

# THEN, THWACK!

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Carl and Andrew had decided to hold hands as they walked down the street. This was Chelsea and it was the done thing. The cool October evening moved them closer. The heat of their bodies made the chill seem pleasant. Isolated figures moved by, clutching thin jackets to their chests. Arms now around each other's shoulders Carl and Andrew walked slowly, lit by the cafés, the book stores, the fashionable men's shops. Tonight they pointed out this or that thing in a window, ooing or laughing, making up stories about odd objects of furniture. In their conversation they furnished a dream apartment. Tomorrow they would shop for clothes and books.

They turned a corner. Four men in their early twenties, from the outer-boroughs by their looks, started to hiss and cackle. A big and tall guy in an oversized jacket said: "Hey, fags, why don't you try pussy sometime?"

As Carl and Andrew lost their hold, crossed the street against the light, Carl called back, "Not yours."

The four men broke from their poses and came at them. "Run." Carl said, and started. Andrew followed, but the four bore down in the chase. He turned back. From the inside of his large jacket, the tall guy produced a wooden dowel, perhaps from a trashed chair. Andrew faced forward, put on more speed.

Then, thwack! The sound of his skull being hit reached his ears before he felt the pain. He faltered but did not stop running. Ahead of him, Carl doubled back to grab his wrist and pull him on.

Cars finally came, the group behind fell back. Carl grabbed a yellow cab. The cab driver said: "Police station. I will take you."

"No. They'll be out of the district in no time." Carl said; examining Andrew's head with his hand. There was blood. He gave his own address.

"Hospital, then. Could be bad."

"Up to you, Andrew." Carl looked back to the intersection. The group had melted.

"I —. I think I want to go to your apartment, Carl." Andrew said, and touched his head. He felt a large bump, warm fluid.

"You're bleeding a bit." Carl supplied.

"I know. Not badly though."

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Carl's place was entirely white. It had white walls, white sofas, white rugs. There were somber paintings and glass tables. Tall windows framed a view of the city. Old buildings glowed in street light. Modern hulks loomed beyond them.

"Damn. I'm going to bleed all over everything," Andrew said.

"No you're not. Get into the bathroom and I'll fix you up."

There were too many mirrors in the white-tiled bathroom. The large, softened bulbs seemed stark, unforgiving. Andrew sat on a ledge leading into the bathtub. He looked into a face he had always seen as thin and handsome, topped by soft black hair. He saw the swelling above the right ear, the blood dripping down now to his neck, a red flush to his face, a strange look of shock and fear. He was no longer human, but another hunted animal in a town of predators and prey. A rush of adrenaline licked his spine. He felt his heart pound against his ribs.

"I look awful," he said as Carl grabbed peroxide and bandages.

"Yeah, you do," Carl said coldly. He frowned. Andrew examined him at work. Carl's short blond cut and methodical moves made him look more military than usual, but that quality did not seem as sexy as it had. He moved as if following an instruction manual. There was no play in him. "Lean your head back and I'll use the spray attachment to wash your head. If you want, take off your shirt now."

Andrew did so. "It could have been worse."

"I know." Carl rinsed his hair with cold water, then used soap, then peroxide. Andrew cried out, each cry louder, deeper.

"Quiet." Carl was drying Andrew's hair with a white towel that now showed red. "Have to throw this one out." The real bleeding had stopped. He bandaged the wound, then cleaned himself thoroughly, using the disinfectant.

"I'll put some towels on a pillow on the couch. You can sleep there tonight. I'll get you some blankets and a painkiller." Carl kept a supply of useful prescription drugs behind his bathroom mirrors.

"Goodnight," Carl intoned, switching off the lights. Andrew hugged the comforter to himself and stared out at the old Chelsea buildings, all arches and columns glowing yellow and blue. The reassurance in their beauty now seemed uncertain, as if they might vanish or crumble if he lost his feeling for them. The pain was less, still throbbing.

Andrew closed his eyes and saw the scene replay against the lids of his eyes, as if he were watching a film of the event. Frame by frame, he saw the twisted lip of his attacker, the cold anger in his eyes, the hand gripping the wood. He heard the crack of the stick hitting his skull, a sound effect dubbed in that could not be real. The pictures stopped. He sank into fitful sleep.

In his dream he saw Carl standing nude on the edge of a black volcanic crater. He crossed his arms against his gym-built chest. The pit bubbled with red lava. Carl turned, smiled, took a forward stance and dove in. 'So heroic,' Andrew thought. 'He needn't have done that.'

The morning light was gray, dimmed by cloud cover. Carl in his pale blue robe read the paper, drank coffee from the mug with the old radio on it. Andrew sat up.

"What time is it?" He stopped, grasped at the bandage. "Hurts."

"Here." Carl walked over with a glass and two yellow pills. "Want some coffee?"

"Yeah. Sorry to spoil our Saturday." Andrew downed the pills. They were bitter on his tongue. "We are still having brunch at Blue Neon, right?"

Carl sat next to him on the couch. "You sure you still want to?"

"Yeah. I mean, Michael and Fred are going to be waiting for us."

"I thought you might want to go home, rest a bit." Carl looked off into a painting.

"I don't know. I'd rather be with people. I know I must look like hell, but they're our friends. Who cares what the other people think?"

Carl turned, shot him a sharp glance, smiled broadly. "Right. Who cares?" His smile faded. He got up, sat at the glass table and read a theater review.

Andrew stood up, sat across from him, poured a cup from the glass coffee maker, took the front section of the Times and scanned the headlines. "Carl, can I borrow a shirt for the day?"

"Sure," Carl said. He did not look up.

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"Girl! What happened to you?" Michael had jumped up when he saw Carl and Andrew enter the Blue Neon Restaurant. "Did that butch man of yours slap you around because you weren't working the street hard enough?"

Fred turned around against the back of his chair. His brow creased, he examined Andrew cautiously.

"Hello Fred. Hello Michael." Carl turned a chair backwards and seated himself casually.

Andrew, shaking, no longer moving like a former dance student, edged into his own chair. It was less than comfortable. There were large menus waiting on the table. He grabbed one and half hid his face behind it.

Michael, not a man to have a question pushed aside, grasped Andrew's left hand. "Andrew, what happened? You can tell your Auntie Michelle."

"I got hit in the head with a stick by a kid from goddamn New fucking Jersey or somewhere out with his crew."

"What? What did they say?" Andrew told him. "And did you say anything back?"

"What does that matter?" Carl interrupted.

"You mean you were the one who said something." Michael played detective. Carl told him what he had said.

Michael gave an abrupt laugh. "Damn. That's a good one. 'Not yours.' I don't think I'd even have the presence of mind to come up with that one under the circumstances. No wonder they came after you with a stick. Why did the guy go for Andrew, then?"

"Because I was slower. Because Carl's stronger. Because the guy could get me. Because I was at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"And because I said something I shouldn't have." Carl spoke in a low, dead voice.

"I didn't say that." Andrew looked down into the menu, not reading. "I don't think I can eat."

"Girlfriend, you've got to get your strength back." Michael looked at Andrew, then at Carl, then back. "You're going to heal. It takes time is all. Maybe you'll have a scar, but unless you shave your head bald and move to the damn East Village, no one's going to see it. I'm going to make you eat if I have to spoon feed you some of that granola and yogurt with seasonal fresh fruit, seven ninety-five on the menu. You could buy a whole field of oats for that where I come from."

Andrew smiled a little.

"Aren't 'seasonal' and 'fresh' redundant in that context?" Fred spoke for the first time.

"You know I married an editor from outer space," Michael said, clapped his hands and laughed. "What's seasonal now, anyway? I guess apples, pears, and kiwis. Those little kiwis, they always seem to be around. I guess people like them because they're fuzzy like balls, and I mean tennis balls. I just think they're the weirdest things. Is that all they've got in New Zealand: kiwi fruits and sheep, just rolling over the hills? Doesn't it sound just gorgeous? Fred, honey, let's you and I go there sometime."

"Next vacation, if I can deal." Fred sat unmoved.

"That's all right." Michael turned. "He may look boring, but the repressed ones always come out at night. Thank you universe!"

They ordered from a tall, handsome waiter who paused to note the bandage and smile at Andrew, conveying sympathy in a knowing glance. Andrew smiled back. He felt a bit of the weight lift.

Fred said: "Did you report this to the police or anyone? The Anti-Violence Project?"

Carl spoke. "Oh good. Now you can become a statistic."

Fred continued. "It's kind of important. The police are very reluctant to call anything a bias case. Every case they can't deny has to get some attention higher up. Shows why we need some police protection, not this do-nothing attitude of the

New York cops. Look, you're hurting now, but I'll go with you after brunch if you want."

"Yeah. I'll go. Carl?" Andrew looked into his eyes.

"What?"

"I'll call you later. Maybe we can see a movie."

"I might have some work to get done. Call me later."

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Fred and Andrew walked into the Precinct House. At the desk, Fred spoke up. "My friend here was gay-bashed last night."

*Gay-bashed.* The phrase resounded in Andrew's mind. ~~Sounds like whip-~~  
~~lash.~~ Sounds like a party: "Come to the Roxy tonight for a big Gay Bash — with DJ's, club kids, lights, go-go boys, hatred and violence."

The officer at the desk strained not to react. "Okay. Wait in that room. The Sergeant will be in to take your story."

It was a small room, off to one side. Andrew and Fred waited twenty minutes. The man came in with a form. He took down relevant information, listened to his story and started to ask questions. "Are you sure that's what they said?"

"Yes." Andrew.

"And you were holding hands?"

"We were holding each other around the shoulders."

"Now, I've got to say something here, and I mean no disrespect by it. I mean, what you do is your business. However, when you display yourself in public like that, you've got some people out there who don't like to see that. Don't you think it's kind of, well, provocative?"

Andrew was losing patience. "So it's all our fault, then?"

"I didn't say that. However, you were making a kind of shall we say political statement."

"It's Chelsea. I see men together all the time."

"I see a lot of that too. Don't get me wrong. It's not what I see when I'm out in New Jersey where I live, but in my line of work I'd rather see two men hugging each other than punching each other. I'm just saying that when you do that sort of thing you've got to be on your guard. And if you're called names and get provoked, you've got to get out of there as soon as possible." He handed Andrew the form and a pen. "Sign the statement after reading it over."

On the back of the form, the story appeared in blunt copspeak. Andrew signed and dated it.

Fred spoke up. "Can we have a case number on this?"

"Call me tomorrow. Here's my card. We should have assigned it a case number by then. You may be getting a call from the bias unit. The detectives down there do a good job. They may want you to look at some mug shots. Thank you for your time and good day."

Fred and Andrew walked out of the dingy cop shop into the clear cold light of the afternoon.

Fred said, "I've got to get home. Michael's waiting."

"Thanks for coming, Fred."

"Glad to."

They hugged each other warmly and turned down different blocks. Andrew went to a major chain bookstore. He pulled a book from the shelf about homoeroticism in medieval life, art and culture. He took it to the in-store café and started reading. 'At least it's illegal to burn us alive these days. Not that the lunatic

right isn't working on changing that one. I suppose we've made some progress.' He sipped the last drop of his badly done latte, looked into the cup to read the coffee grounds.

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"Carl?"

"How are you feeling." His voice seemed concerned, aloof.

"Wish I had a few more of those pain killers."

"You know, you might worry about a concussion. If you start feeling dizzy, Andrew, or blacking out, you should go to see a doctor."

"Thanks, I will. Listen, I saw in a bar rag where they're having a most identical-looking gay couple contest at a club tonight."

"We don't exactly qualify."

"I just thought it might be fun." Andrew scanned his own smallish studio. It was packed with his belongings: shelves of art books, a sound system and recordings in every format. Clothes hung on racks. He fixed on a framed photo of himself taken by a friend who had died the year before.

"How about a movie? There's a movie about two hot archaeologists who discover the remains of a lost gay city, then travel back in time."

"Look, Andrew. I've got a lot of work to do at home. Deadline approaching. You know the story."

"What about brunch tomorrow? What if I come over around noon?"

"Yeah. Okay, Andrew. See you then. Bye."

"See you tomorrow, Carl."

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"The sergeant told me you're not supposed to say anything back when they provoke you." Andrew sat on a sofa in Carl's apartment.

"So it's my fault." Carl stood in front of the window, looking toward the street.

"I'm not saying that."

"What then?" Carl did not turn.

"I don't know. I'm just telling you what he said. Maybe it's just a lesson we have to learn."

"I don't want to learn any lessons. I put my arm around you because I like you. I'm dating you." Carl paced to the window and back. "You think you're the only one who was scared out there?"

"I'm the one who got hit." Andrew sipped a glass of ice water.

"Didn't I come back to get you?"

"After you had gotten clear first."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, maybe pulled me along faster at the start."

"Then we both would have been whacked, knocked down on the street and kicked in the head by all four of them. When I saw I had room to maneuver, I realized you were in back of me."

"What are you talking about, Carl? Your instinct was to save yourself. That's not necessarily bad; maybe it's right. I didn't have the reaction time you had."

"What are you saying? You didn't have the time to react because you didn't know I was going to say something?"

"Yeah. Say something and run. Why did you say something?"

"Don't you think I've felt anything about this? I —. I don't know why I said it. I don't know why I say half the things I say. I've never been able to keep quiet and take it. I always had to argue against everyone — at school, at home, at work. I can't just leave things alone. I was angry and it was a damned good comeback. I wanted to put them right where they were trying to put me. I did it and it felt great, at that moment. Those little nothing creeps threatening me! I've got my life together. I'm supposed to be an adult and do whatever I want to do. Where do they get off hounding me? What business is it of theirs what we do, who we are to each other." Carl stopped.

"And who are we to each other?" Andrew stared squarely at Carl.

"I don't know. I don't like your tone of voice. I can't stand this kind of accusation." Carl punched the white sofa.

"I guess you'd rather punch me. In the animal world, the weakest ones are the ones the predators kill first. Right now I'm not so strong, not so good looking as the day before. I guess you want a man who's always strong, always handsome, with no difficult personal problems to ruin our dating, shopping, movies, concerts, parties. I never realized you were that shallow."

"And if had happened to me?" Carl asked.

"I'd stick by you."

"Would you?"

"I would." Andrew placed his ice water on the glass end table.

"Hey, I fixed your bleeding last night."

"And kept me on the couch."

"I didn't want you in the bed. What if your wound had opened up?" Carl stood still.

"Was it just the furnishings you were worried about?"

Carl dropped his voice. "How long have we been dating?"

"Three months."

"Not long."

"A little while."

"You expect everything right away. I can't give it to you, Andrew. Maybe I can't let anyone in."

"Carl. I got hurt."

"That's what scares me. Can't you get clear of it? Can't you leave it alone? Okay. I caused it. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry."

"Somehow it doesn't feel any better hearing it. I can't blame you, but somehow I can't help wish things had happened differently." Andrew stopped. "We were holding each other a moment ago. Now it seems you don't want me to touch you, come near. I'm proven weak because I'm dealing with something I didn't want, wasn't ready for."

"It's too soon for all this." Carl was gesturing. "I wasn't ready for a threat. I wasn't ready to take care of you. I don't want you to make me prove anything to you. I held you because I felt for you. Don't make me define it. You don't have the right."

"And maybe I won't ever get that right. Maybe I can never ask anything of you. I can't know what you want from me. I can't your vision of where we are going."

"I have no vision. I wanted to take it as it came."

"Here it is, then. What's real?" Andrew crossed his arms.

"I've been meaning to say this for a week. Now is the worst time." Carl took a breath. "I don't think I can ever love you like you need to be loved. I've got too much to do. I've got things to accomplish. I just want it to be fun. I can't have any obligations right now. I don't think that means I don't like you. I do. This has been one of the best times."

Andrew drew breath. "It's over. Like that?"

"How else does anything end?" Carl looked away.

"Can we at the minimum not hate each other?"

"I can't hate you. I cared. I can't go that far with you. Look, if I'd been walking alone they never would have picked me out."

"As a fag? I can't believe you're breaking up with me because I got smashed up by a gang of kids. You know, Carl, you can't forgive any weakness, any sign I'm not some ideal stuck in your head. You're no better. You're a gay man who hid it for years under some masculine cover so you wouldn't be called those names the kids like me were called. Probably threw a few insults out yourself, screwed some girls to stay in the game. It's ending now. Your straight acting and appearing pose is your own torture, not mine. You live with it. I want away from that as much as you don't want to deal with it. Good I found out now rather than later."

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Andrew sat with Michael at Café Olé.

Michael held his hand. "At least you got some of it out."

"You should have seen him. He was shaking. I didn't want to hurt him, but I let him have it." Andrew sipped iced coffee through a straw.

"You can't help it. He did it to you and you had to get back. It's human nature." Michael shrugged.

"And there's no getting past it?" Andrew stirred the cup with his straw.

"We all can be the best or the worst of ourselves at any moment. He couldn't handle what he saw happening to you. It could have been him just as easily. No one wants to look at where they might be if things were different."

"Michael. I was falling in love." Andrew looked out at the street.

"You fall in love too quickly. Hold it back."

"If I hadn't said what I said, hadn't accused him."

"Don't go there. He is who he is. He's not over himself one bit. He's got to go to a program to realize how his self-obsessed attitude screws everyone over. I think he likes that kind of control. Ultimately he's his own victim. He gets what he wants but he never knows what he wants, never appreciates anything he's got. That apartment! Man, you get an echo in there if you breathe. He can't fill his life up either. He's got to have some real tragedy happen before he sees what it's about. You're going through one. He's got to push that away with both hands and a ten foot pole."

"It wasn't feet, but you've got the right figure on the pole." Andrew smiled in an evil way.

"Oh honey. And you let that man get away? I take back every word I said." Michael giggled. "Meanwhile, girlene, have I got the man for you."

Andrew sat back, smiled, listened to the description. "He sounds nice. Give me a couple of weeks, when I don't look like the walking wounded."

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The buzzer rang. Andrew opened the door. The guy was gorgeous: square-bodied with strawberry blond cropped hair and deep blue eyes.

"I'm Greg. Michael's told me about you."

"Good man, Michael." Andrew smiled slyly.

"I'll have to thank him later. I brought some wine. I know we're supposed to go out, but if you want we can save it for later."

Andrew put the bottle on the kitchen counter. "If I invite you back, that is. If I do, don't expect anything more than conversation, yet."

"Coy man." Greg laughed. "You know, a year ago, something similar happened to me. I don't want to get too heavy too fast, but I know what it's like." Greg fixed on Andrew.

Andrew peered into Greg's eyes. They were knowing, kind. "Let's talk about it later. Dinner first. And there's a film I'm interested in."

"Let's go then." Greg opened the door.

Andrew brushed past him. He looked back at the apartment. Its fullness seemed a fraction less empty.

END