

*NB, This is the third in the Perry series, following 1, NO HAIR and 2, ALMOST TWELVE.*

# THE SWEETEST GIFT

*by*

*Walt Kauffmann*

© 2009

Sandy kicked a rock off the sidewalk into the road, by the curb, while Perry followed alongside on his bike. "I just kicked it into the gutter, I'm not a vandal," Sandy justified his action.

"I didn't say anything," Perry half giggled. He steered his bike back and forth to keep his progress in pace with Sandy without stopping or falling off. "Walk faster!" he admonished, adding, "how come ya didn't fix your flat yet?"

"I have the patch kit, I just didn't figure out the destructions yet."

"You mean the instructions?" Perry part asked, part corrected.

"Yeah, the destructions," Sandy grinned, looking back at Perry. Then he ran ahead a few steps, and Perry caught up, then Sandy ran again, laughing. Perry caught up easily on his bike, then Sandy ran for longer, and as Perry got close again, Sandy ran again. They did this until Sandy was slightly winded.

"I know how to do it, we can fix it when we get to your house," Perry offered.

"We should do the homework first," Sandy said.

"What homework?"

"The Math," Sandy reminded with dread in his voice.

"Math is after lunch, we'll do it at lunch," Perry confidently said.

“Okay,” Sandy whimsically agreed, but turned to walk backwards so he could face Perry, and said, “you’re good at Math.”

“You’re good at English.”

“But you’re *real* good at Math.”

“You’re gooder at English than I’m good at Math,” Perry insisted.

“You said that on purpose!” Sandy laughed.

“I say everything I say on purpose!”

Sandy just laughed more, turned and ran. Perry easily kept up on his bike, and Sandy didn’t stop until he got to his house. He lifted the garage door open, and Perry laid his bike on the smooth concrete floor. It was easier than using the kickstand, and he knew he would be leaving before Sandy’s parents got home from work, so they wouldn’t run into his bike with their cars. Sandy went right in the door to the kitchen, which wasn’t locked either, and Perry followed. Sandy offered, “Want a hunk of juice?”

“Yeah, what kind?” Perry asked.

“Pineapple!”

“Mmm!” Perry concurred. Sandy poured two glasses and they both drank them right down. Perry walked out the door to the garage, asking “Where’s the patch kit?”

Sandy ran over to his father’s workbench, retrieving the patch kit. Perry grabbed Sandy’s bike from where it leaned against the wall, setting it upside down on it’s seat and handle bars in the center of the garage floor. Sandy also brought some wrenches, closed end and open end adjustable, in a box. Before Perry loosened the nuts, he spun the front wheel slowly, looking at the tread. Shortly he saw it. “Look! Ya don’t always find it easy, but we got lucky. It looks like a thumb tack.” He pointed to the tiny shiny metal disk stuck to the tire. Perry picked at it with his slender fingers and nearly no fingernails to speak of. He liked to keep ‘em short. “Damn! I almost got it!”

"Let me try," Sandy offered. Perry pulled his hands away, and Sandy began digging his nails under the tackhead. "There! I think it's coming... wait, it's going sideways. There!" He held it up. "The tack part is bent, that's why it would only come out sideways."

"Hey, you got a china marker?" Perry asked.

"What's that?" Sandy screwed up his nose, and Perry could tell he really didn't know, and that made him smile. He really liked being with Sandy. He had been thinking about him erotically more, especially since Laurence gave him permission to find somebody else. Well, not exactly *permission*, but Laurence said Perry *might* find somebody, and that Laurence would still love him anyway. He wished now, that Sandy could be that somebody. He knew that he must have thought of Sandy that way without even realizing it, that's why he wanted to lick tuna from Sandy's lip, and why he understood stuff in Sandy's head like Sandy knew stuff in Perry's head. They were tuned in to each other. But Perry was afraid that Sandy might not be *that* in tune. Not to do gay sexy stuff, and touchy kissy stuff. That's what Perry hoped, what he wished for now.

"It's one of those red grease pencil things, you've seen 'em. With the string on the side?"

"Oh yeah," Sandy agreed, "no, we don't have one of those."

"How about masking tape?" Perry asked. Sandy ran to the workbench and brought a roll of masking tape over, with a big grin. That made Perry grin, too, and stare at Sandy a minute, and Sandy didn't seem to mind being stared at. Perry quickly marked the spot on the rim where the tack hole was, then took the wheel off and pulled the tire off, but left the inner tube on. Finding the tape on the rim, he soon discovered the tack hole in the inner tube. "There it is. The hole." With his thumb over the hole, he pulled the inner tube off the wheel and set the tube on the floor. "Put your finger on the hole right here, so we don't lose it." Sandy followed Perry's orders while Perry opened the patch kit and got the red rubber patch out. It was the peel off kind, with glue already on it. Perry peeled it and placed it over the hole, squishing it down good. Then he stood up and looked around the garage. He saw a phone book over by the side, the big kind with yellow pages and everything. He hopped over and brought it to the inner tube and Sandy. "This'll squish it flat, so it doesn't leak." Perry stood up then, and Sandy did, too. "Whatta ya wanna do?" Perry asked.

“Wanna hear more music that I like? I got a new one at the flea market Saturday.”

Perry was not into music much, but the classical stuff that Sandy liked was better than that hip-hop stuff everyone else liked, so he said, “Yeah, cool!” At least it would get them in Sandy’s room. Maybe he could make a move in there. More private.

“It’s this guy Wilhelm Kempff playing Bach on piano,” Sandy explained as they headed into his bedroom. “It was only two bucks, but when I got home, on the back it said they made it in Australia, so I checked Amazon online, and they don’t even sell it in America.” Sandy was real proud of his rare CD, Perry could tell. “My favorite is track three, called *Sicilienne*,” Sandy said.

“Put it in,” Perry encouraged him, as Sandy closed the door to his bedroom. So the music wouldn’t annoy anyone? There was no one here but the two of them. Whatever, Perry thought, more privacy. Maybe he didn’t just like Sandy, maybe he was in love with him. How could he be sure? Sandy put the CD in and pressed *three* and *Play*. The music was nice and neither of them said anything, just listening. Perry heard a faint buzz at the window. Two flies were chasing each other between the screen and the glass. One hopped on the other’s back, then they flew apart, then were on top of each other again. Maybe they were fucking, Perry thought. He looked at Sandy, who just stared at the CD player. Then Sandy looked at Perry and stared, and Perry did not look away, just smiled, and Sandy smiled, too. Why, Perry wondered, why is it okay for two boys to stare at each other with pretty music playing and not say anything, but just smile and enjoy each other? Maybe Sandy was in love with him, too. How could he know? Maybe he would have to say something shocking. But what? The song ended.

“Did you like that one?” Sandy asked.

“Yeah, it’s real pretty,” Perry admitted, “like you.”

“Why’d ya say that?” Sandy complained, turning pink, and Perry’s heart nearly stopped. He had made a mistake, how could he fix it? Sandy added, “Girls are pretty, ya don’t say that about boys.”

“Why not?” Perry asked with such a sorry heart, he could see now that Sandy had almost tears in his eyes, like Laurence did at the end of *Philadelphia Story*. How could he fix it? “Don’t you think I’m pretty?”

Sandy just stared at him for a moment, then mumbled, “No...” paused, then corrected himself, “well okay, you are pretty, but boys don’t say that about each other. That’s queer shit.”

“This is your bedroom,” Perry explained, “and there’s nobody here but us. From now on, here in your room, or at my house in my room, or anywhere else there is nobody around and it’s real private, we can both say whatever we really think, no matter what anybody else would think, because they’re not around and we won’t tell ‘em, okay? Deal?”

“Okay, deal.”

“So do you think I’m pretty?” Perry asked again.

“Yes,” Sandy agreed, no disclaimer this time, but he giggled and added, “but I’m not pretty because my ass is too big!”

“Is not! You’re the same size as me,” Perry claimed, “all over!”

“But my ass is too big.”

“Is not!” Perry repeated, turning about in Sandy’s bedroom until he stepped over to the desk. “I’ll prove it!” he exclaimed emphatically, “you must have a ruler here somewhere.”

“Top right drawer, right side,” Sandy instructed, and Perry smiled at him.

“So neat!” Perry tittered, pulling open the drawer and grabbing the eighteen inch ruler. “We’ll measure!” It already sprang into Perry’s mind exactly how he would get to see Sandy’s bare bottom — by insisting on going first himself. He held out his left hand flat with his fingertips just touching Sandy’s chest, below his right armpit, just about level with where his nipple should be under the shirt. Holding the ruler in his right hand, thumb below, fingertips atop, he slid his hand in until his index finger touched Sandy’s left side. “Your chest is eleven inches across. Now you measure me the same way.” He handed Sandy the ruler. Sandy measured.

“Eleven inches.”

“Okay, now you measure my butt,” Perry said, turning as he unsnapped his pants. He dropped his pants and unders, letting them fall around his ankles as he placed his palms on the desk. He leaned over, sticking his butt out at Sandy.

“What are you doing?” Sandy objected, but Perry had his rejoinder ready.

“This has to be exact! And remember, this doesn’t leave this room. Don’t tell anybody.”

“Okay.” Sandy measured, his fingertips just lightly touching Perry’s naked bottom. It gave Perry a chill. And a thrill — he was getting a boner from Sandy’s warm and gentle fingertips. “Eleven inches.”

Perry pulled his pants up. Sandy better not see his boner just now — that *would* be too shocking. “Okay, now I measure you,” Perry demanded, “drop ‘em!”

Sandy hesitated, fumbling with his button and zipper, but slowly he pushed his pants and unders just past the tops of his thighs. Perry giggled and helped, pushing them to Sandy’s knees. “Don’t peek at my front,” Sandy smiled, turning his sparkling eyes and grinning red lips to Perry, “just measure.”

“Why, is it only an inch?” Perry teased.

“No.”

“Three inches?”

“No.”

“Getting bigger as we speak?” Perry continued teasing. He wanted to stretch out the time of his viewing Sandy’s pretty bottom. It was rounder than his, but not broader. Not really bigger at all, it seemed just lovely to Perry. His own boner nearly poked up above his belt, or where a belt would be if he wore one. He finally measured, left fingertips lightly touching Sandy’s left butt cheek. It was very warm, too. As he touched the other cheek with his right fingertips, Perry’s head swam. He seemed to lose his breath. He could barely get out the words, “eleven and a half inches.” Perry leaned down, his face just inches from that sweet bottom, but he dared not press his cheeks, his lips to Sandy there, not just now. He pulled Sandy’s pants up, and Sandy

took over, straightening his underwear and pants, and buttoning up. Neither boy spoke for a minute or two.

"It doesn't leave this room, right?" Sandy broke the quiet, "that's the deal we made, right?"

"Never," Perry promised, "I won't even tell anyone that we're *almost* exactly the same size. Never."

"See, I was right," Sandy insisted, "it is too big."

"Don't even say that," Perry objected, "if anything it's me that's too skinny, after all that time I had leukemia. You are really just right, and you're so good looking, too."

"Stop saying that, it sounds so *gay!*"

"So what, it's just us here, right?" Perry reminded, "That's the deal, right, complete honest stuff between me and you, right?"

"But all of a sudden ya keep saying stuff, and you're making me feel like you think I'm gay, and it hurts my feelings."

"Okay, I'm sorry," Perry said, with a pang in his heart that told him he *had* said enough for today, maybe too much. "Let's do something else, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You're my best friend, ya know."

"Let's pump up my tire!" Sandy suggested, opening the door, and as they walked out of his room he added, "You're my best friend, too. Now let's leave all that talk in the bedroom, like you promised."

"Okay," Perry agreed, "we'll leave it in there," then spinning about to walk backwards, facing his best friend, with a big grin he slyly added, "we'll leave it in the closet!"

"Shut up!" Sandy laughed, and Perry knew then, that his mistake wasn't so bad, they were still okay with each other, still best friends.



Friday at school, everything seemed normal, they did the Math at lunch, but after the last bell Sandy didn't invite Perry over, and couldn't come over Perry's either, saying he had to do "something". Perry accepted that, thinking it maybe had to do with his birthday party Saturday, and that he shouldn't push for an explanation. When he got home though, he remembered that everyone agreed that they wouldn't give him any gifts, that they all would just have ice cream and cake and hang out. So he started to worry that maybe he *had* pushed Sandy too far, that Sandy wasn't gay and didn't like anyone to suggest he might be, which is really what Perry had done, in a way. Maybe it *was* a big mistake. The more he thought about it, the heavier his heart became, and he wished it wasn't his birthday tomorrow, that his mother would go out with her friends tonight and he could go over Laurence's apartment. He really wanted to talk with Laurence. Everything was ready for the party tomorrow anyway. Why couldn't he go over Laurence's, just for a while? He felt whiney and depressed, scared and shaky. He had to stop it, control himself. Why did he have to be so hot for Sandy anyway? Why couldn't he be happy just to have him as his best friend? He had to talk to Laurence, Laurence would know. He had to cheer up before Mom got home.

"Mom!" he jumped up as his mother opened the door, "Let's go out for dinner tonight! Then there won't be anything to clean up!"

"Well hello to you too!" his mother said, "How about a hug?"

"We could try that new Japanese place," Perry proposed, hugging his mother hello, "and then you could catch up with the girls from your office and relax and have some fun."

His mother laughed, "And you want to come with me and drink Shirley Temples?"

"Who's Shirley Temple?" Perry asked, adding, "No, you could just drop me at Laurence's apartment, he wouldn't mind."

"No, I don't want you to stay over there tonight, after all, he'll be here all day tomorrow, and all your friends are coming over. It's gonna be a very busy day, you'll see."

"I won't stay over, I promise, he'll drive me home," Perry insisted, "I just need to talk to him a little."

"And it's not something you can talk to me about?"

"It's a guy thing, you know, man to man."

"I've had two grandfathers, a father, a brother, a husband and a son, and no one thinks I can understand men."

"Oh Mom, I'm sorry!" Perry heart heavily complained, "See, I hurt your feelings and I didn't mean to, and I keep doing stuff like that! I'm so *stupid!*"

"C'mere you," his mother steered him to the couch and sat him down, sitting next to him and hugging him. "Listen to me. No way are you stupid, you are very smart, practically at the head of your class, and I am so very proud of you. Not to mention, you are very handsome. And in all the ways you are different from other boys, you are better — sweeter, kinder, more considerate, funnier, more hard working, and even cuter! Don't worry, you didn't hurt my feelings. Now, what if Larry is out on a date with his new friend or something?"

"His friend Tad waits tables at a restaurant. He doesn't finish on Fridays 'til after midnight."

"Well, why don't you call Larry?"

"I don't like to talk about stuff on the phone."

"You're probably one of very few people your age that doesn't talk incessantly on the phone," his mother grinned, "but I meant you should call to ask him if you could come over for a *little* while."

Perry smiled his biggest smile, and said "Okay." As he picked up the phone, he added, "Thanks, Mom," with his undiminished smile.

"But don't hang up, I want to talk to him before you hang up."

"Okay," Perry keyed in Laurence's number. "Hi, it's me, Perry... you did? ...from my voice? ...oh, well, I was wondering if you're not doing anything special later, if I could come over for just a little while? My mom'll drop me over after we go out to eat, if it's okay... it is? Okay, my mom wants to talk to you, here she is." He handed his mother the cordless.

"Hi Larry, listen, if you haven't eaten yet, Perry suggested that new Japanese place over in the Crest Hill Shopping Plaza, and I thought maybe you'd like to join us. Yes, that's right... okay I'll give them a call in case we need reservations, say about seven? ...You mean for Perry? ...yes it is rather adventurous for him, when it comes to food anyway... okay, we'll meet you there. Bye."



Perry looked both ways up and down the black asphalt parking lot outside the Japanese restaurant, then raced ahead to Laurence's red Miata, as Laurence walked and talked with Jean about him. Of course, he pretended not to be listening.

"I can't believe how many vegetables he ate!"

"Wasn't it funny," Laurence asked Jean, "how we both kept picking the vegetables off his plate? The ones he didn't like."

"Yeah," Jean laughed, "I think they were all carrots, he kept picking up carrots because he couldn't tell with the batter!"

Perry couldn't help shouting his excuse from the door of the Miata. "I hate carrots! 'Specially if they're nearly raw!"

"So are you catching up with the girls?" Laurence asked, simultaneously giving a smiling recognition to Perry's interjection.

"No, no, no," Jean insisted, smiling at Perry, too, "I'm making an early night to rest up for tomorrow. I'll just get home in time to catch Bill Moyers."

Laurence beeped open the door locks on his Miata, and Perry got in. He could see in the mirror that his mother and Laurence continued to talk, probably about him. He guessed his mother was concerned, or felt left out, that he needed to talk with

Laurence, but not with her. They were always very close. She shared everything, and he almost did the same. They really opened their hearts, especially after his father split and they both thought he was going to die. It kinda bummed him out leaving her out of this, but he just couldn't tell his mom that he was gay. Not yet anyway. She might blame Laurence. He knew he could never wait so long like until he was like grown up, or something. It would be so cool to have his own apartment, like for sex, and bringing friends over, but hell, he didn't even have hair yet, down there. What the hell were they talking about? He knew he only had about two hours before Laurence would have to drive him home again, so come on! Finally he saw Laurence in the rear view heading to the Miata, and Mom getting in the Toyota. Laurence opened the door, sat down, closed the door, put the key in the ignition, started the engine and hooked his seat belt. Then he looked at Perry with a big smile. Perry hooked his seat belt. His mother made him sit in the back seat of the Toyota, since he's still under twelve, but the Miata has no back seat. He smiled at Laurence, too.

"I know this would have been our weekend together," Laurence said with a conspiratorial twinkle in his eye, "but this isn't just a ploy to get some face time with me, is it?"

"It isn't a *ploy*." Perry whined, "but it doesn't feel so bad now, like it did this afternoon when I was all alone after school."

"Did you feel sick?"

"No, no," Perry immediately responded, realizing the tone of concern about his health that he never intended to raise. "No, I'm not sick or feeling bad healthwise, nothing like that."

Laurence drove toward his apartment, and after a moment or two of silence, he asked, "Do you want to wait until we're in the apartment?"

"Yeah," Perry agreed, "is it okay?"

"Sure," Laurence must have wondered what Perry wanted to talk about, but Perry was afraid of his own emotions. He wanted to wait for the privacy of Laurence's home. "Did you like that Tempura?"

"Yeah, just not the carrots, but I liked the green ones, what were they again?"

“Zucchini, it’s a squash, a summer squash in the same family as pumpkins.”

“Is it big and round like a pumpkin only green?” Perry asked.

“No,” Laurence laughed gently, “it’s more like a cucumber in shape and size.” He paused for a moment or two, then added, “If it was cucumber, I wouldn’t eat it. I hate cucumbers more than you hate carrots!” He turned briefly with a sparkle in his eye, and Perry felt better, knowing somehow why he loved Laurence. Because he made him feel right, okay just being himself. Perry didn’t trust himself, he nearly was going crazy this afternoon after school. That’s why he wanted to wait until they were safely inside Laurence’s apartment before they talked about what bothered him. He might go crazy right there in the car, and then somebody could see him bawling or something as they got out of the car and went in. That wouldn’t be good. But Laurence made happy small talk, and looked at him that way, making Perry feel safe, so he could relax and wait until they were inside the apartment. Perry leaned his head over the gear shift, pressing his cheek against Laurence’s upper arm. As he sat back upright, Laurence reached his right hand over, warmly ruffling the short hair above the back of Perry’s neck. Whispering barely louder than the rumble of the engine and the humming tread of tires on asphalt, Laurence reassured Perry, “It’ll be okay. I promise.”

The humming deepened and slowed as Laurence withdrew his hand from Perry’s neck to downshift, turning into his parking lot and pulling into his space. They both got out without a word and went in the doors. The lamp by the couch was already on, and Perry kicked off his shoes while Laurence locked the front door. He sat in the middle, like always, and Laurence sat by the end table that held the lamp. No TV this time, no old movies, no getting nearly naked and cozy with his man. He had to talk now, but where to start?

“You want a Pepsi or something?” Laurence asked.

“Maybe later,” Perry answered, “I’m just trying to figure out how to tell you what happened, so I could ask you what to do.” He thought for a minute, then added, “I think I screwed up.”

“Well, why don’t you tell me the whole story?” Laurence offered, “Begin at the beginning.”

Perry smiled and finished the quote, "Then continue till you reach the end, then stop."

Laurence laughed gently at Perry's knowing the *Alice* quote, reaching his arm out to encircle Perry and pulling him against his chest for a warm hug. "Tell me the whole story, I'm sure you'll feel better."

"Okay, well, it happened yesterday, but I guess it started a while ago. You know how you said I might find somebody?"

"Mmm hmm," Laurence concurred.

"Well, I actually already found somebody, but I didn't realize it. I was so busy thinking about how hot Wilt was, and about Tad at the restaurant, and a lot about you, but I never stopped to think how much I liked my best friend Sandy. But I *have* been thinking that about him a little even before you said that I might find somebody, and more and more after that... and well, Thursday I just think I tried to push it too far. I mean, to find out if he's gay, or if he'd hate me if he thought I was gay."

"Okay, slow down," Laurence interrupted, "it's okay. Just tell me exactly what happened on Thursday."

"Alright. So on Thursday, yesterday, Sandy and I went over his house. We usually go over his house, or sometimes we go over my house. I mean I always wait for him to invite me over, I don't just go without that, but he does invite me a lot, and if he doesn't, I invite him over, but sometimes he has something to do, or leftover homework he has to catch up on, or other stuff. Sometimes we do homework together, but usually we just play, or hang out and stuff. So yesterday we fixed his bike, 'cause it had a flat, so I helped him with that." Perry smiled then, and said, "Mainly I fixed it, 'cause Sandy isn't so mechanically inclined, he's more interested in reading, like books and poetry, and he likes classical music. So after we fixed his tire, we went in his room and he played a new classical record he got at the flea market. He goes to flea markets a lot on weekends 'cause him and his parents like collecting junk. So anyway, like I said, I've been looking at him a lot, and oh yeah, he looks at me, too. It's like we're telepathic or something, like if somebody does something no one else notices, but we do, and it's funny and we look at each other and smile or laugh. Stuff that no one else gets, ya know?"

"That's nice," Laurence appreciated, "to have that with somebody. What happened when he played the record, what kind of music was it?"

"It was Bach, some German guy playing Bach on piano, Sandy was real proud of having found it at the flea market, 'cause it was an Australian CD that ya can't get here."

"Was it nice?" Laurence asked.

"Yeah, that's the problem," Perry decided, "it was so pretty, this song called *Sicilienne*, and I was staring at Sandy, and then he turned and stared at me smiling and everything, so I thought the word *pretty* was good for the music *and* for him, and anyway, I wanted to know if he felt the same about me as I did about him, so when he asked me if I liked the music, I said it was pretty and him, too." Perry paused then, but quietly added, "Or something like that."

"Did he mind?"

"Yeah, he turned all pink and asked why'd I say that!" Perry pressed his forehead against Laurence's arm, then looked him in the face adding, "So I thought I could fix it by asking him if he thought I was pretty, too."

"What did he say?"

"He said No!" Perry felt the tears coming then, and he hid his face against Laurence's chest, but he knew he couldn't hide. He looked at Laurence again, and tearfully continued, "Then he said yes, but that boys don't say it about each other. Then I guess he tried to make *me* feel better, and said he wasn't pretty because his ass was too big." He could feel Laurence's tummy giggle a little.

"He said that?" Laurence smiled, and ran his big hand over Perry's hair. Perry smiled too, although with eyes still reddened and teary.

"Yeah, but that's when I got really *stupid* and said he was perfect and I could prove it, and got his ruler to measure us both."

"Why stupid?" Laurence asked.

“Because I measured his chest first, sorta to show him how to do it, then had him measure *my* chest,” Perry continued, “but then I turned around for him to measure *my* ass first, and I dropped my pants, totally bare ass.”

“What did Sandy think about that?”

“He was like totally shocked and said *whatta ya doin?* like that, and I told him it had to be exact.”

“So did he do it?” Laurence asked.

“Yeah, and his fingertips touching my bare butt gave me a boner, which I hid from him, and then I pulled mine up and told him to drop his, and he did, but only down to the tops of his legs. I pushed ‘em a little further, and teased him a little too, while I measured him. And I promised him I would never tell anyone, and now I’m telling you. Am I bad? Do I deserve to lose my best friend? I’m so *stupid!*”

“No, don’t call yourself stupid,” Laurence comforted him and hugged him, “what makes you think he doesn’t want to be best friends anymore?”

“He didn’t invite me over after school today, and when I invited him over, he said he had *something* to do.”

“Maybe he really did.”

“I know,” Perry agreed, “I thought that, too, but when I was all alone at home, well first I thought maybe he wanted to do something secret from me, like getting me a present or like that, but then I remembered I told everyone not to bother, ya know, that they didn’t have to get me a present.”

“How come?” Laurence inquired.

“I don’t know,” Perry began, “maybe I just didn’t want them to think they had to, like I only wanted presents, but I really only wanted my friends to have a good time and like me. I only have three friends. Plus you and Mom.”

“So there’s just gonna be three boys besides you tomorrow?”

"Yeah, I shoulda told ya," Perry admitted, "you didn't get any extra junk for the party, did ya?"

"No, no," Laurence insisted, "that's great, it'll be even easier, I mean for everyone to have fun. With just four of you guys, your mom and I can make sure everyone is involved and having a good time, including you, my birthday boy." Laurence squeezed Perry to his chest again, and that made Perry feel so good. "Okay, let me recap. You hoped Sandy might be gay, so you kinda tried to force his hand by being very suggestive, and now you're afraid he's straight and might not like you as much anymore, right?"

"Yeah." Perry hugged Laurence again. Although he still almost felt like crying, he wasn't crying, and Laurence's understanding made him feel better already.

"You didn't actually say you were gay, did you?"

"No," Perry admitted, "but before like, I promised we would only talk so honestly when we were alone in my room or his room, and he promised that, too. So when we were leaving his room to go pump up his tire, he made me promise again, and leave all that talk in his room. So I said we'd leave it in the closet."

"Does he know what that means?" Laurence wondered.

"Yeah, everybody knows that's like code for being secretly gay," Perry admitted.

"Did he mind that?"

"No, he just said *Shut Up!* and laughed, which kinda sounded gay anyway."

"Well then," Laurence continued, "maybe today, after school, Sandy *was* going to get you a present, or maybe he had something else to do, perhaps with his parents, and maybe he'll tell you about it, or maybe he never will because it isn't important anymore, but I think you'll find out tomorrow if he is still your best friend, and I bet he is. After all, if he really hated your being so suggestive, you probably would have known that on Thursday, certainly by today. So that means he is still working things out, and maybe he *is* gay, or maybe he's *not*, but still likes you a lot anyway, and he's just trying to work out how to *be* that. So give him time, you'll probably know a lot more tomorrow. I'll bet you have a fun party, and still have a best friend. Try not to

worry about it, okay?"

"Mmmm," Perry agreed, and simply enjoyed hugging and being hugged, and Laurence's understanding reassurances. He wanted just to lie upon Laurence's chest for a while, and Laurence seemed to know that, although they both knew Perry had to go home soon. A few minutes of peace together, a few minutes of love. It would be alright.



Perry helped his mother hang a Happy Birthday banner with shiny metallic letters across the dining room wall up high. Even his mother had to stand on a chair to hold her end up as she fastened it to the wall.

"When did you get all this stuff?" Perry asked, then answered his own question, "I know. Wednesday, when you called and said you had to work a little late."

"I guess I can't fool you!"

Perry lowered his end a bit to hand over to his mother, and hopped off the chair he had stood upon. His mother then clambered up on that chair to fasten this end. "There," his mother stated, satisfied. She added, "Unless Larry brings more. Where is he anyway?"

"He's here," Perry suggested, "that's his car I hear."

"You sure?"

"Yup!" Perry was proud of recognizing Laurence's car by its sound, just as Laurence knew his voice on the phone. Just the sound of his Miata arriving made Perry even happier. He ran to the door, opening it just as the doorbell rang. "Hi!"

"Hello and Happy Birthday, birthday boy!" Laurence had his hands full with two very large shopping bags, which he immediately set down by the coffee table so he could hug Perry. "Hi, Jean," he added while giving Perry his bear hug.

"What's this stuff?" Perry nosily peeked at the two bags.

"You'll find out soon enough!" Laurence said with a grin, as Jean came over and hugged Laurence, too. Perry noticed that, noticed it had been happening more often recently. He wondered if Laurence thought he should do that, maybe so his Mom wouldn't feel left out, or maybe even so his Mom wouldn't think Laurence loved Perry too much. Or maybe they both really liked each other more all the time. He hoped so, and he smiled watching them.

"You didn't bring more decorations, I hope," Jean asked, laughing.

"No, we agreed you would handle that, it's just some activities, games for the boys," Laurence explained, "and Perry's gift."

"Can I open it?" Perry asked impatiently.

"No, we'll wait a little," Jean insisted, "until your friends have all arrived." Perry could tell she was firm, but he could hardly wait, he was so excited.

"Your Mom and I have to make sure everything is set for the lift-off," Laurence added, "so why don't you wait here to let your friends in? It's such a nice day, you could even leave the door open for a while. And Perry," Laurence said with a tone in his voice that made Perry look him in the eye, "if your friends bring gifts, pile them there on the coffee table. We'll all enjoy watching you open them together. Even if some of your friends couldn't afford to get you a present, I'm sure they'll enjoy watching you open them. Okay?" He smiled and winked at Perry, and Perry knew he was right, and had just helped him save face in front of his mother and his friends without them even knowing about it. His silly excessive humility in suggesting they needn't bring presents, well, it was sincere, but he probably should not have said it. But Laurence's proposal just took that question out of his mother's mind before she ever had it. If Perry's love for Laurence could possibly increase, it just did. He just stared and smiled a short moment extra at Laurence, and he knew he had with Laurence what he had with Sandy, what Sandy called extra-verbal communication.

"Okay," Perry agreed, still smiling.

Danny and Simon arrived first. They both lived on the same side of town as Sandy, but even further east, so it was nice that Simon's dad could pick up Danny, too, since Danny's dad worked on Saturdays to get overtime at the factory. Perry had to smile watching them clamber out of the Lincoln Navigator Simon's dad drove. Each had

wrapped gifts, so Perry was relieved that neither would be embarrassed to be the one who did not give a gift. That could have happened because of his well-meaning suggestion. Laurence had explained it to Perry on the drive home last night. Now Perry just hoped that Sandy would not show up without one, because that would hurt Sandy's feelings as much, or more, than it hurt Perry. He was so stupid to have said that, but it's too late now. Perry showed Danny and Simon in, and had them put their gifts on the coffee table, "the grown-ups wanna watch me opening them," and then they all went back outside the front door to wait for Sandy.

Sandy arrived in style. His mother drove him in her yellow Pontiac Solstice. Perry had heard some kids say a Solstice wasn't as good mechanically as a Miata like Laurence's, but it looked cool.

"Dude," Danny exclaimed, as Sandy got out of the Solstice, "nice ride!" With that statement, Danny turned to Simon and gave him a playful, totally open-handed slap to the chest with the back of his hand. Simon exaggeratedly exhaled breath, like the wind had been knocked out of him, causing Danny to do a double take. Realizing Simon was putting him on, he gave Simon a playful push to the side of the head, both of them laughing.

Just before Sandy shut the car door, Perry heard his best friend's mom say, "Sure you'll be alright?"

"I'll be fine, Mom, really!" Sandy replied, shutting the door, and as he turned, Perry could see he held a gift wrapped package in his hands. That was a relief!

"C'mon in, they're getting a whole production ready, I think." Perry explained, leading his three friends in. "Put your package on the coffee table with the others, if ya don't mind." He pointed Sandy to the spot. "The grown-ups wanna watch me open 'em." Then he looked Sandy right in the eyes, and softly said, "Thanks." He realized he should thank Danny and Simon, too, just to be fair. "Thank you guys, thanks for coming."

"Hey, free ice cream and cake, all ya can eat? We ain't passing that up!" Danny looked to the other boys for agreement, "Right?"

"Yeah, I hope your cake is huge!" Simon agreed, "I love cake!"

"I live for ice cream!" Sandy added, as they passed into the dining room.

Perry introduced his gang to Laurence, "This is Sandy, this is Danny, and this is Simon."

Laurence welcomed them into the festooned dining room, "Hi, guys, I'm Laurence," he pointed to the end of the table near the living room, "Perry sits at that end, his mom sits at this end, by the kitchen, and I'll sit here, next to her. You guys can pick any seat, just don't all pick the same one, 'cause it might break the chair!"

When every boy agreed that orange pop was good, Laurence went into the kitchen to bring a chilled two liter bottle out, and as he returned and began to pour in all the party cups, Jean brought out the birthday cake with twelve lit candles aglow.

They all sang the song, ending with "dear Perry, Happy Birthday to you!" Cheers and applause followed, with encouragements to "Make a wish!" and "Blow 'em out!" When Perry did just that, there were more cheers and applause. Perry had wished the same wish he had last night, that he and Sandy were still okay with each other, and maybe even that Sandy liked him as much as he liked Sandy. He looked quickly into Sandy's eyes, and his best friend was smiling back at him.

His mother cut the cake, giving him a large piece first, saying his name, "Perry," followed by Sandy on his left, "and I know Sandy," then Danny on his right.

"I'm Danny."

"Hi, Danny."

Simon, next to her by Danny, introduced himself as she handed him his cake. "I'm Simon."

"Hello, Simon."

As she handed Laurence, next to her by Sandy, a piece of cake, he said "I'm Laurence," and everyone laughed. Finally she cut herself a piece and sat down, and they all dug in.

The boyish feast ensued, punctuated by giggles, laughs and occasional burps, muffled in deference to the lady present.

Danny and Simon, that odd couple, provided their usual impromptu comedy, while Perry and Sandy just laughed and grinned, often silently looking each other in the eyes. Perry was so happy that everything seemed to be the same between them.

"The blue flowers taste best," Danny observed. The cake had icing roses in blue, yellow and pink. Perry would have been just as happy to have no pink roses, but it was okay. He just felt that he and Laurence were not that kind of gay, like the ones they show on TV. He and Laurence just happened to love males in that private way, rather than females like most guys do, but it was okay. He didn't dislike those kind of gay people. The pink roses kind. He just wasn't one himself.

Simon had bits of each color rose on his slice of cake, and he tasted each in succession. "They all taste the same. It's just food coloring," he stated.

Danny rubbed a finger in some of his blue rose icing, and touched it to Simon's nose. Right away Laurence curtailed the seemingly inevitable food fight, "No food fights guys, it's a mess to clean up."

"I'm not escalating, I'm used to his antics," Simon grinned, wiping off the blue icing and licking it off his finger.

"We don't have any antics. All our furniture is new. We left the antics in Alabama." Danny laughed.

"That's *antiques*," Simon corrected.

"Where?" Danny jumped up from his chair. "Looks pretty good to me, I'd say this chair is nearly new!" He quickly sat again, to another round of laughs.

Perry's mom jumped up and ran into the kitchen, bringing back a quart of vanilla Häagen Dazs ice cream. "I almost forgot the ice cream!" She circled the table, giving each party boy a big scoop.

"I wondered what the spoons were for!" Sandy laughed.

"The cake was so good, I forgot, too!" Perry added.

As the pigging out subsided after second helpings, and more, of orange pop, cake and ice cream, Perry's mom began to gather dirty paper plates and plastic forks and spoons, saying "Don't worry, you all can have more later, if you have room," adding, "there's plenty of paper plates and stuff."

Laurence then stood to offer up his so-called activities. Even Perry had no idea of what he planned. So when Laurence pulled a donkey tail out of his bag, Perry joined the others with grievous hilarity and mock moans, followed by general laughter.

"Man, I was just kidding when I asked you about pin-the-tail," Danny reminded Perry, still giggling, "and you said no way!"

Perry, almost doubled over in guffaws, blurted, "I... had no... idea!"

"C'mon guys, this is different," Laurence answered, laughing himself, "you'll see!"

As the boys finally began to pay attention to Laurence's version, they saw a belt kind of thing, separate from the donkey tail, both of which had a black patch on them. Of course, there had to be a blindfold, and Laurence produced that from his bag of tricks as well. No wall yet held a picture of a tail-less donkey, and Laurence drew no such thing from his sack, peaking the curiosity of all assembled.

"Okay," Laurence began, "first, there's no picture of a donkey, because one of us will be the donkey, and the donkey can move around!"

Cries of "What?!" and "This'll never..." mixed into the giggle noises, but Laurence continued over the din of disbelief and amusement.

"There are rules, though," Laurence pointed out, "like no running or knocking into things, everyone else that's not the donkey or the blindfolded tail holder should help there, but not exactly give it all away. The donkey gets to pick who chases him with the tail, and when *he* finally catches the donkey and tails him, then *he's* the donkey and picks the next blindfolded boy."

"Or man," Perry grinned.

“Well, I’ll be the first donkey,” Laurence explained, “and as you can see, the belt has a fairly wide strip hanging down with Velcro® on it, and the tail has some, too. So you really have to get the tail *on* the donkey, not just tag him.” Laurence put the belt on. “Now, I pick... let’s see... Danny!”

“Oh man! Perry should go first! It’s his birthday!” Danny half laughed, half complained.

“No, you’re the athlete and sportsman, you have to prove it can be done!” Laurence explained with a conspiratorial grin. “You guys blindfold him, then spin him around three times. And we’ll keep it in the dining room, this isn’t hide-and-seek!”

Perry’s mom had moved two chairs into the kitchen, and the other two into the living room, then got Perry to help her slide the table over by the bay window as Laurence explained the rules, so there was enough room to keep in the dining room. Just enough. Perry guessed that Danny regretted bragging earlier about baseball, his throwing and left field plays. Sandy and Simon got the blindfold from the table and put it on Danny, Simon in front to make sure Danny couldn’t cheat, while Sandy fastened it behind . Next Perry joined them in spinning Danny around three times. They handed Danny the tail, Velcro® end up.

Danny charged ahead as Laurence feinted left, then right. Danny tried not to look dizzy from the spinning, but that gradually faded. “Hee haw!” Laurence called out, but no sooner did he bray, than he moved to the other side, or around one of the boys, so as soon as Danny headed one way, Simon or Sandy or Perry would try to turn him in the direction Laurence had moved.

“What?!” Danny cried out in exasperation.

“He’s not there anymore!” someone would yell.

“Hee haw!”

“Oh man!” Danny complained, to the other boys’ guffaws. At first he would grab anyone, but he must have realized the only one not touching him back, to turn him in the right direction, was the donkey, Laurence. He reached instead past the arms and hands of those trying to set him aright, feeling for another body on the move just past them. He touched Laurence.

“Hee haw!” Laurence jumped away, but now Danny could feel which way he went, and pushing past boy bodies, he grabbed Laurence and wrapped his arms about him. Laurence tried to get away, but Danny held on, twisting around Laurence until he could reach his butt side, finally sticking the tail to the patch when his fingers found it.

“Yay!!!” the other three boys all cheered, and Laurence took off the tail-belt as Danny removed his blindfold. Perry had loved it, all the boys touching and pushing each other, the laughs and high spirits. It was not exactly sexy, but well, kinda. Laurence was a genius! Only then did Perry notice his mom standing in the doorway to the kitchen. She was smiling so big, it made him so happy! She noticed him noticing her too, and reached over and hugged him. Laurence hooked the belt onto Danny.

“Who do you pick, donkey-boy?” Laurence asked Danny, and Jean surprised him with a big hug. Perry could tell he was surprised from the look on his face, but then Laurence just smiled at her.

“I pick Simon!”

“Why am I not surprised?!” Simon asked with a chuckle. Sandy and Perry blindfolded him and spun him three times, and the game began anew.

Rather than becoming tiresome, Laurence’s version of *pin the tail on the donkey* seemed infectiously cheerful, as if all the boys, not just Perry, liked touching and being touched by other boys, even in nearly naughty places, which always raised a laugh from all, instead of shock or dismay. The very fact that you had to touch a boy’s bottom to “catch and pin” the donkey became dangerously delightful, like the play of boys trying to “goose” one another. It was fun, but also a recognition of one’s own and each others nascent sexuality. Not to mention that it just plain felt good. And Perry knew what the word *nascent* meant. He had looked it up, but beyond what the dictionary said, he felt his own sexuality was not just being born, but that his conscious mind was simply now becoming aware of what had always been a part of his natural self. Only now he was ready to feel it, and think about it. He was so glad that he had Laurence to help him understand it. Now he hoped Sandy was becoming aware of at least some of those same feelings, that it was part of his nature, too.

After each boy had his turn as donkey, Laurence had other games, but none as actively involving as his *pin the tail* version, so eventually the boys slowed down a bit,

until finally something that probably animated all their unconscious minds came to the fore when Simon stated, "I'm thirsty!"

Laurence listed the flavors available— orange, grape, cola, and root beer – while Jean offered "More cake and ice cream?" to an aggregated muffle of tummy-filled groans.

"How about a root beer float?" Danny asked, and every one of the boys enthused over that more party-like beverage. Laurence agreed he could make them, and as he and Jean cleaned up the inevitable foam-overs, the boys adjourned to the living room carefully, so as not to spill, and slowly sipped their sweetly sensuous suds.

All the boys eyed the stack of wrapped gifts on the coffee table, knowing that opening time was the next event, and silently grinned at one another. Suddenly Danny got up and backed away from the chair, saying in a hushed voice, "Perry! Perry!" and waving his hand in a beckoning motion. Perry stood up.

"What?" he responded.

"I gotta pee," Danny answered in his coarse audible whisper, "where is it?"

Perry showed Danny the way down the hall past his bedroom and his mother's room. The bathroom, next to the Laundryroom, had its door open, but Danny didn't go in. Perry kind of grinned, saying, "That's it, don't ya gotta go?"

"Nah," Danny admitted, "I just wanted to tell you something kinda private."

"What."

"Don't take this the wrong way... I mean... I don't mind myself or nothin', but..."

"What?" Perry sort of half laughed.

"Well... I, uh... uh... I think Laurence is gay, and wait, wait, don't say nothin', I mean, I don't mind, it's just I wanted to warn ya, if it's true and I'm right, well... just don't ever tell anybody at school. Not any kids, or not any teachers or guidance counselors, I mean seriously, *nobody*."

"Why'd ya say this?" Perry was confused. He didn't know whether to be angry with

Danny or what? He liked Danny, but he couldn't figure out why he was saying this now. Did he dislike gay people, or just Laurence? He seemed to really like Laurence before.

"I'm sorry, I don't wanna make you mad at me, or to hurt your feelings or nothin', I know how much you like Laurence, and I like him, too. And I know he saved your life with the bone marrow transplant, which is *so* cool. I just don't want him *or you* to be hurt." Danny squeezed his lips together, like he was holding something in, words in his mouth that he was afraid to let out. But he did let them out. "Okay, promise me you'll never tell anyone the secret I'm gonna tell you now. Promise!"

Perry was more confused than ever. What else could he do but promise? "Okay, I promise."

"I have a brother. He's a senior."

"Wow. How come nobody knows? Doesn't he go to our high school in town?"

"He only comes home six weeks out of every year. Two weeks at Christmas, two weeks at the beginning of summer, and two weeks at the end of summer. He goes to a military school in Pennsylvania, in Valley Forge, and in the summer he goes to a Tough Love camp in Colorado."

"Wow, that sounds like being in prison."

"It is. The first time he came home at Christmas, my mother wanted to move his bed out of our room and put him in the basement, but I threw a fit. We always shared our room."

"Why'd she do that?"

"Because he's *gay*. He had a boyfriend younger than him, like halfway between my age and his, and this kid's mother found out and had my brother arrested. They were gonna lock him up in some psychiatric prison hospital, but my parents got a lawyer and their own psychiatrist, and the judge agreed to their solution of sending him to military school, and him never coming back to that town."

"That's so heavy," Perry was floored, and a bit scared, too. He didn't know what to

say at first, but he wanted everything to be smooth and cool, he hated to feel scared or upset. "Okay, I've got a secret for you, too," he suggested, "and you gotta promise not to tell anyone, too."

"I promise."

"Okay, I already know Laurence is gay, and I don't care, and I'll never tell anyone. And that's the end of it, we'll never mention it again. But, I mean, if you ever wanna talk about your brother again, I'm cool. I won't tell. It must be a real downer not having anyone on your side, and your brother's side."

"Thanks, Perry," Danny added, "your so cool."

"Perry!" his mother called from the living room, "whatcha doin'?"

"Come on," Perry urged, "I gotta open the presents!" They sauntered into the living room, as if they had been missing only a moment. Perry explained, "I was just saying, even though you're great in left, at bat... well, ya strike out a lot."

Danny fell right in step with this cover-up. "Even the best hitters in the majors do that. At least when I connect, it's usually a homer, and I drive in runs."

"But you're really good in left, right?" Laurence joined in.

"Da... Yeah, right! Even if it gets past third, or the shortstop, even second base, I'm right there and catch all that shi... that stuff. And I put it right in the first base mitt before the hitter touches up!" There was a pregnant pause as everyone realized Danny had just missed cussing.

Laurence rejoined, "No shit!" and all the boys burst into laughter, even Jean giggled as she mockingly complained.

"Larry!"

"Well," Laurence explained, "somebody had to acknowledge the elephant." The boys all still tittered. Perry had taken his spot in the middle of the couch, with the presents piled up in front of him on the coffee table, including the two big boxes that were not there before.

“What should I open first?” Perry asked.

“I think you should open the big one next to the even bigger one first.” Perry’s mom suggested. Perry smiled at her and knew that the sparkle in her eyes was returned from himself as he looked in her eyes. The card said “Happy Birthday, Love, Mom.” He began to tear off the multi-colored wrapping paper, and right away saw that it was the *Nintendo Wii*.

All his friends oohed at this gift as Perry said, “Thanks, Mom!”

Simon said, “Most the stores are out of ‘em, they’re so hard to find.”

“That’s really cool,” Danny said, and Sandy added, “Yeah.”

“Next you should open the biggest one!” his mom recommended. Perry grinned broadly at his mother, then looked at Laurence. He had seen that big one arrive in Laurence’s shopping bag. Indeed, the card, which he tore open first, said “Happy Twelfth Birthday! Love, Laurence,” and he smiled at Laurence as he tore away the gift wrap.

“From Laurence,” he informed his three friends, tossing the colored paper shreds aside. Inside was a big brown box with no markings, so he had to open it to see what was inside. First there was the *Nintendo Wii Racing Wheel* with software, and under that was the *Wii Fit* exercise pad with attachments and software. Everyone oohed in unison as each item appeared. With all the *Wii* items piled on the coffee table next to the three remaining unopened gifts, Perry stood to toss the big empty brown box over Simon’s head to an empty space on the floor. Still standing, he held out his hand across the table to Laurence, saying, “Thank you, Laurence.” Laurence stood, too, accepting the handshake and pulling Perry into a quick hug that almost made Perry feel unbalanced, leaning over the coffee table, but Laurence set himself and Perry upright again with his man’s strength.

Now there were just three gifts, from his three schoolmates, for Perry to open. He opened the biggest of these first, the one Danny brought. It was a baseball glove.

“I’m gonna show ya how to catch and throw like me!” Danny explained.

Perry smiled, “Thanks!”

The next in size, in descending order, was from Simon. The wrapping paper held firmly with excessive Scotch tape, but Perry got it shredded. Inside he found a set of five chrome ball bearings, each suspended from a wire so that if you pull one or two, or even up to four away from the others and let them crash into whatever number of balls remained, the same number that swung in would swing out the other side, always leaving the remainder at rest, unmoving. "It always helps, like if ya get stuck at some homework, ya just crash some balls awhile, and your brain unfreezes!" That is how Simon explained it.

"These are cool Simon, thanks!" Perry told him, and both boys smiled.

The last gift was obviously from Sandy, and it was also obvious that it was a CD, even though it was wrapped in a pretty red metallic paper with an embossed spiral pattern. "I had that guy's card, from the flea market, so we called him and my mom and me went to get it yesterday, after school." Perry ripped it open, it said *Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring, favourite piano transcriptions, by Wilhelm Kempff*. Perry grinned broadly at Sandy, thinking that the discarded paper almost matched the red of Sandy's lips.

"I really did like that *Sicilienne*," he admitted, "thanks."

"I bet you'll like track nine, too, the *Largo*," Sandy added.

"Uh oh," Danny joked, "Perry's weirding out on the classical music, like Sandy!" Everyone laughed at that, including Laurence and mom and Perry, too. Then all the boys were looking at stuff, mostly the *Wii* things, and talking about setting it up. Perry asked his mom if they could set it up right there in the living room, using the big fifty two inch widescreen they got at the end of summer. Sandy, Simon and Danny all agreed that would be so cool, and Mom agreed, and Laurence offered to help if they needed it.

"Simon is a genius at that stuff," Sandy claimed, "he set up my computer so that the sound can come out of my stereo if I watch a DVD on my computer. Then the sound is awesome!"

No sooner than they got everything plugged in and set up, they were taking turns at *Mario*. Sneaking a peek at Laurence and his mom, Perry saw them rearranging the dining room back to normal. The next time he peeked, he saw them hugging with big smiles, and he knew it was about the party, and his happiness, his friends happiness,

even their own happiness seeing all this, and it made him feel so good. Perry was surprised when the doorbell rang, but looking at the digital clock on the end table, he saw it said 4:03, so the party should be ending. He ran to the door, getting there ahead of his mom and Laurence. It was Simon's dad.

"It's a nice birthday, Perry?" he asked, then turned to Mom and Laurence. "Hello, you must be Perry's parents," holding out a hand.

Mom shook his hand, "Hi, I'm Jean, and this is Laurence."

"Leonard," he answered, turning toward his son, "Ready, bubie?"

"Dad! Don't call me that!" Simon complained.

"I'm not too early?" Simon's dad asked Perry's mom.

"Oh no," Mom answered, "I'm just about pooped! You're right on time."

"Alright! Daniel? Coming with us? The engine is running!"

"Yeah," Danny jumped up, "and thanks Perry, it was great."

"Yeah," Simon agreed, "it was fun. Thanks Perry."

"And thanks to Perry's mom," Laurence reminded everyone.

"Thanks so much," Simon said to Jean, and Danny did the same. Then Danny paused and looked at Laurence.

"And thank you, Laurence," Danny observed, "it was great meeting you." He held his hand out to shake, and Laurence smiled, looking into Danny's eyes, and shaking his hand firmly. Simon then shook Laurence's hand, too, and added his thanks.

"Thanks for coming and thanks for the stuff," Perry saw them out the door, and called out, "see ya Monday!" Simon and Danny shouted back their own *see ya's*, almost in unison while they clambered into the big Lincoln Navigator. As they drove off, Perry turned towards his best friend. He asked Sandy, "Do you need to call your mom?"

“Nah,” Sandy said, and tapping Perry on the shoulder added, “Hey, can we listen to that CD on your stereo, in your room?”

“Yeah sure,” Perry agreed.

“Well I’ve still got some cleaning in the kitchen then,” Mom said. “ if you don’t need me.”

“I’ll help you, Jean,” Laurence offered.

Perry skipped to the coffee table, picking up the Bach CD, turned throwing his arm over Sandy’s shoulder, and whispered softly, “C’mon!”

Entering Perry’s bedroom, Sandy said, “I invoke the Code of Our Rooms,” and grinned broadly at Perry.

Happily curious, Perry inquired, “What’s up?”

“Well, there’s a couple of things, like they’re not really lies, but I guess I didn’t tell the whole truth, and now I wanna,” Sandy admitted, “or at least try.”

Now Perry started to get scared, but he tried to keep smiling. “Okay, no problem,” he encouraged, hopefully.

“Well the first one’s easier. See, I can’t call my mom to pick me up, because she’s not there.” He smiled, so Perry did, too. “They have this big flea market up in Scranton tomorrow, so they go up there on Saturday and stay over at a motel so they can get in as soon as it opens Sunday morning, ya know, to beat other people out on whatever they think is good stuff. And I always go with ‘em, but no way I was gonna miss your party, so they gave in. I didn’t say nothin’ because I wanted to stay a little longer than the other guys so I could talk to ya about the other thing, so I guess your mom or Laurence can give me a ride home later. I just didn’t want to make the other guys jealous, ya know, that I got to stay later than them.”

“But what are ya gonna do later? You’ll be all alone. Like what are ya gonna eat?” Perry was concerned now, especially at Sandy being alone.

"It's no problem," Sandy reassured him, "they left me money to order a pizza, and there's plenty of soda and juice. I can always raid the fridge, it's always packed. And I can watch TV, listen to CDs, go online or read something."

"I think *we're* having pizza later," Perry stated, half as fact, half in scheming wonderment. "That's it! You'll stay for pizza and then sleep over! What time do your parents get home tomorrow?"

"They always skip breakfast to get to the flea market early, then have a big brunch at some pancake house or diner *after*, so let's see, Scranton's about two hours from here, so I guess they won't be back till two or later."

"Great!" Perry enthused, "I'll go tell my mom that you're staying over, and maybe Laurence'll stay for dinner too. In fact, I'll make him stay!"

"Okay."

"Then we'll play that CD. And you can tell me about that other thing." Perry opened the bedroom door and ran out to tell his news and ask if Sandy could sleep over. Sandy kind of shyly hung behind him until everything was approved, and Laurence agreed to stay for pizza later, and a salad mom would make, she insisted on that.

"Okay, *now* we can listen to the CD!" Perry said, bumping shoulders with his best friend, steering Sandy back to his room. Still, he slightly feared what Sandy would tell him in there, what that *other* thing was. Back in the room, he pushed the door closed and braved the question. "Do you want to talk about the other thing first, or listen to the CD?"

"Well," Sandy thought for a second, then said, "play track nine, the Largo, just that track."

Perry set the player to play just that one track, then pressed play. The music was soft and pretty, very gentle, just like Sandy he thought, but did not say it this time and would not. He was too afraid of Sandy's reaction. When the track ended, he just asked, "Play the whole CD now?"

"No, just track three now," Sandy tenderly requested, "the Sicilienne."

Perry did as Sandy asked and sat to listen, but refrained from speech. This, after all, being the track he had called pretty, then added *just like you* to Sandy that had upset him, thinking Perry was calling him gay. Now he feared they were not alright, that Sandy had just put this off until after the party. But why would he do that? If he hated Perry now, why would he even come to the party? Why was he insisting on playing these tracks now? Why did he give Perry this CD? No, he would say nothing now. He simply asked, when the track ended, "More?"

"Not yet."

Sandy seemed so pensive, so thoughtful, like he found it hard to say what he was thinking. Just like me, Perry thought, when I tried to convince Laurence that I was gay, and that it would be okay if we slept together. So Perry decided to say nothing, remembering how hard it was to find the right words, the right way to say what he had to, so he wouldn't interrupt Sandy now. Whether Sandy broke his heart, or had something happier to say, he would let him say it.

"Remember after you got that treatment and your hair fell out, but you had to go back in the hospital again?" Sandy asked, and Perry just nodded yes, "And they wouldn't let me, or any kids visit, but Mrs Lazarelli visited and told us about how they were looking for a bone marrow donor right before your mom found Laurence?"

"Mmm," Perry simply assented, hoping Sandy would find the words, whatever they would be.

"That's when I thought you might die, and I... I..." Sandy looked Perry in the eyes now, "I hated going to bed every night then, because... well, I couldn't sleep and I cried every night." He turned his eyes to the floor again. "I mean, I never told anybody, like my mom and dad, but I cried every night until I fell asleep. Then you found Laurence and got the bone marrow, *his* bone marrow, and Mrs Lazarelli told us you were getting better, and then you came back to school and even had some hair growing back. I mean, I was so happy for you, and for me, too, because you're my best friend, and at night, in bed, I wasn't crying anymore, but I started to wonder *why* I cried. So that question was in the back of my mind, and when you started saying things last week, like you thought I was gay, I mean... I know you can sometimes read my mind sort of, and I can read yours, and we both know it and laugh about it, but... I didn't really think you could read that deep, into the back of my head where I was trying to hide it. But anyway, I knew I was trying to hide it, and that was wrong. Not

just because you're my best friend, but because you're *not* my best friend."

"I'm not?" Perry sadly asked.

"You're more," Sandy admitted, "you're more because I love you. I'm gay and I love you. I can't lie to you, I love you. Please don't hate me."

Perry couldn't say anything at first, his throat was so choked up, and tears began to flow from his eyes down his cheeks.

"Don't cry," Sandy whispered, "just don't hate me."

"I don't hate you," Perry answered at last, regaining his voice, "since I was seven or eight, I knew I was gay, but kept it secret from my mom and everyone, but I *am* gay, and I love you, too."

They wrapped their arms around each other and hugged tightly, then kissed lightly on each others lips. Sitting together on Perry's single twin size bed, they each looked at the bed and read each other's mind. They both knew that there would be no question of either offering to sleep on the floor for propriety's sake. No, they both knew that tonight they would be sleeping together in that single bed, closely together and completely naked.

"Press play!" Sandy requested, and Perry jumped to the CD player. He hopped back onto his bed next to Sandy as Wilhelm Kempff began to play his piano transcriptions of Bach.

"This is the best birthday ever!" Perry proclaimed, hugging and kissing his lover, "and this is the sweetest gift!"

❖ FIN ❖

*A final note:* The soundtrack to this story,  
JESU, JOY OF MAN'S DESIRING, FAVOURITE PIANO TRANSCRIPTIONS by Wilhelm Kempff,  
is indeed available at [ArkivMusic.com](http://ArkivMusic.com)