

TAKE 3

ADVENTURES WITH ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

(Adult Discretion Advisory) Personal Journal¹

Autumn in New York. Nineteen seventy-eight. At exactly 8:00 PM, Thursday, October 12, Mr. Robert Mapplethorpe descended the stairs into the main salon of the supper club and walked into the bar.

He was elegant in his black leather jacket.

Leather seems to give substance to his slender body.

He wore black jeans and black cowboy boots with pointed toes. His black hair was tamed with water from the sink in his kitchen. He had practiced to perfection a certain Manhattan sophistication.

He made me, the Californian, marvel how New Yorkers who live in tiny apartments turn themselves out as if they owned the most stylish coop. Robert is a better dresser than he is a housekeeper. I couldn't survive in his three rooms, well, four, if I count how he has divided the living room with a makeshift wall into two rooms to make his bedroom.

His bed is a mattress on the floor.

The whole place looks like a burglary scene, but I understand. My own apartment is strewn with papers and notes and photographs and super-8 movies. I call it "my intellectual mess." Creative types always have a dozen projects going at once. Every stack of paper means something when you're working hard at various projects. Robert's only room that's in order, because it's practically empty, is his studio, which is the front room, flooded with southern light. Arrayed under the bank of windows is a gray radiator running the length of the wall.

Jack McNenny, who had invited the two of us to the supper club, ordered Robert a beer.

"How are you?" Robert said. "Feeling better?"

I was grateful to him. I kissed him.

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He smiled his wicked grin.

He had rescued me the afternoon before, Wednesday, when he had set me up to push my limits.

I had gotten into trouble.

Not so much sex-and-drugs trouble.

More like existential trouble.

I could see in his face a hint of satisfaction. Robert likes to fuck with people's heads. He likes to set them up to see where their flash points are.

"I'm still coming down," I said. "I'm still wired."

"I'm sorry" He laughed.

"Roberto," I said, "you're not sorry. You think freaking me out is funny."

"Actually, Jack, it is funny."

"You told me you knew those people," I said.

"I told you how they are, especially X. The more I told you about the party the more turned on you got."

"Robert's right," McNenny said. "You always want more. Sometimes more can be too much."

Both, of course, knew the appetite of the tourist trip. I was spending ten days in New York. I was crashing two blocks south of Houston with George Agustinella at 2 Charlton at the corner of Sixth Avenue, but was spending most of my time with McNenny at his nearby flower shop, at 251 Avenue of the Americas (Sixth and Houston), and with Robert at 24 Bond Street, except when Robert was out doing business, which means art business or drug business. Besides visiting friends in Manhattan, I always need some time to myself, which means cruising out alone to hot spots like the Everhard Baths and the Mineshaft.

"If you can't be with me," Robert said, "then you should be out with people who I know because they're the best people for sex."

"They were good sex," I said, "but with the acid something more than sex happened. The orgy was wild, but it was more than sex."

He laughed and lit a Kool. "With X, it always is."

I had told him I had only ten days and wanted to meet the hottest tricks he and McNenny knew—besides picking some strangers on my own.

The third night, Monday, two days before the Wednesday-afternoon orgy, he had set me up for a date with a doctor who was very handsome and very far out. I arrived at the door, and the doctor, I can't even remember his name, welcomed me in.

He is really good-looking.

His place looks like a sex pad. I figured, because he is a society doctor, he probably lives somewhere uptown and uses this East Village address for his tricks.

The place smelled with the usual telltale mix of Crisco, poppers, and smoke. The lights were low, throbbing disco pounded out from his large-reel tape deck. Candles, maybe a hundred of them, all different shapes and sizes, flickered around the room.

The doctor, except for a once-white Bike jockstrap, was naked, showered, and already stoned.

The thermostat was turned up high, really high, at least to me coming in fully dressed from the night chill.

He invited me to sit down, and we both pulled out our drug stashes.

He asked me if I was hot.

I looked at him and laughed.

We both laughed.

The evening was obviously going to be okay. Robert had primed us both with stories about the other, and the click was there.

Robert knows how to make good matches. Most of the time.

He's said for sure he gets some sort of kick setting me up with adventures he knows I'll write about in the book he wants to do together. He hates books. He hates the work involved in a book. I don't. He keeps asking me to write about him. Sometimes, I think that's the main thing he wants from me. (I could do worse. That's why I'm recording everything that happened of what I can remember, because the way gay relationships go, some day my words and his pictures will be all that remain. *Ars longa.*)

Robert said, "You're the most analytical person I've ever met."

"You should get out more."

Anyway, the doctor had lit his bed with spotlights on dimmers.

Robert, the sex-and-fashion photographer, had sort of cast us into our roles for the evening.

An open can of fresh Crisco sat on the bedside table.

We drank a glass of wine, shared our joints. The doctor took a hit of blotter acid. I took half a hit. He took my hand in his and clinically sized up my fist and checked out the smoothness of my fingernails.

We both smiled.

We were absolute strangers, but we were not anonymous.

"Robert scored some MDA for us," he said.

"He's great, for sure," I said.

We both snorted the white powder, hit the joints a few more shares, and sipped the white wine.

The doctor had a hunger for handballing and I liked topping guys, especially if the guy was into fantasy side trips that layered lust into the basic sensual fisting action.

“Why don’t you strip off?” he said. He headed toward the bedroom, clearly visible from where we sat, and lay back on the sheets.

I piled my clothes on top of my boots, where I had stuck my keys and my wallet.

I always do that so when I’m leaving, I don’t have to search for them. I’m also hick enough to think it’s security, so the trick can’t easily find my valuables. I mean, I saw *Midnight Cowboy*.

I walked naked toward him and knelt between his legs. “Robert said you were something special,” I said. “You are.”

He is, in fact, better-looking than Robert had indicated.

His body was very tan against the white sheets.

Towels and a brown bottle of poppers perched on the nightstand.

He reached under a pillow and pulled out two double-nostril silver inhalers, both hung on black leather thongs. He put one over his head and the other around my neck.

“They’re loaded,” he said.

Then the surprises began.

He grabbed me and pulled me down on top of him. We tussled for a few minutes, quite passionately actually, making general acquaintance of one another’s moves. Suddenly, he asked me to kneel back between his legs.

Oh WOW....

He peeled his jockstrap slowly down his muscular legs. He flopped out half erect, but stiff enough to reveal his scrotum, which he covered with his hand.

“Wanna see?” he asked.

Hell, I thought, this is the Big Apple. Sure.

He removed his hand and revealed his balls.

I was amazed.

He was a medical professional with a fetish for surgical body enhancement. His scrotum was shaped like a doughnut. I mean, he had surgically had his sac sliced down the center, separating his nuts, and then had the center cut sewn shut on both sides. The operation was neither self-inflicted nor recent. The hair of his groin was fully grown.

I think I’ve seen everything in San Francisco. That’s why I go to New York, like Holly Golightly: there’s such a lot of world to see.

“How do you like that?”

He is quite proud of his handiwork.

"A lot," I said.

I really did. I spent the night with the bracelet of his nuts around my wrist, moving it up my forearm, fisting into him while he climbed the walls.

The fillip of his take on fisting was fresh.

I like guys who actuate their fantasies.

I slept at Robert's that night.

"Was that different enough?" Robert asked.

"For a pimp, you are so amused with yourself," I said. "Of course."

"Did he tell you his story?"

"I didn't ask."

"He has a friend who is a surgeon."

"I figured."

"He writes prescriptions for his friend in trade for minor surgery now and then."

If I want weird and fresh, Robert always knows the best.

"Did you really like it?" Robert said.

"It was far out," I said. "Just far enough. Yeah, I liked it. I don't think I'll ever forget it. The sensation was great. Besides, Monday nights it's hard to get laid."

"He likes to freak guys out. That's why I didn't tell you his whole trip."

"He's so good-looking, he hardly needs something extra."

"Everybody needs something extra," Robert said.

"You devil, you."

"You're the devil, Jack. I'm going to show you how nasty and dirty you can be."

"I'm never sure what you mean," I said, "but I dare you."

"Don't ever dare me." Robert is always intensely serious. "Let's go to sleep."

"Did you get laid tonight?" I asked.

We were lying on our sides with his back tucked into my belly.

"I saw this one nigger who interested me at first."

"Where?"

"At the Mineshaft."

"So?"

"So I got his number."

"Then you didn't get laid."

"No."

"Do you want to cum so you can sleep?"

"I can sleep."

"So can I," I said. "I took two Valium."

"I've got Quaaludes if you need them."

"I always need Quaaludes," I said. "I'm fine. Save the Quaaludes."

Robert turned over under the sheet and took my face into his hands and kissed me. "You're too smart for your own good," he said.

"So are you," I said. "Thanks for the Doughnut Doctor."

"There's more where that came from," he said. "You get me models. The least I can do is get you the best tricks."

"Have you shot him?"

"He won't let me."

"Why? Because he's a perfect asshole?"

He sighed more than laughed. "You're never here enough."

"Geography is against us," I said.

We drifted off to sleep together, he dozing before me, I feeling his slender, tender body in my arms, loving him just because he is himself, a wild thing, seven years my junior. Bicoastal romances have a special glitter because time is at a premium.

That was Monday. Later, on Thursday, back at the supper club where Robert had made his entrance, he said, "X was a bit pissed about you freaking out at his orgy yesterday afternoon."

"I didn't freak out. I took too much acid. I mean, I didn't take more than I usually take. It's just that in New York I don't need as much. Those guys are so intense. This whole town is a speed trip. I hate speed."

Robert had given me an introduction to actor X's party on the Upper East Side. Its interior is too busy with Oriental art, Persian rugs, Warhol paintings, and photographs autographed to X, whose apartment it is, every nook and cranny of the posh place crammed with, I think, ridiculously expensive collectibles and antiques and draperies and upholstery without a plain and simple spot to quiet the eye, as if some dizzy decorator thinks interiors, unlike music, need no rest. The apartment is so fairy-dusted it should be in *Architectural Digest*. It's too ostentatiously busy for me. Robert touted the place as showy, the kind of place that looked like money. His own loft is a hovel; he couldn't care less about his own interior decor.

During the orgy, which was perversely outré, ten or twelve of us, minus Robert, who was spending Wednesday afternoon chatting up his work with some gallery owner or other, I felt, at first, a comfortable participant in male tribal rites.

I felt rather primal, but somehow not as Neanderthal as the other guests.

I was, and still am, at thirty thousand feet on this jetliner, in awe of the kind of decadence one can find in that part of Manhattan that Woody Allen in his films thinks is the whole world.

Robert wangled the invitation to see how committed I was to perversion. He likes to set people up to shock them into admitting to their own repressed desires. I try to bollix him with an unshockable, even bored, nonchalance.

(The invitation was easy to acquire: I was a new face in town, his friend, and writing was my credential.)

Homosexuality in itself is not perverse, but some homosexuals, the same as some heterosexuals, revel beyond the norms of the received taste of civilization.

Perhaps perversity, the last urban frontier, is avant-garde and retro-garde. No matter, the current norms must always be challenged. That's what artists are for: to poke Babbitts in the eye. If artists don't do that, they're not artists, they're entertainers.

Artists must always be open to witness everything.

Robert and I have that as common bond.

Besides, the guest list he named seduced me: several people I had only read about were to be participants.

Robert is quite frank about everything, even though he never really has sex in groups. He stated explicitly that the orgy would be scatologically satanic sadomasochism.

How can I resist the opportunity to attend a secret party where the cool sexual politesse of "no pressure" allows me to be more solo observer of the local color than direct participant? Robert and I are both basically voyeurs.

I better rethink this quest for experience because my nature as a writer is to slip from voyeur to participant, so I can get inside the process. All writers have to experience everything: a writer writes best about what he knows. Robert scouts the partners for his shoots the same way, but he doesn't lay them unless he has to.

The afternoon's sensuality centered around artist Nancy Grossman's sculpture of a head wrapped in black leather bondage. A large leather dildo protruded from the head's mouth.

I don't know whether that was part of the original sculpture or something added to enhance its powers of conjuration.

I do recognize, from my experience interviewing witches for my book *Popular Witchcraft*, when demonic totems and rituals present themselves.

The group was terribly civilized and urbane, or at least most were. Some were out-and-out dirty-sex machines. Three young men, one of them what Robert would call a “nigger,” had been hired in as feeders to insure the invited guests would have enough primary material.

I had given X my copy of *The Last Taboo*, whose scatology I had reviewed in a feature essay in *Drummer* magazine. I’m very curious about the escalating urban perversatility of liberated gay men.

Fisting, many think, is the last taboo to be incorporated into male sportfucking. They better think again. Scatology, from ritual anointing to communion, is the latest rage among sexual sophisticates who pay Robert court.

A writer, chronicling the popular culture of any subgroup within a subgroup, especially in the age of the New Journalism, must, in the best gonzo tradition of Hunter Thompson, who rode with the Hell’s Angels to experience material for his book, and of George Plimpton, who played with a professional football team to write *Paper Tiger*, engage, even at a minimalist level, the group that he is chronicling.

But there are limits.

Pleasantly stoned, and in tony company, I watched, and, without embarrassment, admit to being a minimalist supporting player in the revels.

Under the looming presence of the Grossman totem sculpture, the featured players moved to heights of ecstasy of flesh and blood and *merde* that surely equaled any theory of Freud or primal experience of Janov.

The men moved from incantatory words to grunts and growls, leaving civilization behind, devolving back to primitive communication of grunt and groan.

One particularly beautiful young man lay on the floor beneath the Grossman sculpture and became an altar around whom the assembled coven gathered to shoot their seed.

No matter how “sick” people may think this ritual, I can truthfully say I found them to have risen through the chosen medium to an ecstatic state.

I am somewhat of an empath, and their high energy was not lost on me. My spirit and my sense of aesthetics appreciated their dirty means to a spiritual end. Their transcendence is metaphor.

New York is a dirty city of a dirty present and a dirtier future.

My sense of well-being, and my perception of how sanity can be abandoned for either insanity or supersanity, caused me to flee to the

shower, where I was followed by a man who had left twentieth-century language behind some hours before.

He was an aborigine.

He cornered me, grunting monosyllables, making his message quite clear.

On acid, everything seems quite clear to me.

Too clear.

I see the existential cosmic hopelessness of It All.

I don't know what drug cocktail he had swallowed. He was so in a trance state that he seemed not to understand plain English.

My only escape, because for me personally things had gone quite far enough, and professionally the writer in me had seen more than any anthropologist with a government grant would ever see, was to grunt back, offering to hose him off.

He took to the hot shower I sprayed on him and made a game of it.

I'll never forget how the water turned him from primordial ooze as his white skin began to wash through.

I confess I felt like God, an acid god, creating Adam, the human, from the mud of the earth.

It's all too much.

I quickly towed off and pulled on my clothing, lacing my legs into my tall boots.

The colorful pleasures of the acid turned to fingernails of speed on a blackboard.

I clutched my throat, gasping for air in the steam-heated town house.

I was shocked, chagrined, ashamed, scared, full of guilt that I had waded out too far into the dirty heart of darkness.

Robert had pushed me in the game a little too far.

I was out of my league and I don't like that, especially here, in the close confines of this plane. The New York sexstyle is much nastier than San Francisco's.

I couldn't breathe.

I was terrified to leave the town house to go out into the Manhattan streets alone.

I was tripping my tits off.

X, the host, himself a television network name, came to see me out the door. I hesitated. This man who tried to be nice to everyone would think me a sexual hick who couldn't handle drugs.

I said, "I have to go, but I can't leave. If I step out on the sidewalk, I'll freak out. I'm already freaking out."

"You were splendid," he said. (*Splendid!* What a word! I think he was patronizing me out the door to get rid of me.) "You seemed to be having such a splendid time."

"I did. Thank you. Your party is great. I think it's because I didn't eat enough before I came. I've been out late ever since I arrived. I slept maybe four hours last night."

"Then please don't leave."

"Thank you."

As God is my splendid witness, I silently promised myself what everyone promises in that splendid state: "Just don't let me turn into Diane Linkletter. I promise I'll never take drugs again."

I started laughing. The whole scenario was so comic.

"You're okay," X said. "You can laugh?"

"Crazy people laugh."

We both laughed.

He put his famous arms around me.

No one in those Upper East Side rooms seemed to notice or care. The hired feeders had long before left. Only the noncelebs (except for one grade-B TV personality) and the sex fiends, the coldhearted creme de la creme of calloused Manhattan shits, remained, pigging out on their drug-induced appetites.

Why should they care?

I was one of Mapplethorpe's choice friends, after all.

I was his current squeeze.

Knowing him certified I wasn't a bimbo or a bozo.

What comfort could I possibly need?

I suppose they thought I was as jaded as Robert and as untreatable.

X held me for a moment, but he did not know me; he could not soothe me.

I resisted him. I'm Irish and Austrian: that makes me independent and hopelessly romantic. I always resist depending on the kindness of strangers even when I should.

X took me upstairs to his living room, whose opulent busy decor made my eyes spin with architectural indigestion.

"I'll call Robert," he said.

"No."

I felt more dying than faint and careened from one wingback chair to another, bouncing off a suffocating sofa, hoping to outrun the speed and guilt and fear.

X grew impatient.

He wanted to return to his orgy.

He offered me some leftover in his refrigerator: cold consomme.

“Call Robert,” I said.

Hours later, really only twenty minutes, Robert arrived, quite confused. “Oh, Jack,” he said. “I keep telling you not to go out. I keep telling you to stay with me.” He put his arms around me, trying tenderly to right my confusion, making light, reassuring talk, washing two Quaaludes down my throat. He finished dressing me, and took me out to a waiting taxi.

I said I was sorry about a hundred times.

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “I got what I wanted.”

“I never thought I could be grossed out.”

“Actually, you got what you wanted.”

In the backseat of the taxi, I pushed on him very hard. I wanted to hit him, but I’m a lot bigger built than he is. “What the fuck do you mean you got what you wanted?”

(I still don’t know what all he wanted.)

Slight as he is, he was able to maneuver me around to see the driver’s rearview mirror. “Look at your face.”

“I don’t want to see my face. I can’t see my face. We’re in a cab, for godsake. I feel sick.”

“We’re almost to Bond Street.”

No one I know in New York lives on the ground floor.

Everyone lives up several flights of very steep stairs.

When we reached the heavy industrial door on his flat, he guided me through and set me down on a chair in his studio.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“You’ve got what I want. You’ve got perfect dark circles under your eyes. You know that’s what I look for.”

“Robert Mapplethorpe’s famous raccoon effect.”

“Actually, right now, your soul is outside your skin where I can shoot it.”

“Don’t take my picture. Not now I look like shit.”

“Actually, you do.” He smiled a grin at that moment that I didn’t really like, but he had come and rescued me.

He had told me he loved me more than once and he had proven it, because Robert Mapplethorpe is not usually in the business of rescuing people he purposely tweaks. He despises innocence, which he says is another word for ignorance. (He’s right.)

“I’ll make it fast,” he said.

"You'd better. I'm tripping on acid and dealing with Quaaludes and I think I need to eat something."

He quickly arranged his lights, adjusted his tripod, loaded his camera, bent over it to frame the viewfinder, and without coaching much more than asking me to look into the lens began clicking off his frames.

I tried to look normal. Big joke.

Finally, he was satisfied. "Gotcha," he said. He came to me, lifted me up, hugged me, and walked me to his bed where he lay tenderly, soothingly, beside me. After two hours, which on bad speed seem like two years, he said, "I'm calling McNenny."

"Why?"

"We'll go eat."

"I can't eat."

"You need to eat. Food will slow you down."

Robert and I had both known Jack McNenny before we met each other.

McNenny owns a flower shop called the Gifts of Nature at the north-west corner of Sixth and Houston and when Robert first started shooting flowers, McNenny found for him the best cut blooms in Manhattan.

McNenny and I are the typical story of tricks who become friends.

Robert called him and took no small pleasure in announcing I was a basket case in need of dinner.

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

McNenny stood waiting in his flower shop surrounded by roses and mums, piddling with vases, picking at arrangements bunched in his refrigerated display case.

There's something I've always found soothing in the shop McNenny converted from an old neighborhood pharmacy, keeping its dark wood shelves and counters intact, polished, and lit with track lights.

"Take a hit of some of your famous California vitamins," McNenny said.

"I look that bad?"

"You don't look bad."

"Actually, I told him the same thing," Robert said.

"He took my picture."

McNenny's comic Irish was up. "Good. You can decide if it's a 'Before' or 'After' picture later."

"Fuck you," I said.

"Let's feed him," McNenny said. "Take these." He handed me the vitamins and looked at Robert. "What happened to him?"

"I got him invited to X's afternoon soiree."

"I couldn't go," McNenny said. "I had to work."

"You're lucky you missed it," I said.

"Fuck no, man!" McNenny said. "You're talking to the scat king of Manhattan."

"I forgot," I said, "the reason you named your store 'Gifts of Nature.'"

Robert laughed.

McNenny closed up shop and led us around the corner to a small village diner.

The eggs, the muffins, the conversation the two of them engineered to distract me, on top of the Quaaludes, brought a first wave of calm.

Only once did I for no reason other than anxiety rise up suddenly from the booth and lurch toward the center of the floor.

The waitress looked at me like, well, oh yeah, another burnt-out case.

Robert pulled me back to the booth.

The instant we sat down—Robert and I opposite McNenny—in the intersection outside the corner diner, two cars collided.

One slammed the other across the cobbles. It came crashing through the plate glass window of the diner.

Ciao, Manhattan, I immediately thought.

Shards of glass showered the cash register.

The front grille of the car crushed halfway through the doughnut counter and dropped hoodfirst down to a weird tilt.

In a second, the accident had begun and ended.

Everyone froze in position.

Instantly, everyone calculated that no one was injured. They all began to laugh. Quietly at first, then louder.

The front wheel of the tilted car was still spinning in the doughnuts.

I stood bolt upright with a scream coming up from my freaked-out guts.

McNenny rose mirrorlike up opposite me. His face looked so weird. He was laughing.

Robert pulled me down next to him. He, too, was laughing.

Their laughing started the whole diner laughing louder.

Even the driver in the car was laughing.

I looked at Robert.

"This is very funny," he said.

The spinning tire shot one more doughnut across the floor and then it flattened with a final quick hiss.

"This is very funny" Robert repeated.

"This is funny?" I said.

"Welcome to New York," McNenny said.

We three looked at one another and laughed hysterically.

At least, I did.

They buoyed me up and led me to the door.

The proprietor was in the street screaming for the cops.

The waitress, still laughing, waved Robert away when he tried to pay. They walked me back to the Gifts of Nature, once full of prescriptions, now full of flowers. McNenny filled a small vase with water and handed me three blue Valium.

Robert said, "I think he should crash here. You'll be around, and I have to go out."

I hate feeling like an invalid, with people talking about me in the third person. I hate drugs. Why do I take them? I'm writing this on Valium because I'm afraid of flying, which I do only because airplanes extend the range of my sex life.

Robert said, "You're fine. Go upstairs and try to sleep. I've got appointments."

McNenny lives above his flower shop.

The Gifts of Nature is a triangular building because of the way Sixth and Houston intersect. The open space of the ground-floor corner shop with all its plate glass windows seems interesting, but McNenny's upstairs apartment with its little rooms seems like a small slice of pie.

The place smelled like an outhouse.

I was too zonked out to care. McNenny dropped me on his bed, and within five minutes, I passed over into a speedy, image-crazed sleep. Hours later, I didn't even feel him crawl in next to me when he came back from the Mineshaft, which he says was around dawn. He says he passed out for an hour and got up and went to the flower mart.

When I woke, I showered and went downstairs. McNenny had a large Styrofoam cup of hot coffee waiting for me. "Robert called," he said. "He thinks you should stay here today."

"I can't go anywhere yet."

"You feel okay?"

"I'm fine. Wired, but fine."

"Robert wants you to stay here."

"Maybe I can help you or something."

"Drink your coffee and relax."

McNenny and Robert both existed without sleep.

He chattered for an hour about how one day four years earlier he had walked into Doc Siva's pharmacy and announced to the proprietor of thirty-eight years that his store ought to become a flower shop.

While Siva watched, stunned, McNenny removed the suppository display from the corner window and replaced it with a philodendron Doc had behind his counter. The Clairol Lady gave way to an overwatered Swedish ivy.

Doc watched the changes. He had been thinking a lot about the last thirty-eight years in the preceding months. McNenny was no stranger to him; he often stopped in for sundries and conversation.

"The doc was amazed," McNenny said. "He says, 'So you're in advertising. What do you know about plants?' Not plants," I said. "Flowers. Cut flowers. Arrangements." And he says, "Arrangements you can probably handle." I got the shop on one condition. I promised to maintain the 1930s wooden cabinets, the frosted glass panels, and the marble floor. "None of this plastic everything," Doc said. So I got the shop. That's how I met Robert. He stopped in to check out the cut flowers."

"I need more coffee," I said.

McNenny offered to go down to the diner. "You stay and watch the shop. In fact, you can cut the ends off all those new day lilies. About three inches. Use the small hatchet and try to keep the mess way in the back. I like the customers seeing us working, but they don't have to see everything."

I spent the day coming around, chopping flowers. Robert called twice. I took a short nap in the afternoon. When I woke, he and McNenny were conspiring downstairs in the shop.

"You two are up to no good," I said.

Robert, the devil dancing in his eyes, said, "You'll like this. We're going out to dinner tonight."

"Not to the diner," I said.

"Better," McNenny said. "A supper club."

"I don't think I like supper clubs."

"This one's special," Robert said.

"I'm young, strung out, but I've only got so many days in Manhattan," I said. "Supper clubs suck. Let's eat at Mama Leone's. I want to go to the Mineshaft."

"I'll take you to the Mineshaft later," Robert said.

Someday I'll stand up and say no to that man. I should have last Wednesday. To him and McNenny both. Neither told me till it was too late why, just why, they were so intent on eating at an uptown supper club.

I hate uptown. I only like Times Square, the Village, the plays and movies . . . the bars, the baths, the after-hours joints, and I much prefer to eat at the Sheridan Square deli that used to be the Stonewall Bar, where the riot against the police started gay liberation ten years ago in June 1969.

That night, Thursday, *after* we ate at the supper club, McNenny and Robert confessed the plot they had set up.

That Thursday afternoon, as I slept upstairs in McNenny's flat, a man had climbed out of a taxi outside Jack's Gift of Nature. Six months before, a supper club in which the man was a partner, had opened, McNenny (so unashamedly gay) had created an order for the man he knew to be secretly gay, an excessively beautiful arrangement. He even delivered the piece by taxi himself.

The man had said, "Thanks."

For six months, McNenny had billed the supper club for the flowers. For six months, he received nothing.

McNenny, the afternoon I was asleep, saw the man exiting the taxi and crossing Houston Street outside the shop. McNenny, angry, beside himself, the way only New Yorkers can get beside themselves, turned all mouth. He ran out of his shop and collared the man for payment.

"Butt off, fag," the man had said.

McNenny, president of the neighborhood small business association, loves any chance to make a scene.

"Everybody knows I'm a fag!" His Irish was up. "You fucking closet case. You think you're fooling anybody around here? This is the Village, for crissakes!"

The man climbed into a cab.

"You're as dishonest about your life," McNenny shouted, "as you are crooked about your bills."

"Don't talk to me that way," the man said. He ordered the taxi off into the stream of traffic speeding up the Avenue of the Americas.

Livid, McNenny returned to his shop and immediately called the restaurant. "What night does Joe Blow have off?" he asked. "My wife and I," McNenny said, "want to surprise him by coming up for dinner one night soon. We want to make sure he's there."

Wednesdays, he was told, and Thursdays, the man was off.

A few minutes after McNenny hung up, Robert came into the shop to check on me. McNenny, who has a mouth no one can shut up, told Robert what had happened.

"So tonight he's off?" Robert said.

"D day," McNenny said.

They both admitted later they had exchanged, probably in one fast beat, the knowing looks of conspirators.

They were laughing the same wild laugh they had laughed when the car landed in the doughnuts.

That's when I had come downstairs and said, "You two are up to no good."

That's when Robert, truly with the devil dancing in his eyes, had fed me all the shit, except the truth, about why we really had to go to the supper club.

They both laughed like hyenas, I figured, at me because I was more interested in sex than dining.

"I'll meet you both there," Robert said.

"Eight o'clock sharp," McNenny said.

"Where are you going, Robert?" I needed him then.

"I'm trying to hassle with a dealer on some Mission furniture," he said. "It's boring. You'll be better off staying here. Hang out. Go for a walk. I promise I'll get you to the Mineshaft in plenty of time. Actually, I've got some business with Wally tonight."

(Wally Wallace is the founding owner of the Mineshaft.)

Robert hugged me and left. He is so ambitious.

He's maybe got too many irons in the fire, but he handles everything okay, except then, when I really wanted him to stay with me, and one of his deals stood in the way.

That night, McNenny and I took a taxi to the Upper East Side club. Robert had not yet arrived, so we sat in the bar. At exactly 8:00 P.M., Mr. Robert Mapplethorpe descended the stairs into the main salon of the supper club and walked into the bar. He was, as I said, elegant in his black leather jacket, black jeans, and his black leather cowboy boots. His hair was wet with curls.

"Did you get the Mission furniture?" I asked.

"The price is too high," he said. "The secret of collecting anything is to get in before it gets popular."

"It's not taken off in California yet," I said.

(I should check into this as soon as I get back.)

McNenny ordered Robert a beer and another for himself. They always laugh when I order bottled water without a lime twist. Alcohol is not my drug of choice. It gives me a headache.

"How are you feeling?" Robert squeezed my knee.

"Fine. Still a little speedy. But fine."

"He took his vitamins," McNenny said.

"You Californians." Robert grinned and shook his head.

"I gave McNenny a double hit of niacin," I said. "It's good for cleaning the system."

"Usually, I drink Drano," McNenny said.

The maitre d' escorted us to our table.

McNenny, suddenly the last of the big spenders, effusively insisted we order anything we wanted. "Price is no object," he said. "In fact, if you don't mind, I'll order for you."

Cocktails, appetizers, escargot, soups, lamb with mint and spring onions, sides of spaghetti, wines, and flan spun across the white linen tablecloth. They gorged with gusto. I picked at small amounts of what looked tasty mostly because I knew I should eat to make up for the last forty-eight hours and to prepare for the long, sleazy night at the Mineshaft.

"Eat," McNenny said. "Eat."

"The more you eat, the more you'll dump," Robert said.

McNenny's scatological interests fascinated Robert.

"Is that what this is all about?" I said. I couldn't, and can't, handle McNenny's voracious appetite that way.

Halfway into the main course, McNenny grew flushed, red, agitated.

"What's the matter?" Robert said.

"It's the niacin," I said. "It causes your whole body to tingle."

McNenny clutched the tablecloth.

The waiter approached. "Is everything all right, gentlemen?"

"Yes," Robert said. "Our friend is having a vitamin rush."

The waiter raised a supercilious eyebrow. We were, after all, the only diners in leather, as sure a sign of deviancy as wearing a sweater or walking a poodle.

"Drink some water," I said. "It only lasts a few minutes."

"The fuck it does," McNenny said. "It's like red-hot needles all over my body."

"Come on, McNenny," Robert said. "You're overreacting."

"I overreacted yesterday" I said.

"No!" McNenny said through gritted teeth. "I took a hit of acid before we left."

Robert and I broke up in laughter.

"It's not funny," McNenny said.

"It won't last long." Robert took charge. He escorted McNenny to the john and administered one of the many substances he always carried in his pockets.

It was all madness.

A few minutes later, McNenny followed Robert to the table. He was okay.

Friends together, sharing a private joke, we thought we were hilarious.

"Everybody else must think," I said, "that we're either rude or having the best time here."

That made us all laugh even more.

We lingered so long over coffee and aperitifs that I was growing anxious about douching up for the Mineshaft.

"No action starts before two A.M.," Robert said. "Relax."

When the waiter brought the check, Robert picked it up, very casually, took a look and laughed, and handed it to McNenny.

McNenny casually reached into his wallet and peeled out a fifty-dollar bill and laid the tip on the table.

He and Robert exchanged glances and laughed.

McNenny then placed an envelope under the check. "Come on," he said. He stood up, followed by Robert, and both turned to me and said, "Hurry up."

"What's the rush?" I said.

Robert took my elbow and steered me halfway through the crowded tables of the supper club.

We were passing the maitre d's station when the waiter at our table starting shouting.

McNenny grabbed Robert, who dragged me by the elbow, and we all broke into a fast gallop toward the door, scattering incoming patrons to the side.

"What's going on?" I yelled.

"Shut up," McNenny said.

"Pretend you're in a movie," Robert said.

McNenny pushed the two of us into a Yellow Cab and climbed in after us. "Sixth and Houston," he yelled, "and step on it."

The taxi's takeoff threw us all together in a pile in the backseat.

I looked back through the rear window and saw three shark-suited goons come running down the sidewalk after us, and stop.

With relief, I watched them growing smaller in the distance.

The florist bill, of course, was in the envelope McNenny had left on the table.

"That," Robert said, "was perfect."

McNenny couldn't stop telling and retelling the story of how the supper club faggot manager had stiffed him. He was beside himself with glee. "Welcome to the Big Apple," he said to me.

The goons' look had scared me, really still scares me.

"I don't think I'm ready for this."

"Sure you are," Robert said. "You just need more drugs."

That night, while we three were at the Mineshaft, each trailing off separately through the maze of rooms and corridors and stairwells, cruising for sex with the two or three hundred other male patrons, someone smashed the largest plate glass window of the Gifts of Nature.

McNenny had already had it boarded up when I arrived at eleven the next morning.

Robert and I had met up at the main bar in the Mineshaft after our separate late-night adventures and taxied together back to his Bond Street studio to sleep.

An early phone call from a *Vogue* editor had awakened us shortly after nine. Robert, very sleepy, talked softly, hung up, and turned to me.

"I have to shoot some *principessa* this afternoon."

Too tired to move, we lay in each other's arms for a long while. When finally Robert had to get up, I had already decided to stop by Gifts of Nature, have coffee with McNenny, and maybe help him in his shop to kill time and rest up for that night's return to the Mineshaft.

"You don't want to go there again," Robert said.

"I like anonymous sex," I said.

"I think you should stay here with me."

"You always say that. I can't stay."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll get bored with me." I really meant I needed fresh meat. I mean, I like him. I even love him. But he has all of New York every night; I had only ten days. I made polite excuses. "I am a guest, and you know what they say about guests."

"Don't jack me around, Jack."

"I'm serious."

"So," Robert continued relentlessly insinuating himself into my plans, "if you're going to McNenny's, I'll either call you there from Sam's when I'm finished at *Vogue*, or should I just come by the shop?"

"Either," I said. "I'll be there. I owe him for being so nice to me yesterday."

"What about me?"

"I owe you, too, except that you took advantage of me and shot my picture."

"It wasn't exactly rape."

"When I write about this, and I will write about this..."

"That's what you're for."

"I wasn't ready for my close-up. Can't you just hire a press agent?"

He changed the topic. "Wasn't last night something?"

"It was too much. You can use my photograph for the obituary we all almost deserved."

"Actually, I should have contact proofs later today" he said.

"I can hardly wait."

In fact, I was genuinely curious to see how Robert had Mapplethorped me. I'd seen his interpretations of other people I knew and how their real faces were transformed into Mapplethorpe masks.

I feigned indignation.

He never fawns over my writing.

I never fawn over his photography.

We take each other's skills for granted.

It's enough tacit, mutual endorsement that we're making conceptual progress on the book he wants to do in tandem: his photographs, my text.

All that morning, I worked with McNenny, sweeping the glass and broken flowers from the marble floor of the shop.

McNenny was never quiet. His Irish mouth never stopped. He complained to every neighbor who wandered in to cluck about the damage. They all agreed the neighborhood isn't what it used to be.

Doc Siva's daughter stopped in, because "I had to see whatever happened. I'm so glad Daddy retired to Florida."

"We should all retire to Florida," McNenny said.

Shortly after four o'clock, Robert breezed in. The *Vogue* shoot had been rescheduled for next week.

"The cunt is not ready"—he shot a very Mapplethorpe look at me—"for her close-up. She feels, she says, like one big zit. I told her to lay off the drugs. Sam is at some fucking board meeting. I wanted to see him. I miss him when I don't see him."

Robert's tenderness is always so sweetly offhand.

"So you're turning into a fucking florist," he said.

"And you take pictures of pansies," I said.

"You need a spanking."

"So do you." I sat among a dozen boxes of cut roses on a stool at a high table in the back of the shop.

McNenny stood at a counter in the middle of the store next to a large red-rose funeral arrangement he had worked on all morning.

I was scissoring bunches of tight-packed daisies into shape.

McNenny, short against the towering funeral arrangement, was jabbing at his next creation, sticking cockscomb into a Styrofoam frog, surrounding it with daisies, carnations, and baby's breath, throwing comments to Robert and me, saying how much he hated FTD's precise designer arrangements, fielding chatter with customers about the unseasonable weather, their health, the broken window, the high price of good roses, and how much Doc Siva liked Miami.

The human flow of the shop warmed me.

With Robert returned early, the world seemed to flow at a pleasant pace, a pace my self was homing into as the overkill of the acid from the orgy the Wednesday before this Friday was out of my system.

Robert handed me a flat brown envelope. "Here's your photograph," he said.

"Oh, God!" I opened the clasp and pulled out the portrait. I must have frowned.

"Let me see," McNenny said.

I showed him.

"Not bad," he said.

"Don't you like it?" Robert asked.

"It's very good work," I said. "But I don't think I look like that."

They both groaned.

"Shit, yes, Jack," Robert said.

"That's not my face."

"Of course, it's not your face. It's your look. I shoot through faces. You're dirty"

"Oh, God!" McNenny said. He ran toward the front of the small shop. Robert and I looked up.

"What?" I said.

Robert, street-smart, bodily pushed me behind the high counter and joined me.

A strange man had entered the store.

I always like New York's colorful characters.

This guy was straight from Central Casting, a Mediterranean type: floral print shirt with the collar flared out over the lapels of his dark blue double-knit leisure suit, shirt unbuttoned down over his hairy chest, a gold chain around his neck. Three blocks away, Robert had said, Francis Ford Coppola had filmed the street festival sequences for *The Godfather*.

"What are you doing?" I said to Robert. "This guy's here for the funeral arrangement."

"Funeral?" Robert whispered. "Shut up. Don't move." He deftly, this photographer of flowers, ever so slowly, seeming not to move, piled up bundles of daisies to obscure our faces.

McNenny is always so tough-mouthed. "You here for a pickup?" he asked. "You the party who ordered the funeral arrangement?"

"Yeah," the man said.

"So here it is," McNenny said. "My Gifts of Nature specialty. I call it 'The Last Rosary' Fifty rose buds, only the best, stuck into five decades of silver-aluminum holders."

"Nice," the man said. "Very cute."

Two more men, startling after an afternoon of gossiping old women, entered the side door of the shop from Sixth Avenue.

They stood eyeing several Madonna vases.

One touched an arrangement.

The three seemed unaware of each other, yet somehow they seemed together.

Suddenly, all their attention focused on McNenny.

"I want my money," the man at the front said.

Robert pulled me down lower. He reached for the small hatchet that lay in the tool drawer. We crouched our butts into a bunch of American Beauty roses, waiting for McNenny to talk his way out of this.

"What money?" McNenny acted like this was a musical comedy.

The man looked out at the driver in his car parked illegally on the Avenue.

"From your little party last night at my restaurant."

"Oh, that," McNenny said coolly. "You'll get it." His hands never missed a beat working the arrangement in front of him. "Your partner ordered a display from me. I made it special. Hey, I'm a little guy, you know? Hand to mouth. I waited six months for my money."

The man slammed the counter with his fist. "I don't give a shit about your money. He ain't my partner. He's a manager. And he ain't too good a manager."

McNenny backed away from the counter.

The man leaned across the Styrofoam and stems. He palmed a gun in his hand.

The other two closed in.

One of them kept his eye on us.

"Omigod! Omigod!" I whispered to Robert. "Omigod!"

Robert kicked my leg.

The man at the counter turned sharply toward us. "You two girls, shut up."

"Yeah," the man with his eye on us said, "maybe we want witnesses, maybe we don't."

"I'll put the check in the mail," McNenny said.

"Not good enough." The first man nodded to the other two. "Take care of this fern," he said.

He exited to his waiting car.

The two hoods picked McNenny up bodily, slamming him into his refrigerated case full of roses.

His head hit the door, shattering the glass, spilling daisies and baby's breath to the floor.

They kicked him around in the flowers.

The side of his head opened up. Blood, redder than the roses, covered his face.

One kicked McNenny's kidneys and smashed a praying ceramic Madonna vase into his groin.

The other rang open the heavy brass cash register, scooped out a handful of bills, looked around, and tipped the cash register up on edge, pushing it deliberately off the counter. It crashed to the floor next to McNenny's chest. A threat, a warning, it could easily have been aimed to land on his head.

They left him lying on the marble floor, moaning in the roses and blood.

The one who always kept his eye on us walked toward us and with his gun barrel knocked the flowery hedge of camouflage away from us. "Fags!" he said.

"Your partner's a fag," McNenny shouted. "And so are you!" Robert shouted, "Shut the fuck up!"

"Yeah," the man said, "shut the fuck up."

He backed out the door.

The car drove off. Slowly.

The confrontation had lasted only seconds.

Four days ago, that afternoon, that Friday, the florist, the writer, and the photographer could have been murdered.

At St. Vincent's emergency room, the black doctor took eighteen stitches to close McNenny's head, which a nurse wrapped in gauze.

"John McNenny," the secretary at the emergency desk addressed him.

"No," he said. "My name is not John. My name is Jack."

"Jack is the same as John," she insisted. "Jack is the nickname for John. I must use your legal name."

"My legal name is Jack," he said.

"You've heard of Jack Kennedy and John Kennedy?" This fish would not stop. "They were the same person."

McNenny looked her straight in the face. "Pound cake, cunt!"

At least his mouth still worked.

I know in reverse the fight he was going through. His legal name is really Jack. My birth-and-baptismal name is really John, but I've never, ever in my life been called anything but Jack by anyone other than bureaucrats filling out forms.

Robert complains about people who say the word *apple* in Mapplethorpe; he hates worse when I call him "Nipplethorpe," because of that movie he made getting his tit pierced. (I love teasing him; no one much does, he's so serious.) What really pisses him off is the confusion people have between him and Robert Opel, the performance artist who streaked the Academy Awards. Opel runs the Fey Way Gallery in San Francisco and featured several Mapplethorpe photographs in a show. Somehow, the Roberts Opel and Mapplethorpe have fused and people think there is one artist, Robert Oplethorpe.

They hate each other but they have not yet met.

Later, the three of us returned to Gifts of Nature.

"Where's your camera now that we need it, Robert?"

McNenny is always so nasty.

"Come on, McNenny," Robert said.

The neighbors came to look at the broken refrigerator door and to console McNenny's mummified head. "What next?" they all said.

The police arrived.

Robert said, "It was punks."

"Yeah," McNenny said, "punks."

The cops sized up the scene, and they called us "boys," but that wasn't what they meant.

"So what can you say?" one of the neighbors said. "What can you do?"

"At least you tried," Robert said, "to skin the cat."

"It's all a crock," McNenny said. "It's all a big crock of shit."

"Life's a big crock of shit," Robert said.

McNenny was a mess.

Robert and I took matters in hand. We closed the shop and taxed McNenny back to Robert's. He called the doctor with the doughnut

scrotum, who came to Bond Street and shot McNenny up with something to ease the pain.

"Give us all something for the pain, Doc," Robert said.

"I'm fine," I lied. "My Quaaludes are settling me down fine."

Robert led the doctor into the kitchen for medication.

"I want to go out," McNenny yelled.

"Where?" Robert said.

"Anywhere. Just out."

"As long as he stays with you," the doctor said.

Robert looked put upon.

"Never sleep after a blow to the head," I said.

"Right." He gave me the evil eye. "Right," he repeated, very flat. "I thought you and I could finally be alone."

"Don't mind me," McNenny said.

"You almost got us killed," Robert said.

"You don't like situations you can't control," McNenny said.

"No one does," I said.

Telling Robert the truth about Robert is a sure way to piss him off, especially when he's not getting what he wants.

But that's true of everybody.

"The sooner we leave," I said, "the sooner we'll be back."

We tramped down the stairs to Bond Street. The night air cooled the tension.

The doctor took one taxi. We three took another.

"Where we going?" McNenny said.

Robert directed the cabbie north to the tramway car that goes up and over the East River alongside the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge to Roosevelt Island.

The tramcar was a good idea. We rose smoothly up and out over the dark water. Behind us, Manhattan spread out, classic as a movie shot, as we gained altitude in the car.

"Roosevelt's all mental hospitals." McNenny paced a short circuit back and forth in the small room of the lift. "All along the west side of the East River are hospitals."

The other passengers, silent, watched him like some idiot savant, finding some, maybe, authority in his bandaged skull.

Robert and I stood apart from him and very close together.

"That hospital over there is where Dr. Tom Dooley died." McNenny walked to us. "You remember him."

Manhattan was reflected below, distorted, in the strong East River currents.

“He was gay, too, you know”

A woman seated at the front window glared at the three of us. “Isn’t anybody straight anymore?” she said.

Robert smiled at her and she smiled back.

“We ought,” she said, “to deport all you boys.”

“Yeah,” McNenny said, “but who’d do your hair?”

“Come on,” Robert said. “We had enough trouble tonight.”

The tramcar descended to Roosevelt Island.

Together we exited down the promenade to the water’s edge. Manhattan stretched clear in the late autumn air as far as we could see. The city lights reached up into the muffled hum of the night air.

McNenny wobbled off to sit on a bench.

The lights wobbled on the water.

The Atlantic wind rustled the island trees.

Traffic cruised overhead on the Queensboro Bridge.

“This is sort of romantic,” I said.

“We could run at each other in slow motion,” Robert said.

“We’re not lovers,” I said.

“But we fuck good.”

The lights and the bridge and the water, everything that had happened, made me want to be romantic, but Robert is always so analytical.

I was stuck between McNenny zoning out on the bench and Robert staring down into the obsidian mirror of the East River.

New York is fun, but it’s not like San Francisco.

I felt, and I feel, distant from New Yorkers no matter how much I like them.

I shouldn’t have said it, when I said, looking at the city over Robert’s warm shoulder, “I love you.”

But I did and I’m glad I did, because he turned his face to me and said, “I love you, too,” so coolly, so really real, I truly believe him, not as lovers, but as friends.

He put his right hand in the left back pocket of my jeans. The wind caused him to shiver. I put my arm around his thin shoulders.

Robert is so urbane and cool and classic.

I’m too romantic not to sense how isolated he is.

We kind of just stood there watching Manhattan show off.

I remembered how Francie in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* had looked at the same flickering skyline and had said it was important to look at

everything as if it were the last time you'd see it, because the last time of anything has the poignancy of death itself.

God, I really do love him, in the gay way, to be sure, but more, in the human way, because he's so fragile, so thin, so likely to disappear. There are so many miles between us and so many dangers in the heart of the darkness he courts that so scares me.

McNenny walked up behind us. He put a hand on Robert's left shoulder and on my right and stuck his bandaged head between ours. Then he shouted, "Thank you, New York, for letting me live here!"

Robert and I laughed out the tension of the day. We all three got really quite hysterical.

We took the tramcar back, put McNenny in a cab, and wandered along Fifth Avenue.

I saw a window full of silver unicorns at Tiffany's.

Robert laughed. He thinks I'm so funny, I think sometimes he means funny-peculiar, but he says we make intelligent sex, which is a new take for me.

Later that night, that was three nights ago, we slept together after we made "intelligent sex," which was when he again licked my left eyeball with his tongue, and I made him stop because it's like too personal and freaks me out.

He keeps insisting I'm dirty.

I keep telling him I'm not.

I think I'll not frame or hang his photograph of me.

If truth is in it, it's his truth, and if it's mine, I won't ever admit it.

McNenny's head was still bandaged this morning when I left.

In 1980, Jack McNenny became the New York distributor for my quarterly magazine called *MAN2MAN*. Robert offered one of his photographs for the premiere issue, but he never got around to sending it.

The international art world was calling him everywhere, and he hadn't the time even to continue with the book we had been planning since 1978 titled *Rimshots: Inside the Fetish Factor*, even though he had selected and sent all the photographs.

In 1981, Jack McNenny fell sick; his spleen had to be removed. In 1982, he sold Gifts of Nature and moved for health reasons to San Diego, where, "unrepentant," he started publishing the underground magazine *Jack's Shit List*. McNenny died in 1983 at thirty-eight.

The last model and shoot I arranged for Robert took place, with me and my then lover, Jim Enger, in San Francisco in 1981. Robert sent, via Edward De Celle, autographed photographs from the shoot in 1983.

By 1982, I had completed an almost final draft of a novel written during the 1970s. Robert had read many passages in progress and was very supportive of the project.

When the story's two main characters discuss their relationship and the impact of the celebrity coming to one of them, the relationship a *clef*, of course, is ours.

Robert walks, fictitiously, by name through *Some Dance to Remember*, which, when published in 1990, because of his creative input and personal encouragement, was dedicated to his memory.

One critic said the novel does with words what Mapplethorpe did with the camera.

I should be so lucky.

In the novel, the character on the cusp of fame says, "I want us to be a story told in beds at night around the world."

That fictional line came from a true statement Robert once confided. He told me, the writer he had long before sought out, "Don't laugh. But I want to be known, I want my work to be known, around the whole world."

I didn't laugh.

Robert Mapplethorpe was, for all his canny ambition, a real person of sensitive feeling and transcendent talent.

He was a seer unafraid to exhibit what he saw.

It is an American scandal that Robert's sweet person was lost in the cause célèbre avalanche of sympathetic essays about his technique and place in history, because his art was trashed by politicians in search of a controversial issue and by ignorant religionists terrified of their own bodies.

His photographs are mirrors.

He mirrored me to me and frightened me.

I had warned him to clean up his act.

His photographs of me warned me to clean up mine.

I couldn't save his life.

But he saved mine.

Once he was flesh and blood.

Once, faced with his own death in an epic plague, he intensified the quantity and quality of his visionary art.

His growth as a person shows in his uncompromising series of revealing self-portraits that show him ageing fast, from youth to old age, in the terrifying speed trip that is AIDS.

Human life was not lost on him.

Always he was a good man worth loving.