

Bridge Across the Ocean

Pages: 319

Publisher: West Beach Books (June 1, 2015)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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High Praise for

Bridge Across the Ocean

"A delicious ode to summer boyhood adventures." —*Stonewall News Northwest*

"A funny, sexy and very poignant summertime novel." —*The Gay & Lesbian Times*

"Sincere and suspenseful, *Bridge Across the Ocean* is a great escape and very important work, something Randy Boyd should be very proud of." —*XY Magazine*

"An intimate novel with raw emotion. The sexual attraction and the conflict it poses are beautifully handled. Ultimately, this is a powerful, emotional novel that cannot help but move the reader. The book works on every level, and Randy Boyd is definitely a writer to reckon with." —*Lambda Book Report*

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"Reading *Bridge Across the Ocean* was, on some level, a growth experience. This is an incredible piece of work that tears down, sometimes uncomfortably, many stereotypes. This book and its author not only stand alone among the genres and sub-genres of today's popular fiction but rise above it." —*Family and Friends Magazine*

"Boyd does an excellent job of creating the characters. They are three dimensional and realistic. Boyd tackles several complex themes in this short novel with skill. Racism, homophobia, attraction to younger men, dealing with HIV are all handled without preaching and without excess moralizing." —*Gay and Lesbian Review*

"In this groundbreaking, telling-it-like-is novel, Boyd not only crosses race, social and gender boundaries, but touches on the much-needed-to-be-openly-discussed subject of men mentoring boys in all ways of society and the world." —*Wisconsin IN Step*

A LAMBDA LITERARY AWARD FINALIST

FOR BEST SMALL PRESS TITLE

BRIDGE ACROSS THE OCEAN

Randy Boyd

WEST BEACH BOOKS

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Designed by Alan Bell

Waiting (Reprise) by George Michael

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Warner Bros. Publications U.S. Inc., Miami, FL 33014

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication

(Provided by Quality Books, Inc.)

Boyd, Randy

Bridge across the ocean / by Randy Boyd. — 1st ed. p. cm.

LCCN: 99-69807

1. Gay men—Fiction. 2. Afro-American gays— Fiction. 3. HIV-positive men—Fiction. 4. Coming out (Sexual orientation)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3552.O8786B75 | 2000 | 813'.6

QBI00-273

First Paperback Edition: June 2000

First ePub Edition: June 2015 v1.3

Acknowledgments

THANKS TO MY FAMILY and friends who continue to give me love and support, who help me cross my own personal bridges in life and who allow me to be a part of their lives. Special thanks to Ricky Tessitore and the Roberts family. I hope I served you well.

Thanks to all who supported my first novel, *Uprising*, and the gay bookstores, independent bookstores, online bookstores and major retail outlets who believed in the book.

Thanks to those who helped me build this particular bridge across this particular ocean, especially Alan Bell.

And thanks to the one who blesses me with unconditional love and in whose eyes I see love and God everyday...Boomer. You truly give me eternal joy.

For Boomer

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

I am curious to know where my feet stand—
and what this is flooding me, childhood or manhood—
and the hunger that crosses the bridge between.

—*Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass*
One

1988

THE DILAPIDATED BLUE BUS crept its way down the narrow dirt highway from the airport, bouncing up and down with every hole in the ground. There was no air-conditioning and the temperature had to be well above a hundred. The windows were open, letting in a hazy cloud of dust, and because the highway was so narrow, the lush jungle trees lining the road kept swatting against the bus's rusted metal sides, threatening to reach inside and randomly smack a few sweat-drenched faces at any moment.

I noticed that none of this seemed to bother the other passengers, most of them generic variations of Suburbia, USA. Eagerly, they sat propped up in their seats, listening to the dark, young Mexican man who sounded more like a cheerleader than a tour guide:

"You now enter Parrot Creek territory," he barked over a loudspeaker as the bus ground to a halt in front of a pair of huge, wrought-iron gates. "Be ready. Only fun is here for you." Everyone else clapped. I kept staring out the window. The husbands and college boys were already drinking, buying the Coronas sold by the white-haired bus driver for way too many pesos. I had preferred to sit alone and ride in silence.

Once the gates were open, the bus continued down the narrow dirt road, passing a small clearing where a worn wooden sign proclaimed: WELCOME TO PARROT CREEK, OLDEST RESORT ON THE YUCATAN. Named after the New England summer camp the Mexican owners once worked for, the travel agent had said.

"You people ready for a good time?" the guide asked. Everyone else cheered, some raising beer bottles high in the air. "As we go to the main square, I show you a tour of what you see." He went on, but what caught my eye were the glimpses of the Caribbean flashing in the openings between the trees. The water radiated with bright patches of a green I'd never seen before, a glassy, crystal-clear green, glistening as if the sun had saved its most golden rays to flow throughout these depths alone. I strained my neck to get a better view. It was a green to swim in, relax in, bask in. Maybe a green where I could find solitude and a small amount of peace.

Farther from shore, this green that was so full of warmth changed into another color, a blackened turquoise that was much more ominous and much less inviting. These waters were rougher, clashing ferociously with the rest of the ocean, producing rising whitecaps that looked stark against the darkened sea. What caused the color to change? I wondered. What was it about the sunlight, the tropics, the Caribbean itself?

The bus pulled to a stop in the middle of what I presumed to be the main square, a *circle* of cobblestone surrounded by short, stubby palm trees. "We take your bags to your hut for you," the guide explained as we shuffled off. "Just go check in and start having fun, people."

I was the last one off the bus. The instant my feet touched the ground, more unrelenting heat engulfed me. It was hotter than the airport, hotter than the bus, hotter than anything I'd ever felt. Behind me, the bus engine backfired, kicked out a black cloud of smoke and rumbled away.

No turning back now.

I stood by myself in the middle of the main square, sweat cascading like a waterfall on my face, my underarms and the back of my shirt drenched. All around me, people were rushing about: young couples looking like honeymooners, college kids with beers and boom boxes, families with restless children eager to have fun. Everyone was so excited, so happy, so ready for the time of their lives—checking in, taking pictures, carrying golf clubs, tennis rackets and scuba gear. I was the only black person in sight. Not that it mattered, but I noticed just the same.

"I said excuse me," a bottomless voice bellowed in my ear. I startled and turned to see a heavysset man in a white, ten-gallon cowboy hat standing next to me, his mountainous body towering over me, a rare occurrence for someone six-four. "Excuse me," he said again with a Southern accent. "Which way to the guest huts?"

"I don't work here," I said hastily, hoping that would be the end of it.

"You an athlete, son?" he asked. "You look awfully familiar."

I shook my head distractedly. He thanked me anyway and moved on.

"Yo, baby, yo!" a female's voice shrieked. "How are *you*?"

It was a woman plenty of straight guys would go ape over: mid-thirties, long legs, long blond hair. She was heading straight for me, along with a brunette who was older, shorter and heavier.

"I hope *you're* ready to party," said the blonde as she reached me and took hold of my right bicep. Her friend did the same to my left arm. "What's your name?"

"Derek—uh—hi," I said.

"Nice to meet you, Derek—uh—hi," said the blonde. "I'm Dorothy and this here's Julia. At least

that's our MOs this week, *wink, wink*."

"Hiiiiii," Julia said, swinging on my arm.

"Where you from, Derek—uh—hi?" asked Dorothy.

"LA."

"LA? *Solid*. We've been here from Montana since the second school let out—"

"Two whole days," said Julia. "We both teach second grade."

"And we haven't had one ounce of fun yet," said Dorothy. "But *you* are about to change that."

I chortled. "And you heard this from...."

"I *know* you like to dance," Dorothy said, almost sounding black.

"Well, yes." I forced a smile and used it as an excuse to free myself from their arms. "But in this heat, I don't know."

"You play pro sports?" Dorothy ran a flat hand over my pecs without a shred of inhibition. "You must do something. Which is it: hoops or football?"

"Actually...no...ladies...I need to check in."

"Undercover, too, eh?" Dorothy winked at Julia, then turned back to me. "Whatever. But you will definitely see us around. Guaranteed." They walked away arm-in-arm, Julia looking back and smiling every few feet. When I was free again, I decided to escape before anyone else approached.

Through the palm trees, a patch of sea was visible. I made my way down a trail lined with tall, tropical plants, my anticipation rising with the sound of the surf. I was finally going to see this curiously-colored phenomenon up close. I could hear it. I could smell it. I could feel the mist through the wind. Then, all at once, it was before me: the finest, sugary white sand and miles and miles of green and blue water. My travel agent and I had debated on whether it was a sea or an ocean. She had said only the four oceans of the world should be called ocean. I had said that "sea" and "ocean" were used interchangeably, and that a sea was often like an ocean, especially in the case of the Caribbean, which was part of the Atlantic. Now it hardly mattered, just like everything else I had left behind in the States.

In one continuous forward motion, I kicked off my shoes, rolled up the bottoms of my white jeans and ripped open my sweat-soaked shirt, not caring that several buttons came popping off. I went ankle-deep into the Caribbean, felt the waves wash over my feet and let out what felt like my first relaxing deep breath in months.

Without a doubt, it was long overdue.

FOUR OR FIVE GLUM FACES stood on the other side of the narrow glass door, but they'd have to wait their turn just as I had. I twisted sideways in the tiny wooden booth and turned away from their restless expressions, relieved when the operator finally made the connection to St. Louis.

"Mom, is that you?" I plugged the ear that was free of the phone. "Speak up, I can barely hear

you."

"Derek? You got there all right?"

"A few hours ago. There's one phone for the whole resort and you have to stand in line for it. There's no TVs or newspapers or anything like that here. Guess that's one of the reasons it's so damned cheap."

"That's a shame."

"I'm not complaining." The last thing I wanted was for her to think I'd made a mistake. "I did get a hold of Daddy after all to tell him I was leaving."

"What'd he say?"

"You know him. He mumbled something about being careful."

"Derek, if you need any money, I'm sure there's a way I can wire it to you."

"I shouldn't since most everything's covered in their *one low price*. But if *you* need any—"

"Oh, no. You need that when you get back."

"Don't worry, Mom. I will find a way to make money and still have time to paint. God, it's still hard to believe I never have to write another stupid, meaningless promo for a stupid, meaningless TV show ever again."

"You don't regret quitting, do you?"

"Between wrapping it up and planning the trip, I haven't had time to regret it. But I wouldn't anyway. Weissman Productions doesn't care about me. I'm not a little green piece of paper with a dead president stuck on my forehead. I can't work like that anymore. Even if I couldn't have kept the health insurance, I would've been outta there. I think."

"Now, Derek, relax. You sound stressed out. Do you feel any different?"

"I just got here, Mom."

"How do you feel?"

"Fine, Mom, I'll be fine."

"I know. You're strong. You're only twenty-six. Nothing's going to happen to you."

It was the same reassuring tone she used often now, a tone I first heard several months ago when I sat her down and told her I was worried about getting AIDS and needed to take The Test. "Does that mean you're like gay?" she promptly asked. *Like* gay. My mom turned into a Valley Girl to ask her son the most important question of his life. I paused for half a lifetime before answering with one flat word. "Yes." She told me she loved me anyway, and after we stopped crying from all the pent-up emotion, we talked about The Test. When I admitted I was scared, she held me as if she were holding her eight year-old boy and said, "You don't have it. You'll test negative, you'll see." As comforting as if I'd slipped and fallen on the playground. Only her maternal words couldn't erase the early Eighties.

"You won't come down with anything," she said now on the phone, then went on with the standard rationalizations as to why I was going to be one of the survivors. "Just look at all the things you've done in the last year, living healthy, eating right, thinking positive."

"I know, Mom. But just in case they come up with a cure in the next week or so, will you do whatever you can to get through on this one phone line to let me know about it?"

She laughed. "You're funny, Derek."

I loved to hear my mother laugh. She was feminine to be sure, but she had the baritone laugh of a truck driver, a serious, hearty laugh that seemed to ease fifty-three years of pain.

"Well, would you?" I insisted.

"Honeychild, if they come up with a cure, I'll fly there with it in my hand and give it to you myself."

We both laughed and I knew right then she had finally resolved in her mind the impulsive way her youngest son, "the responsible one," decided to clock out of life for a while and take off to Mexico. And her laugh and the way she supported me now made up for the years growing up in that household of confusion back in St. Louis.

"I love you, Mom, and I'm not even close to giving up. And just remember: I'm healthy and my T-cell count is not going to go down by my coming here. And eight days from now, when I get back, I'll tackle everything, money, painting, everything."

"I know, Derek. You do whatever's going to make you healthy."

Every time she made those loving, supportive declarations, I couldn't help wishing we had done all this a lifetime ago: me coming out, both my parents accepting it, all of us getting on with the business of loving life.

After we said our "love you's" and hung up, I heard the ocean calling my name. I needed to sit on the beach—no, plop down on the beach—and do nothing. I journeyed far down the coast till the sight of another human was only a memory. The sound of the waves was hypnotically soothing, the late afternoon sky awash with interwoven ribbons of fiery red and burnt orange; and either I was already adjusting to the heat, or the temperature had dropped a little.

I took off my T-shirt, tentatively at first, then marveled at how comfortable I felt standing on a beach wearing only a pair of blue shorts. Sometimes I had to remind myself I was no longer Tubby, as my brother used to call me. I sat on the sand and grabbed at the excess flesh on my midsection. It wasn't much—not nearly as much as there used to be—but I still longed for a tighter stomach. Using my shirt as a headrest, I lay back and sucked in my gut, feeling the light trace of stretch marks where love handles had once resided. Battle scars from my life, I told myself often. It was a victory, I guess: I lost the weight and with it, a lot of misery. I just wished I never had to wage the war in the first place.

But I'd come a long way. A year ago this time, before getting tested, I was at literal rock bottom. I'd ballooned up to seventy pounds overweight, ate junk food and smoked pot like mad, constantly got into painful, unrequited romances with guys, many of them straight, was closeted to most of the people who mattered in my life, and still had casual, anonymous, marginally safe encounters that left me feeling empty and worried for my health.

It was a hellish time in my life, the first years after college when I had little hope of knowing peace and happiness. I had come to UCLA and Los Angeles to escape my family and find myself. And to find the buddy I had wanted ever since age fourteen. College had come and gone, my youth was slipping, and I hadn't come close to having a boyfriend or feeling at peace with my sexuality.

Emotionally though, I was growing, expressing my frustration to my journal every night and my therapist once a week. Then, on a warm fall evening almost a year ago, growth came in the form of a life-altering explosion. I was in my car in a parking lot, smoking pot alone as I often did, when I heard a song on the radio, "I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man" by Prince, a song about a woman whose husband "left her with a baby and another one on the way." I started imagining the woman was my mother since she and my father had divorced when my brothers and sisters and I were young. I thought about how my mother had to raise five kids on paltry wages and a pathetic amount of child support. I thought about her working two jobs, sometimes three, and all the struggles she had with her husband who cheated on her and her children who fought her and each other. Growing up, I never knew whether to love or hate my mother, or whether she loved or hated me. She would erupt with bitter rage at an unmade bed, or say to me with such contempt: "You look just like your father." Yet she was also supportive of all her children, never failing to show up for a school function or buy us whatever we wanted within reason.

In the car that night, doped up, I listened to that song and pictured my mother with five babies crying out for love, each in their own way, and my father with a guitar in his arms, singing to her that he could never be the man she wanted him to be. A dam burst. Tears came down my face uncontrollably. She did the best she could, I thought. She did what she had to do for her family to survive. She was strong. She loved us. She worked like a dog for us.

Revelations started coming at me so rapidly, I had to get out of the car just to keep up with them. I ran to a park where I was alone. The high was higher than I'd ever felt, the intensity reverberating throughout my entire existence.

I thought about my father: sex-crazed, womanizing, forever on the verge of a business deal that would make us all rich, a confusing man who had a great sense of humor, but didn't believe in birthdays, Christmases, watching sitcoms, saying "I love you." He didn't know any better either, I realized. No one ever taught him how to be the black Ward Cleaver.

Then I thought about my two brothers and two sisters—all older—and all the fights we had. I hated those fights. I hated my childhood. "Don't be a fag, man." "Keep it up and you're gonna be a fag." I didn't even know what a fag was, only that it was obviously the worst thing in the world I could choose to be. But I didn't choose it. *It* chose me. My brothers—the jocks in school, the studs, the playboys—they knew the right things to do, say and be. I tried to be like them, but I was different. I studied. I talked "proper." I got good grades. I was average at sports. I didn't want to fight. That made me a fag before I knew anything about sex, and my brothers and sisters persecuted me twenty-four hours a day for being different.

That night, high on dope, I cried for every member of my family. None of us knew any better. We were all doing the best we could. The only reason we fought each other was because we loved each other. They didn't hate me because I was different. We were all taught to think being a fag was sick. *That's why* my brothers were so hard on me: they were trying to prevent me from being something they thought was bad.

I had to forgive them all. In the flurry of revelations hurtling through my mind at Indy Race Car speed, I realized they weren't bad; and if they weren't bad, then I wasn't bad; and if I wasn't bad, then being gay wasn't bad. I wanted to forgive my family and bring us together. I wanted to release the guilt of being gay and the fear of going to this hell I wasn't sure I believed in anyway. I

realized that if there was a God and I was one of His children, He wouldn't let me burn in any kind of hell because He wouldn't do that to one of His children, just as I would never think of doing that to a child of mine.

I started thinking about loving my family before one of us died, and suddenly realized who I feared would die first: me, the baby. For the first time, I *felt* the reality of AIDS invade my body, my mind, my soul. It was here. It was real. I could no longer deny the terror I felt. "I'm too young," I cried. "I wanna live. I wanna live. I wanna live," I repeated over and over and over. I had a notebook with me; I wrote it down dozens of times, big, shaky scribbles. I ran home, too scared and high and reeling to drive, knowing there had to be monumental changes in my life.

Over the next few months, I came out to every member of my family one by one. My parents and I became closer than I ever thought possible. Timing had something to do with it. My mother had done a lot of growing herself, starting and finishing college and exorcising many of her own demons, including the need to be with a man who didn't know how to treat women with love and respect. My father accepted me in his own stoic, unemotional way. "So what" was his response, as if to say, "What's the big deal?" My siblings had a harder time dealing with it, realizing their fag prophecy had come true and perhaps feeling guilty for projecting. "Do you ever plan on changing?" Daryl, two years older, asked me every week for two months. "No, Daryl," I told him. "There's no reason to change."

In those first transformational months after my night of enlightenment, I gave up smoking pot and started dieting and working out obsessively. I lost seventy pounds in four months. Losing so much so fast was dangerous to be sure, but with each passing day I only felt better, about my body, about my life. I still had bouts with the fear of God, being gay, and getting tested, but in the heat of the battles within my mind, I'd affirm to myself the most important thing I was learning: no matter what I did, said, thought or felt, I was a good person. And when I believed this, I was able to let go of the seemingly eternal inner debates and do things like come out to my friends and co-workers, go out to bars without feeling like a criminal, love and accept myself for everything I was.

I also took The Test. In May. Two months ago. I knew I had to do it. I could no longer overlook the hundreds of men I'd been with in all the dark, anonymous places I'd visited since I was a teenager. I could no longer deny the night sweats that woke me up for a month right after college. I took The Test and over the phone, the doctor said, "You don't have AIDS, but you do have the AIDS virus."

After we hung up, I called my mother with the news, putting up a strong front for her sake. After she and I hung up, I cried for half an hour till I realized it was 5:30, time for Advanced Aerobics. I rushed off to the gym, did the class and knew right then I wasn't going to give up. I went to seminars on HIV, learned ways to boost my immune system, started eating only healthy foods, and found a doctor whose practice revolved around AIDS as much as my life was beginning to.

It wasn't easy adjusting to being positive. Some nights the darkness of my bedroom was enough to keep me awake for hours. But I kept growing. I kept evolving. I kept surviving. I was still healthy, I was learning to love myself and never felt better, mentally or physically, which was much more an affirmation of life than any virus in my body.

But now, ten months after that warm fall night, two months after testing positive and one month after losing the last of the weight, I was tired. Growing was wonderful, but it was also draining. The last year, as fantastic and thrilling and terrifying a ride as it had been, had left me battle-fatigued. I had to get off the roller coaster for a while, stretch out on a patch of sand and rest. In eight days, when I returned to the real world, I could resume the quest for my dreams, to paint for a living, to find love, two dreams that possessed my soul since adolescence. Oh, and of

course, surviving....

THE MORNING SUNLIGHT peeked through the curtains of the patio door just enough to gradually nudge me awake. I rolled over and reached for my watch on the nightstand, but stopped short of checking the time. I was on my own time now. The top drawer of the dresser near the foot of the bed was open; I shot my watch like a basketball into it. Two points.

Each guest had their own hut at Parrot Creek, a one-room adobe cabin, sparsely filled with a bed, nightstand, chair and dresser drawer. Once out of bed, I turned back the curtains to the sliding glass door, revealing a small concrete patio surrounded by palm trees and shrubbery. The Cancun morning was breathtaking, rich with the green of the tropics and the blue of a cloudless sky. To the right, through the trees, a sliver of the ocean was barely visible.

The sight of my very own private patio was inviting. I decided the morning should begin here. Still in the white briefs I slept in, I spread a beach towel across the concrete, coated my body with baby oil and stretched out on the ground. The sun's rays burned through me as if I were under a giant sunlamp, and the heat, coupled with the oil, caused rivers of sweat to form and flow effortlessly down the contours of my body, contours that looked so much better now that I was in the best shape I'd ever been in. My hands began to trace the beads of moisture on my chest, my stomach, my thighs. I glanced around, saw how secluded I was and slid off my underwear.

The feeling of direct sunlight on my dick was all I needed to become hard. I poured on the oil and began stroking myself, closing my eyes and remembering the last time I had touched another man. It was a month ago. Met him at a bar. It wasn't great, but at least it was safe. He was hot: blond, buffed, my age. But he didn't even speak to me the next time I saw him. My erection softened.

I tried to think of someone else: the straight Latino water polo player I met at a party. He knew I was gay, but he was curious. We left the party, stopped by the video store, went back to my apartment, and jacked off watching bisexual porno. Got him to let me stroke him while he came. Never saw him again after that. Said he'd call, but didn't. My erection softened.

Next batter: the black guy with the beard from the gym. That was hot. What a huge, perfect bubble ass...but had we been *totally* safe? What *was* totally safe? What was good sex anymore? How about the short, half-black/half-Asian from the HIV information meeting, the self-proclaimed muscle pig? God, I was so afraid to even touch his cock. All I could think about was the HIV within, just like the first time I jacked off after testing positive and half-expected venomous blood to erupt from my dick like lava from an Hawaiian volcano. But it didn't. I survived and, to my surprise, I still needed love and sex. But here it was July, two months after testing, and the scoreboard read: sex, four; love and satisfaction, zero.

I was completely soft now, but just as determined to get off, on principle if for no other reason. My body was drenched. My free hand slipped and slid over the wetness. I squeezed my pecs, rubbed my stomach, massaged underneath my balls, stroked my cock. Everything was so wet, so hot. After a few minutes, my erection was back. Jacking off was good. Jacking off was great. It had to be. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah....

I opened my eyes, right hand still holding on, stomach still crunched forward. The whiteness of my cum mixed with the oil and sweat and stood out against my skin. I stared at my body, unsure of what to think, what to feel. Then, slowly, I lowered my head back onto the beach towel and started breathing once again.

"HEY, DUDE," a blond guy shouted from the beach. "We need a fourth for two-man volleyball, how

'bout it?" It was tempting. *He* was tempting. He was mid-twenties with a lanky frame, clad only in neon green shorts and flanked on either side by two girls with identical pink bikinis and long brown hair. Twins.

"No thanks, uh, sorry," I shouted back from the walkway, prompting them to turned away in pursuit of another player. A few hours into the morning and I was already good at declining invitations at Parrot Creek: backgammon, Frisbee golf, water polo, drinking games. While everyone else ran around as if this were summer camp, I was enjoying the anonymity of being No One. I strolled down the beach, sandals in hand, dragging my toes through the sugary granules beneath my feet. For miles there was nothing but pure white sand, interrupted every now and then by patches of greenery and cliques of palm trees. Because Parrot Creek was remotely situated on the tip of an upside-down-V-shaped peninsula, the rest of Cancun was far off in the distance.

To pass the time, I had brought along a novel, *Cody*, about two adolescent boys in love; but between the plane ride and the morning, I had already finished it. Now, void of any other real plans, I journeyed to the other side of the peninsula to what was known as the water sports beach. Unlike the more serene section of coastline simply known as "the beach," the bay off the water sports beach was full of activity: sailing, windsurfing, snorkeling, water skiing, scuba diving. Each sport had its own shack where staffers dressed in white issued equipment and signed up guests for lessons if needed. I stood high on the walkway, watching people busily pass with snorkeling gear, life jackets and beach towels, prompting me to wonder how the trip might have been different had I possessed a friend close enough to be a traveling companion.

"Windsurfing lesson?" a tall, big-boned female staffer asked as she ran by.

I hesitated; it almost sounded like fun. "Not today thanks."

She was already gone. I headed inland, through the series of buildings that made up the main artery of Parrot Creek. They were all one- and two-story structures, all southwestern style and loosely connected in the same V-shape manner as the coast. On the inside of the V was a huge courtyard containing the pool and a basketball court. Five guys were playing basketball now. I walked over to get a better look.

"Hey, bro, you ball?" came from a tall blond guy sporting a buzz cut and a blue Rutgers T-shirt. Then he answered his own question. "Yeah, you ball. Wanna run?"

"Not right now," I said automatically, but instantly debated changing my mind as they played on. Rutgers was tall with a solid, beefy body. He looked young enough to be an upperclassman at said school. The other guys were in his league, too. One of them was even black. Thank God: another black person at Parrot Creek. Even if we never said a word, it was nice to know.

Suddenly I had an impulse to recant and join them.

But there were so many reasons not to get involved with these more-than-likely straight boys. It had been a good year since my last heart-wrenching, unrequited romance and I wanted to keep it that way. Plus, even if I did seduce one of them for the purely physical, the virus was sure to get in the way, if only in my head.

I turned away. The veranda overlooking the courtyard was a much safer place. I ordered a water from the main bar and settled into a comfortable lounge chair, arching back and offering myself to the sun. The veranda had a rustic feel to it with its wicker furniture and long, weatherworn wooden deck. A white wooden railing lined the entire length, which must have been fifty feet, and gray-colored steps led to the pool and the basketball court directly below. To the right was the

coast, and beyond the courtyard, in the distance, was an endless view of the tips of tall jungle trees.

As the morning wore on, the deck began to fill with other guests, many of them in search of drinking buddies at the bar. When their chatter became too intrusive, I decided it was time to find a quieter spot on the beach. I descended the veranda steps, immediately noticing a handsome young man reclining against the railing at the bottom. He was smiling and gazing at the sea, hands resting contentedly inside the pockets of his baggy khaki shorts. He was mid-twenties like me, with black, curly hair and a deep olive complexion. As I reached the last step, he began to look familiar, especially when he glanced back at me and his face also lit up with vague recognition.

"We rode in on the same bus from the airport," I realized and said.

"Now I remember." He extended his hand. "Eric with a Z."

"How's that?" I asked, noting his unusual accent.

"My name: Eriz, like the astrology sign, Aries. People don't get it, so I just say Eric with a Z."

"Oh." Finally I grabbed his hand and we shook.

"And you are?"

"Oh, Derek, sorry."

"You sat alone on the bus. Shy, no?" he said teasingly.

I laughed. "More like just chilling for now," I said defensively.

A young male staffer ran by, shouting, "Basketball tournament this afternoon, guys. Free champagne and beer to the winners."

"You ever play ball?" Eriz asked. "You're tall enough."

"No," I said with a tired sigh. "I don't play pro basketball or football or soccer or pro anything."

"I meant do you play for, you know, fun?"

"Oh...oh," I said, somewhat embarrassed. "I'm sorry. It's just if I had a dime for every time people asked me if I'm an athlete."

He laughed empathically, forcing me to tell myself to loosen up a bit.

"So what have you done here so far, Derek?" He took a step onto the walkway that bordered the veranda and lined the beach.

"You know," I said, stepping with him, "so far the only thing I have planned is a serious regime of taking it easy."

"Hear, hear," he chorused.

"Back home, my agenda's packed: work, paint, work out. And that's just the half of—"

I was interrupted mid-sentence by another one of the guests coming toward us on the walkway. He was younger, and although a large pair of sunglasses covered his face, a curious aura wrapped itself around him and caught me by surprise. His body was lean with athleticism and covered only by a pair of green swimming trunks and a towel draped around his neck. Confidently, he walked directly between us and flashed a glowing smile. Eriz and I stepped back as if we were the sea momentarily being parted, and this younger male simply said, "Hi."

"How's it going?" I returned, my voice sounding shocked but cordial. A grin and a nod served as his response. As if I had no say in the matter, my eyes remained locked on him as he continued past us on his merry way. "So where you from?" I said to Eriz while still looking at the young man. Or was he a boy? Perhaps a teenager?

"Everywhere," Eriz said. "Israel, Greece, Cyprus, a few other islands in the Mediterranean, which is where I mostly live now." He talked on, telling me of his origins, but I wasn't there. All I could focus on was the young man who had just passed us, now setting down his towel on the beach in the distance. He seemed absorbed in this task, arranging this here, placing that there, anchoring the towel with his sandals, fishing what must have been sunscreen out of his pocket—all the while looking as if he might be whistling some pleasant tune. Whoever he was, he was caught up in the pure joy of a simple act like laying a piece of cloth on a clump of sand.

"But your accent," I said, turning back to Eriz, "is it Greek? Spanish? Middle-Eastern?"

"None of them and all of them." He let out a hearty laugh. "When you've been in as many places as I, you pick them all up. I believe there's more Greek than anything, which is fine for me: the women love the Greek accent."

He went on about women and accents and eventually invited me to the bar for drinks and a survey of the girls. To show me his theory in action, he said.

"Actually, I gave up booze a while back," I said. Alcohol depressed the immune system. Or so some believed. "Plus I was going to hit the beach while the sun's still peaking."

"All right then. Come to the dance hall tonight. Some of the music is a year or two behind, but it's still a lot of fun."

"I love to dance."

"See you there," he said, then jogged up the veranda steps. I paused to consider it, then put on my sunglasses and surveyed the coast, ready to resume my quest for a lonely patch of beach.

As my feet sank into the hot, sticky sand, I spotted him again, the young man. He was just lying there, halfway between the ocean and me, stomach down, feet swinging behind him, all alone and unassuming, oblivious to the world around him.

Even from a distance, his body seemed so smooth, so flawless, so...so healthy. At first, I had the impulse to continue on down the shore, knowing I could find a more secluded spot farther up the coast. I started moving, through the sand, slowly and unconsciously, not up the coast but straight toward him, my eyes fixed on the sight of him lying there so contentedly amidst the pure, white, unaffected sand.

Two

I GUESS BECAUSE I PRACTICALLY WALKED right up to his towel, he had no choice but to look up and see who was there.

"Hi," he said, even more friendly than the walkway moments earlier.

I hesitated, then placed my towel inches away from his, as if I had staked out the spot regardless of his presence. "Mind if I lay my stuff here?"

"Not at all," he said with a chuckle, then turned over and sat upright, resting his elbows on his knees. I took off my tank top, trying not to seem aware of him watching me, waiting for me to sit down. "You just get here?" he asked, a big grin beaming from underneath his sunglasses.

"Yesterday." I lay on my back and propped myself up by the elbows so I could still see him at an upright angle.

"I got here two nights ago." His voice was alternately deep and thin, as if it were still trying to settle on its range. "Where are you from?"

"LA. Yourself?"

"Scottsdale." He situated himself on his back, propping himself up by his elbows, matching my position. "It's near Phoenix, you know, in Arizona?"

"Sure."

"Are you here for the whole week, too?" he asked.

"Looks that way."

Since my sunglasses were even bigger and darker than his, I was afforded a good study of his body as we talked. He had a lean, mostly hairless frame, not bulky or massive, but tight as if from playing sports and already bronzed by the summer sun. The muscular sections of his arms, shoulders and back lifted and separated sensuously with each casual shift of his body, and a light mane of silky brown hair danced playfully on his thick legs. Even more impressive was his torso. His chest was too developed for someone *too* young, I reasoned; and his stomach boasted the flatness and defined sections I'd never been able to obtain no matter how many crunches I did at the gym. Still, his smooth, flawless skin and his full, healthy, brown hair—highlighted by the sun and tousled about by the wind—betrayed his athletic body and bespoke of youth so distant from my own. Perhaps too distant. Perhaps illegally distant.

"Did you come all by yourself?" he was asking.

"I tend to work alone. You?"

"I'm here with my mom and my brother."

"Where are they?"

"I think they went off snorkeling or something. My brother's kinda hanging out with her because he doesn't want to leave her all alone. Me, I just wanted to come to the beach."

I wondered if that was the way it would be all week: him by himself, his family elsewhere. "Your dad couldn't make it?"

"My mom and dad are divorced," he said with a sheepish laugh.

"Oh. It's nothing to be embarrassed about. My parents split up years ago." I sat up and tried to sound reassuring. "These days it's more like whose folks aren't."

He chuckled in agreement. "It's just the three of us down here." He also sat up. "My name is Rob...Velarde," he said hastily, as if to get the formality over with in order to continue the conversation.

"Rob, I'm Derek. Pleased to meet you."

Our smiles lingered, filling the moment along with the sound of the waves washing up on shore.

"So do you have a job in LA?" he asked.

"A job." I laughed. "I *used* to write those little blurbs you see on TV advertising the upcoming shows. You know: *Tonight on such-and-such-a-show, Dad gets in more trouble than he bargained for.* But now I'm just a painter, a painter trying to sell my first painting."

"Really?" His voice grew excited. "What's it of?"

"Oh...well...it's these two guys in high school, resting on the grass after a spirited game of basketball." I left out the part about them being buddies who were madly in love but too scared to do anything about it, something I was hoping to show in their expressions, their proximity to each other, their hard-ons straining through khaki shorts.

"What was your last name?" he asked.

"Mayfield."

"Derek Mayfield," he said, storing it in his memory. "I'll be sure to look for that painting in a gallery or museum someday. Derek Mayfield."

I started to tell him that he'd be looking for it for a long time, maybe forever; but I was enjoying watching him mulling over the prospect of seeing my work someday.

"So are you a big Laker fan," he asked, "being from LA and all?"

"I'm originally from Missouri, so I like a lot of the teams from the Midwest. But I'll take LA over the Celtics any day."

"That's my team!"

"The Celtics? Those old guys?"

Playfully we took sides in the Laker/Celtic rivalry, the axis around which pro basketball revolved. He brought up Boston's sixteen world championships; I pointed to LA's dominance of the Eighties. He mentioned Larry Bird; I countered with Magic (who was a few years away from his HIV announcement). When he said he also liked the Phoenix Suns, we dropped the debate and started talking about sports in general, letting the morning drift away as we went over the recent seasons in the college and pro ranks. I was partial to UCLA and Midwestern pro teams; he was a big fan of Arizona State, the University of Texas, and the Dallas Cowboys.

"Oh, I've always hated them," I said.

"They're America's team you know."

"As good a reason as any."

He laughed. "I have this same fight with my dad."

"So you do see him," I said, settling back on my towel.

"We see my dad all the time. My brother and I stay with him and his wife every other weekend and he takes us to baseball games all over the state. We follow baseball a whole lot...."

I was only half-conscious that the subject had fully turned to baseball because I was too busy noticing a peculiar occurrence: as we talked, I would shift positions to reawaken my body, and before long, he would match my move, sitting up when I sat up, resting on his side when I did. He was doing this now, imitating me as I reclined back on my elbows.

"Baseball's my favorite sport," he was saying. "At my school, I'm gonna be a starter this year. Then I'm hoping to play for a big time school someday."

I wanted to believe that "school" was college, that he was a freshman or maybe even a sophomore. I pictured him at some JC in Arizona, working hard to impress the scouts at ASU or U of A.

"I play football and basketball, too," he explained, "but baseball's what I like the best. I'm only on the basketball team so I can say I play three sports. And 'cause all my friends are on it."

"Do you have a best friend?" I asked, trying to envision him with a buddy.

"Not really. I'm not trying to brag or anything, but I have lots of good best friends." His tone was far from boastful. He was just telling me about his life. I listened and wondered what it must be like to have a gang of friends in school. "We have lots of fun, my friends and I." He shook his head and laughed, remembering something about his buddies. "I kinda miss 'em."

As afraid as I was to ask, I had to know his age. I lowered my sunglasses. "Just how old are you?"

"I just turned sixteen two weeks ago."

"*Sixteen?*"

"Is that bad?"

"No." I let out a terse breath. "Why should it be bad?"

He removed his sunglasses, resting them on his forehead, and for the first time, I saw his entire face, a face that truly captivated sixteen. His features were ever-so-slightly dark, hinting at southern European origins. His skin was unblemished, his cheeks blessed with a sun-drenched ruddiness, his pores untarnished by anything resembling a beard and the need to hack it off daily with a razor. His eyebrows were thick, pointing inward with determination, his lashes surprisingly long and flowing. But the most alluring part of all were his eyes, swimming in a deep, dark brown so invigorating and full of undiscovered passion. He had to be one of the foremost heartthrobs of his school, I knew, the one the girls talked about at their slumber parties, the one who set the standards of athletic skill and popularity for the rest of the boys, the kind I fell so hard for in my own high school so many eons ago.

"I turned twenty-six a few months ago." I took a deep breath at the thought of the years piling up. "Does that seem old to you?"

"Not really," he said. "I don't know. Seems like most of the people here are closer to your age. Or older."

"Does that mean you don't like it here?"

"I'm not saying that. I just haven't really met anyone my age to hang out with. I mean, I do stuff with my brother—"

"How old's he?"

"Thirteen. But he's got a birthday this week."

I hesitated to bring up the next, lethal subject, but we seemed to be heading straight toward that intersection. Besides, I reasoned, maybe this could extinguish the fire: "What about the girls here?" I cringed as I asked.

"I haven't seen any my age."

"Do they have to be your age?" I asked playfully. He didn't know what to say, so instead he laughed a small, embarrassed laugh and looked shyly ahead to the sea.

"How about you?" he finally asked, catching me off guard.

"Me? Well—see—I'm just here to relax. My time to take it easy. Everybody here," I motioned down the beach to three rowdy couples engaged in a series of drinking games, "all they want to do is drink till they drop."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"It's hard to click with people who can't touch their finger to their nose on the first couple of tries."

"Do you drink?" he asked.

"Once upon a time. I used to smoke a lot, too—pot, never cigarettes. A whole lot. Yeah, I've had my share of partying, but I gave it all up. But I can't tell you the number of times people have asked me if I want a drink down here."

"What do you say?"

"I just decline."

"What about when your friends want you to, back home, I mean?"

"My friends know I don't drink."

"But what if they insist?" His brow creased, his eyes intent as if he were mentally recording my answers.

"Then they must not be very good friends if they don't respect my wishes, huh?"

"I guess not."

"Do you drink?"

"I tried beer once, but I hated the way it tastes."

"Keep hating it and you'll never have to worry about it," I said and he laughed. "Sounds like you do have friends who like it though?"

"A few of them drink, and a couple have even tried pot, but they know the rest of us don't and they're usually okay about it. A few times, they tried to get us to join in, kinda forcefully once."

"How'd you handle it?"

"I just told them I didn't feel right and I was gonna leave if they kept trying to get me to drink."

"Good for you."

"It's okay not to drink," he said with a sliver of doubt, "isn't it?" His tone, so full of sincerity, took me aback.

"Absolutely."

"Plus it's not good for my sports."

"Good point."

"Did you ever play any sports in school?" He leaned forward.

"Little bit, but I stopped around ninth grade." I started to comment on how long ago that seemed, but squelched the thought. "These days I work out six days a week—"

"Six days?"

"Now, don't get the wrong idea," I said laughingly. "I don't lift six days. I just make sure I do something: bike, swimming, tennis, aerobics, weights."

"Me and my friends, we started a workout program for our sports, but I keep telling 'em we can't work the same body parts every day. I mean, that's not good, huh?"

"I would wonder."

"But working on different parts—do you think that's okay?"

"Probably." The sun was now hitting at a fierce angle and despite the desire to look directly into his eyes, I had to use my sunglasses again.

"Why do you say *probably*?" He also slid his sunglasses back onto his face.

"You're still growing. You're already a good size for your age, and with athletics and all, your body is going to develop a pretty good build on its own. You don't want to do anything to interfere with the natural process."

"So you don't think I should work out?" It sounded as if he were ready to make a commitment right then and there.

"I—uh—don't just go by my opinion. It really depends on how you feel."

"But you think it's bad for me?"

"Only you can know that," I said and he looked at me with a blank expression. "If you really want to work out and it feels right, go for it. Listen to your body. It'll tell you if you should do it by the way you feel."

"So you think it's okay?" He was determined to get an opinion out of me.

"If it makes you feel good, yes. Just make sure you take it easy. At your age, there's no reason to pump till you drop."

He interrogated me on my workout routine, what I did, how much time I spent with each exercise. I cautioned him that proper diet was just as important as working out and he wanted to know everything I ate. I told him how I ate mostly healthy, natural foods and drank lots and lots of water, for water was essential for good health.

"Think I'll start drinking more water," he said decisively, "especially during workouts."

"Wouldn't hurt," I said, wondering what he would think if he knew that one of the prime motivations for my healthy regime was the fact that the threat of imminent death had taken up permanent residence in my brain. "But also just keep doing what you're doing, being young, playing sports. It doesn't sound like you eat a lot of junk. You'll develop fine naturally." I had to suppress a smile as I looked over his toned, sprouting physique. All he had to do was keep growing up and soon he'd be ready to take on the world; and here he was, asking me for advice.

"They have a gym here, you know," he said, his voice hopeful.

"I saw it. The equipment is all old and rusty and it's like a sauna in there. Besides, I'm taking a break from the gym."

Somewhat deflated, he suddenly had another thought: "Did you say you also play tennis? My brother and I brought our rackets down with us...." His voice trailed off, my cue to speak.

For a moment, I said nothing, then looked out at the ocean and shrugged. "I'll play you sometime."

"You'd like to do that?" he said with a small amount of disbelief in his voice.

"Why not?" I said aloud to myself.

"You'll probably clobber me, though."

"Not to worry."

"So you'd like to play together sometime?" he stated as if he hadn't heard me correctly the first time.

"Sure," I said, then as an afterthought added, "How 'bout tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? That'd be neat."

Neat? I thought to myself with an inner chuckle. There was a word I hadn't heard used like that in years.

We spent a few moments staring off into the Caribbean, digesting the morning that had turned into the afternoon.

"We must have been talking for hours. I should probably go see what my mom and brother are doing." He rose up with resignation. "What do you think you're gonna do this afternoon?"

"Probably grab a bite, then there's some kind of basketball thing later. I thought it might do me some good."

"I heard about that. It's a tournament, three-man teams."

I paused, then asked, "You wanna be in it?"

"Would you care if I was on the same team as you?"

"If they don't make 'em up for us, sure." I tried to sound noncommittal. "I have to go back to my room to get some tennis shoes. Why don't we just meet on the court in a little while."

"Okay." He started to leave, but turned back. "And what time do you wanna play tennis tomorrow?"

"Uh...why don't we talk about that after basketball," I offered and he nodded reluctantly.

"So I'll see you at the court," he reassured me, then hoisted his towel around his neck and plodded his way through the sand.

My eyes followed him till he was out of sight, then I settled back down, hands behind my head, feeling the heat of the sun on my body. I contemplated this intriguing mix of youthful masculinity and boyish exuberance, a mix as intriguing as the blue-green waters had been the day I arrived. And within this golden figure of a boy existed a genuine interest in me, my life, my thoughts, my opinions. If anyone else had been around at that moment, they would have seen me grinning ear-to-ear, then shaking my head in astonishment.

Before basketball, I needed to cool off and wash the sand from my body. I rose up and dashed straight ahead into the ocean, laughing carelessly as I plunged forward, diving down and deep into the fresh, emerald waters of the sea.

Three

THE BASKETBALL GOAL was a frightening sight. The backboard was a series of bamboo poles tied together vertically. The basket was a rickety old rim barely hanging on by the grace of a couple of rusty nails. Several basketballs were raining down on it now, causing a loud rattle throughout the courtyard and the concrete half-court, which was just below the veranda, lodged between the pool and the beach.

When I arrived, Rob was shooting around with a dozen or so men in their twenties and thirties, as well as Rutgers, the very attractive blond guy who only this morning had asked if I wanted to ball. His buddies were with him. Up close, they were even more appetizing, their shirts thrown to the ground, their naked torsos taut and hardened. But there was also an air of aloofness to the way

they stalked around the court, their faces intent, their movements measured. And it wasn't just Rutgers and his college buds that had that competitive look. The older guys matched them scowl for scowl.

As if he hadn't expected me to show, relief washed over Rob's face as I joined him. "We're just warming up," he informed me. He was wearing a white tank top now, and for the first time, we stood side by side. His head came up to my chin, which made him shorter than I had originally imagined. And, yes, his body was defined, but his shoulders, back and hips had yet to fill out, as if his narrow frame was still working on becoming that of a young man's.

"Okay, everybody," came from a staffer at the edge of the court. He was a thin American in his early twenties. We gathered around him and he began speaking hastily:

"There's twelve of you. If my math serves me right, that's four three-man teams. So choose your sides, two teams play first, then the other two play, then the winners play, then I'll be back in a few to give the ultimate winners their champagne and beer. See ya." He ran off, leaving the twelve of us stranded and agape.

Without the staffer, we organized the tournament ourselves. Rob and I were on the same team along with a redheaded kid who said he was twenty-one; but with his smooth, freckled face and five-foot-six body, he looked younger than Rob. Ours was the second game; our opponents: three of Rutgers's buddies minus Rutgers, all of them early twenties with New York accents.

On our first possession, Rob immediately threw the ball to me on the inside. I went up for a lay-up and was hammered by two of the New Yorkers. I called a foul and they congratulated each other on stopping me. They played with that kind of intensity the entire game, pushing and shoving, calling every violation, arguing against every one called on them. And Rob kept trying to feed the ball to me near the basket and the New Yorkers kept fouling me.

"Take it easy, man," I said to them at one point. "This ain't no NBA championship, ain't no national TV cameras here."

On the basketball court I was *Black*, stone-faced, urban sounding, took no shit. I got it from my older brothers growing up. They were the better athletes, but I was a better student of the game. Then, I had this big, chubby body I didn't know what to do with. Now, I could hold my own. Gone was the awkwardness, mental *and* physical, replaced with know-how and a worked-out, six-foot-four body that, coupled with my skin color, made strangers constantly approach me with: "You play sports?"

At first I tried to get my game on, wanting to get in some impressive moves to live up to the athletic image Rob had of me. I muscled the New Yorkers right back and took control of our team, working the ball between Rob and Carrot Top, which was what I called the redheaded kid since I couldn't remember his name. Rob hit some outside jumpers, looking at me after each one. I'd nod firmly and he'd smile back. But the New Yorkers were too much for us, too intense and too big for Rob and Carrot Top. Eventually, I dropped my game face and started horsing around, throwing up sky hooks and outside jumpers, something I was never good at in the real world. But this wasn't the real world. I hit a thirty-five foot jumper and Rob, Carrot Top and I screamed, "Yes!"

"Magic for three!" I added. Rob loosened up and started taking more jumpers himself. "Larry Bird..." I'd say as the ball was in the air. "Count it!" I'd shout when it went in, which was more often than not. The game turned into our own version of the NBA, one that emphasized fun and mimicking moves by our favorite players as opposed to crushing our opponent for free booze. The New Yorkers grimaced at our antics, but that only added to our amusement and egged us on even

more.

At one point, when the ball rolled into the pool, causing a lull in the game, I turned around to see that Rob had run off to the sidelines and was talking to what must have been his mother and brother. Apparently they had come up sometime during the game and had been watching for who knows how long. Rob was pointing at me as I made eye contact with his mother, then his younger brother. We were all nods and smiles, and I imagined Rob saying something like, "That's Derek, the big black man I was telling you about." They waved to me and I waved back, but before there was time for anything more, the ball came rolling back from the pool and the game resumed.

"That's my brother and mom," Rob promptly informed me as he ran back on the court. I gave them one last smile and we played on. We lost, 15-9, but I did manage to make a jump shot in front of his family. By the time the game was finished, they had left without our noticing. We told everybody "good game," begrudgingly to the New Yorkers, appreciatively to Carrot Top, and I offered to buy Rob something to drink.

"You will?" he asked incredulously. We climbed the veranda steps to the main bar and I ordered and signed for two bottles of the Mexican brand of water they sold at the resort.

"You didn't like the way those guys were so serious, huh?" Rob said as we walked from the bar to the veranda.

"Here we are, a million miles from home," I sat on the veranda steps, "and those guys are playing like some pro scout on vacation might spot them."

"I saw you having fun with it." Rob sat next to me. "That's why I started having fun with it, too." He pointed to the New Yorkers who were on the court shooting around. "But you could take 'em if you really wanted to, huh?"

"Of course," I said, not sure if it was true, but knowing it was the answer he wanted to hear. And the answer I wanted to give. "Where'd your mom and brother run off to?"

"Back to the hut to get ready for dinner."

We fell silent, postures slumped over lazily, elbows resting on our knees, watching but not focusing on the ensuing game. It was the pause of two people, having just met and gotten along so well, yet still somewhere within the delicate phase of beginning acquaintance and therefore unsure of what to do next.

"I guess I should get going, too." He stood up, then quickly added: "But you still wanna play tennis tomorrow?"

"Like we said." I startled myself by the way I wasn't quite ready to see him disappear. "I'm thinking of going to the dance hall tonight. Maybe you could come."

"Maybe—I—I mean—will you be dancing?"

"Chances are."

"Do most people there just dance?"

"Well, I'm sure people talk and hang out, too."

"So if I saw you there, we could talk then?" he asked, a note of hope filling his voice.

"I don't see why not. You should come."

"But if I saw you there, you wouldn't mind if I came up and talked to you?"

"Of course I wouldn't mind," I said, somewhat bewildered.

"But even if I don't go, we'll play tennis tomorrow, right?"

"Well, sure," I shrugged. Because he was so persistent about *tennis tomorrow*, I suggested we play at ten in the morning; and since I'd probably just be waking up from the dance hall, it'd be best if he met me at my hut and we'd go find the courts from there. I tried to give him proper directions, but since we were still new to the resort, it was in vain. Thus, we deemed it best if he walked to my hut now in order to know where it was for *tennis tomorrow*.

On the way, we talked more about the absurdity of the basketball game, and also about our past vacations. This was his first time out of the States; I had spent a few days in Ensenada a couple of years ago.

"Which part of Mexico do you like better?" he asked.

"Hard to say," I began, the wheels of innuendo churning in my mind. "I think Ensenada will always hold a special feeling for me because it was my first time down to Mexico." I broke into a Cheshire-cat grin and said in a nudging tone: "And you know what they say: there's always something special about that first time." I got a skittish giggle out of him, to which I added: "You know what I mean, don't you, Rob?"

He just continued laughing, eyes toward the ground till he realized we were at my hut.

"And this is where I stay," I said, casually slipping in the key and swinging open the door in one continuous move. I watched as he walked in unquestioningly, then I followed him and heard myself asking: "So do you have a girlfriend back in Scottsdale?"

"No, not really." He looked around with the same interest one might have visiting a friend's bedroom for the first time. "But right before we left, I did meet this girl at the lake where me and my friends go."

That he was interested in girls—or at least *talked* about being interested—was deflating but only partially so. After all, who knew what unspoken urges to be with another buddy were buried deep within his still-developing psyche? Who knew if talk of girls was merely a front? And even though I was far from knowing what, if anything, I wanted from him, I couldn't deny wondering if he was as gay-identified as I was at his age.

"So you think she's cute?" I busied myself with trivial tasks, folding a beach towel, adjusting the thermostat.

"I noticed her out of all the girls there," he said. The admission forced him to blow an embarrassed breath from his closed lips.

"Think you'll date her?"

"I don't know. Might be kinda hard. She lives pretty far away. In Flagstaff." *

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