

INCIDENT AT ZHENBAO

He (Mr. Kelly, Dormitory Master) whisked me into his simple neat living room where beyond was a kitchen tucked mostly out of sight around a corner, and through an open doorway nearby on my left was a crumpled queen bed right out in plain view... there... his bedroom... his sheets... his dented pillow where I had awakened him... I tore my gaze away to an office area near my right elbow, a creamy leather sofa faced me...

“Please sit down...”

...with a glass and cherry coffee table to trip over and make myself look like an ass.

“...at the chair by the desk.”

I planted my butt and glanced out the leaded Gothic windows to the bright green campus beyond, but for only a second. The best view was in the room.

His biceps bulged, triceps stretched, shoulders flexed sensuously as he rummaged in the file cabinet. The bottom edge of his tee seductively rose to unveil a round iron butt that drew my eyes like magnets and aligned my brain to a single thought: strip him naked!

I ripped my gaze away to the nearby walls speckled with diplomas and citations.

“Don't mind those, they're just pieces of paper.”

His back was to me, his head still buried in the file drawer.

He turned. I saw, for a fleeting moment, a barely visible line, a scar perhaps, wandering beneath his fine dark thigh hair that disappeared too quickly under the desk as he sat down with a manila file that bore my name.

“You're not assigned a roommate.”

And I wondered if he had one with a bed that big and why I didn't, and feared it meant I could be banished from Ridgeston that much easier.

Manicured fingers flipped through the curiously pregnant folder.

“I've assigned you to a single room. Top floor, north end. Number 301. Please sign here for the key.” He pushed a paper across the desk.

“Yes, Mr. Kelly, sir.”

He stood, his torso twisting across the desk in front of me... and closer yet as he reached toward a small brown metal cabinet on the nearby wall. Dare I lean forward? I could. I could let my lips touch the bulge that pushed at the bottom of his tee. My eyes squeezed shut to garrote the animal stirring inside me. Fingers fumbled in my jeans.

He raised his arms full length to stretch, and pointed his face to heaven and unveiled the thin tight white newly fashionable nylon underwear, a bountiful snowball straining to confine his seductively veiled man-flesh imprisoned by the cloth fringed by coal-dark pubic hair—where I paused long and hard to meditate.

He bayed a yawn. A thick smooth penis glans hinted of an uncut cock that nudged the elastic on his groin and sought escape just as a puff of hair had done in a delicate Happy Trail that narrowed at the navel and faded into a soft line undulating through his six ripped abs—where lay another scar. Like Jesus Christ's.

I felt his stare. And ripped mine away.

"I...I can't find my pen." Embarrassed as hell. I was losing control.

Mr. Kelly tugged his tee, stepped quickly to the other side of the desk and impatiently flipped me one.

"I understand your uncle attended Ridgeston," Mr. Kelly said flatly, his deep blue eyes drilling holes in my mind, reading my very thoughts.

"Yes sir, he did," I said with an anxious voice.

"He stayed here in Taylor Hall," Mr. Kelly said laconically, "This was my dorm too, and, ironically, still is. Our footprints are on the floors of this hall, if you know what I mean. Ridgeston College and the boys Academy have a long, rich tradition. Solid. Steadfast."

His words worked magic on himself. He leaned over the desk and shared sonorously, "Learn well, so you can chart your life with confidence. Here you'll find the cream of young men, our future leaders. The best there is. There's a lot to live up to. Keep that in mind as you loiter here."

"Yes sir, I will."

"For better or worse, this is our dorm."

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MUCH LATER, TOM FINDS HIMSELF ON A TRIP HE DIDN'T WANT TO TAKE:

Geoff's Austin-Healey 3000 Mark III screamed and howled and rocked me like a three-legged horse as he skillfully threaded the roads on the long trip toward Ticonderoga. No one but Mr. Kelly knew where I was or who I was with.

"How's that for a ride?" He beamed with pink mottled cheeks as he slowed to the town's speed limit. Seemed like we were standing still... which suddenly we were at an open gas pump. He slid from behind the wheel and unbuckled the hood to check the oil.

"I've counted every pebble in the road," I joked.

"Don't you love it!"

"Actually I do. I hope you make it through your senior year."

The gas station had food and drinks and nibblies to choke a horse.

"Let's make these sandwiches to go. Beef, okay?" he asked.

The girl behind the counter was already at the slicer. I grabbed two bottles of Coke.

"You think I won't make it?"

"If you spend your time behind the wheel, yes!"

"Oh, you mean driving? Hey, that's the perks of being a senior. At last I have my car back. Damn shame I'm too busy to enjoy it."

"Piled pretty high, huh?"

"Damned straight. I packed some IS to work on this weekend. I have a feeling... ."

Geoff gave the clerk a twenty for the fourteen dollar charge and we slid back onto the leather seats and he roared the Healey back to life, spitting dirt and screaming onto the macadam west into the Adirondacks, and loving the gear changes while I did my damndest to keep the drinks from spilling.

The roads were the usual winding-hilly-bumpy and no problem for the Healey's six cylinders purring aggressively under the long British Racing Green hood. Power and control pervaded the cockpit.

"Makes your cock longer and your balls bigger, doesn't it?" Geoff said downshifting into second to negotiate a sharp turn.

I yearned to get behind the wheel, but Geoff never once hinted he'd relinquish the driver's seat.

"Can you give me a sandwich?"

With one hand on the wheel and one on the gear shifter, the challenge was obvious.

"Sure... ah..." I pointed a sandwich toward his face.

"Napkins, please."

I pulled a couple from the sandwich sack.

"On the lap," Geoff said curtly, bumping my hand as he downshifted.

"How are you going to do this?"

Beef, lettuce, tomato and oozing mustard sauce jutted from the Kaiser roll I waved back and forth mid-air above the shifter and his lap.

"Right in here," he said, mouth gaping, lips flopping like a giant feeding goldfish.

I laughed and farted.

"Feed me! Feed me!"

Geoff gloried in the weaving sandwich road rally and accelerated full on. I failed to coordinate, streaking his cheek with mustard. He touched the brakes, I threw the sandwich into reverse and hit the mark. His open mouth chomped down, but in a heavy left around a bend the sandwich oversteered and tore apart. I yelled a warning much too late. Shreds of beef and lettuce hung down from the accident site above his chin and the wreckage of mustard and tomato spun out of control and littered his lap.

His lips curled to grasp and draw a dangle of meat from under his nose and bring it into his mouth like a conveyor belt. "I always wanted to do that," He said proudly, flashing his rowdy smile and sinful blue eyes at me.

I picked a piece of soggy bread off the floor mat.

"Save it for later," Geoff said dead-serious as a judge. "The coffee sure smells good, doesn't it?"

I nodded and moved the cup over the gearbox toward him. Tires squealed and we slid off the macadam onto a gravel road.

"Damn! I always miss that turn," Geoff hissed as he spun the wheel to bring us out of a fishtail and we decelerated back through the sound barrier toward a lake that lay beyond the mixed forest of evergreens and naked late autumn trees that surrounded us.

"There are some great views around here."

The most impressive was the sudden appearance of a huge three-story stone, dark wood, and slate mansion hanging on the edge of a cliff, blocking the view of the lake. We wound our way toward it among gardens filled with rhododendron, roses, mums, asters and other autumn flowers, and slid to a stop next to a Lincoln.

Geoff honked a couple times. "They hate that," he said with an impish smile.

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NAÏVE TOM LOOKS BACK ON AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE:

Geoff was right. Dale wasn't his real name, I came to find out. But that was none of Geoff's business.

I fought the urge to drink—and lost—and wallowed in erotic memories of Thanksgiving. I even tried some academic damage control with the extra time on my hands trying to goose myself into a B average, but I kept coming back to HoJo's, and what happened so spontaneously that night.

For the first time I felt sex might be okay. I wished I could be... happy... maybe “comfortable” is a better word for living in my skin. I needed confirmation that my gymnast friend existed.

Hell no, I didn't use the floor phone. I used the pay phone outside the dinky bus station down in the village during a pouring rain. No answer gave me a crummy feeling deep inside. Two more times I tried before he finally answered.

“Oh, hi! This is Tom! Tom Hamilton. You remember me, Ken...” I hated to remind him where we met. A hotel bed seemed so trashy, “... from the hotel?” He did!..., even before I'd finished with my shaky intro. I tingled. He sounded happy to hear my voice.

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I talked nonsense for too long, then got to what I was really there for. “Yeah, I was wondering what you were doing for Christmas?” His words came back about family plans, of course, and he remembered I had no family.

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“Well, I hope you have fun in Colorado with everybody. Should be great skiing. Let's talk when you get back, okay?” My heart was drenched by the icy rain. I don't remember hanging up the handset.

I vaguely remember hoofing up the hill to campus beat by the violence of loneliness and how it tore my soul and troubled my mind, and drained me physically.

I'd proved Geoff wrong and proved myself right: Kenneth Brewster, aka Dale, is a real person. I bet myself I'd be alone at Christmas, and sure as Hell, I was the sorry winner.

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“Find a place in town,” the Dean suggested.

With Karen, thought I, but could not even smile at my own sick joke.

“I'm sorry.” The Dean pooped out a word right there between shit and syphilis.

Jim and Johnny straight out of the bottle became my best friends and counselors. And the goddamned payoffs to Jim Bradley continued. I couldn't stand much more. Of anything, actually.

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BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU PRAY FOR:

(more)... “You hear everything, don't you, sir?” I said in a accidentally brazen way. “Sorry, I don't mean to be rude.”

“It's my job to know.” Mr. Kelly hesitated. “The Dean told you the dorm would be closed, right?”

“Yes. Frankly, that sucks. But I lined up a pad off campus.”

“You hopped on that real quick.”

He studied my face as if he didn't believe my lie.

“I just let the Dean’s office know that I’ll be staying over Christmas,” Mike said casually, “It’s traditional an administrator is always on campus, so I volunteered this year. Taylor Hall will be open.”

“You mean I can stay?!” I blurted, forgetting my flimsy lie.

“But since you’ve got a place... you’re all set, right?”

Instant strategy adjustment required. “Actually, it would save a lot if I didn’t have to move. I mean... yeah.”

“It’s up to you. Let me know what you decide in time to make arrangements. Be careful, you may lose your down payment if you to break a rent agreement.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be a problem, Mr. Kelly. I’ll get right on it.” My feet were on the ground, but inwardly I was jumping up and down.

“Whatever. I’ll make sure you have access to the Sports Center.”

My feet never touched the stairs as I bounded to my room.

Mike was my fucking obsession, the eagle eating at my liver like Prometheus. I was a child in some ways even at eighteen, with a body and urges of a man, a perverted man no less. I was told to follow my heart, follow my dream. Foolish advice I got from people who didn’t know shit about my dreams, some of them wet, and they all included him.

Mike possessed my English class, Geology and Chem Lab, and he swam laps with me inside my head, sometimes spurring me on, sometimes distracting me to the detriment of the Sea Dragons. Tuesday and Thursday nights at choir practice and Sunday mornings at church I could snuggle up to Mike professionally and maybe brush against his arm or lean close to him to trade thoughts.

I tried to play it cool and avoid gossip or getting razzed as a brown-noser. The tightrope was thin and slippery, and I lived in fear every day that someone, including that special someone Mike, would expose my infatuation.

At Christmas, I would be alone in Taylor Hall... with him. The magnificent agony of that thought smacked me right between the eyes.

AND THEN....

What a fucking day. Saturday, December 21. The shortest, yet the longest day of the year. Yesterday I sucked on Johnny Walker and watched the last of my classmates throw their crap in cars and head out for the Christmas Holidays. Today I sucked on Jim Beam. Fucking promiscuous.

What the hell am I doing here? A question without an answer. I never decided to stay. I just never left.

I slugged the radio. “All I want for Christmas is my two front...” stupid goddamned song. Stupid kid wants teeth...the little bastard gets all the hugs he wants. Nature gives teeth. Nothing gives me a hug. Can’t even buy ‘em. Hugs that is. They’re free in a world of over-priced throw-away crap. I always wanted a hug. A hug from the old man. He didn't have to say a thing, like “I love you” or “you’re okay”. Just a plain damned vanilla hug. For all the times I asked, Santa never brought me one.

Dr.What's-Her-Face. The Ridgeston shrink. Mr. Kelly wanted me to meet her, tell her everything. I told her... once I got past her middle-aged dark-haired bangs chopped across the top of her square horn-rims... and a jutting nose like a '53 Studebaker and buck teeth like a '49 Buick... told her nothing but shit. But she wore a set of rings on her left hand. No matter how homely, marriage happens. Good for her ass. Where the fuck does that leave me?

"You're very handsome," she said with her chipmunk smile, "you'll find that special girl when you find yourself".

Her words troubled me. I don't know which was worse, finding myself or finding a girl. Even Elizabeth Taylor... especially something like that. It scares the shit out of me.

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How many times have I asked God to change me? The fucker's deaf. I've pleaded for help—but He ignores me. I'd tell Him to fuck off—but He scares me. Why can't I wake up some morning changed? I'll take the easiest way, or the toughest. I'm no candy-ass. Sure as Hell, I ain't no fag.

Fags are flaming queers... except for hunky Geoff... and Jim who says he isn't... yet wants me just for sex. We claim we are not queers... but strange we are for sure. So who knows what we are?

Queers are swishy freaks... like that one in San Diego...they all wear hippie clothes and talk with lips and funny words and flash their eyes and wave their wrists and they live in New York or San Francisco. I'd never want to go. They'd surround me, attack me, strip me naked and cover me with rouge and lipstick.

Fuck that shit. What a nightmare. Dreams? Yeah, I got 'em. Ones that soak the bed at night... does he control that too? He does. He must. He crawls in my head somehow, plants those thoughts of him, of us together, doing fantastic naked things... alone and with others. Exciting things, groping things, wild things that wrap my body in and out with his muscled flesh, his steel blue eyes. He wakes me wet and panting.

Then by day from somewhere come those freaky thoughts to grope and stare and strip the guys—not all—just my favorites, who walk or run or sit in class or wear their Speedos at the pool, they scare me shitless many times. From fear I'd lose control.

My sweaty grip weakens every day on those tons of thoughts and feelings I can't let on and dare not tell a soul. I dread the day they'll slip and crash and scatter on the floor for all to see and mock; the swarm of disconcerted feelings that prayer or cursing can't expunge won't be mopped like spilled milk and be wrung out and be gone... or be forgotten.

Dr. bangs-on-glasses said she'd keep our words in total secret. Why bother, it was all a lie, every word I ever told her. I couldn't tell the truth—bullshit—I don't know the truth! I'd never want... I don't think I want to know.

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I WELCOME YOU TO KNOW THE ANSWER