

Good & Plenty

by Robert Schroeder

From across the crowded bar, past the be-suited lobbyists and in between the plates of fried calamari and glasses of cabernet being hustled to and fro by the Salvadoran waiters, Travis could see that John had changed. Not much, but enough to be noticeable. A little grey at the temples. A bigger belly, riding over the belt. And was that an Italian suit? John was about six or seven tables away, sipping one of those fulsome glasses of wine, chatting animatedly with a group of equally well-dressed friends or colleagues. From where Travis stood, he could hear John's laugh, still that same sharp bark that ascended into a series of rat-a-tat-tat cackles. Until his co-worker Brian tapped him on the shoulder, Travis hadn't realized that he'd been staring.

"Hey man, what are you looking at?" Brian said over the din.

Startled, Travis said: "Nothing." He smiled at Brian. "I just thought I saw somebody I knew."

"OK, dude, whatever," Brian said. He looked toward the bar and back at Travis. "Another round?"

"Yeah, thanks," Travis replied.

When the wine came, Travis clinked glasses with his office mates and rejoined the conversation. But he didn't say much, because he was thinking: *John. Jesus Christ.*

Travis and John hadn't seen each other in at least five years. Or was it six? Travis wasn't sure. Time went by like that in DC. Since moving to Washington after college, eight years ago, so much scenery had passed before him — so many new experiences had — that he felt older than his 30 years. Moving to the city, and into his tiny efficiency on Massachusetts Avenue at Thomas Circle, Travis had felt liberated — and bewildered. A small-town boy who'd attended college in his own Ohio hometown, Travis was bewitched by the lights of the city and by the sights and sounds of his

neighborhood: the Filipina lady downstairs whose cooking smells permeated his room and clung to his cheap Ikea futon; the tinny ring of the bells at National City Christian Church on Sundays; and the emergence, late at night, of the prostitutes who would stalk Massachusetts Avenue and 14th Street and beyond, suited up in hot pants and marinated in the perfume samples they'd swiped from Hecht's.

"Got a girlfriend, honey?" a tall blonde once asked Travis when he was walking back from the Post Pub after midnight.

"No," Travis said, looking down at the same pair of Doc Martens he'd had since college, the black leather now scuffed to grey in places.

"Want some company?" the hooker said in a soft voice, her eyes staring directly into Travis's. "You look lonely." The street lamps bathed the girl in an orange glow.

"I'm fine, thanks," Travis said. He pushed past her and broke into a half-frightened jog back to his third-floor apartment.

"What are you, gay?" the prostitute yelled as he ran.

Inside, he turned the lock and exhaled.

Travis wasn't fine. The hooker was right. He was lonely. It probably showed on his face, even to the co-workers at the news service he worked for. Tall, introspective, diffident but not unfriendly, Travis wasn't usually up for heading to Georgetown or the Hill after work. He'd trade a night at Sign of the Whale or Hawk 'n' Dove for an evening in almost any time. Travis's ideal night was dinner with a friend, and drinks, preferably with Stereolab playing in the background, or maybe even a little Bach. The Goldberg Variations -- Glenn Gould alone at his instrument -- got Travis every time.

"You go ahead," he'd say to the others, their stories about the goings-on of a state's congressional delegation filed. Travis would walk up 14th Street, past the Korean dry-cleaners and the statue of Commodore John Barry and settle into his efficiency apartment. He'd have a drink, read, and go to bed. At 22 years old,

23 years old, he was unselfconscious enough not to notice the sighs he'd let out before he turned off the light.

After about two years of living in DC -- writing news stories, sampling the city's exotic restaurants (there was no Ethiopian cuisine in Ohio) and doing a little volunteer work for a literacy organization -- Travis felt that he'd begun to settle down and make a home for himself. He kept in touch with some college friends, but not many. So he was surprised, one day, to pick up the phone and hear a voice from the past.

"Guess who?" said a familiar baritone.

"John?" Travis asked.

"Well, who else?" said John, mock-hurt but playful. That was John: joking, cunning, whip-smart John. John, who'd graduated two years earlier than Travis and had gone on to law school in New York. John, who had worked with Travis at the college paper, writing blustery editorials against the school administrators over whatever was sticking in his craw that day. John, the would-be politician who always knew he'd wind up back in his hometown of DC some day. John, the charmer and extrovert, calling now as suddenly as he did anything else. The caller ID on Travis's phone showed a DC number.

"So I'm baaaack," John informed Travis. "When are we hitting the town?"

"You're here?" Travis said. "Back in DC?"

"In the flesh," John said. "I found a place near Dupont Circle. It's kinda expensive, but hey -- I'm doing litigation. Pay's pretty good. Where are you, anyway?" John asked. "I called 411 -- ."

Travis told John. As he spoke the address he looked out his sole window, directly onto the brick wall of the building next door.

"Ewww!" was John's horrified reply. "That's sleaze-land. How many hookers have you met? Have you bought any drugs? Come *on!*"

Travis smiled at the sound of John's familiar, sardonic tone. They hadn't spoken in a couple of years, but had exchanged

the occasional postcard -- John writing of his adventures in Thailand; Travis sending John a tourist shot of the Washington Monument, for kitsch's sake. "Look who's living in your home town!" it read.

"Well, handsome, it's time to catch up and get a decent meal," said John. "Like back in Athens? You remember."

They both laughed. Most of the restaurants in their college town were terrible.

"You're on," Travis said, leaning forward in his chair to grab a pen and paper. "Where should we meet?"

"Dick!" Travis heard John say.

Travis thought: *Did I hear him right?* John chuckled. "Dupont Italian Kitchen, sport," he said. "D-I-K. Get it?"

Travis laughed at his friend's bawdy anatomical joke as he jotted down the address. He pictured a place called DIK on 17th Street, not very far from his little place off of Thomas Circle. They set a time and a date and hung up.

Travis put the phone back on the cradle. He noticed he was blushing.

"Handsome" had been John's word. Travis was still grinning the next day at work as his mind scrolled back through his college years, two of them spent in friendship with John. All through college, Travis had known that John was gay. John never hid it, but didn't talk much about it either. To Travis, homosexuality was odd but unthreatening, and there was something in Travis's nature that was eminently live and let live. Beyond that -- and maybe it was the future reporter in him -- he simply liked to let people talk about themselves; be themselves.

And John, for his part, loved Travis's nonjudgmental company. In the early 1990s in small-town Ohio, most college-age gay men were still in the closet, and being a city kid, John felt even more out of his element.

"Why did my parents have to send me to this godforsaken place?" he'd moan into his beer sometimes.

"Builds character," Travis would say, biting back a smirk.

“I’ll build *your* character, you bastard!” John would playfully snarl, before ordering up another Miller Genuine Draft.

To a casual observer, their relationship was suspect. An apparently gay man and his quiet, bookish buddy who laughed at all his jokes. There had to be more than met the eye. But, no. Conscious of the raised eyebrows around campus, Travis always told himself that the whole thing worked. Never good with girls, and always the introvert, he felt John complemented him; put him at ease even as he deliberately riled him up.

So even in five -- six? -- years of not seeing John, Travis knew what to expect as he stepped out onto Massachusetts Avenue for the six-block walk up to Dupont Italian Kitchen. The DC spring, as it always did, had turned quickly to summer, and though it was only May, Travis could feel the fabric of his Tommy Hilfiger shirt begin sticking to his back as he walked past the CVS and up toward the Australian embassy. The faces of the city, so foreign to him when he first arrived, formed a map of sorts for him now: the recent college grads popping in and out at 1500 Massachusetts Avenue; the Latino families out for evening strolls; the old women pushing their shopping carts back from the Safeway to their one-room chambers of solitude. The sun was setting over the low buildings and the pavement smelled like baked sand. It was a hot night, and Travis thought, *I am happy*.

Travis spotted John right away. From down the block, he could see his friend talking to a waiter he seemed to know, communicating as usual with his hands as much as his mouth. John glanced over, caught sight of Travis and summed up whatever yarn he’d been spinning. When he finished, he and the man kissed one another twice; once on each cheek. Travis noticed that there were no women at the restaurant.

“How *are* you?” John asked, settling down into his chair across from Travis at the table for two. His bottle of Zima was already half-empty.

"I'm great," Travis said, and mostly meant it. "The job's good, and I'm still loving living in DC. I knew I would. I mean, hey, it's your home town."

John cocked his blonde head to one side and smiled. The fizz of the drink in the slender glass caught the green in his eyes, and he reddened slightly.

"And you?" Travis asked. "What's the big job you landed? I know it's just your stepping stone to politics. You've got to pay those law school bills, right?"

"Believe me, I'd head right over to the White House right now if I could," said John. "I'm so proud of Clinton for trying to get us in the military."

"Us?" asked Travis.

John cleared his throat a little. He said: "Well, me. But you kind of count as family!"

Family? thought Travis. That was a first. Vaguely comprehending, he let it slide, and decided to flag down the waiter. Soon the meal was set before the friends: Gnocchi with pesto for Travis and eggplant parmigiana for John, with a bottle of chardonnay between them.

"Well," said John when the meal was licked clean and the wine was emptied. "This should be a habit. What do you say? We can have our own little diner's club."

It felt good for Travis, who had no girlfriend and hadn't even been out with a woman for a year, to sit again and talk with his old friend. Looking around, he knew he wasn't going to meet many women at a place like this, but he didn't mind. He needed the company. And he didn't want it from the pavement off of 14th Street.

"You're on," he told John.

"Good," John replied, plunking down his credit card. "My treat. I'm a lawyer now!"

They got up when the bill was paid and walked to the street corner. Travis went to give his friend a hug, but John stepped forward and kissed Travis first on his right cheek and then on his left.

"Oh God, don't look so shocked," John said to Travis, who did look shocked. "It's part of our culture."

Travis was about to open his mouth when his friend flashed him a warm smile and began to walk the other way.

"See you next week, handsome!" he called over his shoulder.

Every other week, then, Travis and John met for dinner. One night it would be Ethiopian in Adams Morgan -- where Travis couldn't choke down the spongy injera bread -- and another, it would be Vietnamese or a homey seafood place near the Uptown Theater. The meals were a treat; a sumptuous way of sinking back into their old relationship in Ohio, where the two young men would talk over politics, classes, the boredom of small-town life and, occasionally, relationships. All over dinners.

So Travis wasn't wholly surprised when, one night, over oysters and wine at a swank new place on Capitol Hill -- John had gotten a promotion and wanted to celebrate with Travis -- John asked:

"So, seeing anybody?"

Travis looked down into the neat pile of shells on his plate.

"No. No time." He smiled weakly.

"How about you?" he asked John.

"Well, you know," said John. "You know what a lesbian brings to a second date?"

"No, what?"

"A moving van!" John said. "Dykes commit so quickly," he said, looking mildly annoyed.

"The flip side of that," John continued, spearing another oyster with his cocktail fork, "is, what does a gay guy bring to a second date?"

Travis waited.

"What second date?" John hooted.

Travis sighed. In college, there'd been no sexual jokes like this one and John had been a little more...engaging. Maybe Travis

didn't feel like laughing that much. Work hadn't been going well lately -- he'd had a string of corrections -- and then there was the absence, as John now knew, of a love life. Travis's low spirits, so evident, gave John an idea.

"What you need, my good man, is a trip to the drag races," said John.

"The what?" Travis asked.

John rolled his eyes. "The drag races," he explained as though to a small child. "The high heel races. On 17th Street. How long have you lived here? Don't tell me you've never heard of them."

"No," Travis said.

"Boy, you've got to get out more," John said.

The drag races, a DC institution, were held every year around Halloween. They had nothing to do with cars. Every year, men in women's clothes would run a race down 17th Street in their high heels. Some would strut, some would sashay. All would vamp it up.

Travis smiled and took a sip of wine. John's eyes lit up.

"Eh? Eh? What did I tell you?" John said. "You'll love it."

Travis's expression had given away his assent. "But John," he said. "One thing. No high heels for me."

John shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, draining the chardonnay. "More glory for me."

Travis was there at the finish line to cheer John on as his friend raced -- no, stumbled -- across and fell into a heap of shrieking, laughing joy. It was a cold, wet October night, but that hadn't stopped any of the revelers from turning out. Even the occasional slip was cause for an outburst at this party of pride.

"Fuck me!" exclaimed a purple-wigged queen as his left foot, encased in a limousine-sized stiletto, skidded over a downed ginkgo leaf. The queen grabbed a friend's arm to steady himself and stared directly at Travis.

"What's the matter, honey?" he said viciously. "Never seen a girl on the town?"

Travis looked down at his old Nikes. The man playfully punched Travis's arm and began to strut toward Annie's Paramount Steak House, where men were gathering like sweaty birds of paradise.

Travis sidled up to John, who had finally managed to stand up and was loudly recounting the race with a trio of other contestants. Amateur cross-dressers were everywhere on the street, blowing cigarette smoke high into the air. Travis didn't smoke. He began to cough, which finally drew John's attention.

"Hey!" John yelled, hugging Travis, rubbing some glitter off of his face onto Travis's flannel shirt.

"Was I awesome or what?" John asked.

"Awesome," Travis said. The many-colored foursome hovered around the two friends. Introductions were made: David was made up to look like Marilyn Monroe; Michael had on a six-foot-long feather boa and burgundy lipstick; Ron was wearing a purple cowboy hat that sparkled with stuck-on zircons. Travis, in his ordinary sneakers and jeans, shifted his weight and nodded.

"Hi," he said.

"We're going to Annie's," John informed Travis. "Come on, let's go. You're coming, right?"

Travis had had a fun night. The revelry, the outlandishness of the evening, had made him laugh more than once, and he loved seeing his friend prance around in his size-nine pumps. John was so many things Travis couldn't be: extroverted, witty, shameless. Being with John was like having a front-row seat at a one-man show. The view was fantastic.

But as Travis looked at the stream of men filing into Annie's from 17th Street, he began to imagine his apartment, back on Massachusetts Avenue. He was cold, and what he most wanted to do was get in bed with a book.

"Mmm, another time," he told John and his new posse.

John frowned for a moment. His arms were holding the waists of two of his new friends, and he looked like a vision of Ziggy Stardust under the lamplight.

“OK, sport. I'll let you go this time,” he said. “But we need to talk.”

That's right, thought Travis. *We do.*

Back inside Travis's efficiency, the heater clanked and pinged to indicate it was doing its job, and Travis settled into his chair with his half-read copy of *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*. He opened it, and just as quickly closed it again.

Travis had a proposition for John. Ever since late August, Travis had been missing his hometown. Also, school. The way his life -- and his life with John -- used to be. Travis also owed his parents a visit. They rarely came to DC, the six-hour drive being too much of a bother for them. And even though Travis didn't always get along with his father, he owed it to him to see him.

“DC's full of freaks,” his father, Ed, an insurance salesman, would say. “And you can have your politicians. Hell they're freaks too.”

Travis even missed the food, especially the Good & Plenty Diner, a favorite with students and locals alike. John always grudgingly enjoyed the place, and pretended to be aghast by its all-day breakfast offerings of scrapple, home fries, eggs and chicken-fried steak. But Travis could see the giddiness in John's eyes as he used his wheat toast to sop up the last of the yolk at late-night, after-beers dinners. They'd order coffee. They were two young men trying very hard to be older.

Now Travis and John were older. And to Travis, at times, older felt like nowhere. Travis would ask John in the morning. Or at their next dinner date. It was never far away.

Travis picked up his book again, and settled back into his chair. In five minutes he was asleep.

“I can't believe,” John was saying, as he lifted a bite of chicken-fried steak to his mouth, “how much I missed this little place.”

Travis was sitting across from John in a vinyl-covered booth at the Good & Plenty, resisting the urge to say “I told you so.”

Ed, Travis's father, had bristled and coughed at the word "little" to describe the diner, taking it as an all-purpose cut by John on their restaurants, their town, their lives. Travis's mother Rosemary -- everybody called her Marie -- gave John the faint smile she reserved for when she subtly disapproved of things. She blew on her tea to cool it down, looking past the in-booth jukebox and out into the late-autumn street.

"Well, it's your business if you want to bring your friend," Ed had said to Travis when Travis called to broach the subject of a trip home with John.

"Sure, dad," Travis had replied, picturing his father in his habitual La-Z-Boy, with his ever-present crossword puzzle book and evening glass of Canadian Club. "Sharpens the mind," he'd say about the puzzles. "Man cannot live by bread alone," he would chortle about the whisky. The biblical reference never failed to produce an "Oh, Ed" from Marie. Frowning, Marie would sit back in her own easy chair, correcting typos in the latest St. Paul's Lutheran Church bulletin before it went to the printer's.

Ed had listened to his son describe his weekend trip idea and Marie had watched the corners of Ed's mouth gradually turn down. Her son hadn't asked to speak with her. It was his father's approval he needed.

"Well, OK, now, we'll be seeing you and old John this weekend," Ed told Travis. He hung up the receiver a little too hard, the plastic making a loud clack through the first floor of their postwar split-level. Ed looked at Marie, who was running a pen through a misspelled word in the bulletin's Thanksgiving announcements. She looked up at him and quickly looked back at the paper.

"That boy needs a girlfriend," Ed said.

Travis hadn't had a hard time convincing John to take the road trip. He'd proposed it not long after the drag races, on another rainy night, now in early November, over steaming bowls of pho in a Vietnamese restaurant in Adams Morgan.

"Don't you want a break from this" -- Travis held up a noodle in his chopsticks -- "kind of food for a change?"

John squirted more lime juice into his own bowl of noodles as he finished munching on a mouthful of bean sprouts.

"No, sport, I don't," John said, flagging down a black-eyed waiter and ordering another "33" Export. "But, anything for you. God, anything to get you to lighten up! You wouldn't even party with us after the drag races."

Travis decided to ignore John's "lighten up" dig and said, "Perfect." He immediately began visualizing the drive, savoring the chance to escape DC for a weekend. He salivated at the thought of the down-home food he'd missed so much.

"Just one thing, though," Travis said to John. "We have to stay with my parents." Travis was still making his lousy journalist's salary.

John grinned. "No problem," he said. "I can handle them. I always did."

All the Midwestern caloric goodness that had sated Travis and John during college was still on the menu at the Good & Plenty. When they got there, with Ed and Marie in tow, John couldn't help but recite the list of country comfort food like a lineup of delectable offenders.

"Chicken and waffles!" he exclaimed.

"Ooh, scrapple. I missed that. Whatever it is. Ha!"

"Ick, liver and onions. Pass."

"Well, now, that's my favorite," said Ed, who'd slid into the booth next to Marie. His ample stomach bumped up against the speckled Formica table top. Marie fiddled with the jukebox, spinning past the ditties by Elvis and Conway Twitty.

"Chicken fried steak for me," John declared. Ed got his liver and onions; Travis -- notably taciturn around his parents -- and Marie got the same thing: biscuits and gravy.

The foursome chewed their meals in silence for a while, blending in with the dinnertime crowd of townsfolk, the odd farmer

and the Catholic church ladies just done with Saturday-night mass. Ed waved hello to a business associate and let slip a quick comment about the Catholics before tucking back into his liver.

"Ring kissers," he muttered.

"Ed," Marie said.

"So," said Ed, turning to John and Travis and looking at John. "Been awhile. Heard you're a lawyer now."

"Yes, yes I am," said John, who'd deliberately dressed down for the weekend in jeans and an off-the-rack Gap oxford. He was making more money these days but wanted to blend in on his visit back to his college town. He looked, in fact, like Travis usually did.

"Litigation, mostly," John said, putting down his knife and fork and taking a swig of iced tea. He was eager to impress the friend's parents he'd known -- albeit only a little -- since college.

"Litigation," Ed repeated, making a face as though he'd bitten into a hidden lemon in his liver and onions. "Country's full of litigators! We need another one?"

Travis and Marie were just watching the back and forth, sidelined like spectators at a boxing match and quietly eating their dinners.

"The country needs *me!*" John replied with a hearty laugh. The line -- delivered with John's always-impeccable timing -- made even Ed chuckle.

"John's doing really well, dad," Travis said.

"For a Democrat!" Ed replied.

"I know, I know, you don't like the president," John told Ed across the table. To Ed's horror, Travis had belonged to the same college Democrats group that John did.

"It's not the whole Slick Willie thing that gets me so much," Ed said, ignoring the silent stares from Travis and Marie that said: *shut up*. But Travis, so deferential to his father -- so afraid, still, of the old man -- could say nothing out loud. Even now he believed that to be a good son was to be quiet and get out of the way when his father was talking. Travis stared into his congealing gravy

as his face began to turn red. He should never have brought John. He could guess what was coming.

Ed seemed to be talking to no one in particular as he leaned over the table, lifted his eyes upward and said: "Why anybody would try to get queers in the military is beyond me."

The words came out like a dare. For a moment, no one spoke. Not eloquent, articulate John. Not quivering, embarrassed-to-death Travis. Nor Marie, who'd turned back to the juke box when she'd heard the word "queers."

Finally, John laid his fork and knife on his plate and cleared his throat.

"Ed," he began, "I'm sure that homosexuals can serve in our military as well as anyone else can."

Ed began to laugh -- a slow, steady chuckle that subsided into a drawn-out sigh. He looked at John, and then at Travis.

"Well, Trav, you always did say your...friend wanted to be a politician. Helluva start he's off to."

Ed looked at the table and scanned his dinner companions' faces. "Time to go," he said. Marie had put her hand on Travis's knee and was squeezing it. Travis couldn't look at John. He was focusing outside, through the window, out onto the street, where the Fords and the Chevys and the 18 wheelers were driving towards I-77 and the east, back toward Washington, where he and John should have stayed that weekend. The vehicles' taillights glowed brightly in the darkness and faded to pinpricks of red.

Travis lit a match.

For weeks, he'd been agonizing about how to make up to John for the disaster that was their Athens trip. The car ride back to DC had been filled with stony silence when John wasn't angrily demanding explanations from Travis -- "Why didn't you stick up for me?" "How could you let your father talk like that?" -- and Travis, unable to answer John, had felt relieved when John got out of Travis's Honda in front of his Dupont Circle condo.

Travis could not shake his guilt. Which was why, in a feeble attempt to soothe his friend's hurt feelings, Travis now found himself touching a flame to a big red candle that sat on a pewter plate on a shelf in his dimly lit apartment. Turning from the candle, he peered into the stove to check on the flounder he was preparing. Three hundred fifty degrees, 20 minutes, he reminded himself.

"Come over for dinner," Travis had entreated John on the phone. "It's the least I can do."

"I suppose it is," John had replied, still upset with his friend and newly unsure exactly who Travis was. It was a week until Christmas, and John was looking out of his office window at a light snow that had covered DC. He paused a moment before saying yes.

"But Travis," John began. "There's one thing I want to --"

"John, stop," Travis said. "I know, I know. I'll say it again."

John waited.

"I'm really, really sorry," Travis said.

"OK, sport, apology accepted," John said. "But the dinner better be good."

And the dinner was good. Borrowing a flounder recipe from a co-worker -- "Just drop it in a stick of butter, honey," she'd advised -- Travis had added some steamed broccoli and boil-in-a-bag minute rice to make what he hoped was the best culinary apology possible. Coltrane's Giant Steps kept the mood upbeat and the Christmas candle gave the room a soft glow.

"Thanks for doing all this for me," John said when they were done and had moved to sit on the futon.

"Don't mention it," Travis said.

For a while, neither of them said anything, sitting side by side on the same Ikea futon that Travis had bought when he first moved to DC. It was late, the meal had sated them both, and the flickering of the candle made both Travis and John meditative and quiet. Travis was so caught up in his waking dream state that he

didn't notice that John was now much closer to him on the futon. He'd inched over wordlessly, just as Coltrane's "Mr. P.C." was heading towards its sixth minute. Aware now, Travis felt John lay his head softly on his shoulder, and heard him sigh a little. Travis stiffened. But as the seconds slowly passed and John's head stayed in its place, Travis relaxed.

The CD ended. The room was silent, except for the occasional sound of a snowflake brushing against the window. The silence needed to be filled, somehow. And so Travis, finally, reached for John's hand and held it. Neither spoke.

Travis and John sat on the futon content, with no need for words, until they each began to nod off. In their drowsy states -- fingers still interlocked -- they couldn't have heard the footsteps in the stairwell a few yards down the hallway. One pair was heavy and labored; the other light and deliberate. Four feet were moving toward Travis's door, where inside the two friends were in a state of half sleep.

Travis and John did not notice the sound of the key turning in Travis's lock until it was too late.

"Merry Chris -- what the hell!" exclaimed Ed, still gripping the door knob as his bulging eyes fell on his son and his friend.

"Dad!" Travis exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. Travis's eyes darted from his father to his mother, who stood a step behind Ed in the hallway. John was sitting up straight on the futon now, staring at Ed as he backed out of the doorway and into the hall. Ed began to pound the wall with both of his fists.

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!" Ed shouted. The wall thumped as he smashed his clenched hands into it.

Travis froze. He couldn't move. His parents had not told him anything about coming for Christmas. He looked at John, who was rubbing his open hands over his cheeks as if trying to wake himself up. John looked at Marie and back at Travis.

"Say something," John told Travis, his breathing rapidly increasing. Beads of sweat began to form on John's forehead. He fixed his eyes on Travis's and said, "Say it. Tell them!"

“John, I -- ” Travis began, looking at his mother. She was in shock.

“Tell them!” John yelled at Travis. “Jesus, at least tell *me!*”

“Mom, I don't know what you're thinking but this is a big misunderstanding,” Travis told Marie.

“I know, son,” she said sadly.

“Misunder -- ” John said, incredulously.

Marie was silent. Travis stood motionless. Ed was in the hallway, inconsolable.

John exhaled, hard. He took one more look at Travis and said, “I'm out of here.”

“John, wait,” Travis pleaded.

But John had gathered his things and was heading for the doorway. John said nothing to Marie as he stormed out of the apartment and bypassed the broken elevator and descended the stairway to the lobby. Ed barely noticed John bolt from the apartment. And he hadn't heard the words that John, in the split second he looked back, had uttered to Travis.

“Why don't you just admit it?”

Six years. It was six years, not five, since Travis had seen John. He remembered now. Maybe it was the extra wine that Brian had just ordered for him that gave Travis the sudden clarity. Maybe it was that Travis could, oddly, hear himself think, sitting there with his co-workers at the bar in the hot DC summer so many seasons after he'd last seen John. Or maybe it was just that he'd automatically, accurately marked the time without his friend, who was now laughing louder across the room. Oblivious to Travis and his musings, John's lips met the plentiful wine in his bulbous glass. He tipped his head back and drank deeply.

Travis gazed across the bar for as long as he could, studying his old friend. To reach John would have taken only a few steps. For a moment, Travis envisioned walking over to John, hugging him or pumping his hand as if nothing had happened in Travis's studio apartment all those years back.

And what had happened? Travis asked himself. A gesture of friendship, perhaps. At most, a momentary blurring of the lines between camaraderie and something else. They'd not spoken since. Travis couldn't bring himself to call.

What *did* happen? Travis mused again as he kept his eyes on John through the crowd. He touched his fingers to his forehead and wiped a little sweat away from his brow. Flushed, he blamed the wine.

Travis would never answer himself. He turned away and took a drink.

