

*Male/male romance, reparative therapy
and the struggle to find love.*

RESTORING THE DREAM

by Robert L. Ramsay

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-047-6

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2017

First Edition

Dedicated to Johnny Townsend
and members of the Oval Table—
Kathy, Doreen, Karen, Eileen and David

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
April 1988

Marc woke from his dream, one of those semi-nightmares that had him running for the school bus on rubbery legs. He couldn't understand why he kept having those miserable dreams. He had hated high school. He would never have run for the bus. He was always praying to the Blessed Virgin that it wouldn't show up. He hoped the engine would catch fire, or that Bill Harwood, the driver with the hooded bedroom eyes he liked to admire in the big mirror over the windshield, would have a heart attack; nothing fatal, just enough to give Marc one day off school, preferably a day when physical education was scheduled.

Marc shook his head to clear the panic, flipped onto his belly, saw the bedside clock reading five forty-six. He reached for Howard. He wasn't there, but his pillow was warm.

He heard water running, the clink of a glass against the sink, the snap of a pill bottle. At least Howard wasn't throwing up. He was a pretty placid guy who took life easy until a big examination or class presentation came along, then he couldn't relax until he'd heaved the contents of his stomach.

The bathroom light winked out. The door opened slowly.

"I'm awake. You don't have to tip-toe," Marc said.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to waken you."

"Got a headache?"

"Can't sleep." Howard stood still as a statue in the dim light bleeding through the closed venetian blinds of the dorm room they shared at the University of Manitoba. Marc marvelled once again at his good fortune in meeting Howard at the beginning of the year, their final year of graduate studies. *What have I done to rate such a hunky partner*, he wondered. Howard stood six feet tall, had a furry, muscular chest and a tight belly. His lightly furred arms and thick

thighs showed off muscles maintained by mucking out stalls during weekends spent on his family's ranch at Rock Lake. If someone had asked Marc to create his own dream man he couldn't have done any better, though maybe he would have opted for a stronger stomach, one more likely to hold onto its contents in sticky situations.

When Howard Hildebrandt had come lumbering through the door with his humungous suitcases in September, mumbling something about a mix-up at the student housing office which meant he couldn't have a room to himself, Marc had assumed he was a football player, a big, dumb and full of cum linebacker. Being the dumbest of the dumb when it came to throwing, catching or whacking a ball himself, Marc had been reticent around Howard. He was surprised and totally relieved when he extracted from one of his three suitcases, not a pigskin, or shoulder pads, but a scuffed up boom box and a truckload of classical cassettes: Beethoven, Bach and Mozart, lots and lots of Mozart. While classical music wasn't Marc's thing, it was easier to deal with than some jock spouting stats about passing, rushing and receiving. Marc was even more relieved the day he learned that Howard shared his minority affectional orientation.

That discovery had come about awkwardly one afternoon three weeks into the fall term. Marc had dashed back to the dorm to grab Margaret Atwood's novel, *Life Before Man*, which he needed for his Fundamentals of Teaching Canadian Literature class. When he burst into the room Howard was sitting on his bed, his jeans and boxers around his ankles, his hand gripping a part of his anatomy Marc had not until that moment seen, because Howard always undressed in the dark or modestly turned his back. At that stage of Marc's life he didn't have a large dossier of erect members to compare with Howard's, but it looked more than adequately long and thick, the tip slick with spit and dark plum red, about the same colour as Howard's face when their eyes met.

"Sorry man." Marc slammed the door and scurried back down the hallway, but not before noticing that several bodybuilding mags were spread out on his roommate's bed.

He had to go back to the room and get the novel because it was his day to make a presentation on it, but what, if anything, should he

say when he went back? He was a daily devotee of newspaper advice columns, Ann Landers and Dear Abby, but neither of them had prepared him for this specific situation. Should he pretend he hadn't seen what he had seen?

Five minutes later when Marc opened the door Howard was seated at his end of the study table, his head buried in a thick engineering textbook. "I'm sorry Howard. I should have knocked. I never thought—"

"Yes, you should have, but forget it."

"I noticed you were looking at muscle mags. You into guys?"

"Look, I gotta study."

"Sure. Sure." Marc had retrieved the novel and dashed back to class.

If it had been left to Howard, nothing would have happened between them, but Marc wanted to talk about those magazines and what they meant. It was kind of awkward at first, but after Howard blushed and ran into the bathroom to throw up his macaroni and cheese supper, they'd talked. Then they'd hugged, and kissed, and began sleeping in the same bed.

Now the final term was winding down, a few weeks and they'd both be marching onto the stage to receive their degrees. "You're doing a good impression of Michelangelo's *David* by standing there in the gloom, my dear man. Aren't you coming back to bed?" Marc patted the pillow beside him.

"Nope. Can't."

"Come on, big guy. Crawl back into bed and tell me what's bothering you. Is it those electrical laws you were struggling with tonight? Are you afraid you won't pull off another A in today's test?"

Howard shook his head, then crawled back into bed where he scrunched himself against the wall as though he was bedding down in the barn on his father's ranch, sharing stall space with some skittish mare.

"Hey man, I haven't got the plague. Lie on your side with your back to me. That's the way. Let me hold you. Maybe you'll go back to sleep." Marc turned on his side, put his left arm over his buddy and

snugged him in close, threaded his fingers through the hair on his chest, kissed the back of his neck. “I love you, Big Man.”

Marc was dozing off when Howard flipped onto his back.

“Marc?”

“What is it?”

“Engineering isn’t keeping me awake.”

“What’s eating away at you then?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this, but—” Howard’s voice broke and he turned his face into his pillow. Marc had never seen his roommate cry before, not even after his grandfather was killed when he wrapped his seventy-year-old bones around the power take off while operating the manure spreader.

“What is it, Big Man?” Marc caressed his broad back, reached for his shoulder to snug him back into the curve of his belly. “What’s wrong, my love? You know you can tell me anything.”

Howard sniffed. “I’ve done an awful thing.”

“You have done an awful thing? I can’t believe it. Not a good Christian boy like you.”

“Stop calling me that. I hate it when you call me that. I may be a Christian but I’m not good.”

“I’m sorry. What awful thing have you done that’s making you tremble like this?”

“I’ve...I’ve accepted a job.”

“You have? That’s wonderful. Congratulations, my friend.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve accepted a job with Bronnel Engineering, here in Winnipeg.”

“You’ve done what?” Marc reared up on his elbow.

“I’ve accepted—”

“I heard you the first time.” Marc punched his pillow behind his back and sat up in bed. “Let me get this straight. You’ve taken a job right here in town after we both agreed that we’d move to Vancouver when we graduated, and you’ve done this after I’ve already accepted a teaching position on the coast?”

Howard’s sobs shook the bed.

“Quiet down. You’ll wake the whole dorm. Now tell me what this is all about. This is definitely not what you and I planned. You

agreed with me that we'd both look for jobs on the coast, rent ourselves an apartment, save our money like crazy, buy a house with an ocean view, be together, you and me forever, the world's greatest love story. Now you're telling me you've accepted a job right here, in Winnipeg?"

"I know it's wrong of me, but I just can't go on like this."

"*Like this?* What is that supposed to mean?"

"You and me. In bed like this. You and me doing wicked things. It seems easy for you to love a guy, but I can't. I've tried, but the guilt is so strong inside me I can't stand it. It hurts to give you up, and I know this is going to hurt you, but I'm going crazy. I can't go on."

"You double crossing snake. You big double crossing, Christian devil. How long have you known about this?"

"Two weeks."

"And you let me go on sleeping with you, making love to you?" Marc flung back the covers, grabbed his pillow, and lunged across the room. He sat down on his own bed and wrapped his arms around the pillow, clutching it to his stomach as though to protect himself from this stranger in the bed across the room.

Howard was sitting up, his face twisted and red as tears poured down his cheeks, dripped off his chin onto his chest hair, flashing diamonds in the weak morning light seeping through the shades.

"I can't believe this is happening," Marc said, punching his pillow tighter against his belly.

"Go ahead. Punch *me* if it makes you feel better," Howard blubbed, reaching a hand towards Marc. "I know I deserve it, so come on over and punch me out if that'll make you feel better."

"The only thing'll make me feel better is to hear you say you're putting me on, but you're not going to say that, are you. You're going to cower in that lonely bed of yours and let that weird religion of yours control your life—and destroy mine, destroy our life."

"I wanted it to work. I wanted us to be a couple." Howard ran both hands over his eyes and down his cheeks.

"Well then, what's stopping you?"

“I keep praying the guilt will go away, but it won’t. Every time you make love to me I can’t enjoy it. I hear Apostle Thimble in our little country church shouting that God will hurl me into hellfire.”

“Old Father Dann in my church back home would say the same thing—not that I step foot inside that hellish building anymore—but I know he’d be wrong. I know the love we feel for each other is something good, something to rejoice about, not feel guilty about.”

“I wish I could feel that way.” Howard wiped his face down again.

“I don’t get how anyone can be so controlled by what some old priest or apostle says. Really Howard, everything was working out so well for us. How could you do this?”

At reading break they’d flown out to the coast, walked around Stanley Park, browsed the shops along Robson, seen a play, and Marc had arranged an interview with Surrey’s superintendent of schools. Their final day they had looked at apartments to see what was available. Two weeks later Marc had received a registered letter in the mail, a contract to teach science and math in a French immersion elementary school beginning in September, subject to him graduating successfully.

“So what do we do now?” Marc asked.

Howard shook his head.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you.” Howard began sobbing again. “I love you, but...but I can’t get rid of this voice inside my head that says our love is wrong, totally wrong and sinful.”

“Because of what your apostle teaches?”

Howard nodded.

“And you believe everything Apostle Thimble says?”

“Why would he lie?”

“Maybe you need to talk to some other apostle, priest, minister, whomever. This is 1988, not the dark ages. Some churches say it’s okay for men to love each other.”

“Maybe they’re lying.”

“Maybe your Apostle Thimble is lying, ever thought of that?”

“He wouldn’t lie.”

“Maybe not deliberately, but is he gay? Does he know what it’s like to be born loving men? Has he ever studied the issue like we have, like his life depended upon it? I’m no high and mighty theologian, in fact I haven’t been to church since my brother Claude’s miserable funeral, but maybe your Apostle Thimble is wrong. He’s not God. Do you agree with everything the pope says?”

“Course not.”

“So why would you believe everything your Apostle Thimble says? Doesn’t he burp and fart and take a dump like everyone else on this planet?”

“It’s not the same.”

“What isn’t the same? The burping, the farting, the—”

“Don’t talk like that. Everyone knows the Catholics believe in a bunch of weird things like bleeding statues and climbing stairs on their knees, but the tabernacle isn’t like that. We’re protestants.”

“Sure you are, but you have to admit that some of those things written by that prophet of yours, Brother Tickoff or whatever his name is, are pretty weird too.”

“Brother Tingley.”

“Okay, Brother Tingley it is. I haven’t said anything before, but when you’ve come back after a weekend at the ranch and told me some of the things you’ve heard at church, I’ve wanted to laugh my head off. Like does anyone really believe that your Brother Tingley went to heaven, that he had those little coffee klatches with Jesus, that he brought a leaf back from heaven with him?”

“It wasn’t coffee. It was grape juice, and I know the leaf is real. I’ve seen it myself.”

“Okay. Okay, my big, loveable man, but I wager if anyone did a scientific analysis of that leaf they’d discover it was just a big old maple or oak leaf from an ordinary tree like those outside this window.”

“It is not.”

“Fine, have it your way. Besides, I don’t want to make fun of you and your beliefs, even if they are weird, but what are we to do now?”

Howard threw back the sheet, swung his legs over the edge of the bed and reached to hug Marc. “I do love you, Marc. I really do love you. You’ve got to understand that.”

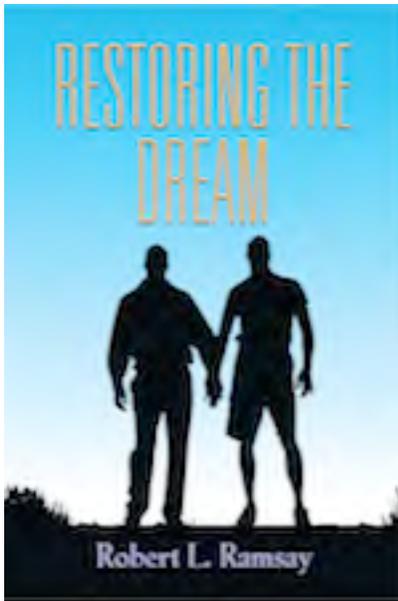
“So you say, but you can’t have it both ways.” Marc pushed Howard back onto his own bed. “Why reach for me now? If I hug you back won’t that just make you feel guilty?”

“But I do love you.”

“You sure have a queer way of showing it, accepting a job thousands of miles away from where I’ll be this September.”

Their final two weeks of term passed with awkward sluggishness. It felt to Marc like they were two strangers, cooped up against their will in the same hotel room by some emergency situation: a blizzard, an earthquake, or some other disaster. He tried to talk to Howard, pleaded with him to get some counselling, but he just mumbled that he had to study and buried his head deeper into his engineering textbooks.

On the last day when Marc came back to the room after defending his master’s thesis, Howard’s side of the room lay bare, like he and his Picasso prints, boom box and cassettes of *The Magic Flute* had been raptured, or whatever his queer religious group figured happened to you at the end of the age. Howard had sometimes talked about that when he came back from his weekend at the ranch, but Marc had never paid much attention. He figured it wasn’t important, but apparently it was important enough to shatter their dream of a life together.



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