

When footsteps sounded again—soft and pattering this time—he checked his digital clock. It was 2:23. He heard Drew clear his throat.

He lay in bed fighting his lust, quieting his body, which was ready to be strummed like a guitar, until 2:43. Then he heard the footsteps return and fade away. At once he masturbated silently and furiously, aware that this particular orgasm, for all its delirium, marked a return of control. It was time to create his own life, for better or worse. Nothing else could do it for him—not travel or grief groups or reminiscences of Davey or childish dreams of love.

In the morning he hardly looked at Drew. He spent the hours before noon circling apartment ads in the *Times*. Then, still saying little, he went out to see what he could find.

When he told Lewis, a few days later, that he had found another place to live, Lewis didn't seem perturbed, but that was his way. He merely remarked, "I knew you wouldn't stick around very long, Martin. This place was never cozy enough for you."

Martin didn't bother to reply. Maybe they would discuss the whole thing in a few months, maybe even make amusing, insightful comments about the limitations of friendship and the charming treacheries of young lovers, but not now. Not yet.

Country People

I had misgivings the minute I walked in. The classroom was too small, the desks were for kids, and the blackboard was on rollers. When the first students turned up, my worries increased. I knew that adult education courses tend to attract the odd and the lonely, but this bunch looked more displaced than most. Taking the enrollment slip from a large, sad woman in her midforties, I wondered if my job was just to keep them occupied till they found what they were missing.

The woman's name was Emilia Quinn. She was wrapped in yards of yellow fabric like a sari. Her dark hair was in a tangle, but her eyes were beautiful. She gave me a wounded smile and took a seat by the window.

It had started with Ray Stonington last month, August. Ray had been in one of his mild, helpful moods, which should have warned me. We were sitting in his dining room, the candles illuminating the pine table, the Dutch corner cabinet, the spinning wheel in the corner. The dinner had been superb, as elegant as this eighteenth-century tavern in the Hudson Valley which Ray had converted to a residence.

He had spoken too casually: "They're looking for someone to

teach a night course in literature for adults.” Ray named the college, one of those two-year affairs that Governor Rockefeller had sown around the state—an institution without the distinction of Vassar or the sectarian rigor of Marist or the blue-jeans cheerfulness of Bard. “Why don’t you ring up the dean? He’s a friend of mine.”

I shook my head. I was through with all that. Twenty years in the New York City public-school system was enough. “Why do you think I moved up here?”

“This won’t be anything like New York, Michael. One night a week, no knives, no drugs, sweet country people.” I looked skeptical, and he continued. “It’ll help with the shop.”

Ray was manipulating me, but I fell for it. Since retiring from teaching, I had been living out a lifelong fantasy—running an antique store. The hardest part of selling antiques is finding the damned things. Suddenly I could imagine the students inviting me over to look at Grandpa’s sea chest, at Great-aunt Laetitia’s sewing dummy. I gave a reckless laugh.

“The only course I’d consider teaching would be a gay-lit course. That’s what I couldn’t do in the city.”

Ray had given me another mild look and changed the subject.

A young man with fluffy sideburns under a blue Civil War cap handed me the class chit. The rest of his outfit was also vaguely military, though I spotted the edge of a beaded vest. He looked at me with wide brown eyes, unsmiling. *This* country person didn’t look so sweet, though he gave off a sexy glow. His name was Cornelius Graef.

Yes, I’d proposed the course as a lark, an after-dinner joke, but a few days later Ray had called back. “I talked to John Sterling at school. Would you write up a proposal for a gay-lit course? He’d like to get it approved—on a non-credit basis.”

I hung up the phone quite stunned. I’d meant it when I said I wanted to get away from all that—not only from teaching but from the old preoccupations. Too much despair, too many deaths. Besides, a new literature was being born, post-AIDS, coming from

the generation after me. Did I really have anything to say about it?

Daniel Boone was standing in front of me. Where did these people get their clothes? Maybe I should expand the antique-clothing department in my shop. (“Care to see something in a designer deerslayer, sir?”)

Daniel Boone’s name was Nicolas Hillebrant. He was seriously handsome, powerfully built. “Question, sir.” Greenish eyes played over me, calmly judging.

“Have a seat, Nicolas, we’ll have questions later.”

He didn’t stir. He was beyond taking orders from teachers. “I have no money for books. I hope they won’t be required.”

“We’ll discuss that in a few minutes, if you don’t mind.”

Nicolas turned at last, looking disgusted, and sat down next to Cornelius. They were friends apparently. I felt an old vulnerability stab at me—if I wasn’t careful I’d give them too much attention, work for their approval, even flirt with them. My palms started to sweat. There were unexpected pitfalls in teaching a gay class.

The rest of the students straggled in. There were two more women—Millie Herkimer and Teage Dane—looking butch and paired, in short hair, work shirts, slacks. There was Israel Solomon, an elderly man with a pouter-pigeon figure and clouds of cottony hair. He took the front seat eagerly—a red-hot, as we used to say in grad school. The remaining two—William Astbury and Bradford Gower—were pale youths, no more than twenty, both afflicted with shyness. They slunk, more or less, to the back seats.

I waited for more latecomers. Eight pairs of eyes studied me. Not friendly, not unfriendly, just waiting. Maybe the sweetness would come later, I thought.

I began the introduction as planned. Michael Littman, formerly of New York, now of Livingston. Please call me Michael. I had never given a course like this. I owned the Den of Antiquity on Route 22. We would explore together. I would need their help. We

would be reading and discussing selections from several thousand years of gay and lesbian literature.

I paused for questions. Nicolas Hillebrant spoke up. "I have no money to buy books, Michael. Neither does he." He jerked his head at Cornelius. A few others murmured in agreement.

"I'll either circulate my own books, borrow extra copies, or make Xeroxes. You won't have to buy anything."

A little relaxation—legs spread forward, sighs released, glances exchanged. It had been a problem for everyone. "Let's talk about the material," I began. "Also what periods interest you—classical, medieval, nineteenth-century, modern." I paused. "I'd like to make the course as democratic as possible."

Cornelius Graef spoke up. "Did any of them write about war, comrades-in-war, that stuff?"

I mentioned Whitman and the Civil War diaries, *Billy Budd*, then worked back to *Amis and Amile* and the Theban Band. Cornelius's face lit up. "You're gonna give us all them?" He smiled at Nicolas. *They're lovers*, I thought.

Millie Herkimer, the older of the two butch women, asked if there were stories about women living in the countryside. At first I could think only of May Sarton, then recalled *Patience and Sarah*. I sketched the tale, and her eyes glittered.

Gradually everyone spoke up. Their interests varied. The Bible, Oscar Wilde, Sappho, South Sea natives. The women liked poetry; the men wanted true stories. Only Israel Solomon was interested in political essays.

At last, when we had more or less settled on the shape of the course, which would meet once a week for twelve weeks, I asked them why they had signed up. Their reasons tended to be vague. Indeed, many of their comments were bewildering.

"People around here won't talk." Emilia Quinn shifted her bulk in the ridiculous child's seat. "Pretend they didn't hear you and clam up if they do."

William Astbury in the back spoke up. "We hear things've

changed, but you'd never know it in the valley. They keep us in the dark."

I wondered who was keeping whom in the dark, but I said nothing. Millie Herkimer took her girlfriend's hand. "We want to borrow some of that pride."

We broke up early. Israel Solomon walked me out to my car, informing me that he hadn't sat in a classroom for forty years, had run the apothecary shop in Livingston all his life, and was now retired. The shop, he said, had been founded by his grandfather. Israel had modernized the place but finally sold out to August Hardwick, the present owner.

He hesitated, shuffled, leaned into the car after I got in. He wanted to tell me something else but couldn't quite manage. Well, there'd be plenty of time. I'd probably hear everyone's story before we were done.

As I drove off I saw them all standing in a knot by the road in front of the building. When I waved, eight hands shot up. A surge of hope and, yes, sweetness barreled across the space. A ball formed in my throat. There were pitfalls, but there were pleasures, too.

During the following week, I looked up every time my shop bell jangled, hoping it would be a student, but no one showed. In fact, the bell rarely rang. My one sale consisted of a pine blanket chest, the milk-based paint still intact, which brought \$135 from a New York dealer.

Only one event reminded me of my class—near Putnamville I saw a sign pointing to the Herkimer School. Ray Stonington informed me it was a home for problem kids—part reform school, part psychiatric hostel. No doubt a member of Millie's family was involved in some way.

The following Tuesday six Bibles were produced on my instructions—most of them small, old, and giving off musty smells. We started on Genesis 19, which most of them knew. After we got through with the fire and brimstone, I started on some of the new

theories. The sin of Sodom might be inhospitality to strangers. "That we may know them" could be interpreted in many ways. The dogma of several thousand years was being questioned nowadays.

They hardly stirred as I spoke, their eyes wide. When I finished, Israel raised his hand. "They taught us that if a man lieth with another man as with a woman, that's an abomination."

Cornelius sputtered. "That's just a slander."

"There are no Sodomites," Nicolas chimed in. "There never were."

"We need new words then," Teage Dane said.

"Let's call ourselves squinchies and frimsters." It was Bradford Gower in the back row. Everyone hooted.

By the time the discussion ended, we were one awareness, one crew aboard the good ship *Revision*. The notion of unlocking minds had lured me into teaching twenty years before, but I had never released excitement like this.

After class, everybody bustled into the hall with me, still throwing out ideas. Emilia Quinn took my arm—her eyes fiery, her hair damp across her forehead. "You should have come up here a long time ago, Michael. Everything would have been different."

"A lot of things had to happen first."

"Well, thank God they did." She squeezed my arm.

I left them, as before, in a knot in front of the building. I wondered if they would walk home. More likely a van would pick them up. Livingston was loaded with vans.

As I drove home I speculated about their living arrangements. The class chits hadn't listed home addresses and we hadn't given any personal histories yet. A new thought struck me. Could there be a commune tucked in the hills around here, something left over from the sixties? That would explain the costumes, the occasional swap of odd decorations. It would also explain their ignorance. I pictured them reading *Godey's Ladies Book* and Mark Twain by kerosene lamp—an oddly gratifying image.

My thoughts moved on to the Herkimer School. Millie said her

father's sister, her aunt Millicent, had started it as a seminary for young ladies. Millie didn't seem surprised when I told her about its conversion to a home for juveniles—her family had sold it years ago. She only smiled when I informed her I was going to take some of the school's antique fixtures on consignment. She said they should fetch a good price.

Now, turning into my own driveway, I was filled with contentment. I recalled my old habits, lying awake in the New York night, converting the screech of fire engines and ambulances into something more harmonious—the rattle of coaches, the echoes of post horns. Those fantasies always produced sleep. Now they were all around me—in my shop, the countryside, the classroom.

I unlocked the front door. I had just four rooms on one floor, not fully furnished yet, but I was more settled than I had ever been on Thirteenth Street. For a moment, coming in, I had the crazy notion that some of the original air from 1819 had been trapped under the floorboards and I was actually inside the last century. Then I laughed, fixed myself a drink, and flicked on the TV.

Nobody had bothered to read the *Symposium* clear through, despite the trouble I had gone to in Xeroxing it. In fact, nobody even brought a copy to class. When I asked why, they got fascinated with the dust on the floor and molding on the walls. At last Emilia Quinn spoke up. "We like to hear you preach, Michael."

"She means lecture." Nicolas laughed. "You do really fine at that."

I started on responsibility, the contract between student and teacher, then decided to can it. If they didn't want to read I'd preach. They must have seen the surrender in my face, because they settled back, grinning.

By the time I got into my favorite passage, everyone was paying close attention. "For they love not boys, but intelligent beings," I read from the Jowett translation, "whose reason is beginning to be developed, much about the time at which their beards begin to

grow. And in choosing young men to be their companions, they mean to be faithful to them and pass their whole life in company with them, not to take them in their inexperience and deceive them. . . . And observe that open loves are held to be more honorable than secret ones, and how great is the encouragement which all the world gives to the lover.”

A pause. The words, so simple and so radical, did their work. I could feel a chunk of the twentieth century breaking off and dissolving.

“That’s very interesting, yessir.” Israel Solomon was mashed down, quivering, in his seat. He half turned around. “Some of you remember David. David Whitmore.” He looked up at me again, breathing hard. “He was just that, my companion for life. But he didn’t realize it.” A strange sound came from his chest. “I’m not sure I did either.”

I put down the Plato. Here it was.

Israel and David had been classmates in Albany, both studying pharmacology. Then they had worked together in the drugstore founded by the first Mr. Solomon. But in a long lifetime Israel hadn’t told his friend how he felt. “There was once,” he said, “when David was sick—meningitis, very common in those days—when I almost did tell him. I thought it was my last chance. But his wife came in, and I lost my nerve.” Israel studied his hands for a moment. “If I’d known about Plato, I could have quoted him. It would have made everything, well, respectable.”

He closed down. Heavy, unsaid things washed around the room. I let the silence lengthen. Wasn’t this why we’d come together—to know our history, to make sure it didn’t happen again?

At last Emilia spoke softly. “It’s never too late to mend things, Israel.”

He didn’t reply. There was a scuffling of feet. Time to move on, I thought. Nothing can be changed, only corrected in the mind.

Israel came up after class and finished the story. David Whitmore hadn’t died of meningitis but of a fall two years later while climbing

Overlook Mountain. “So I had a second chance,” he concluded, “but I didn’t have the nerve then either. I sold the pharmacy. I didn’t want to work if David wasn’t there.”

I patted him lightly, resisting the urge to hug him. There’s nothing wrong with hugging, but it can’t undo a lifetime of secrecy. “Try reading the Xerox,” I said as I got into my car. “It’ll help.” He looked pleased and dubious at the same time. How could Plato help, really?

The drive to the Herkimer School took me through the center of my town. Downtown Livingston is only a few blocks long, but it offers all your basic services. I was interested in some extra-strength Tylenol. Last night had not been one of my better nights—due more to financial worries than to Israel’s history, however. The drugstore—now the Hardwick Rexall—had been established in 1912, according to the script on the window. I stepped back to check out the brick building. I wasn’t surprised to see a familiar name stamped on the iron plate just under the eave. *Solomon*. And below it, 1868.

A middle-aged man in a pharmacist’s jacket sold me the pills. “Mr. Hardwick?” I asked.

“That’s me, John Hardwick.”

I introduced myself. He had heard about the Den of Antiquity. He was glad to make my acquaintance. I started to tell him that I knew Israel Solomon, grandson of the Solomon upstairs, then checked myself. Hardwick might ask how we met. It wasn’t my job to yank Israel out of his hometown closet. I thanked him for the Tylenol and left, with a final glance at the plaque up top.

The Herkimer School was a rambling building in the Dutch style. Now it showed signs of abuse—torn screens, tar-paper patches, dying shrubs. It was as mismanaged as the lives of the boys within, I thought. The manager, an Irishman named Scully, with a varicose face and a slight limp, turned me over to the caretaker. As we descended to the basement of the main building it occurred to

me that my antique hunting always took me to places where people no longer lived.

The gem of the collection was a pewter chandelier, eight-branched, in good condition. I put the date at 1780–1790. There were also some light fixtures—tulips of amber glass, three to a stem, with rotted wiring, and an imitation Tiffany table lamp. Not a bad haul, I thought as we lugged the stuff upstairs.

I was waiting for the manager to reappear to sign the consignment papers, when I noticed the founder's plaque to one side of the front door. *The Herkimer Institute for Young Ladies*, read the florid script—an incongruous touch, considering the male adolescent snarls coming from upstairs. The first name on the plaque was faint, oxidized, but I managed to make it out—*Millicent Herkimer, Headmistress*. I pictured her as a tall maiden with a spine like a ruler and an immutable sense of right and wrong. Nothing like her confused niece. My eye ran down the names of the original faculty—each introduced with a cursive *Miss*—but I was interrupted by Mr. Scully. We chatted about the fixtures, my job being to keep his expectations low. Most people who consign antiques think they'll make a killing.

Again that night I had trouble getting to sleep, but not because of financial worry. I had convinced myself by bedtime that it was unrealistic to expect a shop to turn a profit the first year. Something else was tugging at a corner of my mind. Finally it let go of me, and I drifted off.

The class began to go more smoothly, even though their reading was patchy. I had the impression that one of the women—Emilia or Millie—read the text and did summaries for the others. We progressed from the Greek poets to the medieval ones, from Michelangelo to Shakespeare to Byron and Edward Carpenter. We managed Emily Dickinson, Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, and Gertrude Stein.

It was hard to catch them at their goofing off. At least one

member of the class was always up on the homework. Sometimes I caught references to materials not under discussion, which made me wonder if their reading was wider than they let on.

But one night, when it was apparent that only Teage Dane had read the Willa Cather story and that everybody was taking cues from her, I recalled my commune theory. “Do you all live together or something?”

Cornelius, usually so guileless-looking, coughed and turned away. Nicolas filled in. “We’ve known each other a long time.”

“It’s not a commune, is it?”

Emilia stared at me hard. “How did you know?”

I tried not to sound pleased. “It wasn’t that hard. The clothes, the way you always leave together, somebody does the coaching for the next class. Where is it?”

“Just off Sisleytown Road,” she replied.

I paused, expecting an invitation to visit. A slight unease swept through the room. “What do you grow?” I asked finally.

William Astbury piped up. “Timothy, sorghum, alfalfa, bluegrass.” He laughed briefly. “Plus a lot of weeds.”

“You sell it to the dairy farms around here?”

He nodded. “Or they pasture right on our land, though it’s against the bylaws.”

Well, that explained it. It might explain some other things too—their insularity, their timidity. “Don’t you miss traveling, seeing the cities?”

Millie Herkimer replied in a reproving voice. “Americans are one thing today and another thing tomorrow. We prefer a settled life in one place.”

Who was I to blame them? Hadn’t I taken refuge in the past, which was a community of sorts? The room was quiet. They were waiting, slightly embarrassed. I got the clear message that their urge to include me in their lives had been neutralized by something else. Were they growing a secret cash crop on that land of theirs?

They wouldn't be the first around here. Well, I might or might not find out eventually.

In the meantime, "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather was waiting. They took a dim view of Paul's suicide, once they heard about it.

Little by little, as the weeks went by, their stories came out. I kicked things off with my own. I told them about teaching in New York, my increasingly desperate search for a lover until, ten years before, when I was thirty-three, I'd met Tom Ritenour at a bar in Greenwich Village. They listened as I told about setting up house, our five years of fidelity, the difficult "open relationship" that followed, Tom's illness and death.

After this had been absorbed, Millie had a comment. "Maybe if you'd lived in the country, you would have been more content with each other." She glanced at her friend Teage. "Not so many temptations."

"Maybe so," I agreed. It was a moot point, and it didn't matter anymore.

Emilia Quinn weighed in next. She had lived with her mother. They took in summer guests—city people mostly. "So you see, Michael," she scolded, "we weren't as isolated as you like to think." She had a lover, a woman neighbor who managed her own farm and raised her children alone. But it had been difficult—not only the fear of gossip but the presence of the children and the elder Mrs. Quinn. At last her lover's farm had failed, the furnishings auctioned off, the place repossessed, and the woman herself committed to the state hospital at Wingdale.

"Our difficulty," Emilia said finally, brushing the tangle of dark hair from her eyes, "was fear. They were all lined up against us. We didn't know there had been others before, just like us."

I got a bright idea. "Why don't you bring your friend to class next week? If she can get a day release?" Emilia looked shocked. "She might learn something, feel better about herself."

Emilia took a deep breath. "It's too late for that, Michael." There

was so much death in her voice I let the matter drop. Everyone else chimed in to cover my stupidity.

It was the week we were doing *Maurice*, near the end of the course, that Nicolas, looking mischievous, produced a photo. He waved it around. "Recognize him?" I had no trouble. It was a sepia print, mounted on cardboard, of Cornelius Graef. Cornelius, a bewildered eighteen, was posed in a fake Civil War uniform, with a fake musket in his hand. I turned the photo over: "W. A. Reed, Artistic Photographer, Copying a Specialty, Negatives Preserved."

Nicolas let out a teasing chuckle. "We took it in Rensselaer one afternoon. There's a photographer who lets you strike old poses."

I gave the photo back. Nicolas kissed the bewildered young face. "I think he's embarrassed," he said.

Cornelius sank down in the seat, pulling the cap—maybe the same one—over his face.

"Try to think of Plato," Israel remarked. "An open love is more honorable than a secret one."

"Shove off, Israel."

"If Plato is beyond your grasp," Israel went on, "try to think about Edward Carpenter and George Merrill. Or Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas. Or Maurice and . . . what's his name."

Millie Herkimer clucked. "Cornelius, you were always a bad sport."

"Yeah?" The cap came off. "Why don't you tell your happy story, Millie?"

Millie flushed and turned away. But everyone was waiting.

"I was a teacher until a few years ago," she began.

"Like your aunt Millicent," I added.

She nodded. "A family weakness. But at school I met another teacher who forced me to face certain things." She reached over and touched Teage's hand. "I wasn't made for marriage, children, all that. It was my antagonism toward the opposite sex." She smiled apologetically. "Toward some of them anyway. We . . . this other

teacher and I . . . wrote several letters. The letters were discovered; we were both discharged." She paused. "So here we are, trying to understand what happened."

"The heterosexual dictatorship," Bradford Gower remarked. He had become quite fond of that phrase.

"Also the male dictatorship," Millie amended. "They often go together."

Nobody disputed that.

We broke early that evening. *Maurice*, for all its Edwardian passion, had paled beside the pain in the classroom.

When the final session rolled around, we were deep in December. The fields were rusty, the trees like frozen bolts of lightning. We had all pulled closer, huddling around the lives we discussed, drawing warmth from old passions. I hoped I had given them more than literature, though—courage maybe, or freedom. I asked for comments, suggestions, evaluations. But for some reason the old reserve was back tonight. The course had been "interesting," "informative." My suggestion that we all repair to the Maverick Inn for a last drink was met with an embarrassed shuffle. Finally, irritated, I asked point-blank what they'd gotten out of the course.

Bradford Gower broke the silence. "Now I won't be ashamed if people call me names." A nod from William Astbury. "We won't run away."

Emilia spoke next. "You've given us ammunition, Michael."

"Pride too, I hope."

Cornelius started to speak. I could feel the words forming, wild things under the moon, but he beat them back. Pride wasn't in his vocabulary—at least not yet—but he had tried.

When the class ended, each student filed forward to shake my hand. Teage Dane kissed my cheek, then pressed a few strawflowers in my hand—dry and lavender. I laughed and thanked her.

Outside they huddled against the cold, knotted up as usual, as I struggled with my ignition. I let the engine warm up as we traded a last long look. I was full of sadness. We would never be a group

again, never merge into a whole, examining prejudice, hunting justice. We might run into each other at fairs or auctions, but we'd never be a family again. It was the nature of every enterprise, I reminded myself, and might stand for the impermanence of all human connection. Still, as I drove off with a final wave, I felt a lash of the old rage. Why must all meetings end in parting? This was another, muted version of Tom's death. *Goodbye*, I thought, is the saddest word in the language.

I was due at Ray Stonington's for dinner the next night—a small celebration to mark the end of the course, he'd said. I was grateful. Even if the students had vetoed the idea of a party, Ray had come through. I really didn't want to be alone, not even inside my favorite year, 1819.

I drove carefully into Ray's driveway—he'd just put in more bluestone. Maybe, I thought, heading up the walk, I'd give the course again. Do it better next time—different selections, sharper commentary. But, luckily, I spotted this as a fantasy, a bad habit from the old days. Courses often got worse instead of better. And these students, for all their quiriness, had given all they had to give. I had no complaints.

Ray had other guests: a young stage designer visiting for the week; the real-estate agent who had sold Ray his house; an assertive middle-aged woman named Jane Snow, who was helping Ray plan a garden of eighteenth-century produce—not an appetizing idea, I thought, unless you liked gourds.

We talked a little about my course. Ray had filled them in before I arrived. "You were right," I said to Ray at one point. "They were sweet country people. But it was harder to get to know them than I thought."

"That's often the way." Ray removed his glasses and rubbed one eye. "But once you know each other, it's for life."

I laughed. "I hope so."

It was a typical evening at Ray's—good food, good company, and everybody had to wear a lady's hat to dinner. "That's a Lily

Daché,” Ray said approvingly when I chose a snappy little number in black velvet with an eye veil. “It would have cost you a fortune in 1940.”

We were still at table, lingering over coffee, when Ray passed around his latest treasure, found in a box of miscellanea purchased at auction. It was a photo of his own house, before the north wing had been added. “I can date it quite easily,” he said. “About 1895. They’d already cleared the land for the new wing.”

It was sepia, with a familiar border. Something stirred in me and I turned it over. “W. A. Reed, Artistic Photographer, Copying a Specialty . . .” and the street address in Rensselaer.

I let out a whoop. “One of my students just had his picture taken there.”

Ray looked disapproving. “Somebody’s pulling your leg, Michael. That place closed fifty years ago. There’s a Burger King there now.”

The next instant a shudder went through me, and the knowledge uncoiled from the place it had been waiting. *Teage Dane’s name was on the founder’s plaque at the Herkimer Institute.* I had seen but not seen. Everything else fell into place. Israel Solomon had sold his store to the Hardwick family in 1912, the year his friend David died. The farm woman at the state hospital couldn’t visit our class because she was no longer there. Cornelius Graef had been snapped in a studio by a photographer who mounted his pictures in the style of the day.

I tried to pay attention after that, but it was difficult. My head was buzzing, and my palms were wet. I left as soon as I could, apologizing for my behavior. “That’s okay, Michael,” Ray said at the door. “We know you teachers are hopeless when you lose your precious students.”

I drove the little car as fast as it would go. A half-moon was climbing as I parked on the shoulder of Sisleytown Road. Luckily, the stones faced west. I’d be able to read them.

It took me a while, but finally I came to the last row. I had

collected them all, every one. “Okay,” I said aloud, the wind whipping my voice, “why didn’t you tell me?”

I walked back to Cornelius’s grave, then ran my hand over the granite marker, touching the dates. All except Emilia and Israel had died young. Why? Suddenly I knew—and also why they had disapproved so harshly of Willa Cather’s Paul.

Snow began to drift down. *They died of the plague, I thought, and the plague was ignorance.* Maybe that was the worst of all, because it brings darkness to a living soul.

Snow settled inside my collar. I hunched down, into myself, as far as I could go.

But they had overcome it, because all plagues end sooner or later. There’s no telling how or when, but they end.

It was too cold to stay out now. I turned and walked back to the car. The moon shone through the brightness, illuminating the stones. I got in, started the engine, and drove home, thinking about the course I would give next time.

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FIDELITIES

Richard Hall was a novelist, an acclaimed short-story writer, and a widely produced playwright. He was book editor of *The Advocate* from 1976 to 1982 and the first openly gay critic to be elected to the National Book Critics Circle. His landmark essay, "Gay Fiction Comes Home," was the front-page article in *The New York Times Book Review* in June 1988, and his reviews have also appeared in *The New Republic*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Village Voice*. His *Family Fictions: A Novel* is also published by Penguin. Richard Hall died of AIDS-related complications in October 1992.

