

Mitch's Jacket

Brian Allan Skinner

Mitch hadn't spoken in a couple years. I can still hear his voice, though: deep and slow and dreamy, like the host of the all-night jazz radio station. I don't remember exactly when he stopped talking. Me and a couple of buddies tried to piece it together. It was gradual, slow as summer sunset. He had less and less to say, and one day the silence became loud enough to hear.

Nobody wanted to push Mitch on it. He looked at us, clearly knew what was going on, and smiled at the right times. He handed out backslaps and handshakes and bought his share of beers. It was nobody's business but Mitch's why he didn't speak. He was never a talker even when he spoke.

But that didn't mean Mitch didn't communicate. He spoke through his leather biker jacket. He'd managed to make that jacket speak in squeaks and creaks and low groans. Anyone could understand what his jacket was saying. Sometimes, though, his reactions were a little off: like there was a time lag or like the questions were being answered by an impersonator.

Mitch moved his upper arms against his sides or his forearms against his chest or belly. He'd twist his torso into a variety of positions to get the desired syllable or inflection from the jacket. He spoke slowly, but could become animated to the point that his quirky fits and starts suggested an epileptic seizure. Old Charlie thought maybe Mitch'd had a stroke and that's why he'd stopped speaking.

It was creepy the first few times Mitch spoke to us through his biker jacket. As I grew more used to talking to his jacket and receiving cogent replies, I realized how nuanced the leathery words were. I guess maybe it wasn't so different from his real voice: leather worn soft and pliable and comfortable.

Newcomers were the most fun, especially Columbia students or professors. We'd coax Mitch with a couple of boilermakers to say something to them and we'd all try to keep straight faces. Most figured it was belly-talking, you know, ventriloquism, or some nano or implant. If they stumbled into *The Gripevine* a second time when Mitch was there, it dawned on them it was the black leather jacket talking. They'd buy the whole bar—what was left of the old-timers as well as us new regulars—a round of beers. Mitch was a good guy to have around.

Most of us were bikers, some queer, most not, but nobody was sure about Mitch. It was nobody's business. Mitch had a close pal that roomed with him for as long as anyone remembered. I never saw him hang around with anyone else, man or woman. But women didn't hang out at *The Gripevine*, and that was the only place I ever saw Mitch, so there were no conclusions to be drawn. Once I saw him take something out of his buddy Kevin's back Levi's pocket, a key, something small and metallic, maybe a pocketknife. It seemed a little familiar, that's all, groping his buddy's ass that way.

A couple weeks back Mitch burst into the bar soaked to the skin. It had been raining all day, but to get that wet, he'd have had to have been on a bike, and the only bike I ever saw him on, always hanging on the back, was his buddy Kevin's. And Kevin was dead: died in a crash on the Sawmill in a thunderstorm, about two years ago.

The bartender and a couple others got Mitch out of his engineer boots and his jacket. The water poured out of his boots. The guys propped him up, stretched between two chairs near the only radiator in the joint, and we tossed our jackets and hoodies over him. He shook as though a low-voltage current were running through him. Two Jacks later, he calmed down, but without his jacket he was dumb as a stone. Even his coughs and sneezes were silent.

Rolled into the sleeves of the leather jacket were half-a-dozen watercolor sketches that slipped out as the jacket dripped. They were smeared at the edges where the rainwater had seeped into them. As I stooped to pick the sketches up, a couple weak gasps came from Mitch. Their tone cautioned me, and I placed the drawings in his lap atop the pile of clothes.

Gently, gingerly, Mitch unfurled the drawings and angled them towards the cluster of us at the end of the bar. Each watercolor was a picture of clouds, towering clouds with dark bellies: thunderstorm clouds. He shuffled them a few more times, looking at them intently and slowly. He settled on one and placed it atop the stack. I guess it had been my favorite, too.

Mitch shut his eyes. Maybe the other guys thought he was dozing off, but I saw he was fighting back tears. A couple of them escaped from beneath his lashes and rolled down to his chin. I heard one of the fat drops splat onto the sketch. The others seemed not to hear it.

I can't figure out why I hadn't connected the dots earlier. Mitch's buddy Kevin died right about the time Mitch went mute. I didn't think I should share this observation with the others, with those who knew Mitch and his buddy. Wouldn't be the first time I was accused of having an overactive imagination. More than that, sharing my notion seemed like intruding on Mitch's private life: like watching a couple banging in the backseat of a Buick, unable to turn away even though I'd seen that—and plenty more—before.

* * *

It was more than a week after his soaking before Mitch returned to the bar. His voice, the voice of his jacket, was cracked and hoarse: what you'd expect from someone caught in the rain in November. He still looked chilled: hunched over and quavering as though stirred by an imperceptible breeze. We didn't push him.

* * *

In time the stiff leather softened again, but the voice of the jacket did not. Monosyllables became his standard reply. Mitch no longer had anything to say to those who wandered in off the

street, either. We could not induce him with either booze or drugs, even pinwheels and wiggies, to get in on a little fun at their expense. He became dull as a preacher. Stool by stool, his congregation drifted toward the opposite end of the bar where mischief still prevailed. I felt bad for Mitch. I knew it was coming up on the anniversary of his buddy's getting smeared all over the parkway. So I sat next to him.

“How's goin'?”

Mitch shrugged his wide shoulders, not a peep coming from the jacket. I heard a high-pitched buzz, like music from some goddamned device. Worse, it was the latest fad: all that squeaking, freaking falsetto crap like *Farinelli's Balls* or *Lorena's Knife*. I'd never known Mitch to break or even flout any of our taboos against nanos.

“What gives?”

In a booming bass he said, “Mitch feels like singing.” Only he sang it, melodically and smoothly. Only it wasn't coming from him. Mitch's jacket was singing.

From the basement to the attic—staccatos and trills, notes and two-note chords—Mitch's jacket serenaded us. Everyone gathered around him like nuts and bolts pulled to a magnet. He told us he was feeling better and would like a drink, or maybe two. “A Jack for starters,” he sang. It was actually beautiful—and moving. Bill Wilson himself couldn't have refused him that drink. And there was no one present who was going to let him pay for it. Old Charlie stepped up to the plate first.

“That double-note stuff you do, it's like Tuvan throat singing.”

Leave it to Old Charlie to get us all scratching our heads.

“It ain't me,” Mitch sang twice, while at the same time we heard, “It's the jack-et singing,” from a higher register, matching the tempo note for note.

Old Charlie motioned to Wesley, the bartender, who understood the gesture. A second Jack appeared in Mitch's hand. He sipped the whisky slowly, while the jacket chanted its thank-yous: like a vaudeville ventriloquist drinking a glass of water while the dummy chattered.

It was not long before the requests for Mitch to perform this or that tune ensued, commissioned with more Jack Daniel's, until Mitch could no longer put two notes or two words together. He murdered “When Enough's Not Enough.” When at last he resorted to ordinary speech, the nuts and bolts slipped away as though Mitch's magnet had been turned around.

I huddled in closer to him, until our shoulders touched. I was a little worried, I guess. I felt him swaying on the stool as though moving to music only he heard. Then I realized he was

simply drunk swaying, walking the deck in a high sea. I reached out and grabbed his right shoulder. I think if I hadn't, he'd have toppled right off the stool, head first.

“Whoa! Steady as she goes. Thar she blows.” Mitch's jacket slurred every bit of nonsense he sang. A gust of laughter from the other end of the bar—nothing to do with Mitch—drowned it out.

I knew the building he lived in on Riverside Drive and insisted on getting him home. The jacket sputtered something it was easy to ignore. I waved to the guys. They seemed oblivious.

Normally, I would have taken him on my Harley, but I didn't think he could've stayed on my bike if it was parked. Four blocks or so wasn't too far, though Mitch's condition didn't make it easy to hold him upright. I wrapped his right arm round my neck and put my left arm around his waist. It took a while to coordinate my zigs with Mitch's zags. I'm sure those we passed couldn't tell who was holding up whom. I wondered if anyone thought we were a couple.

Wouldn't you know it: less than a block from *The Gripevine* the sky opened up, spilling cold rain in torrents. What was it with this guy? He was like a lightning rod for rain. A cab splashed us with a wall of water as we crossed Broadway, and we were thoroughly soaked before going another crooked block. The cold water poured down my neck and spine and found its way down to my ass crack, only slightly warmer by then. Soon my boots were squishing. Mitch was getting harder to hang onto. I pulled him closer.

Two more blocks and we made it to Mitch's building. The rain gave us one last lashing before I got us into the revolving door. At least there was no room inside the door to fall down. But as soon as our compartment opened onto the lobby, Mitch went sprawling, sliding halfway across the slippery marble floor. We'd formed our own pond. I tried to yank him up by his rear pockets, but succeeded only in losing my balance and landing on top of him. Anyone wandering in then would have quickly drawn the wrong conclusion.

I thought Mitch was choking and rolled him over so I could administer CPR—or what I remembered of it. He sputtered a few times as I kneeled over him and I realized he was giggling. It made me angry at first, but then I became helpless not to laugh myself. We swam across the wet floor to the elevator where we hauled ourselves upright on the handrails inside the car. Mitch held up five fingers and then four fingers and I pushed the button.

As the car accelerated, Mitch slipped gently to the floor. He heaved with gusts of laughter. The door opened and I picked up his ankles, pulling him out on his ass like a rickshaw. Some old woman in a frumpy robe stood a few feet away in the hallway, wagging her head.

“There goes the neighborhood,” Mitch sniggered. Or his jacket did. But his leather jacket was sopping wet. I wasn't sure how he'd made it talk.

The woman looked up at me as though I was the one who'd said it and gave me the finger. Then she toddled off and slammed her door. It echoed like a gunshot.

I had to urge Mitch to his own door without somehow steering him to the wrong one. I felt like the jerk at a party who was trying to control the Ouija *gnomon*. Old Charlie taught me that one. Comes up in crosswords a lot.

We stopped at the third door. Mitch swayed back and forth as he tried getting his hand into the pocket of his wet Levi's. I came up behind him and, reaching around him, shoved my hand into the tight pocket. I was in a hurry to get warm—and dry. I felt for a key and came to realize what the other item in his pocket was. By fumbling around, I was stroking his hard-on. More giggling. I pulled my hand out with difficulty, but I had the key. I found the light and got us safely to the bathroom. I don't know how I didn't get us electrocuted on the wall switch.

The only safe place for Mitch was on the floor, propped against the old claw-foot bathtub. By the time I got him and me out of our leather jackets and boots, Mitch was no longer interested in cooperating. He just wanted to sleep, and slouched the rest of the way to the floor. It was toasty from the riser pipe, but I couldn't leave him on the tile floor in his wet clothes.

I was more than toasty after stripping Mitch out of his Levi's and longjohns and socks. I was quite hot, in fact. I found I was getting a little bit hard after the exertion. I was not too surprised. I'd fantasized a long while about what Mitch looked like under his snug, nicely-worn jeans and enjoyed countless scenarios concerned with getting him out of them. But this one had never occurred to me. Somehow it was far sexier than all the others—all the ones I'd made up.

* * *

It was nearly midnight and I realized I'd be spending the night. Mitch lay naked on the sofa with the quilt from the bed doubled over him, only his face visible. I found a pair of longjohns and an old denim shirt slung over a chair in the bedroom. It made me hard all over again, putting on Mitch's clothes. I'd just sat down in a stuffed chair opposite the sofa with a steaming mug of Cup-O-Soup, the last item of food I'd found in his kitchen. A little Tabasco might have livened it up, but there was none. I heard snuffling and stirring from the sofa.

"That was left by the previous tenant," came the voice from somewhere inside the quilt.

But if Mitch was naked, who was speaking? Was I dreaming? I shot up, nearly baptizing Mitch with the fowl water.

"Steady as she goes, matey," he sang. His dimples emerged. They always got to me.

I had to laugh. Mitch sat up, half covering his middle with a corner of the quilt.

"Yeah, it's me talking," he said. "How'd I get naked?"

“I took your wet clothes off. How long have you been able to talk?”

“You? How’d I get wet? Since I was about eighteen months old.”

“You don’t remember? The thunderstorm.” Our conversation struck me as somehow Tuvan. “I meant recently.”

“No, I was pretty young. I took you for straight, I guess. What recently?”

“Let’s start over,” I said.

“OK. I’m hungry,” Mitch replied. “Let’s order take-out.”

I liked his approach to starting over.

“It’s a halal place down in the Village. But they’re very fast getting here. And always good—and cheap. They’ve spoiled me. That’s why I never keep food at home.”

I found it difficult to believe I was hearing Mitch speak. His voice was warm and deep, a little bit hushed: the tone of voice he’d use if he was rubbing my neck or my shoulders. He pushed aside the quilt and got up, nonplused by his nakedness and the fact that I was staring at him with my mouth open. Mitch walked a little unsteadily to the bedroom. “Gonna call in our order. Anything special?”

I shook my head. The living room was sparse and tidy; the furniture a bit scuffed, but polished. My eyes continued to roam. There were several odd metal sculptures, all rusty. Two smaller ones sat on the table, the rest reached up from the floor, like lamps without shades. Or maybe more like old-fashioned lightning rods.

Mitch returned in thermal longjohns and a faded hoodie, looking soft with wear and washing. He moved lithely, like... not like a dancer, exactly, but like someone who danced. I’d been studying his movements for a while, but found it hard to admit this, especially to myself. Was I falling for him? What had been in our drinks?

He spread the quilt out and sat down on the sofa, putting one leg under him. Then I saw the watercolor he’d shown us at *The Gripevine*, hanging over the sofa behind him, matted and framed, making it even more striking than I’d remembered. It was hard to look away. I was sure the clouds moved, folding into themselves and billowing out again without ever getting larger than the frame. The sky behind them changed, too. I had lost track of time. It was a... a... water and air... and light... fire and wind... dark and dangerous... Where was the word?

“Thunderstorm!” I shouted. I was sure there was a flash in the clouds as I said the word. I felt as though I could be drawn into the picture if I didn’t hang onto something. I gripped the arms of the chair.

Mitch saw what I was looking at. He patted the sofa cushion, inviting me to sit next to him. My heart fluttered. Mitch had broken one spell and cast a new one. I turned on the cushion to face him, but glanced sideways now and again, keeping an eye on the watercolor.

“It’s a weird drawing,” he said. “Kind of pulls you in. They all do.”

I nodded. “That’s the one you showed us the other night, right?”

“One of them, yeah. They all came from a neighbor down the hall, a strange old guy named Bill. He was a bit of a pack rat, a hoarder, you know. Drawings and sketches everywhere. No room for anything else. All clouds, every last one. Cabinets full of them, all labeled.”

I became convinced that while the cloud picture behind us was getting bigger, the sofa had become shorter.

“Bill invited me and Kevin in once to pick out a few of his duplicates. Didn’t have a clue how he could tell he had doubles. He said we could have the ones we’d chosen when he pegged out. But all his stuff ended up in a dumpster, several dumpsters.”

Mitch’s bare feet pressed against my thigh. He gradually insinuated them between my butt and the sofa cushion, keeping them warm, no doubt. The gesture seemed unconscious. The radiator had grown cold. He wiggled his toes. I could not concentrate on what he was telling me.

“That last dumpster didn’t have a tarp over it. I realized whose stuff it was and went scavenging. My God. All those drawings in the other dumpsters—gone. It started raining. I leaned in to save a few of them and, right in front of my face, was a folder marked *Kevin & Mitch* with the ones we’d picked out. The rain grew harder. I rolled the drawings up and tucked them into my sleeves. You know the rest.”

“Hardly,” I remarked. The sofa wasn’t much longer than a love-seat. My hand now reached to Mitch’s far shoulder. My heart skipped when I thought of touching his slightly longish brown hair. I did it. He acknowledged the gesture but seemed unfazed. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I didn’t know what the hell was going on.

“Me and Kevin had a thing about thunderstorms. Maybe it was their raw power, male power, and the fact that they could kill you. He’d pull over and we’d run into a park, dancing under a tree and then into the middle of the field, getting soaked. And horny. I don’t know if I liked the getting cold and wet or the getting warm and dry more. Both, I guess.”

I felt my stomach growl and I’m sure Mitch heard it. I didn’t care about Kevin. He was dead. I was right there.

“Should be here soon,” Mitch said, patting my thigh. It was consoling. He seemed unmindful of the gesture and the electricity it sent through my leg to the base of my spine.

I looked into his eyes. They changed color and intensity like the sky in the cloud picture. He was probably an ordinary-looking guy, but I don't remember finding anyone more handsome. I felt drawn closer to him: a bolt to the magnet. Then a cloud passed across his face. His eyes swelled with tears.

"We'd been together since tech college. Welding: me the sculptor, him the biker and mechanic. I liked bikers, especially queer ones. There'd never been anyone else. I lived with him longer than I'd lived without him. This isn't how I pictured my life, without him."

"Me neither." Even I wasn't sure what I meant: maybe that I hadn't planned on being alone either. He sat so close I could feel his heat. The radiator pipe clanged. I looked for signs I was dreaming, but everything was just the usual strange, especially me.

The tears spilled past their gates and rolled down Mitch's cheeks. I dried them with the backs of my fingers, slowly and caressingly. His stubbly skin tickled the hairs on my fingers. More electricity. More flashes of lightning.

Mitch collapsed into my arms, resting his head against my chest. He rolled in between my legs and stretched out to his full length. I put my hand on his neck. I couldn't tell if I was getting an electric shock or sending one. They felt about the same. Maybe both at once.

I felt so completely comfortable, quiet, peaceful—at ease, I guess. I hadn't felt this right since I came from my mother. Our breathing became synched. Time could stop if it wanted to. I think I dozed off for a minute. Mitch nudged me.

"Don't be scared," he said.

"I'm not." I scoffed at him.

"I'm talking about the doorbell. It's really loud. It's going to ring."

Mitch got up from me and the sofa. The cold air rushed past the warm spots where Mitch had lain against me.

"I'm not afraid of doorbells, either."

A raucous, clanging bell—likely another of his metal creations—nearly spooked me out of my skin. It sounded like the robots' prison break. Mitch chuckled, and reminded me he'd warned me.

I jumped up from the sofa. "How'd you do it?"

He buzzed somebody in without asking who it was.

“I’m not sure, but I seem to need an antenna. I haven’t been able to do this since .. uh... Kevin died. I can’t read people, but if it’s anything electrical, I can feel it a mile before it gets here.”

I was going to ask him if people weren’t a little electrical, too.

Mitch opened the front door just as a good-looking young man, Middle Eastern, stepped across the threshold with a ridiculously tiny paper bag, way too small for a pair of hungry men. I liked how that sounded, but not how it felt. My heart sank.

“This is Habib’s nephew, Basim.”

“Uncle Habib sorry for you. He say it so late and he close kitchen. Can’t make supper. Sorry. But he ask his friend Shakti Pat. Shakti Pat say he feel nice tonight. Here.”

The kid, who had strikingly blue eyes, did indeed offer the tiny bag to Mitch. Mitch got some money from the window sill above the radiator where his wallet and its contents were drying out. My stuff was jumbled among his.

The boy bowed. Mitch took what looked like two fortune cookies from the white cardboard carry-out container. Something was scribbled on the side. Mitch bowed to the boy who smiled at both of us, turned, and left.

“Mmm. Steak and potatoes. Perfect. You must be as hungry as I am.” He held a fortune cookie in each hand behind his back.

I was first inclined to think Mitch was putting me on. Then I thought maybe he was a little deficient upstairs—not seriously, but that sometimes it showed. His enthusiasm was like a boy’s. I found myself thinking my choice mattered. Weren’t they both the same? I tapped his left upper arm. He was pretty solid. He held out his hand and smiled at me. God, he was handsome.

“Come on. Let’s have some supper.”

Mitch opened up the quilt and we crawled beneath it, facing each other, our legs alternating. His toes brushed against my privates a couple times before I realized it wasn’t accidental. I guessed Mitch didn’t even know he was doing it. But I got hard nevertheless.

“The question is always whether we eat the cookie first or read the fortune.”

“Let’s eat,” I said without hesitation.

We broke the fortune cookies open and set the folded paper slips on the back of the sofa. The cookie did indeed taste like steak and potatoes. Mitch cautioned me to go slow.

“It’s just as filling as the real thing,” he told me. He broke a little piece off his cookie and put it between my lips. He wiggled his toes as he leaned forward.

I felt so good: warm and contented and no longer hungry. I was enjoying the tingle of feeling horny, too. After finishing my fortune cookie, I was almost too full. It must have been something like astronaut’s rations. I waited for Mitch to finish his cookie.

Swiveling around on the sofa, I lay back against Mitch, putting my legs between his. He wrapped both arms around my chest and pulled me closer. Something was poking at my butt through my longjohns. I was so naive, at least as far as men were concerned. It should have been a cinch: Mitch was a man just like me. But I was making it complicated in my brain.

He took one arm away, again leaving a cold spot, as he reached for the paper fortunes. He handed me one and held the other in his hand, resting it against my chest. I wondered how he knew which one was mine.

“I just do,” he explained. It was no explanation at all. “You first.”

The paper was so thin I could see through it. The more I unfolded it, the larger and thinner it got, until it was the size of a dinner napkin. I stuffed it under my shirt.

“No peeking.” I scolded. Who was acting like a boy now? “Your turn.”

Mitch unfolded his fortune against my chest. I was almost certain he was playing with my nipples, but I wasn’t one hundred percent sure, so I let it pass. By the time he’d unfolded his fortune, it was just as wide and thin as mine. I was too close to make out anything but a circle and a couple of words, both kind of long. He held out his arm to show it to me and gave a little grunt. I brought it into focus: a circle with eight dots around it and more dots in the center, a bunch of them.

I turned my head to face him. My lips brushed against his cheek so I figured I might as well go ahead and kiss him. He purred, at least that’s what it sounded like to me.

“That’s an oxygen atom—well, a cartoon of one, anyway,” I told him. “And the ‘dihydrogen monoxide?’ That’s a fancy way of saying water. It’s something Old Charlie has fun with, especially on April Fool’s Day. You never heard him say it?”

“Nope.” Mitch said. “OK. Your turn.”

He began fumbling under my denim shirt. I found it tickled, and squirmed to get away from him. Had we been just a little more boyish, we would’ve been rassling on the floor.

“Don’t tear it,” I warned him.

“Not likely. Kevin used to wear it over his leather jacket when it was brand new to protect it from scuffs and scrapes. It’s like iron.”

Mitch realized too late I had meant for him to be careful of the paper fortune. He couldn’t take back what he’d revealed to me.

“Oh, man,” I said, putting my hand on his cheek and looking up at him. “I’m so sorry. They were just slung over the back of the chair. I thought the longjohns and shirt were yours.”

“It’s OK. They’d been there long enough. The world moved on. You look good in them. Sexy, dude. But you can’t distract me from having a look at *your* fortune.”

Mitch lifted his hands and I removed the fortune from under the.. under my shirt. I held it up. It was another line drawing, this one with two circles, each with two dots: one at the edge, one at the center. Underneath was written, “Hydroxilic Acid.”

Mitch laughed. Yes, his laugh was sexy. I hadn’t heard it that many times. It was mostly Mitch’s jacket that laughed.

“Our welding instructor used to warn us that hydroxilic acid corroded more steel than any other chemical compound.” He chuckled. “It’s also another name for water.”

“Wait,” I said. “Get up a minute.”

We put our feet on the floor and pulled the corners of the quilt over our shoulders. I took his paper fortune and aligned its edges with mine. I held them up to the lamp. The combined sketch showed a water molecule, it’s two hydrogen and one oxygen atoms, and two of its chemical names. We both laughed, like a couple of kids who’ve finally figured out how to do a magic trick.

“Leave it to good old Shakti Pat,” Mitch remarked, wagging his head as he got up.

He grabbed a corner of the quilt and marched toward the bedroom. I stepped on the opposite corner and stopped him in his tracks. I wanted to know what it meant.

“Shakti Pat is sly, that’s for sure. But I can’t tell you. You’ll figure it out. Let’s sleep on it. If you want to, I mean. But there’s only one quilt,” he said, yanking the quilt away from me and continuing into the bedroom.

It was another either-or moment about to branch into two alternate universes as Old Charlie would say. Thinking too much makes me hesitate. I picked up the train of the quilt and followed him.

Mitch rolled up the window shade. A warm light from the street lamps in the park shone in. He moved the two wooden chairs with our damp leather jackets on them a little further from the radiator. He stripped naked and climbed under the quilt. I fantasized about climbing in next to him, forgetting I no longer had to fantasize. I kept the... my longjohns on, though. Sliding in next to Mitch, feeling his warmth, I understood how hungry my skin was. I slipped out again and took off my longjohns. I spooned next to him and put my arm across his chest. Mitch purred.

I couldn't explain to myself why I hadn't made a move on Mitch—or at least given him a sly wink—before tonight. We'd huddled at the bar sharing stuff in our lives for uncounted hours over countless beers. We stood at the urinals next to each other and made each other short loans. He must know me as well as I know myself—which is maybe not so well after all. Why had he never asked me, for Pete's sake, if I was straight or queer. Why hadn't I asked myself? Why not until tonight? Why tonight?

I enjoyed the gentle rise and fall of Mitch's chest, felt his fur get caught in my fingers. Streaks of light and rain from the window spilled down the wall. It led me adrift, like watching the watercolor of the clouds. I recalled how we had read each other's fortunes without either of us asking if we wanted to share them. Two boys. I smiled.

Mitch rolled over the other way and I switched, too. It was my turn as the spoonee. He breathed on my neck and mumbled something, sounding like the voice of a damp leather jacket. He put his lips against the back of my neck but drifted off before he delivered that kiss. That was too cute, too. I returned to my reverie, feeling protected in his arms. It was clear we got along. He was easy to be with. And we had already shared our fortunes. What was left?

“Our lives and our sacred honor.”

I jerked awake, but didn't think I'd been asleep exactly. I couldn't tell if it was Mitch or his jacket that said it.

“Was that you?”

“Mmm humh.”

I still wasn't sure who'd said it. It probably didn't matter.

* * *

I awoke with a start the next morning, too, not quite recalling the layout of the room where I'd fallen asleep. But I remembered it was Saturday, and ducked back beneath the covers.

“Come on, lazy bones. It's the crack of noon.”

Mitch pinched my butt and gave me a poke, I wasn't quite sure with what part of him. I slipped from under the quilt and sat at the edge of the bed. We stood up at the same time.

After sleeping naked with Mitch, very little of my self-consciousness remained. We stood together at the toilet and then climbed into the old claw-foot bathtub. He shielded me from the spray of water until it turned warm. It felt like rain from heaven. It smelled like real rain, too: scoured by wind and lightning, not chemicals.

We took turns in front of the showerhead, scrubbed each other's back, and lingered over regions and details of each other's body. Mitch had nothing I lacked, but it seemed I'd never observed male anatomy before, never caressed it with either eyes or fingers, never explored its varied terrain, even my own. But I knew what I liked.

Mitch did, too. He stroked me under the stream of water. His rhythm was not mine. It was... languorous: lots of time, all the time needed for me to be aware of everything, to feel everything. He touched me everywhere at once and when I came the explosion was in every atom of me, every molecule of water, every... where. I thought the top of my head would blow off. I didn't think I could stand.

He gripped my shoulders to steady me; his hard-on slid against my thigh. I knew if I thought about it for longer than ten seconds, I'd talk myself out of returning the favor. The court would provide plenty of evidence that I hadn't a clue what I was doing. In fact, they'd show I didn't even know who I was.

But I did know who I was. And I wanted to please my buddy, to pleasure him, to make him sing and shout. I didn't need any other qualification than that I was a man. I knew how it felt. I knew how to touch because I knew how I wanted to be touched.

I didn't know if my pressure and rhythm would flip Mitch's switch, but it didn't seem I was hurting him. He offered no instruction. He closed his eyes and seemed to drift up into the clouds of steam. He purred; that's the word I had for it. I stood behind him, rubbing against his backside as I stroked, like rowing a ship, like steering it, my hand upon the rudder. I wanted to take him up to the cloud tops, sail above them. I wanted to touch him with the lightning.

Mitch shuddered as though he'd received an electric shock, wave after wave of it as he spurted into the stream of water. His mouth was open, but he seemed dumbstruck. I held onto him as he came, feeling the throbbing, enjoying the power of it, the power I had unleashed. We rested a moment under the showerhead, face to face, arms around each other. He burbled water and made funny noises.

"My God, man. Was that tantra or kundalini?"

"Yes, it was," I replied, not having a clue what Mitch was taking about except that I had made him feel good. That made *me* feel good, call it what you will.

* * *

Mitch and I spent the rest of the day lolling around. We got half-dressed in our longjohns, talked on the sofa, went back to bed. We got up again, put on our Levi's, sprawled on the couch, rolled on the floor, took another shower. The idea of food never came up. I think we were both still full from the fortune cookies. He got me to come two more times, something I had never achieved before in a single afternoon. I had no idea where it was all coming from. Tit for tat, I got Mitch off an equal number of times.

Round about five o'clock, as the sky darkened again, we got all the way dressed and thought maybe we'd go out for a bite and then head over to *The Gripevine*. Our boots and the lining of our leather jackets remained only slightly damp. Mitch had me wear his jacket and, while I normally freeballed until it got really cold, I wore the longjohns he'd given me under my Levi's. I wasn't even sure those were mine. I knew only that I liked being around him, watching him move, listening to him talk, seeing him smile. Those dimples.

We stopped at the soup place on Broadway. We were lucky it was an all-you-can-eat joint because we really packed it away. Mitch poured enough soup into his stomach that I thought his legs must be hollow. But I was only one bowl behind him—or maybe two. I'm sure we ate up their profits, as well as all their crackers.

Heading down Broadway toward *The Gripevine*, we heard a rumble overhead and looked up: nothing too threatening. Mitch put his arm on my shoulder and we picked up the pace.

"I still want to know how you could tell last night's thunderstorm was coming. You pegged it almost exactly right," Mitch said.

"I didn't know. How *would* I know?"

"You let on less than is actually going on inside. Is it going to rain again?"

"Of course. But not tonight."

Mitch dropped his arm as we got to the tavern. I think it was simply so that we could fit through the narrow door. But my stomach had been going up and down in an elevator since we left the soup guy's place. I was nervous about what the other guys might think of our waltzing in together. All these years we'd known each other and not once did Mitch and I leave at the same time or come in the door together. Nope. Not once. Until last night.

The regular group of fogeys and bikers had gathered at the far end of the bar and they glanced up. Old Charlie walked over to us, a beer in each hand, as though he'd been expecting us at just that moment.

“We wondered whether you guys were ever going to find each other,” Old Charlie cracked, handing us the beers before we’d even sat down.

The guys waved and smiled and carried on their conversations as though Mitch and I were a minor distraction about which there was nothing remarkable. Old Charlie motioned for us to come over and join them. I raised my beer to salute them.

The light above the bar shone through my beautiful amber beer, illuminating the perfect billowing head of foam. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. Clouds and foam, tall clouds, towering clouds, weightless, ever-changing, sky-ships floating over a limitless sea, all filled with light, golden light and...

“Water,” I shouted, stunned by the sudden revelation. “It’s about water,” I told Mitch. “Water brought us together and water will hold us together. Water! Water!” I loved saying the word.

Mitch smiled his biggest grin with the deepest dimples.

Old Charlie squinted at me, scrunching his wayward eyebrows together. “None of that in here, son,” he cautioned me, and broke into a routine of his I hadn’t heard in a while.

“Water is the strong stuff,
it carries whales and ships.
But water is the wrong stuff,
don’t let it get past your lips.
It rots your boots
and wets your suits,
puts aches in all your bones.
Dilute the stuff with whiskey,
aye, or leave it well alone.”¹

The whole place was quite jovial now, everyone chuckling and laughing. The bartender Wes poured two Jacks for Mitch and me. “On the house,” he said, but nothing was ever on the house except rain or snow. I guessed Old Charlie had put him up to it.

“Just one,” my jacket said. I wondered when Mitch had figured out how to work it from a distance now that I was wearing his old jacket.

After we finished our beers and enjoyed the warmth of the whiskey, we turned to leave, slapping backs and telling our friends, “Later.” No one tried to detain us. They seemed barely sorry we were going so early. Mitch turned around at the door and waved his arm to the group. I

¹From “Rab’s Last Woolen Testament” by Robin Williamson

followed him out, latching my hand onto the rear pocket of his Levi's as if it were a practiced move. No one paid us the slightest mind.

I got on the Harley, parked around the corner since the night before. "The keys are in *your* jacket," I said.

Mitch handed over the keys and climbed on behind me. He put his arms around my waist, one hand slipping almost immediately down to my crotch. A finger probed between the buttons, no doubt to keep warm.

The engine growled to life. I pulled the zipper up on my biker jacket and angled away from the curb. I guess it was no longer Mitch's jacket.