the answer.

The white one was just the right size, and the nostalgia elicited by her resemblance to Little Goldie almost kept James from noticing the blonde-maned sorrel filly in the same section of the corral. He wished he could go in and check them closer, but settled for leaving his business card stuck in the trailer door with a note, "Please call me, I want to buy a horse," scrawled on the back.

Back home, Grace and Tony were gone to church, and would be staying late for a basket dinner. James decided to work some more on the endless job of shop-cleaning.

First, a couple of good jolts of speed to motivate him, and he set to work. As the boring routine of "sweep into a pile, vacuum up pile, move more crap and expose more dirt, sweep into a pile . . ." continued, the drugs loosened his tongue a bit and he again talked to himself.

"So, how's it going? Feeling better now?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You're really thinking of buying a pony of your own-ey?"

James chuckled. "Yeah. Any objections?"

"Not as long as you know why you're doing it."

"I'm doing it because I'm sick and tired of playing a fake role. I've spent all my life pretending to be a good little preacher's boy, or a good little preacher, or a good little technician, or cab driver, or narc, or good father, or a sober, responsible member of the community! Remember how good I am at faking people out? Remember how I used to get good and ripped on LSD then play that game of going into a police station and rapping with the cops for an hour or so just to see if I could maintain outward appearances while fireworks sizzled and popped in my brain? I'm thirty-six years old! It's time to be myself for a while!"

"Hey, no need to get hostile! That's the answer I wanted to hear. There's nothing worse than living an illusion so long that it becomes a delusion and seems real. You still have to maintain a public image, but with those that count, especially yourself, you have a real need to be

what you actually are."

"It's easy to say, isn't it? But I still wonder if I'm doing the right thing. Am I progressing or regressing?"

"Can you really regress from where you are right now? Your left arm bears the scars of literally thousands of needle punctures. Two nights ago you seriously contemplated deliberate suicide after risking death with that silly stunt on the highway. Your business is going downhill, your wife and kids are gone, you hardly ever see anyone besides those you do business with. Just what has trying to live up to everyone else's idea of 'ideal' done for you?"

"Ouch! I get the point. So, I'll look 'em over if the guy calls back."

"Good. Is that the phone ringing? Maybe it's him."

It was.

Frank Buntz told James that the white pony he was interested in and the sorrel with her had already been sold to another party. "But if you really want one of them, come on over and maybe we can work something out."

James wasted no time. When he got to the corral, there was a three-quarter-ton flatbed truck hooked up to a fifth-wheel stock trailer parked in front, and a large, sixty-year-old man wearing overalls dipping water from a rain barrel into the stock tank.

"Frank?"

"Yeah. You James?"

"Uh-huh. I was wanting to buy a pony."

"What'd'ja have in mind?"

"Well, I want a pet, mostly. I'm separated, and my daughter's crazy about horses, but I don't get to see her much now. I guess I don't care so much about it being saddle-broke, but I'd like one that's gentle."

Buntz scratched at the stubble on his chin, then pointed. "That paint gelding over there's a nice one. You can walk right up to him."

"Looks good, but I've been looking at those two little mares in that separate pen over there. What's the story?"

"Them are the ones that's already sold, but let's take a look, anyway." With that, Frank Buntz unlocked the chain on the gate and led the way inside. The two passed through another, smaller gate into a pen that reached under an extension of the barn roof, providing shelter from the weather. The loading chute also extended into this area, explaining why the two animals had been isolated there.

"I can let you have either one for fifty dollars."

"I kind of like the shaggy white one," said James, trying to walk up to the suspicious pony. She circled, keeping her distance.

The horse-trader took a couple of ropes from hooks and quickly caught and tethered both animals. James then proceeded to check each one out at close range. The toes of the white one's hooves poked out in front, curling up at the ends, indicating that the mare had foundered at one time, causing permanent injury to her feet, damage that could easily get worse with time until she was crippled beyond walking and would have to be destroyed.

The blonde sorrel's hooves looked quite healthy. At request, the trader provided a hoof-pick and James picked the mud and manure out of the bottom of her left forehoof. The sorrel shied when he first approached, but stood still after reaching the end of her rope, trembling a little as James held the hoof up to work on it. When the sole had been scraped clean, he looked carefully for any hint of a brown ring in the edge of the white horn-like material. He repeated the

operation on the other forehoof and one rear. Her hooves seemed to be in excellent shape.

"Any chance you've got vaccination records?" James asked as he petted and calmed both animals.

"Got ones from the auction sale. Gimme a minute and I'll get 'em." Frank left the corral.

This was the opportunity James was awaiting. Gently, but with quick economy of motion, he lifted the white mare's tail and gently rubbed the exterior of her vulva. She shifted nervously. James spit on a fingertip and slipped it inside. The white mare whickered, stamped a hindfoot, and clamped her tail down hard, trying to cover her genitals.

With a quick glance to insure that Frank was still inside, James repeated the operation on the sorrel. She shied some, too, but it seemed to be more nervousness at being close to a human than anything specific about her sex organs.

James was in a quandary. Neither one seemed to give definite signs of being trainable in the way he wished, nor definitely untrainable for sex. Probably, either one could learn with a little time.

James was leaning back against a fence when Frank returned with the sale papers.

"Made up your mind?"

"Well, I think I'd rather have the white one, but her feet don't look too good."

"They ain't."

"Can you give me a better price on her?"

"No, not really. People want them fuzzy or shaggy ones these days, plus she's bigger than the sorrel. She'd bring more at the meat market."

James paled. "Meat market? You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. That's why you don't see very many ponies around. The killers buys up most of 'em. They sells the meat to the Japs." James shuddered at the thought. He knew that business was business, and for every bite of meat someone ate, some kind of animal had to die. But horses . . .

Suddenly he was very glad he hadn't asked what happened to Little Goldie.

"Look, I'm a horse-trader. I don't like it neither, but them's the facts. You seem to know something about horses, have you had many?"

Yeah, but not the way you mean.

"Most of what I know is just what I've read."

"Okay. The white one has bad feet, but she's kinda cute like one of them little dogs with all the hair hangin' down in their eyes. I already got her sold for what I'm askin', and the guy don't care none about her feet. But if I was you, I'd take that little sorrel. She ain't broke or nuthin', but she's only two years old, and she'll train right out an' make you a good pet. Her feet's fine, an' if you watch what she eats, they'll stay good. Most people has problems when they let a little pony eat lots of fresh grass early in the spring when it's too rich, or they give 'em a lot of grain."

"She's pretty."

"Yep, she'll be a good'n. The man what bought these two says he's got the white one sold, but there's no tellin' what's gonna happen to that sorrel. She's likely to either go to someone who'll ruin her feet by not takin' care of her, or git fattened up for Tokyo dinner."

James was fascinated by the trader's quick zeroing-in on his tender spot, admiring the man's obvious talent for salesmanship. But, still, he made some valid points. Besides, if the other customer already had the white one sold, it wouldn't be fair to him . . .

"Okay, I'll take the sorrel. Is it okay if I give you a check to close the deal? If you'll hold it until tomorrow afternoon, I'll bring you cash in exchange."

"Huh. I hold the horse until you do?"

"Sure. I need to fix up a place for her, anyway I cant take delivery for a few days. Speaking of which, how much to deliver her?"

A faint gleam came into Buntz's eye. "This your address on the card?" A nod. "Oh, I'll have to hook up the trailer an' all, an' take a while . . . how's twenny dollars sound?"

It sounded a bit steep, but James had already committed himself to the deal now, getting enthused, so he agreed. The deal was closed and the arrangements made.

On the way home, James detoured by a farm store that was open on Sunday afternoons and picked up a tether chain, a curry comb, and a sack of feed.

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The next few days passed quickly, yet dragged interminably. James made good on his promise regarding the check, and, at a time when he wanted to expend all his efforts preparing for the new family member, his business hit a hot spurt.

His first inclination was to postpone service calls, but he found himself fighting a renewed sense of responsibility. He no longer could figure on just taking off on his own if things didn't work out. He had to make a living not only for himself, but his pony, and he needed a fixed base of operations to do that. He spent less time on the computer and went to bed early to take advantage of the daylight.

"POLKA PONY: Rob, will you tell MR. MASTER and the rest that I've gotta leave Q-Link?"

"ROB 47: Sure. What's up?"

"POLKA PONY: Oh, well, I'm getting busy, and this takes too much time, and costs too much, even at six cents a minute."

"MR. MASTER: What's this? Hey, come back and visit some day, PP. It's been fun."

He never would.

About Tuesday, it occurred to James that he'd better check city law. He'd seen horses around town, but most of them were on considerably larger lots than he owned. A quick phone call told him it was all right as long as he had just one horse.

He drew up a basic design for a simple four-by-eight-foot shed that would shelter the sorrel during storms, and serve as a boudoir if everything else went according to plan. He started collecting materials and marking out his proposed pen.

Tom Sheisskopf and family watched the backyard work with interest, but Linda kept them from asking questions, focusing her beady eyes on James as he measured and drove stakes into the ground. Mrs. Windward on the other side asked James if he was planning "another ugly radio tower," and worrying that it would affect her property's value. "All within city codes," James reassured her.

Reverend Tony, of course, had a good idea of what James was up to, and gladly offered his knowledge and advice.

While the building project was barely started, James bought a large, heavy plastic water pan, a halter, and the other bare necessities to move the pony in. He figured he could tether her to the trees growing in his back yard or stake her out in open areas and, between the grazing and a few oats, she'd be fine while he built.

Frank Buntz promised delivery Thursday afternoon when James called him that morning.

"Dad, what do you think Mom's gonna say?" Jim asked when they were alone at lunchtime.

"I don't know. Not much, I suppose. You're a grown man, this is your place; what can she

say?"

"Aw, hell, she'll know what's going on . . . remember when she found those pictures Mike took of me and Goldie one night?"

Tony grinned. "I remember. Boy, was there hell to pay over that. Bad enough she suspected what your inclinations were, but that one of you eating horse pussy freaked her out! Especially since the camera angle made it look like the horse was smiling."

"How do you know she wasn't?"

Father and son chuckled, looked at each other, then burst into loud laughter, James weakening from emotional paralysis and lowering his head to the table, Tony breaking into a cough. As they began to calm down, James tilted his head, grinned, and looked at Tony. "Ponylingus."

That set them off again, laughing and coughing, shaking the table for a moment. James was enjoying this, as was Tony, being reminiscent of the times they would get into punning contests late at night over soft drinks and cigarettes before Tony's bronchitis forced him to give up smoking. Such closeness had been all too rare lately.

As his strength returned, James lifted his head. Tony peered through his thick cataract glasses, looked him square in the eye and asked, "If it was the other way around, would that be filly-atio?"

Too much! Shrieking in mental pain, roaring with laughter, the cataplexy struck full force as James threw back his head and slid down out of the chair to the floor to lie there gasping for breath, laughing with each exhalation, tears flowing freely from his eyes.

Tony looked concerned and started to rise, but James waved him feebly away, choking out, "I'll be-okay-it's just-so funny! I-haven't laughed-haven't dared-laugh like this-for years. Oh, gawd, Dad, you're wonderful! Life's wonderful!"

Tony looked serious again. "Funny thing to say-sort of like you weren't too sure, lately."

James sobered again, and raised up on his elbows. "I wasn't. I was real unsure last week."

Reverend Tony asked, "Sure now?"

"Yes. It's like we talked about Saturday; I sorted a lot of things out, and your advice about being myself, and worrying about what I need instead of what everyone else thinks or says I need, and most of all just taking things as they are instead of what I wish they might be-that helped a lot."

He got to his feet and walked around the table to hug his father. "I love you, Dad. I love Mom, too. I really hope she doesn't take it too hard."

"I wouldn't worry much about that. We've both been happy, seeing you come out of your pain these last few days. I think she'll be more accepting than you give her credit for. Hell, she's put up with me for forty-seven years."

The skies clouded up that afternoon, threatening rain. James sat anxiously in his shop, nervously awaiting the arrival of his pet and- hopefully-his lover. One necessary item had been left off his shopping list, but he dug around in cardboard boxes until he found the lead rope with the snap-eye on the end he had bought many years ago to use when he surreptitiously visited other peoples' pens.

He tried to work, but was too nervous. He read back issues of *Reader's Digest*, smoked, and shot dope.

Finally, about four o'clock, he heard the squeal of brakes out front. James grabbed the rope and halter and burst out the front door of his shop. There was Frank Buntz waddling his corpulent bulk around to the rear of the big stock trailer, the little sorrel looking lost in the

seemingly vast confines.

"Gimme yer headstall and rope." Frank opened the tailgate and went in. Wrapping the rope around the filly's neck, Frank removed his halter, put the new blue nylon one on her head, clipped the line to it, and led the frightened pony out the rear. James paid him the agreed-upon haulage, and took the rope.

"She 'uz raised on pasture all her life, an' ain't been around people much. You be careful an' treat her good!" Frank reentered his truck and drove off.

James led her to the front porch where his parents were standing, Tony watching with interest, Grace with a puzzled look slowly turning to dawning comprehension on her face.

"Folks, meet-hmmm, you need a name. A good name." James contemplated her as she looked back at him with tense eyes, whites showing around the dark brown and black of iris and pupil. "Your coat is almost light enough to be red, and your mane and tail are golden, like light honey poured onto dark. Your name is 'Wildhoney Cherry.' "

Turning again to his parents he made formal the introduction: "This is Wildhoney Cherry. I'll call her Cherry."

Wisely, his parents made no move toward the nervous Cherry, but they repeated the new name, greeting her, then James led her around the house to the back.

Besides a few trees and a garden patch, Jim's back yard was home to his ham radio tower. It stuck forty-five feet into the air and was guyed to three poles set around it, one of which held a winch used to raise and lower it on its hinged base. The tower, and, more importantly, the odd-looking "home-brewed" antenna on top, had sometimes been a bone of contention in the neighborhood. The Sheisskopfs claimed his radio transmitter interfered with their television, although no other neighbors had trouble. Mrs. Windward claimed it was ugly, reducing the value of her house. It was visible for half a mile in any direction, which gave James the idea of making and mounting a five-foot lighted star on it for Yule, and stringing colored lights up the tower and guy-wires. Mrs. Windward griped about that, too, and Tom Sheisskopf felt compelled to attempt to outdo James's lights every year.

However, nobody ever complained when the thunderstorms came and he was "netted in" with the rest of the tornado spotters on the ham-radio Skywarn Net. Instead, people constantly hung around listening to descriptions of the storms' progress, tracking them from Coffey-ville, Kansas, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, all the way over to Springfield, Missouri. The neighborhood took comfort in knowing when to worry and when to seek shelter.

It was to the piece of four-inch well-casing that held the winch that James now tethered Cherry, planning to get the chain and snap-hooks so she could eat some grass and settle in a bit.

Cherry had other plans. As soon as James tied the rope and approached her, meaning to pat her a moment and soothe her, she gave a mighty backward tug and pulled the loop right out of the end of the rope, freeing the snap-hook. She took off into the large field behind James's lot.

As soon as she gained a little distance, the temptation of the grass overtook her, and she stopped to sample some. James had started to follow, but when she stopped, he ran back to the house and grabbed his new chain, then went two doors south for some help.

In a few minutes, Cherry's head snapped up as she spied James, five neighborhood kids, and Tom Sheisskopf making an encircling movement toward her. She started walking away, keeping a close eye on the widespread group. As they closed in, she picked up her feet and trotted around them, stopping again to graze when she felt sufficient distance had been gained. Two more attempts resulted in the same thing. Some of the kids had a hard time keeping up because they were laughing too hard.

Even through his annoyance and frustration, James was pleased with the way Cherry carried her head, the graceful motion of her feet, and the beauty of mane and tail flowing in the wind. He called the others together for a huddle.

"Look, we're too close together. We need to spread out, almost all the way across the field, and head her for that corner over there where the fences form an acute angle. Then we can slowly come together as we close in. Okay?"

The plan was put into motion, Cherry keeping her distance, not seeming to notice that she was losing running room. Soon, the group was standing only a few feet from each other, and a few feet from the pony. They were tired, and she was tired, but Cherry had enough wind left for one final attempt.

She headed right for a small gap between people, digging in her hooves and sending clods flying behind her. Fortunately, James was one of the people by the gap. More fortunately, he was highly motivated. Most fortunately, he managed to snag a secure grip on her halter as she lunged for freedom.

Then he discovered that even a little 300-pound pony had a lot of pulling power as he found himself spun around and dragged. At the same time, Cherry discovered that a 350-pound man made a pretty good anchor. The horse's momentum carried them about ten feet in a circular path before their motion was halted.

James lost his footing and fell down. His weight dragged Cherry's head with him, she slipped in the wet grass, and fell down beside him. James quickly threw an arm over her neck and a leg over her barrel to hold her as he snapped the chain onto the halter.

The rest of the group looked at the two on the ground, then at each other. The wiseguy of the crowd, fifteen-year-old Kurt, asked, "How do you yell 'rape' in horse-talk?"

Everyone, including James, cracked up at this. Cherry, the fight and wind knocked out of her by her fall, just rolled an eye at all of them, obviously wondering what kind of maniacs she had fallen in with.

James quieted down quickly, and started stroking Cherry's neck, reassuring her that it was okay, that no one would hurt her. He thanked his helpers and stood up. Cherry got quickly to her feet and stood stiff-legged as James gently prodded all four legs and her rib cage, making sure that the fall hadn't injured her. Then he led her back to the solid post and attached the chain, leaving her to graze as he went to the back stoop and sat watching her a while.

She's really pretty. No, she's beautiful! The way her muscles ripple under her skin as she moves, those trim legs and ankles. She's built more like a small thoroughbred horse than some chunky pony.

James went into the back door of his shop and opened the bag of feed. He took a handful and went to Cherry. She evaded him again, circling the pole. Quickly tiring of the game of "Ring Around with Cherry," he simply put his feet on the chain and walked up to her. Stopping within arm's reach of her nose, James held out his hand. Cherry shied, but then caught a whiff. Her neck stretched as she reached out her nose and sniffed more closely. Reaching as far as possible, approaching only as close as absolutely necessary, her soft lips wiggled into the pelletized food. She got a nibble, chewed, then reached for more.

"Aha! Better-tasting stuff than you've had in your life, I'll bet!" James pulled his hand back a bit. Cherry couldn't quite reach his hand, now, so she took a small, tentative step closer and was rewarded with another bite. The two repeated this a few times until the food was gone and Cherry stood within reach of James's belt buckle.

He quickly reached out and grasped her halter again, causing her to shy backwards, but he

held a firm grip and stroked her muzzle with his free hand. She relaxed and accepted the attention, merely quivering a bit as he moved closer to one side of her head and scratched her withers. This was something Cherry could relate to, having shared many a mutual-itch session with other horses. As James continued to scratch, she got into it, swaying back and forth to move the pleasurable sensation around to the right spot of the moment.

After a couple of minutes James let loose of the halter and Cherry continued to enjoy the massage for a bit until she noticed that her head was again free, whereupon she removed herself to the length of the chain, snorting loudly, whether at herself or James it was not clear.

She stared at James as he stood where he was, then lowered her head to the grass again, keeping a wary eye on the odd-looking horse who had been so nice after earlier scaring her half to death. She moved, browsing through the grass, and didn't seem to notice that she had put slack in her chain and was, in fact, moving closer to the man.

James smiled, went back to the shop where he picked up the curry comb, and reapproached the pony.

Again she was reluctant to let him get near, requiring the "step on the chain" gambit, but her eyes were a bit calmer than before, and she rapidly took to the pleasant sensation of the metal comb as it dragged loose hairs out of her shedding coat. By the time James had thoroughly covered her body, flipping the comb backwards to use the coarse teeth on her mane and tail, he was able to drop the chain and she stood grazing, tolerating his close presence as he stroked her neck with his hand. However, when her browsing caused her to move and he attempted to follow, she picked up her heels again. He went back to the porch to watch her for a while.

He talked to her from his perch on the back steps, and her ears twitched his direction with each sound.

"Hey, there, Cherry girl, we're gonna be friends. Yeah, just you and me. You're pretty, you are. You have great legs."

There was a tapping from the glass patio doors behind him, and he turned to see his father standing there, looking out. Tony slid the door open an inch or so and asked, "Is it okay if I come out? I don't want to spook her again."

"Come on out. I think it'll be okay."

Tony carefully placed his cane and eased himself down beside James.

"Where's Mom?"

"She's out taking her evening walk with Mrs. Windward."

"What did she say?"

Tony pursed his mouth. "Well, she wasn't thrilled with the idea at first, but she agreed you have long needed something we couldn't give you, and that you've really gotten a better attitude in the last few days. She'll come around."

"She knows, right?"

"As much as she's willing to let herself know. Your mother sometimes tries to hide from unpleasant thoughts or situations, like most people do."

"That's okay, I guess. I hate to push it in her face, but I won't pretend the situation is other than it really is just for Mom. That's the kind of thing that's gotten me here in the first place."

"Yeah. Well, when are you going to build your barn?"

"I figure I'll start in a little while. I want Cherry to get used to seeing me around before I make any loud noises. I'll do my cutting out front in the driveway so the power saw won't scare her. She's still pretty wild."

Tony chuckled. "Yes, we saw that! I haven't seen you run in years!"

"Uh, right . . . well, I guess I'll get her water pan and set it out at the limit of her chain so she's not so likely to knock it over or step in it."

After watching James do so, Tony went back inside to sit down. Concrete was hard on his age-brittled backside. James went into the shop, where he collected his drawings and took them out front. Earlier he had backed his pickup into the driveway, and the lowered tailgate made a convenient workbench. Soon he was measuring (twice, to be sure) and cutting with a will.

When he had six pressure-treated posts cut and marked for position, and several two-by-fours cut to length, he put them, a hammer, a large carpenter's square, and some nails in an old wheelbarrow and toted them around back.

Cherry shied again at the noisy load, but only backed a few feet as James made a wide circle around her area, then stopped near the back edge of his lot.

Within half an hour he had assembled the back and front walls' basic framing on the ground, and was ready to erect them. He returned to the front yard, where he loaded up six concrete building blocks that he rolled around to the building site. This time Cherry's head came up warily, but she didn't move as James went by.

James placed the blocks on the ground and stretched a string between them, lining them up straight, then he hung a spirit-level on the string and noted how much ground he would have to dig out of the corners to level them. Soon they were placed to his satisfaction.

Grasping the top of the front wall, which consisted of two posts spaced four feet apart with two-by-fours, he lifted it up by the cross-framing and planted the protruding bottoms in the hollow cavities of two east-side blocks, where the framework balanced upright in the calm air.

Quickly, he repeated the process with the back wall. It was a bit harder, being twice the width with three posts instead of two, but it went in just as smoothly. James grabbed a five-foot scrap of wood, his hammer, and a mouthful of nails and quickly tacked it across between the north ends of the two sections to keep them upright.

Then he took his precut lumber and square and finished off the north side. He set the remaining post in the southeast block and nailed on cross-pieces to make the south wall.

The light was growing dim by this time, but James looked on his creation with satisfaction. He had, in the course of two hours' work, made a very good start on Cherry's shed. The blank back wall faced his house, and the other long wall with the open doorway faced away, so that no one could see inside without walking into the large field behind his lot, where they would be plainly visible. James picked up his tools and went inside.

The elder Falabellas invited James to join them for supper.

"Nice job out there, son."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Are you going to sheath it in plywood or clapboard?"

"I've found a place with exterior-grade flakeboard on sale. I'll use that and cover it with rolled asphalt roofing."

"Well, I've lived in plenty of houses with that for siding. It should be fine."

"That's what I thought. Your parents always stayed warm and dry in their house. Heck, half the houses in that little town were built that way. It isn't too pretty, but it works."

Grace Falabella had been silent through half the meal, but then she spoke. "I walked with Mrs. Windward this evening, and she wanted to know what you were doing with a pony."

James looked curiously at her. "What did you say?"

"I told her you bought it for a pet. She was pretty upset. She says it will smell and draw flies, and ruin her property value. She asked me to tell you she doesn't want it around."

Tony frowned and James's face clouded as he said, "Why, that ungrateful old bag! Doesn't she have the guts to tell me herself?"

"Now, she's a nice lady and goes to church all the time-"

"She's a snob! Her husband was a regular guy, nice enough, but he was a janitor all his life! She sells Avon door-to-door, but likes to pretend she's God's gift to social propriety. Doggone it, where does she get off griping about my new pony, or all the bitching she's done about my perfectly legal antenna systems?"

Tony jumped in. "Hey, take it easy! She's entitled to her opinion!"

James calmed down a bit, but continued, "Yeah, and she's welcome to it. When her husband was charged with child molestation, Sheila wanted me to run right over and shoot him or something because he used to talk to our kids. I told her that it was up to the legal system to determine his guilt. I offered to appear as a character witness in his behalf, because I knew the girl and the family, and they're nothing but troublemakers, and now even Sheila thinks it was a put-up job, since we found out what liars the Sheisskopfs are. When he went to prison anyway, I shoveled snow from Mrs. Windward's driveway so she could go sell perfume. I helped her prune her trees. I mowed her lawn for her several times. Gratitude. Phooey!"

"James . . ."

"Oh, don't worry, Mom. I'll still be nice, polite, and civil. But Cherry stays, whether Mrs. Windward likes it or not."

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence.

Afterwards, James went back out into the night. Cherry's head turned as he approached with another handful of feed. She backed up a couple of steps, but stopped when she saw the outstretched hand, extended her nose, and took a bite. James didn't have to step on the chain or hold her head as he slowly closed in. He stroked her neck and scratched her mane at the shoulder as she ate the rest, then she stood still for more rubbing.

James then put his arms around her neck and stooped to hug her. Cherry accepted this a little nervously, shifting her hooves back and forth, but he was satisfied with the progress of their relationship, and went to bed. No drugs tonight, he was tired. A good tired.

CHAPTER NINE

May 1987

James awakened and dressed early the next morning. When he opened the door at the foot of his couch/bed, the rising sun shone through the window in the laundry/utility room that the door led into. He looked to his right, into the kitchen, then quickly turned his head back. "Sorry, I didn't know you were in here."

His mother put down her insulin bottle and syringe, and calmly slid her slacks back up. "No problem, son. Haven't you been to bed yet?"

"Yeah, I just got up." He walked into the kitchen to the table and looked out the patio doors. The yard was wet with dew, sparkling like glitter in the sunshine. He slid the door open and inhaled the fresh air.

He looked over at Cherry just as her head came up. She whinnied a greeting at him, seeming friendly enough. "Hi, girl," he responded, sliding the door shut again, turning to the bathroom to take care of morning business.

His mother was fixing breakfast when he came out.

"Do you want to join us? It won't be any trouble to throw in a little more oatmeal."

James shuddered. The thought of breakfast still repelled him. "Uh, no thanks. I'm gonna get an early start on a couple of projects. Then I still need to fix Mrs. Wharton's antenna. She's been gone whenever I had the time to get there, and I know she enjoys her soap operas as much as you do."

James went back to his room to look up her number, called her, then went and did the job. It went quickly, and James drove down to the local lumberyard for the flakeboard siding and some more pressure-treated posts. As soon as he had the sides on the shelter, he needed to lay out and start the pen so Cherry wouldn't have to wear a chain and halter all the time.

On his return, he walked right up to Cherry, and didn't even have to hold the chain or carry a bribe. A few moments invested in shoulder-rubbing and checking her water, and he was back at work.

A couple of hours saw the siding nailed on and cut for the roof-peak. Then he planned his fence, digging holes for the wooden posts that would form the corners. The straight stretches would be done with steel posts driven into the soil.

Just as he finished the last hole his mother called to him from the patio.

"Yes, Mom?" he said, brushing the dirt from his hands.

"Are you building fence, now?"

"Getting a good start on it. What did you want?"

"Well, I may have some bad news. You'd better come in and clean up for supper while I tell you about it."

Mystified, James washed up and sat down.

"I went walking with Mrs. Windward again this afternoon. She said to tell you—"

Angrily, James interrupted, "Can't that woman talk to me herself? Why does she think I have to get my messages relayed through you? She seems to think I'm still a little boy, the way she plays 'tell my mother'!"

Mrs. Falabella looked hurt. "I'm sorry, Mom. I shouldn't yell at you. I'm just irritated at her, sitting in all her snobbish glory and handing down her Pronouncements from on High. Go on. Please."

"Well, she's been calling the mayor and the police and complaining about your new pony. She said she found some city ordinances that'll keep you from having one here."

"Hey, I checked it out before I bought Cherry! What's she talking about?"

"I'm not sure. Something about fences. Maybe you'd best call City Hall again before you get too deep into it."

James brooded through supper, attention commanded by dark thoughts about people who weren't content to live their own lives and insisted on controlling those around them. After washing his dishes, he went out into the shop to build the gate.

It was nothing fancy, just a four-bar wooden gate with cross-braces made from one-by-fours nailed securely together. When finished, he sat down at his desk and worked a crossword puzzle while watching a little television on the computer monitor. Composite color monitors make great TVs when fed the video signal from a VCR.

Once, he reached for the shaving kit. He still hadn't used up the supply of dissolved tablets he had prepared a week before, the morning of the awful night in the motel. He put it back.

I don't need any of that right now. I'm already twitchy enough about Old Bag Windward. Besides, I want to get to bed early and be at City Hall first thing when they open.

The next morning found James parked in front of the civic building. He had already given

Cherry more water after moving her to a new grazing area, plus another handful of feed.

This getting up with the sun is already becoming a habit for me. I wonder. . . no, I don't suppose farmers do it because of anything between them and their livestock-at least, not most of them.

When he saw the silver-haired yet attractively young city clerk fishing in her purse for the door keys, he got out and followed her into the building.

"You're here bright and early! What can I do for you, Mr. Falabella?"

"I just bought a pony to keep on my place, and understand my neighbor has been complaining. When I called the other day, you or someone in this office said there would be no problem, but she claims she found something down here that would keep me from having one."

"Oh, I remember. Let me look it up for you." She went to the old bound ordinance book, and flipped through the pages.

"Here it is . . . Section 167.4 says that you cant keep goats, pigs, or chickens in the city limits . . . no cattle except dairy animals for your family use . . . horses-yes, here!'Any horse pen, fence, or enclosure shall not be located less than one hundred feet from the closest part of another's dwelling or place of business. If more than one horse is to be kept, there shall be a minimum enclosure of at least one-third acre per animal.'

"That's what she called about. She tried to say her whole lot was her 'place of business' since she sells Avon. I told her that if she wanted to claim it as a business place, she'd have to get a license and a zoning variance since you're in a new addition."

James nodded. "How much ground is required for one horse?" "There's no minimum for one animal, just if you have two or more." "Is the minimum distance measured from her property, or from her house?"

"The house. I know, because we went through this with another person, and that's the way the city attorney and the judge interpreted it"

"Okay, thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome. While you're here, what about that water bill from last month?"

James winced. "Uh, I'll see you in a couple of days, okay?"

"Well, all right. Just dont let it go too long. Reconnect charges are up to \$6.00 now."

With a wave of thanks, James left.

Back home again, he spooled out and measured a hundred feet of coaxial antenna cable, then enlisted his mother's help after checking to see that Mrs. Windward's car was gone.

"Here, Mom, you hold one end of the cable against the corner of her house while I walk the other end around. Hold tight, because I'm going to pull against it."

As he moved in a shallow arc, James was relieved to find that the back wall of the shelter just cleared the required distance. He marked the path of the cable end with stones he had removed from the post-holes as he dug them, then surveyed the results.

Drat! The pen was going to look damned funny. Instead of a nice, neat rectangle, the sides running north and south from the stable on the west side were going to have to angle back to the east. He'd wind up with a skewed pentagon. *Oh, well, pentangles are significant in the Craft, so maybe this is a good omen of sorts.*

"Are you done?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, thanks, Mom!"

James redug his postholes and set the pressure-treated landscape timbers in them, filling in with bagged concrete premix, tamping the dry mixture firmly and then wetting it and the ground around it.

"I have to go into Joplin for some steel T-posts and fence wire. Want to ride along?" James asked his mother.

Grace Falabella was a little surprised. Usually, James preferred the company of his father.

"About how long will it take? I need to make a cake for the bake sale after church tomorrow."

"Maybe an hour. The Payless Cashways lumberyard has a sale on them, but they're pretty fast on service. Wanna come?"

"Okay, I guess so."

When they were on the highway, headed into town, Grace said, "I wanted to talk to you, anyway."

James grinned. "I rather expected you did."

"Well, it's about your pony-

"Your questions, or is this more from next door?"

"No, it's me. Daddy said you'd talked to him about it, and he says it's something you have to do."

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, I want what's best for you, you know. If that's what it takes to make you happy, I suppose I can live with it. But-can't you, uh," she blushed, "well, you know-*play with yourself* or something?"

James glanced at her, then put his eyes back on the road.

"Mom, I do. At least once a day."

"Then why . . . ?"

"It's lonely. I want a partner, but I'm scared of disease, and I'm not at all ready for another emotional relationship. Frankly, I'm afraid of being hurt again, and afraid of hurting someone else. I am what I am, not what you wish I was. Not what I wish I was."

"That's kind of sad."

"Yes, I suppose so-but I'm going to make the best of a bad situation. Can you live with that?"

After reflecting a moment, she replied, "Yes. But be careful, okay? Please?"

"I will. No more pictures, for sure!"

Grace choked a bit, then laughed. "Thanks! Those ones I found . . . oh, my!" They chuckled together.

It took about a week of wire-pulling, nail-driving, post-bracing labor before the pen was ready for occupancy. Meantime, Cherry lowered the lawn's level, leaving clumps of grass that she didn't like as well. The little filly showed a marked preference for the large patch of Zoysia grass James had started on the north side of the back yard a few years before.

Days before the pen was done, Cherry obviously decided James was her friend. Whenever he was in reach of her tether, she liked to come over to be scratched and nuzzle him in return.

The third night after she moved to his house, James decided it was time to try her.

About midnight, after the moon was down and the little city slept, he went out back

wearing only a pair of jogging shorts and rubber thongs, carrying a small jar of petroleum jelly. He scooped up some pelleted feed in a bowl, but put it down out of reach. It would be her reward if all went well.

Cherry seemed curious as he tightened her tether to limit her freedom of motion, but wasn't alarmed as he scratched her favorite "itchy" at the base of her mane. As he had done several times before when he was certain of being unobserved, he ran his hands over her back and down her rump, then slid his right hand under her tail.

Cherry first clamped her tail down in instinctive response, but rubbing the base of her vulva stimulated her clitoris, which quickly hardened into erection. Her tail eased and lifted, and he gently inserted a fingertip, which caused her tail to come up even further.

Stroking her neck with his other hand and saying, "Easy, little girl," in a gentle, quiet voice, he soon had Cherry rocking back and forth in time with the penetrating digit, her muscles clamping and releasing his finger. The mental image of that pressure on his member gave James an urgent erection.

It was time to find out . . .

James slipped off his sandals and stepped out of his shorts. Standing naked, he opened the jar and lubricated himself. Cherry was, of course, a virgin, and she fit quite snugly around his finger. He didn't want her first intercourse to be the least bit painful.

With the same greasy hand, he rubbed some on the lips of her vulva, then stroked her back and hips and continued his soothing vocalizations as he stepped behind her.

This was the moment of truth. Would she accept him as a lover, or kick his nuts halfway to the moon? He lifted her tail to one side, grasped his penis with the fingers of his right hand, using that thumb to spread her lips open.

She turned her head to watch, but showed no sign of hostility as he slipped just the tip into the opening prised apart by his thumb. James was breathing hard, his whispered endearments coming in ragged gasps.

"Okay, honey, I'm going to put this in, now. Easy, easy . . . it wont hurt. Oh, God, you're so hot, so warm! Now, just let me slide it up and down, that's right, you like it when it touches your clit, dont you? Oh, Cherry, oh, I've got to put it in further! Oh, yes! Oh, God, you're tight! So tight, so slick, so warm, and OH!"

As he penetrated to his full length, the head of his penis barely slid through the muscular ring mares have inside the vagina to keep urine out of their uteri, and Cherry gave a full-strength "twitch!" accompanied by a low whicker.

Still, she showed no sign of objection, and every indication that she was enjoying it as much as James.

Once he had full penetration, James stood still for a moment, legs spread and knees slightly bent to bring himself low enough for the coupling, savoring the sensations of coitus. Cherry held herself still, pussy contracting slightly at irregular intervals. Then James began to stroke, ever so slowly. The friction of vaginal walls rippling along his shaft combined with the ring sliding on and off the head of his penis was exquisite. Added to this was Cherry's motion; she swayed back and forth in opposite-phase concert with him, obviously enjoying the copulation, and her muscles added that equine magic: clamping down on the head of his dick at the end of the out-stroke, and on the base at the full penetration, bringing the tip of her clitoris into contact with James each time.

It didn't take long, a few minutes at most, before he felt his orgasm approaching. He sped up just a little, not too much since he had always found slow strokes to be more stimulating than

fast. Cherry kept pace, sensing his approaching ejaculation.

When it came, James pressed himself hard against her, rubbing her flanks in a rapid circular motion with his hands. Cherry pressed back hard against him, instinct making her want the semen deposited as far up inside as possible. She whinnied, cunt rapidly clenching again and again, milking James dry as he spurted.

He pulled out after a minute, testicles aching from the pressure of their contact and the intensity of his orgasm. Cherry stood with tail lifted high, her vulva still "winking" as commingled vaginal secretions and semen oozed out, a milky dribble.

She shook her head as James walked forward, then nosed at his exposed penis. He stood still, apprehensive that she might decide to nibble on it-those teeth were pretty big, even in a little pony-but she just smelled of it, then gave it a short lick with her tongue.

James hugged her, then scratched the "itchy" again before he put on his shorts, loosed her tether back to regular length, then brought the feed over. Cherry eagerly attacked it as James contemplatively rubbed her coat. "Oh, my little filly! You are something else indeed! I think we're going to have a good relationship."

The consummation of their affair wasn't even marred when James noticed the curtain of his parents' bedroom window fall shut. *I suppose Dad heard me open the door. Wonder if he watched the whole thing? Oh, well, the old fart doesn't get much of a thrill anymore since diabetes flattened his pecker. Hell, I hope he enjoyed it!*

CHAPTER TEN

May 1987

Again, James awakened with the sunrise.

This is getting to be a habit Hope it doesn't ruin my reputation.

Regardless, he felt good; no headache, well rested, even his morning mouth didn't taste like a neglected catbox as it usually did.

Nothing was on tap for this morning, and his parents weren't even up yet, so after the usual awakening chores were taken care of, James opened the refrigerator.

What have we here? Sausage, eggs, frozen hash-browns, cheese . . . I think I'll surprise the folks and cook up a good breakfast hash. Probably not on their diets, but this is a special morning! Suiting action to thought, James soon had sausage gently sizzling on the stove.

Knowing there would be a few minutes before the food required further attention, he headed back to his room and opened the drug drawer on his desk. He stared for a minute at the pill bottles, grinding equipment, little bags of ten syringes each, alcohol swabs, cotton, and all the rest of the things that had dominated his life for most of a year. Then, somewhat to his surprise, he closed the drawer again.

Maybe later. Maybe never. Shit, this is weird! All the time I was using, I hated it, didn't want to do it. But something inside drove me to it anyway. I wouldn't stop until I was out of drugs, and couldn't forge a prescription, or get another one from the doctor yet. As soon as I got more, I'd resolve to just use them the way they were prescribed, talking to myself about how they would last longer that way, and swear that I'd stick to it this time; but before I even got home with die bottles, I'd stop at another pharmacy and buy some more rigs if I didn't have any left over from the last run-which I usually didn't because I'd destroy them all as soon as the drugs were gone, making more phony resolutions.

But here I am, I have over three hundred tabs of Dex left, lotsa nice, sharp, clean syringes, no work to do today, and I don't want to shoot up! Huh . . .

Actually, James knew he had work to do for himself, for Cherry. The fence wasn't done, yet, the lawn needed mowing, and there was still a hay shelter to complete along with getting the asphalt roofing roll nailed onto the top and sides of the stable. But first, breakfast needed tending to.

Back in the kitchen, James saw the sausage was browned, and had cooked out enough grease to fry the potatoes, so he broke the sausage into little clumps with a spatula and poured in the frozen spuds.

As they sizzled out their ice and water, Tony came down the hall.

"What's cooking? Smells good!" He peered through his thick lenses. "What're you doing up so early again?"

"I just felt like it. I feel good this morning, and thought I'd make a nice breakfast."

"Is there enough for all of us?"

"Yep. I had some of that home-ground sausage from the meat market downtown, the good stuff Ron makes, and I decided to mix up something nice. I know you and Mom cant eat this sort of stuff very often, but this is kind of a special occasion, as I'm sure you saw last night."

Tony at least had the grace to blush ever so slightly as he grinned. "Uh, yeah. I did see. Damn, you two looked like you were having one hell of a good time!"

"Mom know?"

"No, she was asleep, and I sure as hell didn't tell her! She knows, but it embarrasses her something fierce. She prefers to ignore that reality, and I let her."

"Yeah, well, I guess I will too, except when she asks me outright. She's nice and sweet and I don't see any point in making her uncomfortable unnecessarily."

"Right. Paper here yet?"

"I'll see." Leaving the stove, James went out the front door and picked up the daily. He tossed it to Tony, who was sitting in his usual place as his coffee brewed. For himself, he selected one of the horse-care books he had checked out of the library and looked up the section on foot care and shoeing. Years back, he had seen a pony with hooves that stuck way out in front, much worse than the pinto mare he first had sex with, curving up in front like an Arabian slipper. Someone told him that was "founder," too, and came from a horse eating the wrong thing, or too much of the right thing, and sometimes it crippled them so badly they had to be put down, killed.

No way did he want that to happen to Cherry! She had been so good the night before that he looked forward to a long life with her. Even if she was just a convenient, warm hole to stick his prick into, she showed signs of being a nice little horse, and she was some of the best sex James had had in many years. While he knew something about horse health and hoof care, he wanted to learn as much as possible.

Father and son were seated, reading their respective literature, when Grace came into the room and got her syringes and insulin out. She, too, looked at James in surprise.

"Didn't you go to bed last night?"

"Slept like a baby. I just woke up early again. Want some hash for breakfast?"

"Well, we shouldn't eat that kind of thing anymore." She looked wistfully at the skillet where the potatoes were turning a golden brown.

The newspaper rustled. "Dammit, honey, cant we eat a little something good once in a while? I get so damned tired of oatmeal!"

"Well . . . I suppose it won't hurt, just this once. But we'll have to go very light on lunch and supper!"

Tony picked up the newspaper again.

"Can I help?"

Automatically, James started to protest, then caught himself. "Sure, Mom, stir in four eggs as soon as the spuds are done. Cook it for another minute or so, and it should be ready to eat."

The sound of the spatula scraping the skillet bottom mixed with the rustle of the newspaper as James studied charts and text about fescue grass, grain rations, hoof-trimming, and trace minerals for a healthy horse. He also carefully read the section on toxic plants.

Reverend Tony slapped the paper down on the table in irritation. "Says here that *Doctor* Floyd Bentson is going to take over First Methodist in June. *Doctor* Bentson will have a church car, a private secretary, two assistant pastors, a youth minister, a music minister, probably a swimming pool, a \$50,000 salary, and a partridge in a pear tree!" He looked disgusted.

"I wonder if his sermons are really that much better than mine were? Can he visit more sick people, or counsel more troubled ones? But I forgot—he's got *Doctor* in front of his name! By damn, I'm impressed!"

Grace put plates and flatware on the table, and served the hash. "Yes, dear, I know. Here, eat your breakfast."

Although he agreed, James did his best to ignore Tony's tirade, having heard it all too many times before. He dug into the food, savoring the flavor after adding some salt and pepper. His parents, on a low-sodium diet, shook on the salt substitute. He continued reading:

"Too much new spring grass, especially rich varieties like fescue, can lead to laminitis, commonly known as 'founder' in a horse. If you suspect your horse has foundered, which can be detected by excessive heat in the hoof and the corona band just above it, stand the animal in cool water for half an hour, followed by leading the animal around to promote circulation for half an hour, then go back to the water. Alternate this treatment as long as possible, and permanent damage may be avoided."

Tony spoke, "Hey, this stuff is really good! Thanks, son."

James nodded, "You're welcome," and directed his attention back to the book, engrossed in hoof care.

"A horse should be shod if it is to be ridden heavily, or driven to cart (in which case shoeing the front hooves is more important than the rear), or will be spending most of its time on rocky ground. Other than those conditions, it is generally healthier for the normal hoof to leave a horse barefoot, since shoes tend to inhibit normal wear and distort the growth of the hoof. If shod, a horse should be unshod and trimmed at least once every six weeks."

Those don't apply to Cherry. I'm far too big to ride her, at least from on top, heh, and have no intention of harnessing her.

"While barefoot, regular trimming is still required as the toe of the hoof tends to grow faster than the heel, throwing the foot out of balance. Light exercise on a hard-paved road can help the hoof wear evenly, thus reducing the need for trimming."

Hmmm. . . . James looked up. "Mom, would you mind if I started walking with you in the evenings?"

Grace again looked surprised. "No, not a bit. When did you start getting interested in exercise?"

"Not me. I still think exercise for its own sake is inefficient. But it says here that to keep her feet healthy, Cherry needs to spend time walking on pavement, and the only way I can see to do that is to lead her. I guess that means I'll have to walk, unless you're volunteering?"

Grace said, thoughtfully, "No, I don't know if I could control her, and I wouldn't want the responsibility for her. I guess you'll have to do it. Sorry."

"No problem. I didn't expect you to take over. I don't suppose it will really hurt me or anything. I don't mind work if there's a purpose to it."

"Well, fine, come on along. I'm not sure what Mrs. Windward will think of it."

"I don't care what that snooty old bag thinks of it! If it's gonna bother you, we'll walk at a different time than you."

"No, I'm sorry. Come along with me, and if she doesn't like it, she can go by herself."

"Okay. When?"

"Oh, about four or so. The days are warming up, but it's pretty nice about then."

"Okay. We'll be ready."

James made no protest when his mother gathered up all the dishes to wash them. He went outside to his carpentry. As he drove galvanized roofing nails through the asphalt, James's thoughts wandered back to Tony's bitter outburst.

It's funny. Both of us entered the ministry against our better judgment-Dad lasted until he retired, but I got out quick, staying just the first year I was assigned to a parish so they wouldn't be stuck with an empty pulpit

In my case it was pretty simple. Mom and Dad urged me into the ministry, something I didn't really want to do in the first place, but I was determined to give it my best shot and not let down the people in the congregations. Those two tiny churches had been hanging on by the skin of their teeth, no regular pastor, making do with whatever member could be persuaded to give a little talk, or sometimes a pastor from another denomination. That led to the first problem I had with one of the churches. The leading elder's wife was dying of stomach cancer, and a neighbor, a Baptist lay preacher, had been visiting and counseling her all through the illness. I suppose I should have been more understanding, but it hurt me that the family didn't even ask me to assist in the funeral service-and it's against denomination rules to use a church for anything without the consent of the duly-appointed pastor. Over the situation, I kept my mouth shut, but Dad later pointed this out to the family after they had a while to mourn. Nobody really won in that one.

Of course, what were they to think of me, a "young, punk kid"? I visited the churches the Sunday before I was to take the pulpits. The old farmers were probably a little shocked to have a fat man in a fluorescent, multicolored, paisley shirt, charcoal-gray suit, and electric purple socks with tire-tread sandals introduce himself as their new pastor.

I figured that if I hit them hard and fast, they'd overlook other possible shortcomings.

"Damn!" James looked at his thumb, then gave the hammer a dirty look. Just a couple more nails, and he'd have to climb back down and move the ladder. Work continued.

I guess matters came to a head when the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee came to visit me at home one Saturday. It started out easily enough.

"Preacher, we'd like to talk to you about your sermons a little bit"

"Something wrong? I work hard on them."

"Well, they're pretty good, most of the time. It's more a matter of subjects."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you seem to always take the same kind of text"

"Co on."

"Uh, it's just that-well, shucks, we were wonderin' when you was gonna do a good ol' hellfire and brimstone sermon?"

That bothered me. I had been hoping the subject wouldn't come up, that maybe nobody would notice.

"I'd really rather never do one of those, brothers."

One of the others who had been standing quietly in the background spoke up. "Why, preacher?"

I sighed. "Look, let's sit down at the kitchen table and talk about this. I'll see if there's any coffee."

My mother (I was still living with my parents at the time, this time in their parsonage) heard me and put a pot on to brew.

I kept the conversation to trivial matters, talk of crops, weather, livestock, while we waited for the coffee. It wasn't hard to get fanners talking about those subjects.

Finally, with the passing around of the percolator, came the moment of truth.

"Folks, you're good, God-fearing people, right?" They all nodded agreement "You're close to the land, close to nature, and because of that, you're close to God every day, right?" Some smiles with their nods. "Then it disturbs me to hear you ask for something like this."

"Gee, Preacher, we just kind of like those old-fashioned ones. They're fun!"

I nodded this time. "I know. But you have to ask yourselves why they're fun!" More puzzled looks.

"Look, I've been trying my best to keep my preaching up with the message of the Gospels, the 'Good News.' I know you all pretty well, and I don't think there's a hard-drinkin', whorin', unrepentant sinner in the whole two bunches, right?"

A look of more-or-less agreement passed between the group.

"Okay, so I've been expounding on all the good stuff in the Bible. Heck, you're all old enough to know the hellfire, brimstone, and damnation parts by heart, right?"

Further agreement

"There's not a one of you needs reminding how bad Hell can be just so you won't stray, right?"

I was batting a thousand.

"So, when I was studying and talking to other students, and other preachers, and thinking about the matter, I decided that unless I had someone in the congregation that had been dragged in, kicking and screaming, and really needed the Devil scared out of him, that there was no good reason to ever bring the subject up more than momentarily."

The chairman put down his coffee cup. "What I want to know is, why did you say it disturbed you that we asked for one?"

This time, the smile left my face. "Because, gentlemen, and I don't want to sound too harsh here, when a group of God-fearing, moral people asks to hear one of those beauties, I wonder how much of that desire is motivated by wanting to feel smug about their status, the way they're saved and safe. I wonder how many people will be out there in the pews, gloating a little bit over the thought of that 'Unwashed Philistine down the road burning forever, choking on the smell of sulfur, screaming in continuous agony. I wonder how much damage I'll be doing your souls by tempting you into the sin of pride, of smugness over your own righteousness. 'Pride goeth before a fall,' and I don't want to be the cause of someone's fall rather than their salvation! I'd wind up sharing the hot seat next to them, have to look into their pain-filled eyes with my own tortured orbs, and gain extra pain from knowing I put them there!"

"Gentleman, that's my main reason. But, also, consider this: We have more class than that. Let's leave the shouting and thumping for the Rollers."

That finished it From the standpoint of logic and intellect, I won, hands down. But, emotionally, I lost them. I had committed a sin they were unable to forgive-I told them the truth about themselves. I was young, brilliant, articulate, and a fool.

It didn't take me long to realize what I had done. People still smiled, still gave their money when the collection plate was passed, still shook hands as they left the church door at the end of the service. But nobody came to ask for spiritual guidance. Nobody asked me how I was doing. I had become their judge, even as they had wanted to judge others in their own minds and hearts.

This gave me pause to reflect on the whole situation-was I really suited to do this? Did I truly believe all the things I said from the pulpit? From then on, I didn't have the stomach to continue. I started looking again at the Bible, reading other books that the denomination wouldn't be pleased to know I was reading, books that raised serious questions about Christianity.

The last of the barbed wire was strung between the posts. It was there for strength, integrity, and tightness. It would be unwise to depend on it to hold a horse, particularly an unknown quantity such as Cherry. Many horses ran into barbed wire when they panicked, and could sustain serious injuries to legs, bodies, even eyes as they struggled to get free of the entanglement.

James walked over to his materials pile and started pushing the roll of woven horse-wire that would form the actual fence. Beginning at one end, he unrolled it against the barbed wire and posts. Once in place, with the tension of the stretcher against it, he began the tedious job of tying the wire fabric in place. This left his mind free once more.

The Bible didn't really paint a very pretty picture of God or people, His "special creatures." The more I looked at it the more it seemed that God had dealt from the bottom of the deck when He made Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden. The old Bible College hogwash about "God gave man free choice, and man abused it" didn't ring very true-it seemed more like a weak justification.

If God knew everything, why didn't He know exactly what He was doing when He placed temptation in Eve's path? Why didn't He know that she would fall prey to it? Either God knew what would happen, which meant He intended for the Fall to take place, or He didn't know everything; in either case, it was pretty easy to look upon God's actions toward the First Family as rather a dirty trick.

I had long been a dabbler in electronics and the other "hard sciences," and reading about advances in quantum physics, astronomy, paleontology, and biology had given me, not a cynical skepticism about the notion of a Creator, but rather an ever-increasing respect for the Mind that could design a whole universe that worked so well as it seemed to.

Could such an awesome intellect as this be, at the same time, a petty tyrant blaming His creatures for His own design flaws? It didn't make much sense. So, whether or not I bought the notion of Genesis and Jehovah, I had to believe that people are the way we are for some reason.

Given the power of the Creator, He could, if He so desired, obviously have made us perfectly obedient little creatures, perfectly fitted for the averred task of spending eternity standing around the Heavenly Throne, chanting praises over and over, telling Him how great He was. This bothered me, too. Doesn't God already know how good He is? Hell, He made everything! Did He go to all that trouble simply to produce a few billion yes men? What would that say about His psychology? The more I studied without the blinders of early training, the more I saw the God of the Bible as a petty tyrant, a paranoid egomaniac, chortling to Himself over all the pitfalls He'd placed in the path of mankind, the impossible rules He'd handed down,

and then patting Himself on the back over His "mercy" at offering a redeemer-something gained only through the ultimate blood sacrifice. His early history with His "Chosen People" also revealed horrific bloodshed, the slaughter of innocent children, the piracy of civilizations by nomadic, shepherding brigands.

I decided that I didn't like Jehovah very much.

But . . . but... I still believed, even more, in a Creative Principle, a Grand Architect, a purpose for existence. After careful thought, it seemed the most logical thing to believe rather than rejecting Deism outright. At about the time my year's appointment was over, though, I had lost all respect for and belief in Christianity, at least as it was commonly taught.

So. Why, then, did Man exist? What was our purpose? Was there one? I had to believe that If there were no purpose to existence, then believing there was one certainly did no harm, and was a comforting thought If there was a purpose, then believing and acting as if there wasn't could lead to much trouble down the road.

I found my answer in various schools of early and contemporary pagan thought The notion of reincarnation, that souls are permanent unlike bodies, gave purpose-you lived on the earth or wherever to learn and grow, just as children go to school. Discamation was the "summer vacation" between classes when your soul rested, assimilated the lessons just experienced in the previous lifetime, correlated those lessons with previous experiences (hidden from memory while carnate), and made an informed, perhaps mentored, decision about the next incarnation with the goal of learning specific things.

I could live with that

"Are you ready for the walk?"

James was inside, putting on fresh clothing. He had taken a shower after finishing the hot, sweaty work with the fence. About all that remained to do was mount the gate on its hinges, something he could accomplish quickly in the cool of the evening.

Cherry's pen would be ready for her occupancy that night. He looked forward to celebrating it with her in the privacy of her little stable, away from possible prying eyes.

"In a minute. Let me get my shoes on."

He emerged from his room wearing shorts and a light shirt. Although it was only early May, the weather was warm and muggy.

"Well meet you around front." Grace Falabella nodded as James exited through the glass patio door, new lead-rope in hand. Cherry whickered a greeting as she saw him, and stood as he walked up, clipped the lead to her halter and unhooked the tether chain. They walked around the end of the house together, Cherry tugging at the rope as she tried to investigate everything along the path with the curiosity of a horse.

James's mother met them at the edge of the yard, and all three stepped off into the street for a few feet until they were in front of Mrs. Windward's house. Grace walked to the door as her son and Cherry waited patiently, the little horse sampling the quality of the grass on the road's shoulder.

Mrs. Windward's voice came from her porch. "You expect me to walk along with an *animal*? My husband and I retired here to get away from the country! That beast belongs on a farm, not in the city!"

To his surprise, James heard his mother's voice raised in his pet's defense. "Really, Wilma, you have an unreasonable attitude! As far as 'moving to the city' is concerned, this little town hardly qualifies! If you'd just get to know Cherry, you'd find out she's a nice little pony. I wasn't

too sure about her at first, myself, but I like her."

Mrs. Windward stood fast, attitude firmly set. As Grace returned to the road, James began to turn around.

"Where are you going?"

"Look, I don't want to interfere with your friends. We can walk another time, another way. Go back and tell her I won't force Cherry on her."

"Oh, stuff the old bag!"

James grinned in delight and surprise.

"She's always putting on airs, as though she was something special. Well, like you said, her husband is a retired janitor, in prison, and she sells perfume door-to-door. She makes noises about Cherry's smell and the flies, and I'm tired of it! The prevailing wind blows from her house to ours, not the other way, and the smell she is getting is from her neighbors on the other side raising all those basset hounds. Cherry smells good, darn it! Kind of earthy, but very natural and fresh."

James looked at his mother with admiration. "I didn't know you felt that way."

Grace blushed a bit as the three started down the street. "Well, I didn't at first. But anyone or anything that can change you so much so quickly is worth a lot to me. I haven't seen you work so hard and be so happy about it, or life, or *anything*, in years. I even gave Cherry a little hug and kiss this morning. She's sweet."

A few houses down the street they approached a group of homes with a concentration of children. Most of the kids were outside playing in the late-afternoon freshness. The pony immediately drew their attention.

Cherry shied, pulling backwards against the leash, as several small ones ran up to get a closer look. "Easy, girl." James rubbed her favorite spot on the shoulders, calming her down a bit. "Be slow, children! Don't scare the nice little horse." The kids, most of them around eight years old, slowed down.

"Can we pet him?" "What's his name?" "Is that a real horse?"

"Okay, okay, sure! First, her name is Cherry, and if you come up slowly, one at a time, you can pet her. Yes, she's a real horse."

One brave girl advanced, hand out. Cherry held back with her body, but stretched out her nose to investigate. She lipped the hand.

"Tee-hee! That tickles!" said the girl as she quickly pulled her hand back. Cherry jumped back, too.

"I'm sorry, little horsie, I didn't mean to scare you." The girl reached out again, this time offering a sticky fragment of Tootsie Roll. "Will she eat this?"

James thought quickly. He didn't want anyone offering his newfound mate treats but himself. But why? Was he jealous? *Oh, hell, it couldn't hurt.* "I don't know. Just be sure you hold your hand flat so she doesn't get your fingers by accident, and don't move suddenly."

Cherry reached her nose again and sniffed the offered treat. She folded her lips around the chewy chocolate for a moment as if contemplating the taste, then decisively closed them and started to chew, hard. The children, James, and Grace all laughed as they watched her chomp vigorously on the candy, head bobbing up and down with the effort, the filly's enjoyment obvious to all.

When it was gone, Cherry eagerly reached out, searching for more. The little girl, Candice if James remembered correctly, said, "I'm sorry, Cherry, that's all I have."

Meantime, the other children had gotten brave again, and some offered Cherry grass

plucked from their lawns. She took most of the offerings, then stood still as the children petted her nose, neck, and shoulders.

"We have to keep going, now," said James as he proudly stroked Cherry's neck, then pulled gently on the lead.

Similar scenes were repeated three times in the short, six-block walk that was his mother's limit. Once, one of the parents whom James vaguely knew came out with her children to fuss over the pony with as much delight as the youngsters. Their path took them by a retirement housing complex and some of the widow ladies seemed infatuated by Cherry as well.

James felt good at the end of the walk. He was proud of Cherry, and he had received more positive attention from his neighbors during the brief half hour than they had shown him during the previous six years. He was already looking forward to the next evening's perambulation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

June 1987

As the end of the month drew near, James and his parents had settled into a routine.

During the morning hours, Cherry would be brought out of her pen to graze various parts of the back or front yards while James took care of business. Mrs. Windward tried to make trouble about that, too, but the police were tiring of her complaints and the chief owned a pony for his own children as well. "Ma'am, the law just deals with stables and enclosures. It doesn't say anything about temporarily staking out an animal. You're wasting our time and making ill feelings over something you can't do anything about. Do you want to be like the Sheisskopfs?"

The comparison didn't please Mrs. Windward and she shut up.

James really enjoyed walking around town with Cherry, and soon they started going much farther than his mother cared to go. She went back to a slower, shorter walk with Mrs. Windward while man and mare took off at a brisk pace. When he noticed his expensive, comfortable work shoes rapidly wearing their soles out, James invested in some cheap walking sneakers from a local discount store.

Pretty soon they had established a route. Down the length of their street to the supermarket on the county highway that ran through town, across the road and down a hill to the city park where they would circle the swimming pool and explore the small creek that ran through the park, back up to the video rental store where they were both welcomed inside (James maintained a computerized stock list for the owners, and Cherry never, ever had an "accident" on their floor-in fact, she never relieved herself away from one area of her pen), up a small rise to the local Easy-Mart, sometimes stopping for a bottle of soda, over past the car wash to the drive-in restaurant. Cherry eagerly pulled ahead on that lap, since she knew there would be a treat in store for her.

Depending on finances, temperature, and mood, James would sometimes get Tootsie Rolls, which he would hold in his teeth for Cherry to take from him. Other times, to the delight of onlookers, he would buy a small chocolate ice cream cone that Cherry eagerly devoured.

Heading home the back way, Cherry greeted more of her friends. Children waited for them to come by so they could pet the pony again. James found himself becoming friendly with many of the mothers and other women along his route. It took a while before he realized that he was now relating to them as plain people and that he no longer undressed each one with his eyes, speculating on how they might be in bed, mind constantly in a turmoil of lust.

The drug stuff languished, neglected, in his desk drawer. He had not had a shot or even swallowed a pill since Cherry came into his life. He enjoyed all the attention she brought him even if people thought he was a bit odd. No problem, he was odd.

What else do you call someone who can only relate to women when he doesn't want sex from them, when his desires are fulfilled by an animal? But, still, it's better than before. Cherry has simple needs, and she makes them plain to me. Some grain, some hay, water, a little simple grooming and affection. She happily returns companionship and sex for these. Hell, if women were that simple then life would be easy for every man.

James knew deep down inside that this was bullshit. He had deliberately limited himself, socially, to fit his crippled emotional abilities. But that was okay, wasn't it? He did what he had to do, what he could do.

One morning found James in the music store where he once managed the service shop, talking with his old friends. He happened to mention that he needed to get home and take care of his pony. Ron, the drum department manager, shot him a surprised look and asked, "What the fuck are you doing with a pony?"

Ron had a good sense of humor, and James gave him a calculating look before answering, "Hell, a man has to do something for sex!"

Ron laughed. "Damn, I'd pay money to see that!"

James grinned. "You couldn't afford it."

"Think it's that good, do you?"

"No, it's the overhead—consider the cost of a romantic dinner for two, one of whom eats like a horse, while the other one is!"

The general manager joined in the laughter.

Life was good.

"Eric Hendrix quickly reached in his pocket and pulled out an ordinary-looking pencil. There was no lead inside the willow wood, which had been cut at midnight under a full moon and carefully inscribed with mystic symbols and runes before being painted yellow. He made a series of passes and flourishes, constructing an invisible wall of force between himself and the hell-spawn that Rev. Doctor Alexander, the disguised Satanic High Priest, had set upon him. The creature howled with a thousand voices of a million damned souls in eternal torment as his shape melted into a smoking puddle. With a smile of triumph, the agent of W.I.C.C.A. again turned his attention to the evil Rev. Doctor Alexander."

James leaned back in his chair and contemplated the paragraph. With a grunt of disgust he deleted it from the computer's memory.

Shit. Six months of work turned out fourteen good chapters. What an idea! Action-adventure/occult/horror. This book would sell in three different bookstore departments. Fourteen good chapters! I started out with the protagonist suiciding and being rescued at the last minute by an underground organization that had been fighting True Evil for centuries. He fought child molesters, homeless people kidnappers, environment polluters, and now, the climax, a Satanic High Priest disguised as an internationally known televangelist. Everyone who reads it, as much as I've completed, wants to see more. They like it. And now I'm having one hell of a time bringing it to an end.

James had written things off-and-on for years, but the sale the previous year of two short humor pieces to a professional market had given the writing bug sharper teeth. He got the urge to write something bigger, a novel. The solitary life of a writer had a certain appeal, and the idea of

getting paid for putting his nightmares down on paper had an even stronger one.

The problem was that his last chapter was turning to crap. Two months' worth of crap. James shook his head. Something was wrong. He couldn't seem to get any oomph, any pizzazz into the words. Now *The Sorcerer* resembled *James Bond of Sunnybrook Farm*.

I suppose the words came out of that famous angst, the sense of frustration and despair. Damn. I wonder if I can recapture that feeling?

Oh, well. Cherry had come in heat that day. She was a good lay any time, but the first heat cycle had convinced James that stallions really had something to get excited about. She was twice as enthusiastic, spreading her hind legs and pushing back with a vigor, shaking her head and whickering in a continuous low growl. Her smell was different, and he needed no lubrication as her juices flowed freely. As soon as it was full dark he would go outside and join her in the stable. Even though the little building provided privacy, the weather had turned too hot for much close physical activity during the daylight hours.

As he cleared the computer screen, the phone rang.

"Hello?" His face assumed a neutral expression as he heard Sheila's voice.

"Hi. Look, the kids want to come back and visit and see the big fireworks display on the fourth. Can you put us up for a couple of days or should we get a motel room?"

"Uh," James's mind blanked out at the exact moment when he needed it racing. "Oh, uh, no! There's room here, I'm sure. When are you coming?"

James liked his kids-he thought. He wasn't sure all the time, because it was so damned hard to relate to children.

"I thought we'd come on the afternoon of the second and stay about four days. That'll give them time to shoot a few fireworks of their own, see their old friends, and rest up before we go on to my parents' place. Is that okay?"

"Oh, sure! I'd like to see them."

"Diana has a pet bird; well bring him along since we cant leave him in the apartment by himself. Do you think your cat will bother him?"

"Um, we'll make some kind of arrangement."

"Good. I think you'll like him."

"Okay. It'll be nice to see you all again."

"Uh-huh," her voice sounded a bit dubious, "well, it'll just be for a short visit, and I imagine I'll spend most of my time with my friend Theresa, but the kids want to see you and Grandma and Grandpa. Listen, I cant afford too big a phone bill. We'll see you in a few days. Bye."

"Goodbye."

James hung up the phone, head swimming. What now?

Oh, shit. What'll she say when she sees Cherry? I know what Diana will do-that little girl is nuts about horses-but Sheila knows all about my early history with them. Douglas? Who knows? But he's an easygoing kid.

James calmed down a bit.

To hell with Sheila! She can take it or leave it, damn it! I'll just wait and see what happens. She lost any right of control over me when she left.

The senior Falabellas were elated at the news. They had been closely involved in raising the two children, much more closely than with their other grandkids, since they lived nearby. James and Sheila had sometimes paid them to babysit, helping stretch their modest church pension.

"We can fold out the couch in the living room for a bed for the kids. I suppose we can make up a pad with that foam rubber for Sheila to sleep on the floor." Grace was full of plans.

"Mom, the kids have sleeping bags. They can sleep on the floor of my room, and Sheila can use the couch as it is—that way we won't have to move all of your furniture around. But I'd best get out the flea spray and do all the rugs again so they don't get tormented."

"Right. Oh, what should I cook? What do they like, again?"

"That's easy. The kids love beanie-weenie or macaroni and cheese. Nothing fancy or Diana won't eat it."

"I know. Fried chicken! Douglas likes mine better than his other grandma's, he's told me so. Mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and an apple cobbler."

Tony's eyes lit up at the prospect of all the forbidden food. It was like an oldtime Sunday dinner again. Surely he could get a few bites of the good stuff when no one was looking. A diabetic diet could get damned boring, and James usually only cooked enough of his own food for himself.

James grinned at his mother. "Calm down. It's just a short visit, and I'm sure that they'll have other things on their minds besides the menu. Relax enough to enjoy your grandchildren."

The admonition did little good, as James already knew. His mother went into a tizzy of housecleaning, a gray-haired whirlwind zooming this way and that as he and his father sat at the kitchen table and watched in amusement. "Your mother is happiest when she's doing something like this. In almost fifty years I've never found a way to stop her, and she'd be frustrated as hell if I ever did."

The time went quickly. James and Cherry walked by day and made love by night. Service calls came in and were dealt with in a quick and efficient manner. James considered buying some fireworks for his kids, but decided to let them select them themselves, with a bit of fatherly guidance and a strict eye on the budget.

Thursday, July 2, 1987, dawned with a clear sky and a promise of heat. James had only one call to make that day and finished it quickly. About noon he fed Cherry some grain and moved her over to a newly mowed section of the yard. She looked a bit askance at him as he approached with garden hose, bucket, brush, and a plastic tub of horse shampoo.

"C'mon, little girl, let's look our best for the visitors." Cherry quickly decided that she liked taking a bath as the water, not too cold and not too warm, sluiced out dust from her coat. Dunking her tail in the bucket and swishing it around raised no objections, and James was careful of her sensitive eyes as he washed her face with a damp sponge. She swayed in rhythm to the scrubbing of the soft brush on legs, back, and belly.

When the job was done, rinsing and all, Cherry was shining, her reddish-brown coat gleaming in the sunlight. James was rather the worse for wear, mud on his legs and bare torso as he led the little pony to a dry spot and tethered her there. No sense in having her roll in the dust back in her pen, which is likely exactly what she would have done if given the chance.

A quick shower and change of clothes, and it was time to nervously await his fate.

About four o'clock the blue car pulled into the driveway. Before Sheila shut off the engine, James was out the door and his children were unbuckling their seatbelts. Father and offspring met in the middle with lots of hugs and babbling. Diana ran back to the car and extracted a bird cage.

"This is Budgie, Dad! Isn't he pretty?"

"Yes, he certainly is—a pretty blue. Does he talk?"

"Oh, sure, I've taught him a lot of things! He can say his name, and 'I love you' and 'Shut

up' and-"

"Hey, Dad! I got my white belt in karate! And I have lots more Legos and some new G.I. Joe stuff and-"

James let the words flow around him, babbling like a refreshing stream over a stony bed. He had never realized how much he missed his kids. He never let himself feel it. Now he knew it would have made his hell twice as tormenting.

He stood as Sheila approached. "You're looking well, James. Have you lost some weight?"

"Thanks. You look good, too. Yes, I've started walking for exercise, and I've lost about eighty pounds."

She seemed to warm up a bit. "Well! I've started walking, too! They have a track in the city park, and a friend of mine and I go out early in the mornings when it's cool and do a mile or two."

"I usually do my walks in the evenings-if you brought your shoes, maybe we could go on one later, kinda help work the kinks from the long drive out of your system, let the kids stop off and see their friends on the street."

"Well see. First thing, we need to visit the bathroom. You haven't moved it or anything, have you?"

James grinned. "Um, lemme see . . . I think it's still in the same place."

He held his counsel while the car was unloaded, bathroom trips were finished, and the travelers had availed themselves of the iced tea. Then he said, "C'mon out back. I want to show you something."

He led them through the front door and around the south end of the house.

"A HORSE!" screamed Diana in that broken-glass voice so many little girls have when excited. She started to take off on a dead run. James caught her by the arm. "Let's go a little slower so we don't scare her."

Douglas seemed interested but not overly excited. Sheila, James could see when he sneaked a sidelong glance at her face, was wearing a careful, blank expression.

By now, Cherry was used to being approached by strangers and children, although she was not quite as cooperative on her own territory as on the street, held by a lead-rope. James reached into a pocket, took out a Tootsie Roll, and broke off half, which he handed to Diana. "Hold it in your hand with your fingers and hand flat so she can't bite them, and reach out slowly to give her a chance to smell you and the treat."

Diana squealed with joy at Cherry's lips. "She tickles! Can I ride her? Huh? Please?"

"I don't know. She's pretty young, and hasn't been ridden yet. Sheila, if you'll get on one side to catch her if she falls, and I'll get on the other side, I'll let Diana sit on her back."

"Okay."

Cherry was perfect-she held still for the children, didn't step on any feet, and even made up quickly with Sheila, who seemed to take a liking to the animal. After a few minutes, everyone but Diana was ready to go inside where it was cooler, the afternoon sun doing a yeomanlike job.

"C'mon, O little horse-crazy daughter of mine. Maybe later we can take a walk together with Cherry."

"Oh, can I ride on the walk?"

"No, sorry. She would need horseshoes to carry anyone on the paved road, and I haven't had any put on her. Besides, she still shies a little at traffic, and you'd fall off without a saddle."

Diana was persuaded to come in with the rest.

The adults gravitated to the table while the kids reacquainted themselves with the house

and the old Siamese cat James first got as a kitten just before he and Sheila met.

Talk ensued on a variety of topics, mostly dealing with Sheila's new life in western Kansas-her school, the town (its primary business was the final fattening, slaughter, and packing of beef), the activities of the children, her parents. The topic of Cherry didn't arise.

As the sun neared the horizon, the outside air cooled down some. "How about that walk?" Sheila looked tiredly reluctant.

"You know it's important not to skip an exercise routine," James chided. "Besides, supper will be about ready when we get back."

"Okay, okay. Kids! Get your shoes on, it's time to go for a walk!"

Sheila dug into a grocery sack and pulled out a shoebox. James put on his tennies. "I'll meet you out front in a minute." He went out back to get Cherry and led her to the porch, where she grazed the front grass as they waited.

He had to caution the children not to walk too close in front of or behind Cherry so they wouldn't catch any trouble if she spooked at something or indulged in high spirits. Diana in particular seemed to have trouble realizing that she wasn't a lifesize "My Little Pony" toy, but an animal with her own personality and the sharp hooves and strong teeth to enforce her own sense of well-being. Fortunately, James was already familiar with this problem from his experiences with other children.

"You have to understand that Cherry wants to watch out for danger, and anything making sudden movements nearby, or something that she doesn't recognize or isn't expecting can make her kick or jerk away."

"But I wont hurt her!"

"I know you wouldn't, darling. But *she* doesn't know that yet. you've been reading lots of horse books and horse stories, haven't you?"

"Uh-huh. And I saved up my allowance and bought a horse magazine at the store, but it's kind of hard to read."

"Wow! you've been reading it? And you're going into second grade this year?" James *knew* his kids were smart, but. . .

"I like to look at the pictures. But I can figure out most of the words, and Mom helps me with the hard ones."

James looked across at Sheila, who wore a proud smile. "She's reading on a fourth-grade level already."

He gave his daughter a contemplative, respectful look.

"That's very good! I'm proud of you. Okay, so have you read of the wild horses?"

"Oh, yes! The ones now and the ones the Indians used to catch a long time ago."

"So, you know that horses had natural enemies when they ran free, enemies like wolves and bears and cougars?"

"Uh-huh."

"To survive, all horses really have is speed to run away. They can fight some with their feet, but it's safest for them to avoid danger, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay! Good. When you think about it, this means that a horse has been bred all these years to constantly watch for danger. Their eyes are arranged so they can see most of the way around themselves without moving their heads, and their ears are always twitching, keeping track of the sounds around them."

"Sure. I've watched them on TV movies. They like to move their heads from side to side,

and they're always watching, except when they wear blinders or something."

"Then a sharp little girl like you can understand that Cherry gets nervous when there's too many people close to her so she can't watch out for things, like that trash can by the road, that just might be a horse-eating tiger!"

Diana laughed. Douglas chuckled, but then ran ahead to his best friend's house. An almost-ten-year-old had more freedom than his little sister.

Thus, in fits and starts, the walk proceeded normally down the home street. Sheila didn't seem to mind the interruptions, visiting with the children and parents who came out for the usual chat-and-pet sessions.

"Are you back to stay?" asked one woman.

"No, we're just here to visit over the Fourth." Sheila's expression was a bit odd, but James put it down to the tactless question.

James altered his usual route out of consideration for tender children's feet and skipped the ramble through the park. From the supermarket they proceeded to the convenience store directly across the side street, avoiding the highway with its heavier traffic. James was glad to see that it was not busy, and Lucy was on duty behind the counter.

As soon as she spotted the party approaching, Lucy stepped out of the door. "Hiya, Jim-boy, how ya doin'?" She was an imposing figure of a woman with a belly that hung almost to her knees, and a voice and heart to match. "How's my favorite four-legged girl?" Cherry nuzzled Lucy's side as she accepted her ear-scratching with evident pleasure.

"We're fine, Luce. Recognize these little bandits?"

"Sure, even if they don't look like you, Saints be praised! Need something cold to drink on a hot day like this?"

"Um, not right now." James saw the hopeful looks vanish from his children's faces. "I thought we'd get some ice cream at Dave's Drive-in." He took delight in watching fallen faces soar to new heights.

"How's your book coming? You know, Sheila, your husband is one hell of a writer! He has me on the edge of my seat, wondering what's going to happen next."

James tried hard to blush. Again, Sheila wore an odd expression as she looked at him.

"Yes, he's always been good with words."

"Well, when I'm working the night shift like this, I always look forward to him walking by, but I try to convince him it's just to see his pony. Don't want his head to swell up any bigger than it already is, y'know! But he's sure been good about coming down later at closing time. There've been so many robberies at convenience stores lately, it makes me and my husband feel good to know he'll be here."

This time James blushed for real. "Aw, you know it's just because I can't help flirting with you. Irish women do that to me."

Lucy roared with laughter, making Cherry start a bit. "Hah, I thought you was German and English and Eye-talian, and here you've been kissing the Blarney Stone! Go on, get down the street, I can't afford to have my reputation spoiled by the likes of you hanging around!"

As the group walked off, Sheila asked, "Is she really Irish?"

James grinned. "No, Polish, actually. But I ran out of good Pollack jokes, so lately she's been pretending to be Irish so she can be insulted when I tell an Irish joke. She's quite a gal-four kids and husband, and she's working this job, another part-time one, and putting herself through business school in the mornings. Plus, she likes to read my stuff. I like her."

"It's plain she likes you, too. Are you fooling around with her?" Her expression, once more,

was indecipherable.

"Jealous?" James disarmed it with a grin. "No, she's just a friend. I bought her a bottle of cheap champagne for Christmas, and she took it home to her husband. He's a nice guy, too."

By this time, they were approaching Dave's Drive-in. One of the counter girls saw them approach the walk-up window.

"What'll it be, today?"

"Four-no, five small ice-cream cones. Chocolate okay with everyone? Five chocolates."

James started pulling napkins from the dispenser as the high-school girl prepared the treats. He handed the ice cream around after paying the tab.

"Why five cones? Couldn't you just get a bigger one for yourself if you wanted more?"

"No. Watch." Sheila and the kids paused in their eating as he led Cherry out onto the gravel parking lot. She was reaching hard, craning her neck in an attempt to get to the cones held high in one hand. As soon as they were clear of the path of foot traffic, he draped the lead rope over his shoulders and took a cone in each hand. As soon as she could, Cherry started devouring her treat, dribbling melted confection on the ground. James fed it carefully, having learned that Cherry was fully capable of knocking most of it to the ground, then attempting to eat it, gravel and all. Not wanting a sick pony on his hands, he soon learned how to prevent that. With a handful of napkins he cleaned off her muzzle and legs as soon as she finished, keeping his own cone out of her reach.

It took only a few more napkins to clean up the kids than it did the horse.

* * *

After a late supper the kids soon fell asleep, tired from the long trip, the walk, and the general excitement. The elder Falabellas retired to their bedroom, leaving James and Sheila to themselves at the table. Small talk soon died away.

Sheila laid her hands flat on the table and looked James in the eye. "Okay. Why did you *really* get a pony?"

He entwined his fingers on the table top. "I think you know."

"Yes. And???"

He looked her square in the eye and did the best job of lying he had ever done. "It didn't work. You cant go back."

Sheila nodded. "That's what all the books tell me."

"Books?"

"You know, the self-help books to learn about why you do certain self-destructive things. Ones on living with divorce, or how your parents can screw you up. Ones about drug addicts." She looked hard at him. "You've changed."

"I certainly hope so. I've been clean for some time, now."

"Not just that. Your attitude's different. You seem to-I dont know, exactly. But it's a big improvement."

"Well, that's why I kept Cherry even after I found out-you know." He took a deep breath. "I think she saved my life. It's a long story. Maybe I'll tell you sometime when you have a couple of weeks. Maybe not. I'm still sorting through it."

"I know what you mean. I've had a lot of time to think, too. Well, I'm totally beat. I need to go to bed."

"I have a few things to do out in the shop, but I'm tired too."

"Just be careful when you come in-remember, there's kids on the floor."

"I'll watch out. Good night." James turned off the kitchen light that would have shone in her eyes on the couch, and went out into the shop. After waiting a few minutes to let Sheila fall asleep, he quietly let himself out the back door. He trembled with excitement as he stroked Cherry's flanks, then lifted her tail.

CHAPTER TWELVE

July 1987

While Sheila slept late that morning, the third of July, James rose with the sun. He cooked link sausages and eggs, finishing up just as two hungry mouths attached to active bodies bounced into the kitchen.

"Oh, boy, is that for everyone? Where's the toast? Do you have any jam?"

"You didn't fry the eggs, did you? I hate fried eggs."

He did a little dance with skillet and plates, barely managing to avoid dropping them as he dodged small feet and faces. He made it to the table intact.

"Yes, Doug, it's for all of us that are up. No, Diana, I scrambled the eggs."

"Are we gonna buy fireworks today? I want some bottle rockets, you can't buy them in Kansas."

"Oh, I *hate* bottle rockets and loud bangs!"

"Yes, we'll go down to the big fireworks market later today. Diana, I'm sorry you don't like all of them, but we'll find you some that you do like. I'll have to ask your mother about the bottle rockets."

"I like watching the ones you do at night. An' I like smoke bombs. Can I have smoke bombs?"

"Yeah, Diana, that's fine. Hey, let's kind of keep our voices down, there're still folks trying to sleep "

"Can I wake Mom up to ask her about the rockets?"

"No! Gosh, Doug, we wont be going for a while-let your mother sleep. It's a long ten-hour drive, and she's pooped!"

James had time available, since he prudently scheduled incoming service calls for later the next week. Besides the time spent shopping for fireworks (he took the kids without Sheila), he treated his family to lunch at Bill's, took them all swimming to escape some of the heat, and, of course, went on the evening walk.

As soon as it was reasonably dark, he set up a sheet of plywood in the front yard on which to light groundworks such as fountains and spinners. Doug had spent much of the day with firecrackers and bottle rockets under his father's loose supervision to prevent fires or injuries. Diana not only had her smoke bombs, but "champagne poppers," snappers, snakes, and one package of relatively quiet ladyfingers.

Sheila sat on the porch, most interested in the fountains and Roman candles, her favorites. They saved the sparklers for last.

Two tired children went to bed, the boy looking forward to a day spent with his best friend and more fireworks, the girl to more swimming and the big show on the night of the Fourth.

James made another check outside to be sure that no fireworks, theirs or anyone else's, had

started any grass or roof fires. He really wasn't too worried since the weather had been rather wet, but a few precautions never hurt. Sheila took a long, cool shower while he made his rounds. He noted without pleasure that Cherry was a little agitated, and saw some expended large rocket casings in her pen.

Damn (he Sheisskopf bunch! They've got three fucking acres in back of their house, and they have to shoot their shit to come down on my place and scare my horse. Assholes! Their extra land was a sore point with James, anyway, since much of it bordered his back boundary. It ran from the rears of three adjacent lots to the railroad right-of-way; James had tried to buy it sometime back, but had no luck catching the landowner. Tom sneaked around and bought it, lying to James's face when the surveyors were back there checking property lines.

The idiot bought the land, and now he just lets it grow up in weeds. Big deal, big-shot "country gentleman" with his stupid little lawn tractor that he treats like a Rolls-Royce. Whenever he takes it out of his shed, his fat pig wife and retarded children come out and all stand around watching, like he was a priest performing some magnificent rite. What a dick!

James shook his head and went back inside.

Sheila was sitting on the edge of the couch, wearing an old cotton nightgown he remembered well. "Come over and let's talk a little."

"Sure." As he sat down next to Sheila, he noticed that it was her old nursing gown with the slits in front to allow a baby easy access to a breast.

"I wanted to tell you something. You've changed, changed a lot! I noticed it yesterday, but it really shows the more I see of you."

"God, I hope so. I was really a mess, huh?"

"Yes. I had to leave, do you understand that?"

"I didn't, not until a couple of months ago. But you're right, it had to be done."

"One of us would have killed the other one, and it would have been a toss-up who. But I'm impressed by the changes you've made."

"Gee," James grinned, "maybe I should have taken off a few pounds earlier."

Sheila elbowed his ribs. "It didn't hurt-but I think that's more a symptom of change, a basic change."

"Tell me more, I'm eating this up!"

"Yeah, right, you big-headed brain. I think what's impressed me more than anything else is the friends you've made. I never knew you to have very many, and *no* women; at least, not ones that you didn't pant after like a dog on the street."

"Ouch. It was that obvious, huh?"

"Yes. And they could see it, too. Some of them even told me you made them very nervous."

"Uh-huh. I know. Hey, one thing I've had this last year is time to think. Maybe one of these days I'll tell you the whole, long, sordid story."

"Well, I have a few things to talk about, too. In fact, I made notes. But right now I look at you and I see the man I fell in love with, the man I married, not the stranger, the frightening thing I lived with for the last five years."

"Uh-h-h." As Sheila moved on the couch, a tit poked out of her nightgown. James pointed, "My changes aren't the only things that're visible around here."

Sheila looked down, then smiled. "It's been a while since you or anyone else has seen that." She giggled softly. "Like to see more?"

"Yeah."

"You could maybe take a closer look?" She reached down and hefted her right breast in her hand. "Real close. Yes, like that! Oh, how can you see with your tongue? Never mind, keep looking! Just like that. Yes-s-s-s. . . ."

Sheila's different, too! This is the same hot-pantsed broad I first bedded down while watching "The Three Musketeers" on TV, after we drank that bottle of wine. That first night, the first time I ever had a woman spend all night in bed with me, screwing our brains out. We figured out later that it must have been one of those first five or six times that Doug was conceived.

They slowly reclined on the couch, Sheila reaching for his zipper as his free hand snaked up under the hem of the nightgown. *Jesus she's running like a backwoods creek! A creek-in-the-crotch-sounds like a toy-bet they'd sell good, though . . .*

Mouth-to-mouth now, the two groped, probed, stroked each other. "Do you-have-any condoms?"

"No. Uh, got any foam or anything?"

"Oh! No, I-haven't needed anything-like that for some time- yes! There. A little softer. Yeah."

"Me neither." *Probably better not mention why I don't need it.*

"Oh, shit! Damn, I want to make love! No, I want to fuck! I need plain, sweaty, sleazy sex! I want to feel you in me."

Sheila bent and took James in her mouth for a moment. He moaned. She straightened up again much to his frustration. "That still makes my jaws ache. Damn, if we did it without something, sure as shit I'd get knocked up again. You know how our luck runs."

"Yeah. Jesus, that was nice. Do you think we could do a sixty-nine?"

"No, my mouth just wont stretch that good. It hurts. I know! Got any Vaseline?"

"Um, yeah . . . you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I'll bet I am. You know how I like it up the rear . . .

"Heh. I'd think you were abnormal if that wasn't so normal for you. . . ."

"Shutup, get the damn lube, and plug my butt!"

"Yes, ma'am! Right away, ma'am! With pleasure, ma'am!"

After Sheila fell asleep, that night's sex with Cherry was even better than usual.

"Look, I promised my folks we'd come see them after the Fourth, and I cant back out on that. But we'll be back in three days, and we need to do some serious talking."

It was midmorning on the fifth. Doug and Diana were properly belted into the back seat of the car, and Sheila sat behind the wheel, window open as she let the air conditioner get a head start.

"Okay. Ill miss you!" James leaned in for a kiss. He gave a quick squeeze to a breast out of sight of the children.

"Quit it! Oh, quit it some more" Sheila squirmed a bit, then firmly removed his hand. "I'll-we'll see you soon." With that she rolled up the window and backed out of the driveway into the street.

Okay, what the hell now, ye Gods and Goddesses?

The day of the Fourth, James and Sheila had exchanged little glances, traded caresses whenever they were alone, and spent a good deal of the night after getting back from the fireworks display engaged in repeated intercourse. *Thank God there was some place open where*

I could buy contraceptive foam. My dick would be raw hamburger if we'd done it all anally!

He went back inside and sat at his desk.

I suppose it just couldn't remain nice and simple, could it? What the hell do I do now? Feast or famine-either I'm not getting laid, or I'm buried up to my armpits in pussy! Which one do I choose? Do I have to make a choice? Maybe not Sooner or later, Sheila will go back to her school, she's signed a contract That'll at least give me a little breathing space to figure all this crap out

If I have to choose . . . which one? lust on pure sex-I dunno. It's really a toss-up. Cherry's pussy is a damned sight tighter, and she's got that clenching action. It smells and tastes better, too. Ever since I've known her, Sheila's has smelled like a dead tuna in the sun, even right after a shower or douche. Of course, so has every woman I've had, except that black stripper. I wonder if all black woman taste so fresh and clean?

On the other hand, it's kinda nice to be able to do it lying down, face to face. And tits. Tits! Sheila has some great ones! I wish horses did-it's frustrating being a tit man, and your mane squeeze just ain't got none! And when she's hot, Sheila's the best piece of pussy I've ever had on two legs!

Shit!

Maybe if I'd told her the truth the other night But I couldn't She'd probably never let me see the kids again. Of course, if she catches me and Cherry, that'll be the end of it, too. Shit

Oh, well, I have three days. I wonder if the Shitheads are in their back yard? It's still cool enough to go out in the stable . . .

James and Sheila spent a lot of time sitting on the front porch after dark, when it was cool and the fireflies blinked over the vacant field across the street. Deep discussions, happy memories, philosophical thoughts, all were traded and savored as they sat there, sipping iced tea Plans were made.

When he wasn't going half-crazy trying to figure out what to do, James was deliriously happy to be back with Sheila. Or at least delirious.

"I have to go back for a year. I signed a contract."

"Damn. I suppose you have to."

"Uh-huh, I do. What would I live on here if I moved right back? It's too late to pick up a teaching job for this school year."

"Besides, we shouldn't move *too* fast, right? We need time to sort out things and be sure that we really want to get back together. I mean, it feels right, right now, but we don't have a great track record for making snap decisions-not good ones, anyway."

"You're right. Okay. Here's how we'll work it. Me and the kids'll stay back here for the rest of the summer, most of the time. Then, when school starts at the end of August, I'll take the kids and we'll go back out west. You can come out whenever you can, and stay as long as you can."

"Well, I wouldn't feel right about leaving Mom and Dad alone for too long, not to mention Cherry. It'd be a dirty trick to ask them to take care of her for more than a few days."

"I know. But a few days a month or so would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so. It's gonna cost, but it'll be worth it."

"I'll make it worth your while, fella!" Sheila reached and squeezed.

"Mmmmm . . . I believe you just might do that." They were now spending their nights together in bed. Mostly. James still managed to be alone with Cherry, too, either after Sheila fell asleep or during the day when she was running around town, visiting friends.

One day she came back and announced, "I talked to Jackie today."

"Who?"

"Jackie-the secretary at the school board. She told me they were short a speech therapist, and she called the new superintendent, and he was delighted at the thought that I'd be available. He wants me to sign up again."

"What about your Kansas contract?"

"They really can't do anything nasty if I'm moving out of state due to a family rearrangement. I called, and explained the situation, and the administration out there seems to think it's wonderful that we're getting together again! They said they'd release me if I asked."

"Wow! You mean, you could move back right now?"

"Yes. Of course, I'll rent a house or something. It wouldn't be fair to move your parents out, and we still need to take this slow."

"Right, that's good thinking."

Uh, that's nice, I think . . . What do I want? This makes the choices a little harder. If she's around all the time, sooner or later she'll catch me and Cherry. Of course, if she gets her own place for a while, that'll be less likely-but it'll also be harder to sneak out, because she'll expect me to spend a lot of nights with her, I'm sure.

What's so hard about giving up sex with Cherry, anyway? I only got her to have some convenient pussy, and Sheila's providing that. So what if it's different and better in some ways? Can't I get beyond my balls? Is my pecker going to always overrule my brain?

Is it-is there something more between Cherry and me besides sex?

No! It's one thing to outsmart the system, but something emotional . . . that really would be perverted!

In love? With an animal??? No. Love hurts too much. I'm not in love with anyone or anything. Oh, sure, I love Mom and Dad, and my kids, and old Kusty, my cat, even Cherry in a way. But I'm not in love! Not with Cherry, not with Sheila.

Love's too dangerous.

"Hey, where are you?"

"Oh! Uh, sorry. Just thinking."

"What about?"

"Er, about moving. Yeah! That's gonna be a project, you know?"

"Of course it will. I moved out there in a U-Haul trailer, though."

"Don't forget your sister and her husband, and your parents-they both took big loads out. And haven't you bought anything since you were there?"

"Just a day bed. And Doug's bunk beds. And some big wooden cabinets. And some shelving units . . . you're right, it might take more to come back than it did to go."

"So, when's your rent due?"

"The thirty-first. But I need to clean it up good to get my deposit back."

"It'll probably take a truck, and I don't have that kind of money available."

"I get paid the twenty-second, and I have some left right now."

"Maybe we need to make a quick trip out there and look over the situation so I can figure out how big a truck we'll need."

"Hah! Good idea-and we can maybe figure out what to do with this!" Sheila grabbed James's crotch.

"Ow! I can think of something to do with it now . . ."

"Hey, someone might see!"

"That's *their* good luck. C'mere, wench."

Driving, renting a storage unit, stashing most of the belongings-those they couldn't haul back in his pickup-and cleaning the apartment took four days. James and Sheila worked hard by day and fucked hard by night. James enjoyed the games they played away from parents, children, and nosy neighbors, but he found himself missing Cherry.

"Let's do it hor- er, doggie style!"

Sheila abruptly sat up and crossed her legs.

"Hey, I heard what you started to say. Did you tell me the truth about Cherry?"

James stroked a breast until Sheila pulled it away. "Yeah, sure. Look, I tried it a few times, but it wasn't the same. She doesn't have any imagination like you do. I mean, she was better than nothing, and better than most women, but not better than you!"

Shit, I hope I can get past this, after all the work we did here!

"Really? Like this?" Sheila ran a hand over James's genitals, then slipped a finger further down and probed at his ventral orifice.

"AHHhhh-h-h-h . . . yeah! Hoo-hah, that feels strange!"

"Hmmp. Ill bet it feels just the same as it does for me. Pretty damned good."

"Uh, well, now that you mention it . . ."

Sheila opened her legs again for his hand, then twisted around onto hands and knees.

"C'mon stud. Just remember, *I'm* the only mare in your pasture, now!"

"Giddyap, Sheila!"

"Damn, do they want us to *rebuild* the goddamned place while we're at it?"

"Quit bitching, we're almost done. We just need to pull the stove and fridge out and clean under and behind them. We washed all the woodwork, shampooed the carpets, spackled all the holes, and cleaned the oven. We're almost done."

"Great. Then all it takes is a ten-hour drive back, then return with a big truck and empty the storage place, and pick up the stuff you have stored in Wichita, and . . ."

"Stuff it, buddy. Let's just do it."

"Dammit, I've looked all over town, and there just *isn't* anything for rent that I can afford, or that I'd live in."

"What about the parsonage down the street? Weren't you looking at that?"

"They want \$400 a month for it, plus a big deposit. You know what those bastards in Kansas did about my apartment deposit."

"I still say you oughta go back and sue 'em. We had that place clean! Dirty crooks just figure a deposit is a bonus they get from every tenant. If I'd only thought of bringing a camera along for proof."

"Forget it. I don't want to go back to that town again, except to load up my shit and go."

"We're going to have to do that pretty soon, too, or the rent will run out on the storage unit and you'll be trying to move while you teach."

They frowned at the ground in front of the porch.

"Do you suppose we could all fit in here?"

"With all your stuff, and Mom and Dad's, and my stuff? Whew."

"I know, I know-but there's a lot of duplication. We can have a big yard sale."

"A *big* one!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

August 1987

Sheila took the children shopping for back-to-school supplies. Tony and Grace were having their blood-sugar tests and James was all caught up on the day's service calls.

He was sitting at the kitchen table working a crossword puzzle, wishing the heat was a little less oppressive so he could go "visit" Cherry when the doorbell rang.

"Oh, hi, Mrs. Windward. Sorry, my folks aren't home."

"That's all right. I wanted to talk to you. Can I come in?"

"Uh, sure, I guess." James held the door and stepped aside. "Can I get you anything? Iced tea?" "Thank you, no." "Well, have a seat here at the table. It's where everything is done. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to talk to you about your pony. I think-"

James interrupted with a frown. "I think the subject is covered!"

"Please don't interrupt until I'm through. It's not what you expect, perhaps."

"Go on." James lit a cigarette and took a sip of tea.

"I think maybe I've been unfair," she held up a hand as James opened his mouth. "I've been watching, and you seem to take good care of the animal, and your children enjoy it as do the other children in the neighborhood. While I'm still not pleased to have one so close to my house, it hasn't caused the problems I expected when you first brought him in here."

"Her," corrected James.

"Please. This isn't easy for me to say." She took a deep breath.

"I've been thinking about the time you stood up for my husband over that trouble with the Sheisskopf girl, when she said he tried to molest her."

"Yes, I still think she was lying about it. My kids heard her bragging on the school bus one day that she lied to the judge and got him sent to prison."

"But you defended him from the first, even before anything your kids heard. Why?"

James thought a moment. "I'm not sure, I guess. I just knew Paul and I knew the Sheisskopfs. They lie all the time and try to cause trouble for people. The day it was supposed to have happened they came over here and asked to speak to me and Sheila in private. Then they told us what Paul did, or allegedly did. . . . They said the authorities told them not to tell anyone, but they thought we should know since we live next door to you and our children played in your yard and liked to visit the two of you."

"Sheila was horrified, and wondered why I didn't go kill Paul on the spot. In fact, she got pretty mad at me about it, but she has her own problems and has a very strong, overprotective mother instinct. However, a little later she calmed down, especially after I reminded her that Tammy S. had made the same accusation against a little boy living on the other side of their house the year before-an accusation obviously false. She was just mad at him because he wouldn't play with her."

"Well, you and Sheila and one other family were about the only ones in town who stood up for him. Even our church didn't want anything to do with us; they asked me to attend somewhere else!" Mrs. Windward's facial lines stood out as her eyes misted.

"Then that attorney we hired, the only one we could afford, he advised Paul to plead to a lesser charge-and they sent him to prison anyway! He spent two years in prison, an old man! He got out and didn't care much about anything after that. You were the only neighbor who would even talk to him. You helped me with my trees, the snow, my car that time it broke down-when Paul died a few months after his release, you were the only one besides our family who came over or called or went to the funeral.

"You were a true friend and a good neighbor, and when you were having a rough time I gave you trouble because you bought a pet! I'm sorry, I shouldn't have-" she stopped to blow her nose in a lace hanky, "-shouldn't have acted like a mean old woman! I was just so upset about Paul. I still am. But you and your parents and your wife and children" (sniff) "you've been wonderful, and I just wonder if you can forgive me?"

James patted her hand across the table. "Sure, if you can forgive me for being rather unkind in turn. God knows I should understand how loss can make a person act in ways they normally don't. Look, let's just call it even and go back to being neighbors the way we used to be, okay?"

Sniff. "Okay. Thank you. When my son comes over to mow my lawn, would you like for him to give the clippings to your pony?"

"Sure. She'll like that."

Mrs. Windward stood. "Thanks for the talk. I have to go run my Avon route now-but come over anytime you want."

James escorted her to the door. "I will. And, by the way, please drop off one of your catalogs here when you get the chance. Sheila has a birthday coming up pretty soon, and I'd like to get her a few things."

The Sheisskopfs hated me while that was going on. Since I refused to join them in their hate sessions, and even offered to appear in Paul's behalf as a character witness, Tom's parents told him I was planning to go to court and call Tammy a liar. He started throwing big rocks into high grass in my back yard, hoping I'd hit them with my mower. They were easy to spot, and I threw them back. Then he tried pieces of rusty wire-that worked. My mower threw a chunk of it backwards, and it went through my ankle.

After I got off the crutches I fixed the bastard, though. I went back on that land he bought behind my house and drove some two-foot lengths of 3/4-inch steel reinforcing rod into the ground, leaving just enough sticking up to catch his stupid mower on his toy tractor. I put them along the back line in the far corner from my place. They had been lying around under the eaves behind my house for over a year, so they had lots of rust on them. Nobody could prove they hadn't been in the ground for years.

It was beautiful. He hit all three pieces at once. He was going fast enough that when the front lip of the mower deck hit them, it bent right back into the blades and got chewed up. Before he could stop the tractor or the whirling blades lost their momentum, the machine moved forward far enough for the blades to catch the bars. The blades, bearings, spindles, and pulleys came apart! Pieces of steel and cast iron whirled through the air, slashing three of the four tires, punching a hole in the engine's crankcase, and even breaking a tie-rod on his steering gear.

It cost the stupid bastard almost two grand to fix everything. I figured we were even, since that's about what his wire trick cost me in medical bills and lost income.

Tom obviously decided he'd better quit messing with me. It was about time for them to switch targets again, anyway. They started picking on two of the kids down the street.

Shitheads.

October 1987

"Cherry, you're something else." Sheila was sitting on the back stoop next to James, commenting as the pony busily "groomed" his hair with lips and teeth. She was staked where she could walk right up to the door, and showed signs of wanting to come in. Sheila wouldn't allow that, since she and James had just finished laying new vinyl tile in the kitchen.

Cherry seemed to pay no heed to Sheila beyond moving her attention to James's face, giving him a tongue bath.

"Yech! Horse spit!" Sheila made a face.

"Hey, it's not so bad! You let dogs lick your face, and you kiss cats."

"But they're house pets, and cats are so clean."

"Uh-huh. And just think what the cat might have licked last . . ."

Sheila paled as Doug and Diana cracked up.

"Oh, Mom," said the girl, "I think it's sweet! Cherry loves Daddy."

"I've noticed. Look, now she's French-kissing. Ugh."

James turned his head for a minute. Cherry didn't mind; she proceeded to lick out his left ear. "Hey, a big, sloppy horse kiss is great for an upset stomach, since their saliva is so high in sodium bicarbonate."

"I'll let you have it. I'll stick to seltzers when I need something. Hey, what's she doing now?"

Cherry was nuzzling and nibbling at James's shirt pocket.

"Oh, she just wants a cigarette." He proceeded to feed her one.

"Isn't that bad for her?"

"Too much would be, but that's how the old-timers used to treat their horses, mules, and burros for worms."

"Oh."

November 1987

"Careful, there! Easy. Easy. Okay, it's clear of the door, tip the couch back level. Watch your step on the tailgate."

Two of James's sisters and their husbands were there to help move the elder Falabellas to a small house a few blocks away.

Earlier in the week, James had talked with his mother.

"Son, I think it's best if we find a little place for ourselves. It's just too crowded, and Sheila and I rub each other the wrong way sometimes. I think she resents having someone in what she feels is 'her' kitchen. We'll still be close by for you and your kids, but we need to be independent as much as we can for as long as we can. It'll be okay. We'll be okay."

I was actually relieved. Hardly a day went by lately that Sheila wasn't griping about something Mom or Dad did. True, with four adults telling the kids what they can or can't do, it wasn't easy for them. Diana took maximum advantage of the situation, often playing the grownups off against each other. Dad would, one minute, be outraged at something she did, the next having a fit because I'd spank her a couple of swats because I knew that she knew better. Diana played off that kind of serve like a tennis pro plays off a slow lob. Doug is pretty good, but he tries to please everyone, and the poor kid sometimes goes crazy trying to follow three or four sets of orders. It doesn't help that he's hyperactive, and can't remember sequential instructions,

either. He tries his best

It's good that they're moving out-three bedrooms plus a family room that Sheila and I use for sleeping, one-and-a-half baths, just a little dinette, and mixed diets-it's a wonder we haven't had more trouble than we have.

Early December 1987

"Ah, it's nice to get away from Joplin and go where we can do some real shopping!" Sheila stretched her arms behind her head.

James glanced at her with a polite grin, then returned his attention to the highway.

Springfield isn't really that much bigger than Joplin, but they do have some heavy-duty shopping areas-the Battlefield Mall, South Glenstone Avenue with all the minimalls spread out along it, the world's largest Bass Pro Shop-but I suppose we won't be going there. I wish we were; they have one of the biggest selections of guns within hundreds of miles.

They hit Pier One Imports, where James amused himself looking at brass horses and digging through the broad selection of incense for something that might help in a spell. Sheila, as usual, went crazy looking at all the baskets and wicker-work.

Toy stores yielded Lego building-block sets that were unavailable in Joplin, and certain "My Little Pony" figures and accessories.

James manfully and patiently walked through store after store of women's clothing and shoes, reading the paperback book he had wisely stuffed in his back pocket before leaving. In the late afternoon, Sheila called him from where he was waiting.

"Come look at this, honey."

With a sigh, he replaced his bookmark and put the book in a hip pocket. A quick visual scan located Sheila within the small shop, standing next to a lingerie display. Lingerie stores made James nervous, as they do many men.

What if people think I'm some kind of pervert, trying to buy ladies' underthings for myself? Hah, I mean, I guess I'm a pervert, but not that kind of pervert! I better make sure I bluff it out good, leave no doubt

"Okay, sweetie-pie, what is it?" he said to Sheila, This is my wife. Sheila," he said heartily to the salesperson. "We've been married almost ten years. *Happily* married. We have two children. Natural children. Oh, I mean, there's nothing wrong with adopting, it's wonderful and takes a lot of love, but we made our children-I mean, uh, we, that is, I . . ."

James wound down in dismay as he saw Sheila and the saleslady choking, trying to keep from breaking into open, roaring laughter.

Okay. I blew it What now? Run? I'd love to, but I'd never make it I'd trip on a gum wrapper and wind up face down in a bikini panty display. Brace yourself, m'lad! Chin up, chest out stiff upper lip and all that rot Queen's man, British tradition, a thin red line. Face the music.

"What's the matter with you? I'm a queen's man-"

That did it. Riant howls broke over racks of sweaters, blouses, nighties, lacy underthings, peek-a-boo bras. The two women doubled up with laughter and James's face fell further "Queen's man?" *Oh, shit that's not what I meant to say! My tongue got tangled in my imagination. "Queen's man." A-humph! "Queen's-" uh, oh hell!*

James's face cracked, he snorted and gurgled, then guffawed along with the other two.

People are looking at us like we're crazy.

He sank slowly, helplessly to the floor.

Christmas Eve 1987

The children were in bed after serious effort on their parents' part. The TV was playing softly in the background, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir presenting traditional hymns. James and Sheila sat on the couch, exchanging private presents.

"Oooo, and what have we here?" Sheila tore the paper, causing James an inward twinge. For so many years, growing up, he had learned to carefully unwrap gifts so that the paper could be saved. There was an odd comfort in seeing the same paper under the tree, year after year. His favorite piece had been dark green with little Santas and beribboned packages of red and gold printed on it. He could remember twelve Christmases using that piece of paper on progressively smaller packages, carefully trimming torn edges to smoothness, taking off only the barest minimum. Likely enough, his mother still had the small remnant carefully tucked away in her box of Christmas paper.

Sheila held up a black lace baby-doll nightie. Her hands were clearly visible through the material. "Heh-heh-heh! Now how is this supposed to keep me warm on a cold winter's night, huh?"

James leered at her. "It's not. It's supposed to stoke my furnace so I can keep you warm!"

She dug through the paper. "Where're the panties?"

"Panties?" James used his best Mexican Bandito voice, "We don' need no steenkin' panties!"

"Hah! I'll show you, Fidel! Open this one!"

James opened the light, flat box. Inside was a pair of panties. Woman's panties. Black, skimpy ones with lace. "Queen's choice? Do you think they'll fit me? Ow!"

Sheila let go of his ear. "Silly! Look closer."

He held them up, spreading them out by the waistband. "Oho! They ran out of material on these! Or maybe someone forgot to sew the crotch shut!"

"Yeah. Seems a shame, doesn't it? If I wear them, it'll be just like not having any on at all."

"Hmmm . . . you may have a point, there. That's a nice thought, but isn't there anything for me?"

Wordlessly, she handed him another package, similar to the first. The box held a sky-blue G-string, obviously cut for a man's groin. James cracked up. On the cup was sewn an assortment of things. There were felt eyebrows over plastic eyes, the kind with black discs that rolled around inside. Two round, floppy ears protruded from either side. In the middle, though, centered under the eyes, was an elephant's trunk. A quick look confirmed James's suspicion that the trunk was hollow, and sewn to a hole in the cup.

"Me Tarzan, you Jane?"

"No, silly, me Jane, you Simba or whatever the hell the elephant's name was!"

"Me Dumbo!"

"Right. C'mon, Jumbo-Dumbo! Let's play with our presents!"

New Year's Day 1988, 12:01 AM.

"Happy New Year! Happy Anniversary!"

James and Sheila hoisted their glasses of Diet Pepsi as others around them lifted varied beverages. Sounds of fireworks and exuberant gunfire echoed through the night as southwest

Missouri rang in the official Central Standard Time new year, a leap year.

Gary from down the block asked, "How is it that you two got married on New Year's Day?"

James answered first. "Simple. A close look at tax laws revealed that it would be advantageous to file our 1977 tax returns as singles, and we were in a hurry to get married, but we could put it off a few days to take the tax break and-OUCH!"

Sheila took over as he lifted his foot and shook it to see if anything was broken. "Don't listen to that crap. It sounds good, but the real reason James insisted on January first was so he wouldn't forget our anniversary!"

Gary nodded, his motions exaggerated by alcohol. "Hell, makes good sense to me! Both of them."

Later, alone, Sheila asked, "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? What do you mean, wrong?"

"You-your *thing*, it keeps falling out. Am I doing something?"

James sighed and rolled off onto his side. He caressed Sheila, bringing her to orgasm with his fingers. She reached for him to return the favor, but he was soft. She turned and stared straight at him.

"Hey, look, it happens to every man now and then," James told her. "It's late, we're both tired as hell. It's okay. It's not your fault or anything, don't feel inadequate or guilty."

They fell asleep.

March 1988

It's my birthday, it's almost midnight, and I haven't heard one word or seen a thing about it. Sheila and I haven't had sex since-well, since New Year's. She won't talk about it, just pretends everything is normal. She moved her day bed into another room, and didn't invite me to bring along the trundle I use.

She goes to bed real early so I won't try to wake her up. Then she still leaves it for me to get up before she does, feed the kids, get them dressed for school, watch for the bus . . . hell, I don't mind taking care of my kids, but who does she think she's fooling with this go-to-bed early crap?

I'd have a gawd-awful case of blue balls if it wasn't for Cherry. . . .

June 1988

"Hello?"

A blurred voice on the phone. "My left side, I can barely move it. Mom's gone to-to the church."

"Dad? DAD!? I'll be right there!"

"Rev. Falabella suffered a severe stroke due to a blockage just past the right carotid artery. We think we got to it in time; hell live, and may recover some use of his left side. But he'll be in the Recovery and Rehabilitation Center for at least six weeks. He may be confined to a wheelchair. We really have no way to predict the outcome of these things."

"Thanks, Doc. Can we see him now?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Summer 1988

"Come in, come in! Mr. and Mrs. Falabella? I'm Jim Young, your counselor. Have a seat. Yes, please sit together there on the couch. Get comfortable. Now, tell me, do you know what you want from your marriage?"

James and Sheila attended the counseling sessions every week. They made up their lists of expectations, lists of things they liked about each other, lists of things they didn't like, kept diaries of little hurts and nice gestures. James soon quit being complete and honest, because Sheila seemed to react worse and worse to everything he said, although he tried his best to be fair and balanced, making sure to point out positive things she did and admit it when he screwed up. But Sheila seemed to take anything he mentioned as a personal attack. She quit attending the counseling sessions in the middle of August. James kept going, finding Mr. Young (M.A. in psychology) an understanding and enlightening fellow. He told him of his early experiences with intersexual social relations.

September 1988

"*Damn you!*" James looked upward and stared through ceiling into the sky. "*Damn you to your own hell! How could you?*"

He knew better. He didn't want to watch the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon. But, somehow, he did every year. James didn't know whether to believe all the hype, the tear-jerking, the deliberate emotional appeals shown every Labor Day weekend. Sometimes he suspected that he and half the nation were being played for suckers.

I hate Jerry Lewis movies-it figures that the French, those miserable snobs, would love him. But those kids-those little kids, cute as buttons, cheerful, smiling, looking at Jerry and the TV cameras with hope, with love, even while they know they're dying. . . . Damn you! How can you claim to be a loving God and do these things to bright, sweet little kids? How?"

James again screamed his question to the heavens. He addressed not only his Pagan gods, who he knew didn't care all that much, but also the God of Israel, Jesus, and all the saints of Christendom.

How can any god billed as "the God of Love" do such a thing to little kids who don't deserve it? The Universe isn't *fair!* *How can I bitch about my little troubles, cry in my beer? I'm still healthy, more than those children. So I'm just not a family man; so sooner or later, I'm gonna probably have to leave Sheila and Doug and Diana because I'm not good for them to be around all the time. So what? THOSE KIDS WILL NEVER HAVE A CHANCE!*

Despite his doubts, James finally picked up the phone and called in a pledge.

Finally, one evening in early September, James brought up the subject of his first animal sex, then gradually told the counselor about his current affair with Cherry.

The guy is good. He's holding his poker face well, although I'll bet this is the first time he's heard a story quite like this.'

Jim Young asked for details and made some notes as James did his best to answer honestly. "So, am I a candidate for the booby-hatch, or what?"

Jim smiled at James. "No, I don't think so. Look, we're about out of time. Let me look up a

few things this week and talk to some people. I can tell you are still troubled although I must admit that you have made one whopping lot of progress on your own."

"Augh. A week?"

Somehow, the time passed. . . .

"Come on in, James." Jim Young stood near an easel with a stylized drawing of a human head and brain, holding a pointer.

"Should I take notes, teacher?" James grinned.

"Maybe, but I rather imagine you will have no trouble remembering this."

James settled down on a comfortable easy chair.

Jim sat on the edge of his desk, within pointer-range of the easel. "First, I want to discuss human needs."

"I assume you know where you're going with this. I hope it's the same direction I want to go."

"Nervous?"

"Uh, a little . . . I just want to know if I'm crazy."

"I don't believe so. I don't think you believe that, either. Want to know why?"

"I've wanted to know 'why' for years."

"I know." Jim tapped his pointer on the drawing near the mid-brain. "Let's begin with basics. Right around here is the brain's pleasure center. We found it by inserting electrodes into this area and sending tiny electrical currents through them. The people who volunteered for the experiment said they experienced a fantastic, undefined pleasure when we turned on the juice. Later experiments confirmed this."

"I've read about them."

"Right. Okay, let's talk about drugs. You were a heavy-duty addict for quite a while, right?"

"Uh-huh"

"Well, here's what happens when you do drugs, most mood-altering drugs. The pleasure center is kind of like the thermostat on your furnace at home. You usually have it set around seventy degrees; but when you take drugs, at first it's like a sudden, extra burst of heat. Pretty soon, though, if you keep it up, the pleasure center's thermostat reads the extra heat and turns off the furnace. That's when you level out- it takes a constant supply of drugs to keep at a normal level. It takes a bigger dosage to feel the heat, more and more drugs to get your rush. Pretty soon you can't take enough to regain that early burst of pleasure."

"Yeah."

"And then when you stop . . ."

"Boom! Crash-bang!"

"Right! Your thermostat is now set way lower than normal to compensate for the drugs, and when the drugs aren't there, your 'barefoot' pleasure level is way down. The result is depression, serious depression. It takes a while for your brain to regain its balance."

"But that didn't happen to me! Well, it did sometimes, when I ran out and couldn't finagle another prescription, but not too bad, and not at all this last time."

"I know. That was one of the first clues. Actually I didn't figure it out, but my boss, Rick, spotted it right off when I was talking to him about you."

"That's not normal, though, so are you sure I'm not crazy? Or maybe it's some kind of side effect of narcolepsy?"

"That's another thing-how long has it been since you had a sleep attack?"

"Uh, gee, I don't remember for sure. Not since I quit taking drugs."

"Right. I got your records from your neurologist, and I believe he was correct in his initial diagnosis. You definitely had narcolepsy, you showed all the symptoms of the classic syndrome. He's all excited about your change. We suspect that the massive overdoses might have straightened out your brain chemistry."

James's eyebrows had climbed during the little speech. "So? What's the answer, then? Why didn't I crash, hard?"

"The only thing we can think of is that somehow, something replaced the drug stimulation in your brain. Exactly when was the last time you shot up?"

"Just before the man delivered Cherry to my house."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, hell, then I was too busy to do drugs, and I worked hard fixing up the place for her. That's all it means! I went to bed tired that night, woke up early and worked hard the next day. Somehow, I was always just too busy; I never really missed the drugs. Finally, I flushed the rest of them down the john, and burned all my rigs. Do you think there's something more?"

"Yeah. We'll get back to that in a bit. Look, there are a few more things I want to cover about the brain. First, you smoke, right?"

"Like a chimney."

"Okay, now you've heard that nicotine is more addictive than anything else we know about?"

James made a wry face. "You better believe it! Dropping the speed, even the times when I had to stop because I ran out, was a piece of cake compared to the times I've tried to quit smoking."

"Okay, listen to this. The reason nicotine addiction is so strong is that it alters your blood circulation, your breathing, your heart rate. It changes all sorts of things-and your body adjusts just like with other drugs. But when you quit . . . everything tries to snap back. It's different from the pleasure center dropoff with other drugs, though. This time, you're not merely depressed, but your brain is convinced that something is seriously wrong with your body. You've probably said 'I'm dying for a cigarette' before, right? Well, your brain is convinced that you really are! It triggers a survival instinct."

"Wow, that makes sense! When I've tried to quit, I'd not only get nervous, but scared, and that just made things worse!"

"Yes. I quit five years ago. I hid in the den for three days, afraid I'd bite my family's heads off. They were understanding, but it was still hard on them." Jim's dark face split with a gleaming grin.

"Whew. Okay, what's this got to do with me and Cherry?"

"Ever heard of endorphins?"

"Morphine-like compounds manufactured in the brain?"

"Right. Runners and joggers sometimes get addicted to something called a runner's high. Prolonged exertion stimulates the brain to produce endorphins. They act as powerful pain-killers, but they also often give you a mild euphoria. In enough concentration, they can be very intoxicating.

"There are other ways of producing endorphins, and these chemicals are one thing that can help ameliorate the removal of a drug habit. Now, for your case. . . .

"One of the most powerful ways to produce endorphins is emotional. Ever hear the phrase 'addicted to love?' "

James stared. His mouth moved, slowly, but no words came for a moment. Then: "Are you telling me I'm in love with Cherry?"

"Seems likely."

"But that's-that's sick. Really sick! Are you now saying I am crazy?"

"No! You need a few more facts before you jump to conclusions!"

James reluctantly settled back in the chair, thoughts awhirl.

Jim came over and sat on the arm, gripping James's shoulder with one powerful black hand.

"Listen, my friend. Listen good. I told you about survival reflexes. There are certain things the human body needs to survive. Air, water, food-these are the very basics. Take away air, and pretty quickly you can't think of anything else but getting another breath. Take away water and within hours, you're uncomfortable, in days, desperate. You can last longer without food, but your body and mind don't like it. A lack of any of these three sooner or later results in extreme survival reflex behavior."

"Huh, I could do with some starvation now and then." James grinned.

Jim smiled back. "Most of us could at times. But there's a fourth need. Maybe it's not as obvious as the first three, but all normal people have a need to love, to be loved. Wild, crazy, romantic love gives a wild, crazy chemical high. But the brain doesn't seem to get habituated or inured to endorphins, so a long, deep love keeps feeding the brain. Your mind likes this. Take it away, and eventually you either find some way to replace it, or you spend your life in misery."

"But-an animal? I mean, she's great for sex, but love? Especially after Sheila came back?"

"You've been hurt so many times by women. You were hurt especially bad by Sheila. Think back. Did you feel best after sex with her, or with Cherry? Whose company do you enjoy the most?"

"Oh, God! I think-I always felt like I had to watch myself around Sheila. I think . . . Cherry."

Jim squeezed James's shoulder again as it shivered under his hand. "It's all right, it's okay, James. Look here, brother, you've taken some awful hits in your life. Nothing that, by themselves, would be impossible to get over. But your dice rolled bad. You got a wild combination, and I think you realize it. What you don't realize is that a lot of people would be sitting in the corner playing with their toes after what you went through! So, you bent a little bit. So what? Many people would have broken!

"Sure, Sheila came back-after you had already made the most important life-adjustments to your situation. You managed to integrate yourself pretty well. Maybe a few pieces are out of place, but you've done awfully good with what you have. Tell me, did you ever really trust Sheila not to go away again?"

"Uh, I don't think so . . ."

"It would really astonish me if you did. Here's the situation. You need love. You don't trust Sheila to not take it away again-you don't really trust any woman not to take it away again, so you won't give it to them in the first place. You aren't interested in men. Your first sexual experience was with a horse. That was what you turned to when your relationships with women failed. What do you expect?"

"Can I change that?"

"Do you really want to?"

"Well, jeeze, man, I want to be normal!"

"What's that? Whose definition of 'normal' are you trying to fit? I tell you, boy, I've been at

this for eight years and had six years of training before that, and I still don't know what 'normal' is!

"You can spend a lot more time and a lot more money trying to fit someone else's notions, or you can accept the fact that you have come to a workable solution to your problems. Quit trying to be 'normal' and just be yourself. A likable, intelligent, sensitive person who marches to the beat of a different drummer."

"Is that what you tell your gay patients? I mean, if they want to change?"

"Matter of fact it is, at least in most cases. Some people literally kill themselves like you were doing, trying to fight what they are. You've made a lot of progress by yourself, but both me and my boss agree you'll be happier if you take the final step and admit that you love Cherry and learn that it's *okay* to love Cherry; she sounds pretty nice to me. Even if it means accepting that you are limiting yourself to something less than a full human relationship, it's better than the frustration of repeated failures at something that just isn't in the cards for you. And it shows every potential of being very, very good, at least for you. Maybe, someday, you'll manage to heal the last wounds and find a woman to share your life-but if not, you'll have lived a happier, fuller life with your equine lover than you would have otherwise."

James sat, motionless. "Do I love her? I don't know, it just seems so-it's just something I never wanted to think about. But, maybe . . ."

"Hey, look, man, it's half an hour over time. The girls at the desk are gone, and my supper will be cold and my wife'll be hot under the collar. Let's talk another time."

James and Jim stood up and began walking through the deserted hallway. "Thanks. Uh, I'll think about it. Maybe, if you're right . . . maybe I wont need to come back."

"That's okay, too."

James grinned. "How do you ever expect to get rich if you keep curing all your clients?"

Jim bent and slapped his knee. "*Rich?* Here? From honkie turkeys like you? Man, dont worry, that'll never happen! I get the same salary whether I waste my time with guys who make me late for supper or sit around on my ass! Besides, there's always more where you came from!"

"Heh heh. Yeah, I kinda figured that. Hey, look, it's been great, and you've given me a whole bunch to think about. You'll either see me, or you wont."

"I kind of hope I wont. You had me digging in books I haven't had to open for years, and they *still* didn't help! You're a rather unique case, you know?"

"I've been told that before, but rarely so nicely," James said as they walked out into the parking lot.

"Well, if you dont come back for another session, let me know what happens some time."

James unlocked his car door. "I will. Heck, maybe I'll buy you a beer. It's a damn sight cheaper than your rates in there."

Jim grinned at him in the streetlights, and closed the door as James reached for his seat belt.

James stopped in an all-night fast food place and sipped a soft drink while his mind took a few minutes off-not really thinking, simply feeling. After an hour, he went home.

Sheila was already sound asleep, so he went to his bedroom/den and undressed. He put on jogging shorts and thongs, the same ones he had used the very first time with Cherry, and went out back.

Cherry softly greeted him as he approached the gate. He went inside the stable, she followed. James sat down on the feed bunker and stroked the soft nose that Cherry extended,

again feeling more than thinking. She nuzzled his chest, licked his face, then nudged his crotch, tail elevated.

"Horny, little girl? My little lover? Me too!"

They made slow love, using their whole bodies in foreplay, rubbing against each other, caressing with hands, lips, noses, teeth, using all that each had to use; then, when his testicles and penis ached with arousal, he entered her and they rocked on their feet in blissful harmony.

It was more than James expected, more than he ever remembered experiencing with Cherry or Sheila or. . . .

They were transported—James with realization, Cherry, it seemed, with an animal sense of something special. Their orgasms came together, seeming to last forever. James stayed hard for a long time, standing still, firmly held deep inside his lover.

Yes-my LOVER.

The counselor was right Ah, there, it's going down, now.

He moved back to the bunker by Cherry's head and sat, naked. She tongued him clean, licking off the juices of their love as he stroked her eyes, her ears, ever so gently.

"I love you, little girl. I'm *in love with* you. You're so sweet, so funny, so-oh, Cherry, my darling!" He hugged her neck, hard, her head over his shoulder, rubbing his cheek against her sleek coat.

James awoke as the sun came peeking over the eastern horizon. He was lying in soft straw outside the stable, shorts again covering his loins. Cherry was asleep on the ground beside him, the top of her head resting on his left arm.

James was happy.

EPILOGUE AND AUTHOR'S NOTE

September 1992

Why write a book on such a disturbing topic? Why didn't James come to a bad end, one that moralists might claim he deserved?

These are two of the many questions I have been asked most often. The answers may not please you, but I hope you can understand them.

I wrote *The Horseman* because several people I respect felt the story had to be told. Despite our differences, people are still much the same in basic nature—some merely have other solutions to their problems. James is not alone. I think it is important that others in his situation discover that they are not alone, either.

Most of us march together through our lives and our society more or less in step with each other. We tend to look askance at those who "march to the beat of a different drummer" or, in this case, "hoofbeat." I hope to show that sometimes we have little choice in what we do. Our society is constantly changing, a world in evolution. Nothing major happens overnight, but African Americans and other ethnic/racial minorities today hold an ever-improving place at the table in our country, and gays are not, perhaps, fully accepted, but they rarely need fear physical harm or imprisonment if they reveal themselves. This change did not take place during all the years that these so-called "perverts" kept quiet and accepted unjust treatment, or hid themselves in the closet. People had to be made aware of the situation, and recognize the humanity of those trapped within it.

While I certainly don't advocate zoophilia as a general solution for sexually or socially

frustrated people, I believe zoophiles should be recognized as practicing a nonthreatening alternate behavior, as certainly undeserving of society's (all-too-often severe) approbation and, in many cases, as leading a viable lifestyle.

There are two general classes of people who have sex with animals. There are the "bestialists," or zoerasts, those who have one or a few sexual contacts with an animal, or use them only when a more "normal" outlet is not available. James placed himself in this first category for a long time, denying his true orientation.

Then there are "zoophiles," those of us who *prefer* an animal as a mate, often forming deep emotional relationships with them. In my research I discovered that there is a small but significant number of people in the United States who, for one reason or another, do prefer an animal companion to participating in the mating dances and rituals of humans, the sometimes hurtful and hateful games that people play with or against each other.

Some of their motives are similar to James's, some differ in detail or in general. One common thread runs through our stories, though. "The day I found out that there were others like me, that I was not alone, was one of the happiest in my life. It is such a relief to talk to another person who really *understands* because he's been there, too!"

This partially explains why I wrote this story.

Why didn't I tie it neatly into a moralistic bundle?

Because reality doesn't always work that way.

The Horseman is a work of fiction *and* a work of truth. James really exists, his story continues. Some of the minor incidents in the book are fictional although based on fact, some are revised and edited for better story flow, some happened exactly as portrayed. Names, as they say, have been changed to protect the innocent *and* the guilty. Some of the characters are real, exactly as portrayed, some are conglomerates of several people, some partially or totally imaginary. The location is roughly correct, but don't bother trying to find James. I'm busy. I value my privacy, and stand ready and able to defend myself and those I love from intrusion, interference, harm, or harassment by self-appointed moralists.

I am James. I am also someone else.

I wrote the main body of the story in the third person because some parts were very difficult to put onto paper from the first-person point of view. Once in a while I had to hit the "Save" key by feel, because some of these memories still hurt-a lot!

Cherry died, tragically, on September 13, 1988, four days after I admitted to and accepted the existence of our romantic love. She expired with her head on my chest, arms around her neck. My wife, children, and friends of mine and Cherry's mourned with me; many were surprised when I didn't take up the needle again. I was not the least surprised of those parties.

Although two veterinarians tried hard to save her life, Cherry succumbed to cyanide poisoning from eating wilting cherry leaves. Our good friends, B. and B., trucked their backhoe from a job site early the following morning to dig a grave under her favorite patch of zoysia grass. We laid her to rest with her blanket, her halter and lead-rope, and the few dollars in coins my family and I had accumulated from the roadside during the previous year-and-a-half's worth of pony walks. I backfilled the grave by hand.

On the advice of good friends, I immediately bought another pony from the same horse trader. At first I was outraged by their suggestion, feeling it would be disloyal to Cherry's memory. These good friends showed me that, instead, it would be a tribute to her, an

acknowledgment that she had been so important to me that I didn't want to be without a horse in my life. Their advice proved sound.

During the process of backfilling the grave by hand, the Sheisskopfs (they, unfortunately, are painfully real, but with a different name) did their level best to make my life even more miserable by harassing me. The job took five days due to inclement weather. During that period those neighbors filed a stream of complaints starting with the city police, claiming that the job was not being done quickly enough, that flies and bad odors came from the grave. With every complaint to successively higher levels of authority, I was visited by police, sheriffs deputies, and county health agents—all of whom came, looked, sniffed, and pronounced my progress satisfactory, with no nuisance or health hazard evident. When Linda Sheisskopf got no satisfaction from local governments, she called the governor to complain. This resulted in a visit from the state veterinarian, who was furious over the waste of his time.

The Sheisskopfs are still raising several varieties of merry hell in that neighborhood, accusing people (seemingly at random) of various nefarious deeds and plots against them. Local police are mildly astonished that someone hasn't killed them yet. Several neighbors are mildly astonished that the police haven't killed them yet.

Mrs. Windward has retired from selling home beauty products, but is quite active and healthy for her age, an attractive, well-groomed, alert, and intelligent woman.

Frank Buntz, pretty honest as horse traders go, still sells ponies from his yard. Advancing adult-onset diabetes is slowing him down these days.

Rev. and Mrs. Falabella moved a couple of hundred miles north after his stroke to be closer to their daughters, she in a retirement apartment, he in a nearby nursing home. My father died of congestive heart failure on Diana's tenth birthday in 1990, two years after his stroke. I miss him very much. My mother is active in church groups and is writing articles for Christian magazines. She accepts her son's differences stoically, if not always comfortably. We love and understand each other much better now.

My new mare was considerably older than Cherry, and certainly no pushover. Yet with patience, kindness, and a gentle touch, she accepted me.

When I first saw her in Frank Buntz's pen, white dapples gleaming against her chocolate coat, Dottie was beautiful. This was the afternoon of the day Cherry died, and I was still somewhat in shock. Vet bills had eaten up what cash I had on hand, but Frank agreed to take a pony cart and leather harness in trade, including delivery. Not knowing at the time what had actually killed Cherry, I proceeded to thoroughly clean and disinfect the pen, stable, and food and water containers before Dottie was delivered.

At first, Dottie was wary of even being touched near her tail. Saddle-and-harness-broken, I decided to just work and relate with her as human and horse until we got used to each other. Since the small-town fall festival was coming up, I called a farrier to put horseshoes on her so we could sell kiddie rides to benefit the Senior Citizens' Center. Evidently shoes were a new experience. The front two went on with only a puzzled look in Dottie's eyes, but the first hind shoe produced whinnies, foot-tugs, and dancing around the tree. When the last nail finally went into the last shoe, I was on my back, Dottie was lying across my chest as I held her in a headlock, and the horseshoer was laughing so hard he could hardly hit the nail.

The rides went quite well, though. Although not very sociable at the time, Dottie got right down to business as soon as a saddle went on her back. We raised almost fifty dollars, selling two-block rides for fifty cents apiece. We were tired (I had to walk her a mile and half to and from the show since I didn't have a trailer, and I hand-led her for each ride), but I have good

memories of children's smiling faces. Many doting grandparents took pictures of their little dears on their first pony ride. We followed that a month later at the school carnival, raising almost as much money for playground equipment.

The first snowfall of the winter on Thanksgiving found Dottie and me out in the streets with two sleds tied behind her. After a couple of freezing hours filled with delighted children, we went into my service shop to warm up, just Dottie and I. We had been working on trust and she had come to enjoy my gentle fondling under her tail. After I combed the snow and ice out of her coat and picked her hooves clean, we stood before the kerosene heater on the concrete floor and made love for the first time. I knew then with certainty that while I'd miss Cherry very much and always regret her death, life could and would go on.

We moved out of my home of eight years the next spring to a rental house with a barn and plenty of pasture, leaving wife and children behind. We are very much in love, and I consider her to be my spouse in fact, if not in law. We celebrate our anniversary with friends, cake, beer, and soft drinks.

Many of our close friends know the true nature of our relationship. Some seem puzzled at their own reactions, claiming, "The general idea of sex with an animal is repugnant, but with James and Dottie it just seems normal and right."

Sheila and I were divorced in the spring of 1990 with no fighting or dissension; we agreed that we simply weren't compatible enough to live together. Although I know for a fact (since she has read parts of this manuscript) that Sheila understands our situation, we generally politely ignore the subject by unspoken agreement. We get along quite well on a "just friends" basis, and I saw my children often until recently, when Sheila and the kids moved a few hours away (with my consent) to improve her career potential. Diana and Douglas love their "stepmom."

Dottie and I signed up for the ten-mile Mother's March of Dimes WalkAmerica in the spring of 1990. (More people pledged money for my little horse than for me!) The day before, I bought new walking shoes. I went to the barn that afternoon to feed Dottie and, while climbing over a solid oak gate to get to the hayloft ladder, my right foot slipped and I landed astride the gate. Although I expected to feel the worst pain of my life at any second, I missed landing on my testicles and felt little discomfort at the time. It took about a week for the internal injuries to manifest as a massive, infected abscess in the groin. It destroyed enough blood vessels and nerves to remove all sexual function: No erections, no orgasms, no ejaculation. Six months later I received a prosthetic inflatable penile implant, and can now literally maintain an erection for days. However, I still have no orgasms, no ejaculation, and virtually no sensation in the penis.

I was dismayed when I got to try out "the pump" for the first time. Since Dottie seemed to like it, I continued. In the time after the surgery I have learned that sex and love don't always require orgasms to be satisfying. Just being close, being coupled, touching, smooching, trading caresses with lips, tongue, and hands can be wonderful. Sitting in my easy chair in the living room with two cats in my lap and Dottie standing alongside (she's naturally housebroken), watching television or listening to music, I feel a warmth and companionship that I can trust. No games, no power plays, just honest affection.

Sure, I realize that I'm "limiting" myself, dodging "the fullness of the human experience." However, that seems at this time to be an unreachable goal, fraught with pain, betrayal, peril. Today I am able to relate sympathetically to women, with no sexual interest interfering with my perceptions of them as human beings. "Better half a loaf than no bread."

Nor do I think Dottie is somehow "human." She is a horse. She acts and reacts as a horse in most matters. She really appreciates a good shoulder rub or a tasty treat. She is more interested in

sex while in oestrus, but she enjoys it any time. She has, however, learned the human pleasure of kissing, sometimes indulging for minutes at a time. (Her breath is sweet and clean.) I relate to her on an equine level. I made my choice with eyes wide open, and don't let fantasy run away with me. All in all, I feel I am a better person for my choice than I was before, able to appreciate people as people rather than as sex objects or rivals.

Cherry taught me I *could*, after everything that had happened in my life, love. Dottie has taught me *how much* I could love.

As our fourth anniversary nears, I find myself more and more in love with Dottie, and she seems to return the love in full measure. She is now sixteen years old, and "Sweet Sixteen" seems to fit perfectly. Her coat is in fine condition, she shows no signs of founder or other foot trouble, and her joints are all in excellent shape.

We now live out in the country with few close neighbors, and those that are near know and accept us as a couple.

AFTER-AFTERWORD

When I first had a sexual experience with an animal, I liked it. This disturbed me, so, given my scholastic tendencies, I attempted to research the topic.

There was little bona-fide literature available, usually only a few paragraphs or pages buried in massive tomes. Kinsey's famous project, which resulted in *Sexual Response in the Human Male*, touched on the subject, mostly yielding dry statistics. According to those results, most men who have had an "animal contact" did so in early adolescence and repeated the experience only a few times, stopping as they entered the later teenage years; almost none of them continued into adulthood. Interestingly enough, the greater the level of education, the older the age when animal contacts cease. This correlates with my experience and that of other zoophiles with whom I am in contact.

While still in high school and college, about the only books I could find dedicated exclusively to zoophilia were phony psychological studies actually designed to sell titillating stories under the guise of case histories. These books tended to preach a little, referring to many of the "zoos" as ill-educated or morally reprehensible sociopaths who would merrily couple with anything close to blood temperature. Inevitably, the zoos were portrayed as people in desperate need of help and pity.

Who was I to argue with "authority"? Within weeks of freshman university enrollment I availed myself of the student health services and consulted a psychologist. Unlike later counselors, both those professionally engaged and social friends, this graduate student simply had no idea what to do with me. As my "treatment" proceeded, I became further and further confused, convinced that I must be some sort of cosmic screw-up, human garbage. I became a recluse, seldom leaving my residence hall except to work a student job in the computation center or to browse the enormous library. I attempted suicide once, taking a whole bottle of over-the-counter sleeping pills. Fortunately, my knowledge of pharmacology at the time was quite inadequate. I awoke a day later, still in my own bed, with no other effect than a raging headache.

Another time, during a weekend at home, I stared for a long hour down the barrel of a loaded shotgun, thumb on the trigger, mentally flipping a coin to decide whether or not to press it. I got better when I finally quit going to counseling and realized what a crock of garbage I had been handed. No, I was still not very well adjusted, but the cynical attitude I adopted armored me

to some extent.

Some psychological professionals feel that almost all paraphilias have not only causative roots in childhood, but begin to manifest themselves then. This was not the case with me.

Through many hours of conversation with friends in the counseling field, friends fully familiar with me and my mate, we have agreed that my becoming a zoophile was a matter of the coincidence of my first encounter with and manual exploration of that old pony mare in the barn at age sixteen. While it's obvious that previous traumatic experiences were probably setting me up for some kind of sexual or social trouble down the road, the thought of sex with an animal really hadn't occurred to me before that time.

My father and I were skilled hypnotists, so we held some hypno-regression sessions that revealed no fantasies about or sexual obsession with horses or other animals before my first exploratory experience. Talking it out with those people whose business it is to know, we have all reached the conclusion that I was, in a way, incredibly lucky. Without such an outlet for my frustration, an ameliorative for my growing anger with and distrust of womankind, I could easily have taken an irretrievably negative turn. Misogynist, rapist, wife-beater, perhaps even child molester -any or all of these might have resulted from my generalized mistrust and a desire to regain control over a runaway life. I'm really not sure they would have in my case, because my basic nature is passive-aggressive rather than active-aggressive, but who can know for certain?

At the time I began writing this book, Dottie and I had already moved into housing away from my human family, living with three other men in a large house. I was happy with Dottie, yet I still felt a lack in my life. Was I the only person who loved his animal mate, or was I a member of a very tiny minority? How would I find out? Books were one thing, but their information was intangible.

I searched for someone, a support group that might help, both via telephone and mail. Writing to such people as "Dear Abby" was a waste of time, since I received no reply, although I enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope as requested, and I tried her three times. The "Playboy Advisor" was much more helpful. Even though they had no knowledge of a support group for zoophiles, the staff there managed to refer me to other groups who suggested I contact Dr. John Money at Johns Hopkins University Teaching Hospital. Dr. Money told me that, as best he could determine, there was no such support group available, but he opened the channel to the publisher of this book.

I didn't fully understand my background and motivations until the process of writing them down forced me to organize my memories and feelings. As I did so, I realized more and more that my life might have been much different had there been a place for me to talk to others who preferred the warmth, loyalty, and love of an animal to the head games and power trips that are all too common in human relationships. Were there others out there like me, suffering a lonely life, perhaps wondering if they were insane? I had come to terms with my paraphilia, but how many others who felt like me were able to do so on their own?

In the summer of 1991 I discovered several electronic bulletin board systems dedicated to the subject of zoophilia that I could call with my computer. This was a joyous revelation as I discovered, on a person-to-person basis, that there were indeed others who knew exactly what I had experienced and shared my feelings. This was great for me, but not all zoophiles have computers and modems, nor know where to call if they do have them. Something more needed to be done.

The cry of "someone should do something" is often heard in our land, but nothing happens until someone does. Given my unusual circumstances-of being independently employed in a

limited field where people have little choice but to call on me for certain services, and being semi-public about my situation, among other things-I carefully weighed my options and their costs. Since my human family has moved away from the area, I no longer needed to worry about them being hurt by my activities.

Beginning in January 1992, with the cooperation of some friends (both local and electronic), I founded Z.O.O., the Zoophilic Outreach Organization. ZOO offers nonprofessional peer-group advice and mutual support. There are no dues or fees, since the people involved consider this a "pay-forward" effort.

Many of the long-term zoophiles I have contact with had a different background from mine-their obsessions with animals began very young, and some of them have never expressed interest in a human relationship.

Some zoophiles feel that their "true spirits" are animal, and that their human bodies are inappropriate. They are most comfortable when among others of their "true species," whether horses, dogs, wolves, or dolphins-these are the species involved with the zoophiles I know. Those in this group, in my amateur opinion, are somewhat similar to transsexuals who feel that their genitals do not match their personality genders. Some people have coined the term "species dysphoria" to describe this particular situation.

Let me point out that these various zoophiles are all functional members of society. They are independent business people, artists, students, salespeople, welders, executives, technicians, engineers, even a psychologist. They are people like you except in their sexual alignment.

A few doctors here and there suggest that we need a "cure" for our inclinations. By contrast, few suggest trying to "cure" homosexuality anymore-it has even been removed from the standard lists of paraphilias-since homosexuality is no longer officially considered a psychological problem. If gay or lesbian people seek counseling today, it is likely to be for help in coping with a world where they still encounter hostility and rejection. Trying to "cure" homosexuality has usually proved futile and often damaging.

The doctors who have suggested trying to cure zoophilia are often doing so from the standpoint of helping a person in trouble with the law because of his or her sexual practices. It may well be that a zoophile convicted under archaic "sodomy" laws will have to agree to psychological treatment as a condition of not receiving a prison term. In those cases, some doctors think that drug therapy might be indicated, suggesting lithium or Depo-Provera to reduce the sex drive so that a person may control what is viewed as a compulsion. I would rather see the medical community offer these people assistance toward self-acceptance and better methods of interfacing with a society that rarely understands their problems.

In my opinion, chemical cures treat zoophilia as a mere sexual outlet, ignoring its emotional component.

I feel no personal need for a "cure," especially something as radical as Depo-Provera, sometimes referred to as "chemical castration." Lithium may be a wonderful drug for bipolar syndrome (manic-depressive) people, but I am leery of its side effects. I have had quite enough experience with mind-altering drugs, thank you.

And why should I want to change? To conform to "social norms"? I needn't fear arrest or prosecution for my proclivities in this state as long as I don't harm my partner or become a public nuisance through exhibitionism or like behavior.

I can and do communicate much more honestly with my family now, and have good, warm relationships with a much wider variety of people (including women-they are now friends instead of prizes or adversaries) than before. With self-acceptance came a lessening of the

pressure to conform, which led me to honest evaluation of my life goals. I no longer worry so much about the outward signs of success or status. I do what I find necessary or pleasing, rather than depend on others to define these things for me. I now sleep well at night, free from most of the stress that many people must endure. I live my life and allow others to live theirs.

I realize that, as professionals, doctors must try to maintain a neutral point of view, but I don't see my situation quite as negatively as some seem to. Once I accepted my nature, I could adjust to it. From my viewpoint, the improvement is so radical that I am quite satisfied and feel that any attempt to suddenly reverse course might well prove disastrous. After all, sexuality is only a part-albeit a significant part- of most people's lives, including my own.

This, I think, is an important point. Zoophiles are not "normal" by most accepted definitions. *I* am not "normal." But we are human beings, sharing most of the characteristics of the rest of humanity. As such, rather than forcing us into chemical treatment, or imprisoning us, or casting us out, perhaps it is time for society to take a closer look at its attitudes toward us. As long as we don't harm or hurt any people or our partners, as long as we are still productive, functional members of society, why, then, the opprobrium? Why not let us be? Is society *harmed* by diversity or enriched? Please think about it.

Life still has its normal difficulties and challenges, its trials and triumphs, but that's okay with James. He and Dottie face them together. Don't feel sorry for James, for his troubles, for his differences. Feel happy for him-for finding himself-and for, at long last, finding love.

I am James. I am happy.