

TAKE 15

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

Mark Walker, in the drawling southern way he talked, showed how significant Robert had been to him during the years when Mark was blind. He spoke the way the blind speak, even after he had regained his sight, illustrating by remembered insight how aesthetic his life had been with Robert in New Orleans.

For eight years, having been sighted until early adulthood, Mark Walker suffered from hereditary retinitis pigmentosa, which made him blind to everything but big blobs of color. An artist himself, Walker, a glassblower, had been, like Robert, sculptural and three-dimensional. Adult blindness depressed him. He wanted to continue working in the arts. That seemed impossible until the supper party, where through the auspices of New Orleans painter-photographer George Dureau and Robert met Mark. Mark had a long, leggy, swimmer's body, much like Robert's, but his hair was blond and his eyes blue.

"I've been described as very like Pan," Mark said.

"You resemble Robert," I said. "He photographed himself as Pan more than once."

"There were facial qualities that I have that he had, especially in the one self-portrait: he's in white face with a skull. Our bone structure, very prominent cheekbones, was similar."

Robert, ever on the lookout for faces that reflected his own, saw that resemblance in Mark when they met. Dureau and Mapplethorpe both knew Mark was desperately broke, but Mark would not take any loans.

Robert, who considered blindness worse than death, suggested that Mark pose as an artist's model. "You can be involved with art and earn a living. You look great," Robert said.

Mark replied, "You don't know what it's like to look into the mirror and not be able to see yourself. Robert began describing me in a way no one else could. I related to what he told me about myself. He became my mirror."

"He gave you a verbal photograph of yourself," I said.

"Yes. He could say just one or two words and we would connect."

"He was a man of few words."

"The physical part of blindness, figuring where things are, is the easy part. Even movement, for me, was easy as dancing. The weirdest part of blindness is personal communication. Robert somehow broke through my sightlessness. He was like a light. In my mind, I referred to him as my knight in shining black armor."

"He was your seeing-eye photographer."

"You know how people play with movie titles?"

"What movie was Robert?"

"He called himself, *I Am a Camera*."

"Perfect."

In his collage photograph *Cowboy, 1970*, Robert pasted a cutout of his left eye (the eye *sinister*) completely over the obscured face of the naked cowboy with gun.

"Robert really was my seeing-eye. He was very poetic and romantic. He was personal. He was always explaining visual things to me, wherever we were, in the street, in a coffee shop, in a gallery. One of the things he liked about me was that I didn't react to him the way other people did."

"You didn't fawn on his talent."

"He was my friend. I am not unfamiliar with artists. Before my blindness, I was curator at the New Orleans Historical Collection. I know the difference between a private person and a public person."

"Robert liked that."

"When I went blind, I stopped going to art shows. I stopped going out. I stopped having sex. Because of Robert, I started all that back up. At art openings, people who knew I was coming with him were sure to have something I could touch. Robert was a teacher. He described the art to me."

"His words let you almost see it?"

"Yes. What is really interesting now that I can see again is looking back over old catalogs of shows. His descriptions were so exact. I have many good friends who helped me during that time, both emotionally and visually. The thing about Robert, during all the censorship publicity, is that nobody has mentioned that he was really wonderful."

"The art became bigger than the artist and the censorship became louder than the art."

"His art was very personal. At least with me. The first photograph he shot was very relaxed and playful. He said, 'Don't get caught up in being a blind boy.' He eased me with grace into it. He said, 'There are professional models making six hundred dollars an hour who are not as good as you.'"

"He wasn't patronizing you."

“Quite the opposite. He was an artistic relief for me. A few years before, I had been sculpting in Italy, studying in Murano, an island near Venice, and the way Robert talked to me, I suddenly flashed on my own perceptions of Michelangelo. Robert gave me confidence. He said, ‘You can project any quality you want because you really have to see it in your mind’s eye. You have an advantage. You can’t be distracted by other people’s looking.’ He talked very much about self-image, and meditation, and conserving my energy. He focused me. It was nothing I had not heard before, but he made it relate to the here and now and made things seem timeless.”

“He coached you into perfect moments of transcendence: the universal, the past, the present, the future vision.”

“He made me able to glide into forty-five-minute poses. He made it possible for me to go on to work with George Dureau at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts, and with several sketch and drawing groups doing studio modeling for figure drawing and portraiture. I was back in the arts and I was supporting myself.”

“So Robert found a vocation for you.”

“I didn’t get caught up in being a blind boy.”

Mark saw Robert on three trips to New Orleans from 1980 to 1982. After one of those trips, in January 1981, Robert talked to me of their affair with a kind of passion. As if he were fucking someone whose total vision he could be. Robert took Mark, celibate for more than three years, into his arms. The relief was wonderful. Because AIDS was alarmingly new, Mark had suffered some discrimination from people who thought his blindness was related to the CMV virus. At the school for the blind, he underwent more than twenty AIDS blood tests.

“I didn’t know what they were looking for. Then it hit me. They think I have AIDS—which at that time was called GRID.”

(Acquired immune deficiency syndrome, AIDS, before it was named, was called GRID: gay-related immune deficiency.)

“Robert had none of this prejudicial fear about you?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Everyone was so frightened then.”

“Robert gave me the confidence to have leathersex again, to do bondage again, to go out and play publicly.”

“He tied you up?”

“Yes. I like to play mutually. Robert and I would fight for the top. That added excitement. I had always been good at tying knots, but, not

being able to see, had given all that up. He grounded me with rope the way he had freed me with visual descriptions.”

Robert punned on human vision photographing Mark blind and blindfolded. He had a point to make about cultural blindness to art.

Mark said, “Because I was as much a top as Robert, I told him what I told other players. If you like bondage, and if you want to hang around with me, then you have to go out into the streets blindfolded. Just as Robert shared his sight with me, I introduced him to my sightlessness. He was fascinated by the concept. He really got off on it.”

Imagine Robert Mapplethorpe in black leather, blindfolded, being led by a blind man, who moved as gracefully as a ballet dancer, through the French Quarter, eating in coffee shops, his mind’s eye excited by the denial of sight. In the humid surround of New Orleans, Robert’s other senses, subordinate to his dominant vision, were enriching his experience to a multisensual take that later layered into his visual work.

“Robert liked my guiding him back to my apartment. I had to lead him up through the main house, out onto a balcony, and across a balustrade to my living room and bedroom, and then down to my leather playroom on the ground floor. He really got off that my place had once been the slave quarters.”

“In what way did he express that?”

“He talked about the energy of the place. He was very sensitive to alternative energies. He imagined what vibrations were stored in the rooms. He talked about slavery”

“Historical enslavement of blacks?”

“Yes. Morally, he couldn’t approve of it, but psychologically he was fascinated so that he made connections between historical slavery and contemporary self-bondage through self-censorship. He was very class conscious.”

Mapplethorpe, like Wagstaff, like most people when scratched, favored his own gene bank.

“Robert was a sexual magician,” I said.

“He was a kind of conjure man,” Mark replied.

“You role-played together?”

“We did mutual light bondage, tying ourselves together, making animal sounds, trying to break free of one another.”

“He liked the descent to that animality as if he was deconstructing what it was to be human.”

“Yes. Animal sounds,” Mark said, “very guttural. I had a very understanding S&M dyke landlady who was impressed by him and George

Dureau. Their fame, I mean, and that I knew them, and brought Robert to her house. Actually, she helped me hang a sling in the playroom. I already had trapeze rigging, because my regular boyfriend at the time worked for the circus. He was an acrobat, but he wasn't around very much."

"Robert loved acrobats."

"A most wonderful night we were doing animal sounds. Did I tell you he was most always blindfolded when we played? We were surrounded by all this circus equipment and we centered down onto one little piece of leather and one little piece of rope. We kept wrapping it around each other's hands, so one or the other of us couldn't touch or see. He said he had never really enjoyed that with anyone else."

"Robert often licked my eyes," I said. "Almost as if he were anointing my vision. Your blindness and my sight were two sides of his investigation into human vision."

"Robert made S&M very personal. He gave us the freedom to experiment."

"In those slave quarters, was Robert fascinated in any way you remember about blacks?"

"That fascination I lacked, because I knew a lot of the blacks George Dureau was into. I didn't trust them. I must explain that while I was blind, I was mugged three times by black guys on the street, usually someone into drugs."

"Perhaps you were being mugged by drugs and poverty personified by people who just happened to be black," I said.

"I'd like to think so. Even though I'm a southerner, I've always been for liberation and equal rights, much more so than the average liberal, but, being blind, that was a hard one for me."

"Now that you can see, what are your feelings about Robert's photographs of you?"

"They're wonderful. At least the ones I've seen. There's one in his *X Portfolio*. He shot some duos of me with Diana Dexter and also with Wally Sherwood that I haven't seen."

"There's a great deal of Mapplethorpe work that has not surfaced. Some people claim he was very tight in handing out photographs, but many of the people he shot have one or two," I said.

"There must be a large body of his work out there."

"Certainly. Stuff that no museum or even the Mapplethorpe Foundation has seen."

"He shot Cynthia Slater many times."

"She died, you know I have many of her unpublished stories which she sent me."

"I'm sorry. She was a wonderful lady."

Cynthia Slater was one of the few women in the seventies allowed in as a regular at Steve McEachern's Catacombs, a private handballing palace he had constructed in the basement of his Victorian on Twenty-first Street in San Francisco. She was one of those lusty women who remained a woman even when she was one of the boys. She was one of the original founders of the omnisexual S&M club, The Janus Society. At an early Janus meeting, we sat in a circle, each one of us pledged to confess that one element we found necessary to make a sex scene perfect. She and I both said, "Pain," and we embraced. Later, in an affairette with my brother, a Vietnam vet, she played "Downed American Fly-Boy" games, until she didn't, until the night she invited my brother out to a stylish supper and told him it was over. Edward De Celle, whose San Francisco gallery first championed Robert, has two of the Slater photographs, which he finds mercilessly harsh.

"Cynthia," Mark said, "was good friends with Diana Dexter. Both of them were quite wonderful in helping me adjust to adult blindness."

"Sometimes we don't have to depend on the kindness of strangers."

"Not with such friends. Robert photographed Dex in New York and again in 1978 at a party in Sausalito where somebody had an elaborate dungeon and playroom."

"Robert shot quite a few photographs as a result of that night," I said.

"Weren't a lot of those in the *X Portfolio*?"

"The title of the *X Portfolio* came from that party."

"Robert had a lot of connections that I don't know much about."

"He thrived on keeping his big circle of friends secret. He was as much social director as film director. He was very secretive about whom he knew," I said, then added, "How did you feel being shot by him with a woman?"

"With Diana Dexter? Fine. Dex was the only woman I've ever posed with. We went to high school together. She worked for the Ford Agency. She was like a very young Liz Taylor. She's dead now."

"At least her photographs remain. I'm sorry you lost her."

"I'll never forget at one point during the shoot, I was lying on my back. Dex had on these severe stiletto-spiked heels, boots, really, that came up about mid-thigh. Robert told her to put the ball of her foot on my forehead. I was in complete leather, with one leg out straight and the

other bent up. Robert pictured me trying to lick up to the insole of her spiked heel.”

“That was a very intense photograph.”

“Believe it or not, Robert marketed it to *Le Figaro* in Paris for a Thom McCann shoe ad.”

“Mapplethorpe was a drummer.”

“Our shoot was really relaxed and childlike. Dex and I felt innocent playing in front of Robert. He was not judgmental of the act before the camera. What he wanted was for us to be ourselves while he found the look, the angle, and the balance. He wanted balance without symmetry. If I had one hand with the forefinger closed, he wanted all the fingers on the other hand spread. He was my mirror. He wanted every fine detail with elegance.”

“When did you last communicate with Robert?”

“The year before he got really sick. Nineteen eighty-three. Nineteen eighty-four.”

“Did you write or send tapes?”

“At that time it was Braille or tapes. Mainly, we talked at night.”

“That’s how we finished up, late at night, on the phone, at long-distance.”

In 1983, Mark Walker moved to a twenty-two-room Victorian in San Francisco, where he co-published *New Sex Magazine*, an erotic post-AIDS journal.

“Robert let me see my real self,” Mark said. “I was blind, but I could see.”

