

Emma Ramos

Where The Children Play

The teakettle's reveille, a sound reminiscent of a nineteenth-century steam engine. Had Lina not awoken to this noise every morning for the past eighteen years she might have thought her home was inches away from destruction, her family soon to be named a casualty of industry. Luckily, she had become accustomed to the sound, just as she had become accustomed to life on the twelfth floor of a New York City apartment building. Only the sound of an unusually low-flying airplane seemed really threatening. Still, she often wondered what she would do in the face of a life or death crisis. Obviously, as a mother, Lina felt her duty would be to protect her children. Yes, this would be her chief responsibility. Yet, she questioned this Tuesday morning, if only one of them could make it out in time, was it so wrong that she, the mother of three, knew without a doubt in her mind that she would save Russell, her first child and only son? Lina immediately switched gears; morbid thoughts are not productive at 6:30 AM on a school day.

"Bigelow French Vanilla or Cinnamon Stick?" Jeff's typical morning inquiry. "Ummm, Vanilla."

6:35 AM, first cup of tea and Lina's only quiet moment with her husband before Grace, her youngest child, is up and in need of full, undivided attention.

Grace would be twelve the following November, and as the baby of the family, she had a way of announcing her presence and demanding recognition from anyone she came in contact with. Whether she was speaking in her loudest possible voice, unexpectedly breaking into song, or hysterically crying over the smallest injury, she always knew how to draw a crowd.

Aubrey was fourteen and, as is typical of that age, singularly concerned with her appearance. As the middle child, she was used to, at times, being overlooked. There was always the younger one to worry about and the eldest to fuss over. Middle children certainly got dealt a harsher hand. Luckily, and possibly as compensation for her everlasting status as, what Lina called “monkey in the middle,” Aubrey was the most adaptive of the three Delacy children. She always had an abundance of friends, full respect from her teachers, high grades and was, to Lina’s satisfaction, very pretty. Aubrey was almost fey-like in appearance, with ivory-colored skin, a small and slightly pointed nose, hazel eyes and light brown hair. Her face was small and fragile, making her lips look thick and artistically distinct. Their dark pink color was quite striking against her linen-like skin.

Grace, on the other hand, was slightly small for her age. She had straw-like, straggly brown hair, freckles, and had worn glasses since she was six. She was adorable, but not beautiful. Grace’s claim to fame, aside from being the youngest of the Delacy children, were her large and expressive bright blue eyes. One could always tell exactly what was going on in that small, attention-seeking head of hers by glancing at her eyes.

Russell Delacy was seventeen, and Lina could not think of him without becoming sentimental. He was exceptional. He really was the most beautiful human being Lina had ever known. When she decided to marry Jeff in her third year of college at UCSD, Lina’s parents were upset. A traditional Mormon couple in Provo Utah, Lina’s mother and father were unprepared for the distress their last two children were about to put them through. Her brother Corey, the youngest, had moved from marijuana to Methamphetamine during Lina’s senior year in high school. With Corey’s troubles, Lina’s mother and father were less able to give Lina’s schooling the required attention. In the end they even liked the idea of her going off to live and learn in San Diego, where her grandparents were, instead of staying home and attending BYU. Later, they would hold this decision accountable for Lina’s behavior. When she informed her family that, not only was she leaving college but marrying a Business School student she’d met whose family was Episcopalian, Lina’s parents were devastated. If she’d attended Brigham Young and spent that year abroad as a missionary (the way her older brother and sister had done), she would not have strayed so far from the kind of life they had hoped she would lead.

Lina’s family did everything they could to stop the couple from marrying. Family gatherings were awkward and unpleasant even after the wedding, which in the end had not taken place in an LDS church. Lina’s mother always reminded her that a husband and wife who are married under the roof of any other church would not be reunited as husband and wife by the Heavenly Father in the hereafter. All this drama, and then Russell came along. He was born three and a half weeks early but

at a miraculously healthy weight. His birth completely softened Lina's parents. They loved their grandson and, in return, were more generous towards Jeff. To Lina's surprise, when she informed her family that she, Jeff and the baby were moving to New York City for Jeff's job, they were both understanding and forgiving.

Russell's birth was not only a source of peace between Lina's parents and her husband but the beginning of the greatest and most treasured chapter of Lina's life: motherhood. She took her little boy everywhere. Whether he was sitting quietly in the front of a grocery cart or playing nicely on the floor of a nail salon, the young Russell and his mother were inseparable.

When Aubrey was born there were moments, though she would never publicly admit it, when Lina almost resented her baby daughter for stealing the time she had become so accustomed to spending with her son. Lately, however, Russell was different. He was uncommunicative. This behavior, Lina was told, was characteristic of teenage boys, nothing to lose sleep over. Lina, nonetheless, did lose sleep over it. What she sensed in her boy, her most beloved child, was something deeper than teenage turmoil.

6:40 AM, and before Lina's first sip of tea, Grace is in the kitchen and as usual, "Sooo starving!"

The youngest child's breakfast order is placed, Honey Nut Chex with milk and a cup of chocolate milk. Then, as if Lina's life were on stage, Aubrey enters without missing a beat. She too is hungry but at fourteen can attend to her own appetite without a mother's help. Jeff sits quietly with this week's edition of *The Economist*--they were the only truly Republican family, as far as they were concerned, within a twelve mile radius--and his tea.

As Lina's attention drifts from her daughters to her husband, who has barely said a word this morning, she notices two details: his hairline looks thinner, and he is putting on weight. Lina eyes Jeff as he unsuspectingly reads his business propaganda, and the thought that arises in her mind is, "I wonder if he's been sneaking beer. Because that would certainly explain the paunch."

But like many thought currents, Lina's momentary hostility towards her husband over the prospect of sneaking beer (was she not in some ways still a good Mormon girl at heart?) softens and transforms into devotion and pride. Three of her four favorite people are gathered at the same table, nourishing themselves and, in turn, each other. Lina remembers a passage she read frequently as a young girl from *The Book of Mormon*, Alma 32:37: "And now behold, if ye nourish it [the tree of life] with much care it will get root, and grow up and bring forth fruit." Setting her cup of tea on the kitchen table, Lina places her hands firmly on its smoothed mahogany edges enjoying this moment of transitory bliss. Then, remembering the next passage, "But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root; and when the

heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth it, because it hath no root, it withers away, and ye pluck it up,” Lina repeats the last part of the passage involuntarily as she notices her son’s absence from the kitchen table, “and cast it out.”

Russell Delacy has been awake most of the night and is dreading the thought of leaving his room to put in an appearance at the breakfast table. He isn’t hungry. Much of last evening was spent at the bookstore. Lately Russell has become a regular at the Barnes and Noble on 54th Street and 3rd Avenue. He’s developed a taste for strong black coffee and (not to mention to anyone in his family) Clove Cigarettes. Unlike most boys of seventeen, Russell is a creature of habit. He is uninterested in video games, drugs or teenage comradery. He prefers to spend his time reading at a bookstore or wandering the city with Starbucks in one hand, a clove in the other. One might consider him a part-time bookworm, part time flâneur.

Russell had always been quiet and contemplative, and had it not been for his clean-cut good looks (his mother had raised him carefully with an emphasis on the importance of cleanliness and physical presentation), he might have been teased mercilessly in school. What Russell loved about Barnes and Noble was that he could browse the literature section, pick out a few novels, take them to the café and read among coffee and strangers. Generally, Russell’s taste in literature tended toward the more mainstream classics. It wasn’t that he was uninterested in or opposed to more counterculture writings; they just had not been made available to him. Last night, however, was something of a breakthrough. Browsing the literature section, Russell came across a book he felt he needed to explore. He had learned about E.M. Forster in school (*A Passage to India* was on his AP English reading list) and read a short biography of his life on the internet. So, last night while examining Forster’s small section at the bookstore, Russell came across a novel that, after reading the short synopsis on the back, he felt compelled to take with him. Actually, it was one line in the synopsis that intrigued Russell the most: “In a highly structured society, Maurice is a conventional young man in almost every way—except that he is a homosexual.”

Russell rises from his bed; it is now 7:00 AM. Being on time for school is always a legitimate excuse, and Russell knows his appearance at the breakfast table can be brief. Russell gathers his belongings, tidies his bed, dresses, attends to his hair, teeth and bladder and makes his way into the kitchen.

And there he is. Lina breathes a sigh of relief. Why does she always have the sense her son will somehow disappear? But he looks thin and tired. Could he be smoking? A beer bellied husband and a nicotine-crazed son, that would be painfully ironic, Lina muses to herself, though actually frightened at the thought.

3:30 PM, and, finally, Russell is free from the confines of his eleventh-grade education. Barnes and Noble, as always, is a possibility, but after waiting months on end for some decent weather, Russell cannot imagine spending what is left of this beautiful spring afternoon indoors.

The downtown subway station is nearby; Union Square Park would be a perfect place to perch and read. Not to mention, an appropriate spot to delve into Forster.

The Village is an area of Manhattan that Russell has always been eager to explore. His parents, however, have always seemed wary of any part of the city below 34th Street. "Chelsea and below is for the gays," Russell's father had explained to both him and Aubrey. "Nowadays it seems teenagers think the area is a 'cool' place to hang out and smoke dope. Russell, you know that if you spend time down there people will assume you are queer."

Ever since he was small, Russell's father had made it clear he did not approve of the "homo life style," as he called it. Russell could remember back to when his father coached his little league softball team in Central Park. If another kid seemed unathletic or prone to tears upon striking out in a game, Russell's father would say something like, "Gosh, boy's parents are in for a rude awakening when they find out their kid's not like normal boys." Jeff Delacy firmly believed that men should be men and any sign of weakness, which included straying from a hetero-normative existence, was unacceptable.

Recently, however, Russell has been spending a lot of time pondering the "homo life style." Some of the arguments made sense to him, but still Russell wasn't totally convinced. His mother, always less aggressive than his father, harbored a more religious and family-oriented opposition to the life style. Two men, or two women, could not reproduce. Russell knew that growing up a Mormon, his mother had been raised to value family above all things. Lina, to Russell's relief, was a humanist and truly believed that all people were equal. Homosexuals were not bad people, just troubled individuals who engaged in sinful activity. Unfortunately, Jeff Delacy thought they were inherently weak and flawed human beings.

Russell, in school and on his own, had studied the Greek philosophers. He knew how important their insights were to contemporary politics. He also knew that many of them engaged in sexual acts that were now considered taboo by "conservative" people like his parents. But Russell couldn't understand why, if God hated homosexuals, He would allow such important thinkers to be afflicted with the "problem".

The No. 6 train is packed this afternoon, and Russell makes sure not to inconvenience or push anyone while finding a comfortable standing spot, away from the automatic doors. He has everything he needs for his venture into the Village: cell

phone (Russell's mother constantly checks up on her eldest child), ipod, a change of clothes (Russell always changes out of his school uniform at the end of the day), a bottle of Snapple Lemonade and E.M Forster's novel, *Maurice*.

4:00 PM, the girls should be home soon. Since turning fourteen, Aubrey Delacy has had the responsibility of walking home with her sister from school, unaccompanied. The walk from The Hewitt School (75th Street and Park Avenue) to their apartment on the southeast corner of York Avenue and 62nd Street is relatively short. Regardless, Lina worries about her daughters traveling the streets of New York City by themselves. It is true that they live in an upscale part of Manhattan, but in a place like New York, anything can happen. Lina recalls her childhood, growing up in Provo. Christy, Lina's eldest sister, got her drivers license at sixteen (Lina could not imagine letting Aubrey drive a car in two years) and became chauffeur to her younger siblings. Even when Christy was studying at BYU she would sometimes pick Lina up from cheerleading practice, at the local high school, and drive her home. Growing up in Provo seemed so safe. When Lina was little she and her siblings would play outside, alone for hours on end. Even after dark, the fear of the children being hurt or somehow corrupted was unthinkable. The lives Lina's children lead were different, she reflected. The thought saddened her. When her husband was promoted and offered the job in New York, Russell was just a toddler, and the thought of him or any other future child growing up and existing beyond the realm of her or Jeff's complete supervision was distant and unreal. Now that time had become a reality, and it terrified Lina. Russell had turned seventeen in March. Now, he was knee-deep in adolescence. What was he doing that Lina didn't know about? Was he seeing girls? Had he ever had a girlfriend? Had he become, and this thought made Lina's heart palpitate, sexually active?

"Sunnington was the next stage in Maurice's career. He traversed it without attracting attention; but there were so many boys of his type—they formed the backbone of the school and we cannot notice each vertebra...."

"Great novel! A classic in gay literature."

Russell was so consumed by his book that it took him a moment to realize there was a man standing over him in Union Square Park, striking up a conversation. As Russell looks up, the sun gives this stranger's head the illusion of being cloaked with a halo. He is thin, wears tight jeans and a buttoned down black collared shirt, fashionably tucked out. When he sits beside Russell, Russell notices the stranger's features. He is very handsome, very well-groomed. He has dark brown hair (slightly spiked), bronzed skin (he must have spent a good deal of time outdoors), deep-set brown eyes, no noticeable whiskers and a small hoop earring in his right ear.

Russell winces, slightly nervous; he suddenly notices the heat of the spring sun.

“Yes, I have read a little about the author. I’m just curious about literature in general. I’m thinking about majoring in it in college.” What a lame thing to say. Russell feels foolish, and the backs of his knees are sweaty. He begins to squirm.

The stranger grins, that condescending grin adults wear when a young person exerts himself in conversation--that look that says, “You are so naïve and predictable.”

“Is that so?” questions the stranger. “Well, I studied at Cooper Union; I’m a painter, but I do love to read. Have you read any of the other classics?”

“Oh yea, I’ve read *The Great Gatsby*, *Catch 22*, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Last summer I started *Crime and Punish...*”

The stranger, now in a most relaxed position, as if he owns this bench in Union Square Park, begins to laugh. He massages his thigh, glancing in the direction opposite to Russell. At this moment Russell has a range of conflicting thoughts and emotions; he is annoyed and embarrassed that this man who stopped him from enjoying his book was now laughing at his expense; it was rude. Yet, Russell is curious. Clearly the stranger didn’t mean “classics” in the traditional sense or else he would have accepted Russell’s answer and, as Russell had initially hoped, been impressed by his literary knowledge. Then, in a presently unexplored part of Russell’s mind, there was a sensation, a foreign titillation that seemed to slither through his body when the strange man massaged himself.

“I meant classics in gay literature: James Baldwin, Michael Cunningham, Andrew Holleran, fucking Oscar Wilde.”

Russell gets it, he understands. This man is gay. Part of him wants to leave, immediately. Make something up (“Oh sorry, I’m actually a Mormon missionary from Salt Lake City. I really can’t have this conversation. I have to go”), but then he is reading *Maurice* in broad daylight in what his father called “queer territory.” And, Russell has to admit, he is curious.

“No, well, I know who Oscar Wilde is. I...”

“Did you know he was gay?”

“I think I may have heard that. I don’t really know that much about... I mean... I just like to read.”

“I see. And how long have you known?”

“Oh, I’ve always liked to read, since I was...”

And again with the smug laughter, “No, I mean how long have you known you were gay?”

With the girls home, both in their room doing homework, Lina takes the moment to pour her second cup of tea for the day (this time she’ll have the Cinnamon Stick) and relax. Jeff has called to say he will be home around 6:30, and Lina plans to

serve dinner soon after: homemade turkey lasagna. Concerned about her husband's recent weight gain, she will use whole wheat pasta. Men Jeff's age did die of heart attacks, and Lina has read that whole grains are good for lowering cholesterol. At this particular moment, though, Lina is less interested in the workings of her husband's circulatory system. If he is going to refuse to exercise and then sneak off to some local bar for a few beers, when he could be home with his family, it was his choice, his funeral. But she did love him with everything, every inch of her body. She loved his smell, the small razor-nicks he always gave himself while shaving and desperately tried to hide, the tough-guy exterior he assumed, only to be heard crying in the bathroom at 2:30 in the morning after a terribly stressful day. Lina believed her husband was a good man. More selfishly, she also liked that outsiders thought they were a strange couple. Jeff was burly and slightly shorter than average--about 5'9" (only 2 inches taller than Lina)--had broad shoulders, uncharacteristically small hands and had just started losing most of his dark brown hair. He wasn't handsome in the traditional sense, and he knew it. Nevertheless, Jeff had a solidness, a firmness of beliefs and values that were unshakable. His self-assurance gave him a kind of charisma that, to Lina, made up for any physical shortcoming. Lina was the complete opposite. She was very beautiful and soft in both manner and appearance. In fact, Lina had an uncanny resemblance to actress Deborah Kerr. When she rented *The King and I* for her daughters, Grace had immediately exclaimed, "Mommy, you look just like Anna!" Lina herself saw this resemblance and enjoyed it. She didn't watch *An Affair to Remember* over and over just for the love story.

Lina sits at the kitchen table, waiting for her tea to cool. Gosh, where has the day gone? Mostly errands as usual, and then there was the Le Jacquard table-cloth, given to Lina by Jeff's parents as a wedding gift. The traditional off-white cloth was now a splotchy, tie-dyed piece that belonged in a Jackson Pollack look-alike contest. Yes, that was the price Lina paid for allowing her eleven-year-old daughter to do her homework while drinking fruit punch at the kitchen table. But poor Grace felt so guilty (she'd emerged from the kitchen, explaining amid sobs that her hand, somewhere between finishing her math homework and replenishing her fluids, had knocked over the glass) for staining Lina's "special" table cloth. Lina knew Grace was genuinely sorry and didn't want to make a big deal about the accident. She'd explained to the woman at the cleaners (the woman was Oriental, or no, Asian. Was Oriental unPC? Lina was always careful not to offend) that the spill was unintentional, but the tablecloth remained an important, even vital article of houseware. Jeff would be furious if he saw the mess. Hopefully, with an extra ounce of bleach, he would never detect any misshap.

Aubrey, as usual, hadn't blundered in quite a while. Lina almost wanted to shout at her middle child, "Please, for once, do something spontaneous. Here, break this expensive, crystal vase!" She sometimes worried that Aubrey was too well-mannered and careful. Did that mean she was saving up her teenage angst for later adolescence? Would she be one of

those children who, out of the blue, went completely wild or became addicted to some horrid drug? Corey, Lina's younger brother, had been that way. He'd been a solid student (Bs, in his case, but still respectable), a mild-mannered boy up until the age of sixteen. Then everything changed. Corey became involved with the wrong crowd at school (the usual story) and started using drugs. Now, he lived out in Lehi (Utah) and worked at odd jobs. He still took money from his parents, and, when she could manage it behind Jeff's back, Lina. Corey had successfully quit using, but the effects of his early drug problems were still very visible. As Lina's attention drifts from her middle daughter to her younger brother, she realizes that, in fact, the two are nothing alike. Corey, for one thing was male. Then there was that typical need for peer acceptance that had always plagued Lina's brother. Aubrey was like Lina had been at her age. She was uncommonly self-assured, never one to follow. Like Lina at fourteen, Aubrey wasn't a leader, but her personal values were strong enough to stop her from seriously misbehaving. If anything, Aubrey suffered from an overactive super-ego. No, if there was anything to worry about, where Aubrey was concerned, it was her teenage romantic ideals and budding interest in the opposite sex. Lina's daughters attended an all-girls school (Jeff had insisted upon it), but that did not make them invisible to boys. "You don't know male hormones," Jeff would say. Lina felt sorry for whoever would be Aubrey's first steady boyfriend. Jeff would surely give him a run for his money. No, Lina did not have to worry about Aubrey falling into a seedy lifestyle. A thought flickers in Lina's mind like a red light, "Russell sometimes smells of smoke." She moves to the very edge of her seat at the kitchen table, clutching her steaming hot tea. Was Russell going to be like Corey? Was he the "troubled" one?

"I'm not gay." Russell's pronouncement of these three words was so automatic that it took him aback. It was as if someone had programmed his response; he hadn't even had time to think about it.

The man on the bench smiles. "Well, I knew without a doubt by the time I was thirteen. I didn't officially come out until college, though. I was safely away from home when I finally emerged from the closet. My family isn't especially supportive; I'm not really in touch with them now. They live in Michigan, where I grew up. New York really is the best place to be if you're young and struggling. I've met many great people in the city. Our community is very open."

Russell listens intently. Each word draws him in with an alluring hum, as if plucked from a gentle instrument. Russell can't tell for sure whether it is the meaning of what this man has said or the melodic tone of his voice, but he is completely intrigued.

"Listen," continues the stranger as he reaches into his pocket. "This is my card. The one on the bottom is my home number. Feel free to call sometime. We can discuss *Maurice*." And, with that, the man from Union Square Park is gone.

Russell sits very still; he has a lot to digest. The term “soul-searching,” though irritatingly contrived, seems to glide through his mind. Maurice was “a conventional young man,” or at least that’s what the book’s cover said. Was it possible to be both conventional and gay? Russell wondered, because the term “queer” itself implied the exact opposite. The man from the bench was certainly gay, but he didn’t seem “queer.” He wasn’t a freak or anything. Although Russell had definitely felt something at the sight of the strange man rubbing his thigh, Russell isn’t ready to confront the physical nature of homosexuality. His immediate concern involves religion, his parents, society, ethics. Ethics, but hadn’t the Greeks invented the term? Was that before or after erecting the bathhouses? No, religion and family were the main sources of Russell’s anxiety. The stranger had said that he himself was no longer in contact with his family. Russell loved his family. The thought of no longer communicating with Aubrey and Grace, and even his father, made him sad. But his mother? The thought of not speaking to her, not seeing her made him ache. Nothing could possibly be worth that. A panic rose in Russell’s chest. He wanted to get home. He missed his mother. He needed to see her. Alright, the subway is nearby. Russell gathers his belongings in a hurry. He glances around, wondering if he will be stopped again, this time on his way to the subway station. Putting *Maurice* in his backpack, safely hidden from curious eyes, Russell heads home. Home, the thought is comforting.

Russell is taller than his father and much more handsome. Lina watches as he enters through the front door, his backpack halfway off his shoulder, ipod still plugged into his ears (what was he listening to?). From where she sits, Lina is able to watch her son without him knowing. He’s let his hair grow out. Gosh, he makes such a handsome young man. Cat Stevens? Is that what he’s got blasting into his ear drums? She wonders. For his seventeenth birthday, Lina gave her son an album that she had listened to over and over as a teenager. Mother and son bonded over *Tea For The Tillerman*, and, lately, Russell hadn’t listened to much else.

*I know we’ve come a long way,
We’re changing day to day,
But tell me, where d’ th’ ch’ldr’n play.*

Russell hits the pause button and sets the ipod on his bed, along with his backpack. The time is 6:15, and Russell knows his mother will be serving dinner soon. He wants to get her alone, though, before his father and sisters begin to gather at the kitchen table. Russell always gets slightly nervous before seeing his mother. The feeling is similar to the sensation he has

right before getting on a rollercoaster, though it doesn't derive from fear. Russell feels giddy, and he eagerly approaches the kitchen with anticipation for the overpowering love that will inevitably fill any room shared by him and his mother.

"Hi, mom."

Lina turns around. The lasagna has been placed in the oven for the next 45 minutes. She swallows hard. Her chest feels so heavy. One would think that after seventeen years, Lina would be accustomed to the feeling she experiences upon seeing her son, that she'd have gotten used to how much she loves him. Still, each new moment the two share alone is as powerful and poignant as the last.

"Russ, dear, how was your day?" Lina turns to set her oven-gloves on the counter, though making sure not to lose the firm gaze she has placed on her boy.

"I..." Russell wishes to tell his mother everything that took place at Union Square Park. He wants to ask, "Is it okay? Mom, what if I am gay? Will you be okay with that? Will you still be happy? Will you still love me?"

"It was good. School was good. I went to Barnes and Noble, studied a bit, read."

"You're always so productive, so on top of everything. I'm so proud of you. Your father's so proud, Russ; you know, sometimes dad just..."

And at that moment, the front door opens, the sound of keys jingling. Lina and Russell look at each other, both equally saddened that their moment alone has been cut short.

"Dad!" The sound of Grace's voice resonates, permeating the three bedroom apartment on 62nd and York.

"Hello, Gracie. Is your sister in the room?"

"Hi, dad," Aubrey emerges.

"Hi, pretty lady."

Russell dreads his father's entrance into the kitchen. He knows his dad will saunter through the door, without so much as a nod to him, and kiss Lina. Then he will acknowledge Russell's presence.

Russell watches as his father greets his mom. He is so lucky, Russell thinks. At forty-one, Lina could easily have any man she wanted. Russell hopes his father fully appreciates...

"Hello, son."

"Hi, dad, I..."

"Caroline (Jeff is the only one who calls Lina by her given name), I don't see plates or silverware on the table."

"Jeff, it's alright, I'll..."

“Aubrey! Aubrey Kathryn Delacy!”

Aubrey appears instantly. Jeff’s holler is a sound the Delacy family is used to responding to quickly.

“Yes, dad?”

“Aubrey, look at the table. Your mother cannot do everything herself. You’re fourteen now; please be a lady. Help your mother.”

Dinner is finished. Lina brings out a plate of sliced watermelon. Russell would like to be excused before dessert, but he knows his father won’t allow it. He is eager to continue reading.

“Russell, I think it’s time for a haircut.” Jeff eyes his only son, while taking a slice of watermelon.

“It’s getting too long, son. You are going to start to look like Aubrey. I don’t have three daughters.”

“All that day and the next Maurice was planning how he could see this queer fish again.” “Queer fish,” Russell looks up from his book. It is 9:30. He remembers he put the stranger from Union Square Park’s card in his pant pocket. It could be serious if his mother found it while doing laundry. She might become suspicious. Russell sets *Maurice* down on his bed and walks over to the chair on which he has flung his pants. Reaching into the pocket, he retrieves the small white card. Russell examines it:

Bruce Orlov, Portrait Artist, Painter

431 East 9th Street

Russell notices the last number on the card, the one Bruce said was his home phone. He seemed like a nice man, Russell reflects. Russell is tired; his day has been unusually eventful. Enough for this evening, he decides. Placing Bruce’s card safely between the pages of *Maurice*, which he hides in his backpack, Russell decides to listen to some music before bed.

“Are you alright?”

Lina looks up at her husband. She is still wearing the skirt she’s worn all afternoon and her bra, though her shirt is long since removed. Jeff is completely naked. He’s always ready for bed before she is, especially when he knows they will be making love.

“Yes, I’m fine dear. Listen, Jeff, I didn’t want to mention this earlier, but I feel like I ought to tell you; Grace spilled punch on the Le Jacquard tablecloth. I know, I took it to the cleaners, and they are going to do their best to...”

“Caroline, I don’t want to talk about this right now. But you know I am not happy. I will talk to Grace in the morning. There will have to be some kind of punishment.”

“Jeff, she feels bad enough. You should have seen her. I was getting the laundry together, and she came in sobbing. I had to sit her down and rub her back before I could get her to tell me what had happened. She kept saying, ‘Daddy will kill me, he will hate me forever!’ Let me take care of this one, Jeff. It was my fault anyways since I let her have a snack and do her homework at the table.”

Jeff sits on the bed next to his wife. Lina really notices his growing midriff now that he is seated and completely uncovered. Her love for him helps quell the momentary distaste she feels over the obvious indifference he has toward his own appearance. But, if it were she who had grown so round, it would be a different story altogether. Jeff would probably stage an intervention. It was what it was. Jeff had primitive views on marriage and marital responsibilities. Lina was expected to run the household and raise their children. (Both included stopping their youngest from drenching every article of fine houseware with Tropicana Fruit Punch.) She was also expected to stay beautiful so that when Jeff came home from a hard day at work (which seemed, now, to include drinking beer), he had something pretty to fuck. Oh, Lina was not used to thinking that word. She hated it. It was so ugly. Lina’s thoughts turned to Corey. When her younger brother was about two years old, his first word was, or was meant to be “truck” (their father owned one). Unfortunately, “truck” in his undeveloped jabber sounded like “fuck”. That poor boy’s first experience with actual, human talk earned him a spanking. Lina could remember the sound of her mother’s hand as it struck her younger brother’s behind, followed by his shrieks. Lina’s mother had always been a bit harsh. Maybe that accounted for Lina’s maternal leniency. Maybe it explained Corey’s troubles.

In the few moments Lina had taken to reflect, Jeff has grown impatient. He was now unhooking her bra and making his way to the top of her skirt zipper. So, she thinks, this is how it feels to be man-handled.

Was it the hair? It was now the longest it had been in quite a while. But could that really be to blame, Russell wondered, for the sudden surge of male attention he was getting? Or, had he gotten it before and just not noticed? All the stares, looks of recognition, Russell couldn’t help enjoying it. And what was it that led him back to Union Square this very afternoon? Was it yesterday’s encounter with Bruce? *Maurice’s* influence? Russell still had Bruce’s card hidden between the pages of Forster’s lesser-known masterpiece. Actually, the card had come in handy as a bookmark.

Russell sits on a bench on the east side of the park (just one bench down from where he was yesterday) and continues reading.

“They walked arm in arm or arm around shoulder now. When they sat it was nearly always in the same position--Maurice in a chair, and Durham at his feet, leaning against him. In the world of their friends this attracted no notice. Maurice would stroke Durham’s hair.”

Maybe it really is the hair, Russell thinks, glancing up from his book. He resents the remark his father made last night at the dinner table about not having three daughters. Jeff had always made comments like that, even when Russell was little. When Russell and his father would go out together, maybe to play ball in the park, if Russell fell and cried over a scraped knee, Jeff would say, “Stop acting like a little girl.” Russell was never man enough for Jeff. He would rather read or listen to music than play sports. Russell was always the kid to come away from a sports game with an “Award for Effort” ribbon.

Being Jeffrey Delacy’s only son meant effort was a given and winning a necessity. Well, Russell never won his father’s affection and, lately, he felt he didn’t really give a fuck. The thought of his father agitated him. Russell decides to try and walk it off.

Earlier in the afternoon, Lina had gotten a phone call that startled her. Corey wanted to come for a visit sometime during July. Lina could not refuse her younger brother’s request outright, but she is worried about how Jeff will react. Either Jeff will say no and have Lina give her brother some lame excuse, or he will approve, leaving Lina to worry about having her strict husband and dead-beat brother together in their three bedroom apartment. Neither solution seemed feasible. Also, and Lina didn’t like to admit this even to herself, she worried about the kind of influence Corey might have on her son. It had been a long time since she had really sat and talked with Russell, gotten a motherly sense of where he was (emotionally). She couldn’t know for sure if her son was impressionable, could be seduced by whatever, yes, unwholesome philosophy her brother might have to impart.

“Hey kid, hey, Maurice!” Russell turns around; the voice is very familiar. The west side of Union Square Park is so filled with shoppers, gawkers, artists, jewelers, and so on, that it takes a moment to locate the source of the greeting. Bruce. Bruce Orlov is standing before a table of his own artwork. The first thing Russell notices upon approaching Bruce isn’t the man himself but a painting he has laid out on the table, priced at \$40. Russell is almost embarrassed by the painting. It is of a young boy (possibly twelve or thirteen) masturbating into what is clearly meant to be a holy chalice. A bearded and robed

man (obviously a priest) stands in the corner, looking pleased. The piece is titled “Fatherfucker”. Noticing and taking pleasure in Russell’s discomfort, Bruce announces “Religions are the cradles of despotism.’ Ever heard of the Marquis de Sade?” “No,” Russell replies. The painting seems purely pornographic, but, at the same time, Russell feels he should like it. He wants to be open-minded. Jeff, at the sight of something like this, would become enraged. Lina might vomit. So, Russell decides, so much for initial responses. The painting is controversial and therefore interesting. Plus, Bruce seemed like a nice man. He didn’t make nasty comments about Russell’s appearance. He had accepted Russell right off the bat.

“Cruising?”

“Pardon?” Russell isn’t sure he understands the question.

“Nothing,” Bruce smiles. “How’s your reading coming?”

“Good. I really like *Maurice*. I think it may end up being one of my favorites.”

“Uh huh. Well, there are a lot of others like it. Listen, I am finished here at around 7:00. If you’re willing to stick around awhile, you can help me bring my artwork back to my place and, as payment, I may let you borrow something.”

Russell looks at his watch. It is 5:00. There is a Barnes and Noble close by. He can go there for a bit, get a cup of coffee, read some more and then come back. Russell knows his father will be irritated if he isn’t home for dinner, but it is the end of the semester, and there are finals to study for. Russell knows that if he calls his mother, tells her he is at the library and swamped with work, she will cover for him. He wants to see Bruce’s place. He has an image in his mind of what it must look like.

“Okay. I just have to call my mother.”

Bruce replies, “Yes, you call your mother. Let her know you’ll be in good hands.”

“No, Aubrey, you only need to set four places at the table.”

“Dad’s not coming home?”

“Russell is coming home late. He won’t be here for dinner.”

Bruce’s place is only a twenty-minute walk from Union Square. 9th Street between 1st Avenue and Avenue A is unlike any part of the city Russell has explored. Across from Bruce’s apartment is a store that specializes in supplies for witchcraft and goddess worship. When Russell was younger, his mother had insisted that he return a ouija board he was given for his birthday. Anything “pagan” or “unchristian” really freaked Lina out. Next to Bruce’s apartment building is a psychic, and

then, as if there wasn't enough heathenism to fill one block, Flower Power Herbs and Roots stood on the southwest side of the street. Russell, upon entering Bruce's neighborhood, feels a little like Dorothy discovering the Land of Oz.

"So this is it. This is where it all happens," apparently Bruce's idea of a humble and friendly icebreaker.

Russell looks around the studio apartment. It is everything he had imagined. Bruce's lair is overflowing with paintbrushes, incense burners, phallic-shaped utensils (brushes, candles, were those chopsticks with heads and testicles?), canvasses (many displaying half-finished compositions), and then, something furry and light brushes against Russell's legs.

"Meet Lucifer Sam," Bruce says, responding to the look of surprise on Russell face. "He's a pure-breed Egyptian Mau."

"Lucifer, like the devil?" Russell inquires, his Christian up-bringing surfacing, if only for a moment.

"Lucifer Sam, Siam cat.

Always sitting by your side,

Always by your side.

'That cat's something I can't explain.' Syd Barret, Pink Floyd."

"I know Pink Floyd."

"I'm sure you know Roger Water's Pink Floyd. So you're not into Rap, Hip Hop?"

"No, I like older stuff."

"Yea, like what?"

"Well, mostly stuff I pick up from my parents. My dad loves Bruce Springsteen. He's pretty great. I like Eric Clapton, Neil Young. Right now, though, I'm really into Cat Stevens."

"Yea, you're a pretty placid kid. I'll have to toughen you up."

Lina sits with her husband and two daughters at the dinner table, strongly feeling her son's absence. Having a family dinner without Russell seems unbalanced. It is like trying to conduct a wedding ceremony without a bride. If it were up to her, they all would have waited for his return before beginning the meal. Isn't that what families do? Put themselves through discomfort, if need be, to demonstrate the love and devotion they have for each other?

"Pass the rice please," requests Jeff. Realizing that Lina is somewhere else, he probes, "Have you spoken to Russell?"

"Around 5:15. He didn't specify when he'd be home, but he promised it wouldn't be too late. I've made enough food, as I imagine he will be hungry from all the studying."

“Mom, when will Russ leave for college?” Lina can’t tell if Grace is concerned about Russell’s leaving or enthusiastic over the prospect of inheriting his room.

“He has one more year in high school, sweets. Why, will you miss him?”

“Yea, I miss him now.”

“Me too. We’re lucky to have him.” Lina focuses her gaze on Jeff as she speaks. She knows that Jeff hasn’t always been pleased with their boy. He would have preferred a more “manly” son. This is one particular area in which Lina feels her husband has been unfair and, at times, even cruel.

“I really shouldn’t stay out too late. My mom tends to worry.” Russell feels a little embarrassed talking to Bruce about his mother. It seems so childish.

“That’s right, and I promised to lend you something.”

Bruce takes an item off his bookshelf and hands it to Russell. “Do you like movies?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What about foreign films?”

“I can’t say I’ve seen too many. My mother and I have watched *Life Is Beautiful* a number of times. She loves that movie.” Again, Russell feels stupid referring to his mother.

“Well, this is completely different. It’s about a man in prison and a young boy, actually. It’s German.” Bruce watches Russell closely as he speaks, searching for any hint of discomfort.

The Consequence. It looks interesting, alluring. Russell remembers his resolution to be more open-minded.

“I never actually saw *Brokeback Mountain*,” Russell confesses. “When it came out, I was too young.”

“Well, this’ll help make up for lost time.”

Russell turns to leave. “How should I get this back to you?”

“Come by tomorrow. I’ll be here all day. You can think of my place as a library. You’ll get one book or movie at a time. Maybe you’ll come earlier, and I can show you some of my work. Maybe you’ll let me paint you.”

“I will watch this movie tonight, in that case. Thanks, Bruce.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Maurice.”

“Russell.”

“If you say so.”

He hasn't been studying, Lina can tell. Was it a girl? Had Russell met a young woman? Lina would like to ask, but she doesn't want to make her son uncomfortable.

Her daughters are in their room. And Jeff? Well, Lina is not quite sure where he is.

"Russ, hun, sit down. You must be hungry, all that studying."

"Yea, I'm a little hungry."

"So, how was your day?"

"Good. I'm looking forward to the summer."

"Of course, you must need a break." God how she loves him. He has turned out just as, no, even better than she would have hoped. Lina continues, "You know, during dinner, Grace asked when you'd be going to college."

"She wants my room?"

"Actually, she said she'd miss you. You know, there are some great schools here in the city. You could stay home. It would save your dad some money, and I'm not sure I want you so far from me." Lina's voice cracks. She can't help it and begins to cry. Now she is sure she's made her son uncomfortable.

Russell can't stand to see his mother sad. He puts his hand on her arm, "Mom, please. Maybe I'll stay in the city. I could apply to Cooper Union."

Lina takes a deep breath. She needs to collect herself. "Cooper Union? In the Village? Isn't that an art school? Are you interested in becoming an artist?"

"Maybe, or a writer. I don't know yet. Something creative."

"Well, whatever you decide, I know you will be wonderful."

"Would dad be angry if I became an artist or a writer?"

"You'll have to ask him. But, it is your future, your career."

"Mom?"

"Uh huh?"

"I think I might be gay." The words spill out, like water from a brimming teapot. He had needed to say them aloud.

Someone else needed to hear what had been soaring through his head, non-stop.

Lina grew pale. "You mean homosexual?" Maybe he meant something different. She hoped to God he meant gay in the archaic sense. Maybe kids were using the word the old-fashioned way again.

“Yes, homosexual.”

Lina can feel her stomach drop. How does a mother respond to such a statement? Not with anger, never with anger. Lina’s mother had managed Corey with “an iron fist.” It hadn’t done him any good, and that was never Lina’s way. She wasn’t angry; she was frightened. Dick Cheney, wasn’t his daughter a lesbian? How did he handle that, she wondered, when he found out?

Helpless, that’s the feeling Lina had, sitting in the bathroom at 2:30 in the morning. Jeff was asleep, completely unaware of the shit storm blowing his way. He will be furious. Lina has the urge, and this isn’t the first time, to protect her son from his father. What would Jeff do? She won’t tell him yet. Today is Thursday. Russell can miss one day of school. She will take him to the LDS Temple at Lincoln Center. No, she will go there herself, after her children are safely off to school. She will make an appointment with the missionaries, have them come to her. She’ll tell Russell to come home straight after school, and they’ll be there to talk with him. She’ll request college age boys. It would be better for Russell to talk with someone his own age, or there about. It would be okay. Russell was only seventeen. He was a child. This “problem” would be straightened out.

Russell leaves the Union Square Subway Station and heads west. This particular trip has nothing to do with Bruce, in fact; Russell hadn’t watched the movie he’d borrowed last night. Too much transpired between yesterday’s encounter and this afternoon. And Russell hadn’t headed home from school, as his mother had requested. He wasn’t stupid and had a pretty good idea of what she’d planned. He knew it would involve someone from the church, probably her church. Though Russell knew his mother was no longer a practicing Mormon (she didn’t attend church anymore), he guessed that last night’s confession would send her running to 125 Columbus Avenue. Russell did not want to hear about God and Jesus. He didn’t want someone telling him what “The Heavenly Father” expected from him. At this point, he didn’t care. If The Heavenly Father was anything like his own father, Russell wanted nothing to do with him. Bruce had said, “Our community is very accepting.” For Russell, that was key. He was gay. He had known this for quite some time now. It was time for him to be accepted as he was.

Russell approaches his destination, one he spent some time searching for online last night. Ascending two moderately steep steps, toward the doors of The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center on West 13th Street, Russell feels a mixture of relief and sadness. The thought occurs to him, “Now I am alone. I am on my own with this. I am claiming sanctuary here, of all places.”

Russell enters the building, walking toward the information desk.

“I would like to see someone who works at the Youth Enrichment Services Center, please.”

“Okay,” says the man at information, pointing Russell in the right direction.

Russell walks down a corridor, outside past a small garden, then through the doors of the YES building. Introducing himself to the person at the front desk, Russell asks if there is someone he might speak with. It is urgent.

“Our regular on-call social worker is out on personal business, but we do have a volunteer substitute. She can meet with you. Just have a seat for a few minutes.”

Lina sits at the kitchen table. Two young blonde men in buttoned-down white collared shirts (neatly tucked in) and well-tailored kakhi pants sit across from her. Each has his own copy of *The Book Of Mormon* in front of him, authoritatively placed on Lina’s table.

“My son really should be here by now. I’m sorry, he must be held up. Would you like some tea? I’m going to make some.”

“Oh no, that’s...”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I forgot. No caffeine. I’m just a little frazzled. I hope you don’t mind if I have some tea. I haven’t actually lived by the Church’s guidelines for some time now.”

The two boys glance at each other, a look of superiority on their faces.

Lina feels both embarrassed and angry. Could they actually think that her having a cup of tea is an indication of some objectionable lifestyle? This is what she’d hated about the Church. Any small deviation from the rules, and you were wholly wayward. Judgment descended.

“Hi, I’m Ashley.”

Russell looks up. She is short, very kind looking. Russell takes a moment to consider the woman standing over him. He will, after all, be confiding in her. Observing Ashley, Russell realizes that he has never knowingly spoken to a lesbian before. She is different, very different from his mother. Her face is so animated. She seems free, emancipated. Maybe, Russell wonders, this is what being an open homosexual looks like.

“I’m sorry to have made you come here for nothing,” Lina looks at her feet as she speaks to the two missionaries. The young men are polite, but she knows they have judged her. They judged me from the moment they stepped foot in my house, she thinks, and they have judged my son.

Ashley Weathersby, MSW, Smith College School of Social Work.

Russell examines the diploma Ashley has propped up on the desk.

“It’s not a vanity thing,” she exclaims, reacting to Russell’s curiosity. “I just want to make sure you and the other people I see, while the usual counselor is out, feel comfortable and know that I’m not a fraud. You can talk to me.”

Ashley’s smile is warm and sincere. She isn’t going to judge him. Whoever Lina had lined up from the Church, their sole purpose was to judge and prepare him for the “Judgment Seat of Christ.” Russell wondered what his mother would be like if she hadn’t let other peoples’ standards dictate her life. It seemed to Russell that the only act of rebellion his mother could be found guilty of was marrying his father. And that was one act Russell, himself, judged unsympathetically.

Lina sits alone at the kitchen table, feeling helpless and defeated. The girls are in their room. Could that be the tv? Aubrey and Grace had been so excited for *Highschool Musical 3* to come out on DVD. Lina’s girls were suckers for Teen Romance. Aubrey would say *A Cinderella Story* was her very favorite movie and that Hilary Duff was so beautiful, she wished she looked like her. Lina could relate. As a young woman she’d watched *From Here To Eternity* and *A Place in The Sun* over and over, crying every time. So, why not Russell? It was true that Lina had been strict about what her son watched. When she’d finally let him watch *Titanic*, Lina fast-forwarded the scene where Kate Winslet appears partially naked. But once Russell turned sixteen, she had become more lenient. Now he could pretty much watch whatever he wanted. Maybe if she’d given him more freedom as a boy, let him watch Kate Winslet expose herself (Lina genuinely felt that nudity in film was inapprortiate and exploitative), he’d have developed a healthy interest in women.

“I need help,” Russell begins sobbing. He hasn’t cried in a long time. “I can’t go home now. I’m all alone. I have nobody. It’s an abomination. This thing... an... I’m so sorry for my mother. I love my mom. Please help me.... Don’t let me go back there. I wish I were dead. Because God, I mean my dad hates fags. I’m so dead.”

Why isn't he answering his cell? Lina is really starting to worry. It is now 6:30. What is she going to tell Jeff. He is completely in the dark. He will lose it. But if Russell does not call, she will have to tell her husband. Her child's safety, at this point, is Lina's greatest concern. Where could he have gone? Lina remembers, in the 80s, hearing about gay men getting blow jobs in Central Park at night. "God, Russell! Just answer your phone!"

They sit in a big circle. Boys from thirteen to nineteen, all gathered together with one issue in common: each is struggling with his homosexuality. Russell is seated next to Ashley, who is leading today's group discussion. When Russell finally works up the nerve to look around the room and absorb his surroundings, one boy in particular catches his eye. He has dirty blond, curly hair, brown eyes, wears glasses and a white t-shirt that features a five-point star surrounded by a circle. Russell can't quite place the symbol, but he knows he has seen it.... Bruce! Yes, Bruce had a picture on his wall with this very image. Russell thinks, if he can gather up the courage once the meeting is finished, he will approach the boy and ask the symbol's significance.

"Who would like to start off today's discussion?" Ashley asks, glancing around the room.

"I came out to my family last night at dinner," exclaims a very handsome looking boy, around Russell's age.

"How did they react?" Ashley asks.

"My mom cried. My dad walked out for a few moments. I was afraid, but when he came back in he hugged me and asked to speak to me alone. My mother and sisters left, and he told me that when he was growing up in the Dominican Republic he had a very close friend who everyone said was 'funny'; other kids in the neighborhood called him 'maricon' which means faggot in Spanish. One day, my dad said his friend disappeared, and when he asked his parents why, they told him that the boy's family found him dressing in his sisters clothes and sent him away. My dad said he never found out where his friend had gone or saw him again. He said that that experience really changed his views on gays. He said that he would have preferred me to be more traditional, but that I was his son and he would support me anyways. My mother is still having a hard time, but she's very Catholic."

Russell looks at Ashley. Her face is lit up, as if someone has offered her a beautiful gift. This boy's achievement clearly nourishes something in her spirit. Russell thinks back to the moment he entered the YES building and realizes there is no other place in which he would rather claim sanctuary.

"Wow, Christopher," exclaims Ashley, "that is really wonderful. I know I haven't been here in the past to hear all the things that led up to your telling your family, but all I can say is you are incredibly brave. You must feel so relieved."

It is 8:00 PM. Lina is sick with worry. She fed her family burnt chicken and completely forgot to reheat the tomato sauce. When Grace complained about the food, while Lina checked her phone for the um-teenth time during dinner for missed calls, Lina had snapped, sending her daughter into hysterics. Now, Lina sits on her bed, cell phone still in hand, as Jeff approaches her. “If he tries to have sex with me now, if that is what is on his mind, while I am sitting here tearing my hair out over our missing son, I will kill him,” Lina thinks. “Caroline, I didn’t say anything at the table because of our daughters. What is going on? You need to tell me now. I am trying very hard to control my temper. I have not called Russell, as I know he prefers you. He always has. Have you spoken to him? I noticed you checking your phone all throughout dinner.”

“Jeff, Russell is in trouble.” And as she utters these words, Lina begins to cry uncontrollably. She will now tell her husband everything. Why, anyways, should he be spared?

Ashley ends the group meeting at 8:30. After two full hours of listening to other boys’ stories, Russell is sad the time is up. Now he must figure out where he will go, his next move.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Russell turns around. It is the boy he had noticed earlier. Russell thought they’d had a moment during the session when their eyes met but discarded the thought as wishful thinking.

“I’m Russell. What’s your name?”

“Justin, Justin Landau. You seem very quiet. I was kind of waiting for you to say something. You’re new, I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Yea, this is my first time here.” Russell felt nervous but different from the feeling he’d had with Bruce. Justin was around Russell’s age. Having gone to an all boys school his entire life, Russell was used to typical teenage male interactions. But here Russell felt at ease. There was no competition. Justin was not going to try to “one-up him” as so many other boys Russell’s age did. And, Russell felt an instant attraction. He remembered feeling attracted to Bruce, that first day in the park, but something about his manner made Russell uncomfortable. It wasn’t just the obscene painting. Russell wanted Justin to like him, think he was smart and interesting. More importantly, Russell felt that Justin might understand him.

“I started coming a couple of months ago,” Justin began, bringing Russell back to the present conversation. “I really like it. Everyone is very accepting here. It’s hard being young and gay, even in New York. Actually, just this year, I started going to a school specially for gay, lesbian and transgendered kids.”

Russell is surprised. He had no idea there were places like that.

“Where,” Justin continues, “do you go to school?”

“Browning, on East 62nd. It’s right near where I live. It’s all boys.”

“Oh, are they accepting of gays there?”

“No one really knows. To be honest, I don’t have many friends.” Saying this aloud saddened Russell. He would have liked to have had someone to keep him company, instead of always relying on his ipod and whatever book he happened to be reading.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. It’s hard not to make friends here.”

Russell smiles and then remembers, “What is that symbol on your shirt?”

“It’s called a pentacle. It’s a pagan symbol.”

“Pagan, is that your religion?”

“I don’t know if you’d call it that. I don’t really have a particular religion. I’m sort of a mix of things. Although the motto that I live by is very pagan.”

“What’s that?”

“Live and let live.”

Jeff is so angry. Lina knows the look on his face all too well. Part of her even hopes Russell doesn’t come home tonight, that he has a safe place to stay. But, he is only seventeen. Lina goes into the kitchen, sits at the table and sobs.

“Here,” Justin continues. “This is my number. We should hang out. Maybe tomorrow? Fridays are a waste of school time anyways. We can be bad.”

“Okay.” Russell likes the thought of playing hookey, something he has never done before.

“Would you want to meet here, then?”

“Sure.”

“How about outside in the garden?”

“Okay.”

“Would 1:00 be a good time for you?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, I’ll see you then.”

Almost everyone has left. Russell is still in the room where the discussion was held, and Ashley is getting her things together.

“Where will you go from here?” Ashley asks, looking concerned.

“I don’t know,” Russell replies. All he has on him is his school bag (containing homework and his school uniform), his ipod, cell phone (which has remained turned off), twenty dollars and *Maurice*. He isn’t sure what he is going to do.

“Listen, Russell. This is not usual, but I don’t feel comfortable just leaving you to your own defenses. Everything you told me this evening, before the group, is confidential, but I don’t think you should go home tonight. I won’t tell anyone about what we talked about, unless I think you are unsafe. And I feel the safest thing for you to do tonight is come stay with me.”

“Okay.” Russell doesn’t have the energy to argue, and he feels there is no alternative. Plus, he trusts Ashley.

Ashley’s apartment is small but homey. She lives in West Harlem (an area Russell is completely unfamiliar with) and is recently single. She explains to Russell that her ex-girlfriend recently moved out, leaving her to manage the rent on her own. She will either have to move to a studio or find a roommate.

“Are you hungry, Russell?”

“I guess, a little.”

“I’ll cook up some pasta, then. We can eat in about fifteen minutes. Wanna keep me company in the kitchen?”

“No, thanks. I would rather stay in the living room.”

Russell finds a spot on the floor, places his book bag against the wall and encloses himself in a corner. He opens his bag and takes out *Maurice*.

“The light within--Maurice had neared confidences, but they would not have been listened to. His grandfather didn’t, couldn’t understand. He was only to get ‘the light within--be kind’, yet the phrase continued the rearrangement that begun inside him. Why should one be kind and good? For someone’s sake--for the sake of Clive or God or the Sun?”

“Live and let live,” Justin’s words returned to Russell as he sat reading on the floor of Ashley Weathersby’s apartment. He was luckier than Maurice. He had a confidant, two, in fact. Russell thought, rereading this passage from *Maurice*, yes, we should be kind for the sake of God. And, we should also “Live and let live”.

Russell listens to 'Tea For The Tillerman as he heads towards the Center for his afternoon with Justin. Russell hasn't slept much, but he feels surprisingly alert and ready to seize the day. He finished *Maurice* last night. The novel's climax seemed, to Russell, to be some kind of omen. If Maurice could find love and happiness in the early twentieth century, then there was certainly hope for him. Russell had also thought a lot about Justin last night. What if he greeted him with a kiss? Maybe that would be too bold. He'd have to play it by ear. Russell is already in the garden at The Center, and it is only 12:30, giving him half an hour before he meets Justin. Russell's thoughts turn to his family. He hadn't spoken to or seen his mother since his coming out, and he hadn't gone to school at all today. Russell's phone still remained off, and Lina was probably terrified by now.

Upon activating his cell, Russell notices the over forty missed calls from his mother. He clicks on one and presses send. There is barely one ring before Lina answers the phone, the sound of relief emanating from her voice.

"Oh, thank God! Russ! I was so scared. Are you okay? Where are you? Has anything happened? Are you safe?"

"Mom, I'm fine. I stayed with a nice lady last night. I met her at The Gay and Lesbian Center on 13th Street."

Lina is so relieved by the sound of her son's voice. Had he said something about a Gay center? Didn't matter. He was safe. I've acted cruelly, she thinks. Somehow Russell knew what I'd planned, he always knew, was always somehow one step ahead. We have a real bond, Lina reflected, before responding to her son. "Russ, you can come home. You're father will just have to cope. He will have to be an adult and bear up."

"No, mom. I don't want to come home. I want to stay with Ashley for a bit. I want to figure some things out."

"Ashley is the woman you said you met?" Lina feels a heaviness in her chest.

"She's is a social worker. She lives in Harlem and has a spare room. You don't have to worry, it won't be forever"

Forever, Lina thinks, God I hope not. But something in his voice felt different, sounded solid, more grown-up. She would, she felt, give her son the space he needed. "Do you have Ashley's number? I'd like to speak with her. You understand, just to make sure you will be safe and looked after. Russell, you know you are my greatest love."

"I know, mom. Let me give you her number. Her name is Ashley Weathersby and she lives on West 137th street." As Russell reads off the last three digits of Ashley's number to his mother, Justin appears.

"I have to go. Mom, I love you. I will see you soon. I promise."

"Hi," Russell says, feeling a little bashful.

Justin sits on the bench next to Russell. "What were you listening to?" Justin asks, noticing the ipod on Russell's lap.

“Cat Stevens. What about you?” Justin, too, has his ipod in plain view.

“Grizzly Bear. They’re new.”

“I’ve never heard of them.”

“Oh, well, I’ll burn you one of their albums. They’re one of my favorites. So you like the classics?”

“Yea, mostly. I’m in a Cat Stevens phase right now, but ‘m open to all kinds of music.”

“I like a lot of the classics as well, mostly The Grateful Dead. I’m not too familiar with Cat Stevens, to be honest. Maybe you can share some of his stuff with me.”

“Alright. We’ll teach each other.”

It is 4:00 on Friday, and Lina has finished her phone call to Ashley. The conversation lasted forty-five minutes. Afterwards, Lina tried calling Russell, but he didn’t answer. Ashley had been very easy to talk to, but Lina couldn’t shake the feeling that she was losing her son. She could see why Russell had taken a liking to Ashley. She was spunky, full of energy. Ashley was also quite young, one of those “naïve liberals,” as Jeff called them. Still, I am his mother, Lina thought, almost speaking out loud. That will never change.

Of course, there had been more to the conversation than Russell’s coming out and Lina’s need for reassurance. As for now, Jeff would help Ashley with her rent. I will see to that, Lina thought. It is the least he can do. Lina hadn’t spoken to Jeff since the conversation with Ashley. Last night, however, Jeff made it clear that he didn’t want to see Russell. This will pass, Lina thought. Pouring water into the tea kettle, a segment from a song she listened to frequently as a girl drifted into Lina’s mind.

A week has passed. Russell and his mother have stayed in touch, speaking on the phone at least once a day. Lina hasn’t seen her son since his coming out, but a date has been set. Russell talked a lot about his “new friend”, and Lina has agreed to meet Justin, though she still feels uncomfortable. How should she approach him? She wanted to be warm, but she wasn’t going to lie to either her son or his friend. You can take the girl out of the church, Lina repeated with a slight smile, but you can’t take the church out of the girl. This will last Lina thought, pouring water into the tea kettle.

The big day has arrived. Russell has chosen a coffee shop in the East Village as their meeting spot. He is a little nervous but mostly excited. He knows his mother will like Justin. Lina has heard from both Russell and Ashley about how nice Justin is.

It will be alright, Lina thinks on her way to the cafe. Russell's path in life is not one I would have chosen, but it is his and his alone. I left the LDS church when I married Jeff, and my children are not products of its doctrine. Russell is his own person. During one of their longer, more recent telephone conversations, Russell imparted a piece of wisdom to Lina that his "new friend" taught him. Russell explained, "Justin's philosophy in life is to 'live and let live.' I've decided it is also my own." Lina wasn't quite sure she agreed, but she did love her son more than her own personal convictions. Lina had never known true maternal fear before the night she'd spent completely unaware of Russell's whereabouts. Everything else, after that night, seemed manageable. Russell is safe, she thinks, and he is a good son. Hopefully, Jeff would come around. He is stubborn as a mule, but Russell is his only son. Lina understood Jeff's disappointment. God knows part of her shared it. But she also believed that her husband loved his child too much to stay estranged forever. And, for now, Russell had Ashley. She was like a big sister to him. Yes, it will be alright.

And there they are. Russell and Justin have chosen a table at Joe's Coffee Shop and are waiting for her to arrive. Lina enters the coffee house, kisses her son and shakes Justin's hand. He's ordered me a cup of tea, Lina notices. "It's Earl Grey," Russell explains. "Justin says it's the Queen of England's favorite flavor." The Queen, Lina muses, reassured of her son's love. So, a new flavor and, with it, the chance at a new beginning. The three begin their conversation, and Lina notices a synchronized melody created by the boys' voices as they fill her in on their plans for the future. This sound, she reflects, taking her first sip of Earl Grey, is a sonic representation of love. It permeates her core stronger and louder than even the sharpest, most fervent reveille. Nothing threatening here, just the sound of clanking mugs and lively conversation.