

Press release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Local Media Firm Releases New Novel

Charleston, South Carolina, USA—October 2009—Queen’s English Productions, a Charleston-based media consultancy and design firm, announces the release of *The River in Winter*, a novel by local author Matt Dean.

Described as “a novel of love, grief, awakening, and forgiveness,” *The River in Winter* depicts a year in the life of a young gay man as he attempts to recover from the end of his first great love affair. Jonah Murray has always led a joyous, resplendent life—a supportive mother, a decent job, fulfilling hobbies, and a satisfying long-term relationship—but when that relationship comes to an abrupt end, Jonah’s grief leads him to question and then to change everything about himself. Two very different men try to lead him down two very different paths. Spike Peterson—handsome, virile, and commanding—seems to offer anarchic freedom and the pleasures of the flesh. Eliot Moon—intellectual, compassionate, and spiritual—offers a more transcendent course. Jonah discovers that to take either path, or to find a third, he may have to pay a heavy toll.

Matt Dean lives in South Carolina with his partner, Todd, and their three dogs. Matt works at home, telecommuting full-time for a software company. This is his first published novel.

Queen’s English Productions, or QEPro, is a local firm that provides multimedia production services, marketing consultation and coaching, and design for print and web. *The River in Winter* is QEPro’s first major print publication.

The River in Winter is available for sale on Amazon.com and from QEPro.

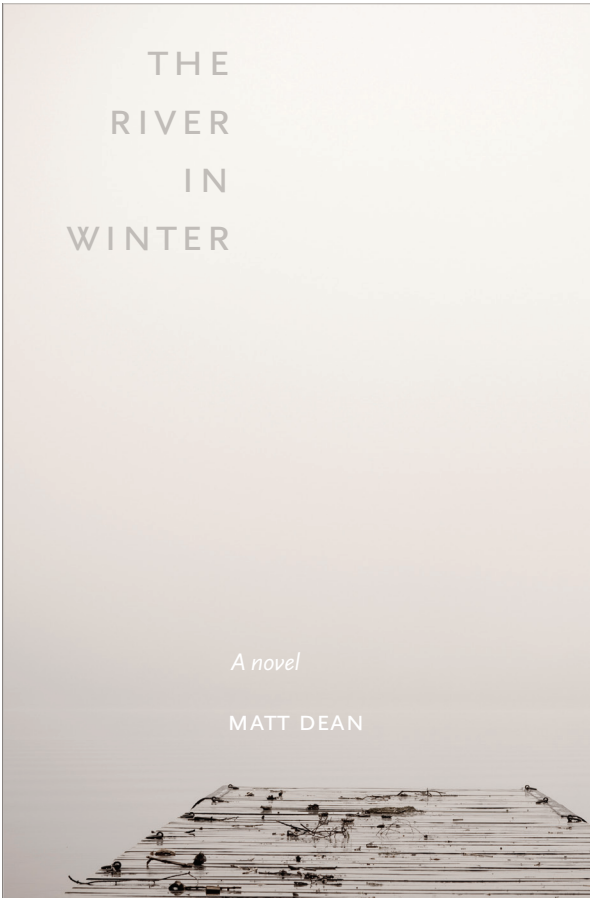
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The River in Winter

A novel of love, grief, awakening, and forgiveness



THE RIVER IN WINTER: A NOVEL

Matt Dean

JONAH MURRAY has known much happiness—a supportive mother, a decent job, and fulfilling hobbies. But after the end of his first great love affair, the rawness of his emotions leads him into a dangerous entanglement.

SPIKE PETERSON—heartbreakingly good-looking, imperturbably self-assured, relentlessly carnal—rekindles Jonah’s longing for companionship. But Spike isn’t the kind to offer companionship. Excitement, yes, but not companionship.

ELIOT MOON, a counselor who facilitates a support group for gay men, offers Jonah a more transcendent path to happiness. But Jonah soon discovers that to take Eliot’s way, he will have to make difficult sacrifices.

Available October 2009
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Of Matt Dean and *The River in Winter*, Carol Bly (*Shelter Half; The Passionate, Accurate Story*) wrote:

“I feel happy that the emotional and spirit range of the book are *big*, not *little*: that is, although you can write amusing witty prose very well, what you are about is in fact Jonah’s increasing insistence on getting a philosophy about and then *doing* a meaningful life

“[Y]our dialogue ear is as good as it gets, and your frequent metaphors in prose description are usually wonderful. You are good at driving the exposition to inward truths or feelings as well as outward. You do such a good job on the sex, too”

About the author



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MATT DEAN began writing in the seventh grade, when his best friend bragged about writing a novel, and he wanted to be able to do the same. (Brag, that is. The writing was somewhat incidental at first.) His earliest efforts consisted of endless lists of characters that somehow never got into action on the page, novels that were barely longer than short stories, and plays that recycled entire plots from Neil Simon. In short, though *The River in Winter* is not his first novel, it is the first that will ever see the light of day.

Matt attended Heidelberg College—now Heidelberg University—in Tiffin, Ohio, where he majored in music and economics. He has had the honor and privilege of studying the craft of writing in workshops led by David Leavitt, Timothy Schaffert, and Carol Bly.

In addition to writing fiction, Matt routinely populates his blog—entitled “Letters from the Country” in honor of a book of essays by his mentor, Carol Bly—with diatribes and observations concerning food, pop culture, technology, politics, and book design. Ardently but intermittently, he composes both classical and popular music.

Matt lives in South Carolina with his partner, Todd, and their three dogs, Charlotte, Candice, and Tallulah. He works at home, telecommuting full-time for a software company. He is a programmer of a sort; his actual job duties often amount to the digital equivalent of holding an ancient engine together with chewing gum and duct tape.

Todd and Matt are corporate members of the Unitarian Church in Charleston. Matt serves on the board of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry.

For more information and to visit Matt's blog, Letters from the Country, go to <http://mattdean.info>.

A CONVERSATION WITH MATT DEAN FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH WEND ELSEN*

What was the original spark that kindled your interest in writing this novel? (Character? event? issue?)

Many years ago, when I lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, I occasionally went to a gay bar called the Town House. I believe it's still there, still gay, and in good financial health, but in the '90s it had a number of identity crises. At first it was the seedy sort of dive you might find up north, where locals scowl at the summer people and everyone lines up to buy pull-tabs. There may have been a leather phase. I'm sure it was supposed to be a dance club for a while. During the peak of Garth Brooks's career, it became a country-western bar, and even featured two-step lessons on certain nights of the week. One night when I was walking along University Avenue to get to the place, I saw a car at the curb with its four-way flashers on. There was some sort of brouhaha that snagged my attention, and lo and behold it showed up in what served, for a long time, as my first chapter.

Here's a snippet:

Outside the bar, two men were arguing. From a block away I heard them, though I couldn't yet resolve their shouted syllables into words. One, a rotund man with unkempt hair and a two-day beard, wore no jacket—only jeans, brown hiking boots, and a T-shirt.

The other was taller and thinner, bow-legged, young and clean-shaven. Snow gathered around a duffel bag that lay in a heap at his feet. His round face was moon-pale. He wore a battered gray cowboy hat; of his dark hair, only the uneven bangs in front showed. Leaning back against the wall of the Town House, he shivered even in his sheepskin coat. A spinning knot of snowflakes landed on his nose; he flinched.

As I passed them I heard the shorter man say, "You was talking to her, though, wasn't you?"

I saw, then, a battered Fairmont parked crookedly at the curb. Its hazard lights flashed, yellow in front, red in back. A woman sat in the passenger seat. Her window was rolled halfway down, and she gripped its top edge with china-white fingers. She pursed her crimson lips, her forehead wrinkling, smoothing, and wrinkling again.

Other than the final paragraph, describing the car and the woman, I can't remember how much of that actually happened. And after that, it's all fiction: Jonah goes inside the bar; the cowboy follows; they go back to Jonah's house; they spend the night together. The cowboy, though named Rory, was the ur-Spike.

I'd been writing short fiction—nothing of any great import—and I had only the vaguest notion that I was starting a novel. But by the time I'd accumulated 3,200 words, I knew I had the first chapter of a book rather than a self-contained story.

* <http://anaisninsblog.blogspot.com/>

Q & A (cont'd)

Around that time, I read *In a Country of Mothers*, by A.M. Homes, and that gave me the barest thread of a plot. That story, involving a vastly inappropriate transference-countertransference relationship with a therapist, never really materialized. The action wandered aimlessly for a couple of chapters, never quite wandering the way I wanted it to, until I hit upon the gist of the current plot.

Many readers feel they “know” an author after reading his book—are they wrong? What are some autobiographical elements, and what is completely different from you?

It's fair to say that Jonah and I have a lot in common. I tweaked little details, just for fun. I made him a Luddite, hopelessly inept with gadgets of all kinds, though I'm a gadget freak and an early adopter. He dislikes Billy Joel and abhors Barbra Streisand, though I adore them both. He's always been self-conscious about his red hair, though I've always been self-conscious about my weight.

On the other hand, Jonah and I are both disorganized slob. We both make snap judgments about people, only to regret them later. We both have a tendency to stammer and yammer when nervous.

As for the plot, lots of little elements came from real life. Christa is sort of an amalgam of two or three of my friends. Martin is based on someone I worked with. I've actually been in the precise offices where the workplace scenes occur and in the precise apartments where Michael and Tigger live. But nothing of any great importance that happens in the book actually happened to me.

I did try to force myself into the kind of transformation that Jonah attempts, but I went about it privately, not in the context of a group. Back in the day, I was heavily involved in Campus Crusade for Christ, but never with a group like Eliot's.

And of course, Jonah is 25 at the end of the book. I've got a few years on him, and I've gotten quite a bit farther in my journey. (Maybe “journey” is the wrong word. Maybe I should call it a “meander.”)

Do you have “gateway novels” in your sock drawer that will never see the light of day?

Yes and no. There were such novels—and plays, too—but they're all in a landfill somewhere in Ohio. When I moved out of my parents' house, I left all my old manuscripts in a file box at the bottom of my closet. A couple of years later, my parents moved, and the box wound up in their basement. Almost a decade after *that*, when they moved again, my mother discovered that the damp and mildew had turned the box and its contents to mush.

As a teenager I was quite fond of Agatha Christie, and the genteel mystery was my first ambition. I planned a whole series of them. I wrote a scene here, a chapter there, but never finished anything resembling a whole book in that series.

I believe the first novel I completed was a young-adult romance, intended for a contest. It was about best friends, a boy and a girl, who fell in love: highly original. The contest rules stipulated a minimum page count, and to reach it I felt compelled to include a number of dream sequences, at least one of which was recycled from an episode of *Laverne and Shirley*.

Q & A (cont'd)

In my first and last attempt at science fiction, a mushroom-shaped space station somehow accidentally hyper-jumped across the galaxy and ended up in orbit around a planet made of copper ore. I'm not sure why a space station would even be equipped with a jump drive, but never mind. Oh, did I mention that at the time of this accidental hyper-jump, there were only two people aboard? And that over the course of the novel they fell in love?

By now it's probably obvious that I wasn't altogether heartbroken to learn that my old file box had been destroyed.

In your acknowledgments you write, "I suspect that writing a novel is an act of such unsurpassed folly that anyone who attempts it is either quite mad or has a lot of help." What gave you the motivation to keep exploring the story, to keep writing?

I'm not what you'd call a particularly self-confident person, but I *have* somehow managed to develop a tenuous belief in my ability to write—not that I'm claiming any sort of innate gift here. In his latest book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell describes the 10,000-hour rule:

The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours.

I've definitely put in my 10,000 hours—and then some—and as a result I generally like what I write, so that rereading some bit of yesterday's work is usually enough to get me through today's.

A certain amount of ennui also helped. That probably sounds odd. What I mean is that I'm most productive at writing when my day job isn't so great. If my job is "too" engaging, then it drains away all my time and energy, and the writing doesn't happen.

I got some encouragement from friends and mentors, as well. In the back of *Poets & Writers*, Carol Bly ran an ad offering manuscript consultations; I'd taken her writing workshop before, so I emailed her and we set something up. We went over the first three chapters together, and she offered a lot of advice and some much-needed pep-talking. I attended David Leavitt's novel workshop at the 2006 Nebraska Summer Writers' Conference, and that, more than anything, gave me the self-assurance to finish. A fellow writer and fellow participant in David's workshop read each chapter of the final draft as I completed it, and his suggestions were absolutely invaluable.

Oh, and though at times he may have grown weary of hearing me whine about my book, my book, my book, or of hearing me talk through yet another crazy idea to rescue it from my own laziness, my partner, Todd, was amazingly and beautifully supportive and encouraging through the whole process. He never for a moment doubted that—if I actually, you know, *finished*—I'd create an actual serious book, meant to be read by actual serious people.

The novel is set in 1992. Why did you choose that period? What challenges and opportunities did that choice present?

I wrote *The River in Winter* in two great bursts. The first draft came in 1997 and 1998, and I wrote it virtually in real time,

Q & A (cont'd)

with events occurring no more than a couple of days or weeks before the time of writing. I set the book aside for “a while,” and “a while” gradually became a year, and then five years, and then the better part of a decade. Whenever I contemplated revising it, I could never quite decide whether to bring it up to date or to leave it in the past.

My ambivalence stemmed in part from the fact that 1997 and 1998 didn't seem historically important. It's not as though a “period piece” necessarily has to be tied to some great movement or event, but that kind of thing certainly helps to locate the fiction on the world stage. It seemed obvious that if I didn't bring the book up to date, readers would either wonder why I'd chosen 1997 and 1998, or wonder what time period it was in the first place.

On the other hand, 2001 stood as great barrier to an update. To choose one trivial example among many, Jonah's mother is that rarest of all birds—a liberal talk radio host. The Barbara of 2007 and 2008 would surely be a much angrier person than the Barbara of 1997 and 1998.

After all this time I can't remember what planted the “1992 seed” in my mind, but I'm sure it had something to do with Bill Clinton. It must have been the publication of his memoirs.

Clinton was the first president I'd ever voted for, and oh, how I loved him—and still love him, even more because of the good work his foundation does. It occurred to me that I might be able to capture that shining moment when everything seemed possible, when he'd just been elected after 12 long years of unpleasantness. It also occurred to me that shortly after Clinton took over the Oval Office, he was forced to capitulate to “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” and that it would hit at just the right place in the novel's plot.

I came of age in the '90s. It's a terribly nostalgic decade for me, even more so than the '80s, when I was in high school and college and was—in the manner of high school and college students throughout history—practically too dumb to live. In a sense, I wanted the '90s to be a character in the novel. I went back and looked up a lot of primary-source material about the 1992 election, and I *hope* I managed to capture the feeling of that night. When Clinton addressed the crowd in Little Rock, I felt so relieved—as if now, *finally*, everything would go back to being all right again. But even at such moments, it's difficult to forget that nothing is ever that simple.

Political correctness seemed terribly important, and I had to refresh my memory a bit. I'd never been fully aware of the right wing's immense displeasure with political correctness, perhaps because Minnesotans are habitually so polite that the character of their ordinary discourse differs little from politically correct discourse. In any case, my research fortunately bore some extra fruit in the form of a job for Jonah. In the first draft I'd given him a techie job, and I'd never quite been able to make that work to my satisfaction. I think giving him a job in the fictional Office of Workplace Tolerance—the legislature's “political correctness police”—makes a lot more sense.

Which famous person would you most want to read your book, and what is the fantasy result?

If Colin Farrell read the book and developed an unquenchable yearning to play Spike, and thus began putting together a film adaptation, for which he would beg me to write the screenplay, I don't think I could ask for anything more.

FROM CHAPTER 1 PORT FORWARD, STARBOARD BACK

On the river the air was sharp and cold, smelling of mud and peat. The current drew me southward, downstream. The oars pulled easily. Brown water swirled away from the blades and, whispering, fell in on itself. Ahead of me, pennants of mist waved skyward; behind me, above my small wake, they scattered toward the riverbanks.

A pocked buttress of concrete—the Lake Street Bridge—stretched high above me. Traffic between Minneapolis and Saint Paul—light traffic, this early on a Sunday—whirred and thumped across the bridge.

I lifted and dipped the oars, port forward, starboard back, guiding my new shell in a quarter turn. Pulling harder now, I rowed diagonally across the current. A few yards from the river's eastern shore, I spun another quarter turn and settled into the rigorous upstream cadence.

The effort of rowing upstream warmed me; my sweatshirt—and under it my unisuit—clung to my back. Feeling muscular, loose, strong, I pulled the oars harder, rowing at full pressure.

As I drew even with the square of sand where the entrance to the beach—Bare Ass Beach, as I knew it—met the water, I slacked off. At the foot of the asphalt switchback to the street, two boys in ragged black denim sat side by side on a picnic table. One passed a cigarette to the other. Both glowered at me, as if I'd caught them at something illicit. One of them pulled the last drag off the butt and flicked it toward the water. It spun toward me in an angry arc.

• • •

Toward the end, during the gloomy months when nothing had pleased him, Tom had taken up smoking. He'd hidden cigarettes and lighters everywhere. Cigarette packs in the closet, one in each mate of a pair of fraying, grass-stained running shoes. Lighters in jacket pockets, at the back of the sock drawer, behind a row of books—why so many lighters?

He'd come home every night with the stink of smoke in his hair and on his clothes. A carton of Marlboro Reds had appeared in the freezer. Again, just as it had on the day I'd found the carton, my gut seethed. My cheeks burned.

Fixing on a patch of brown water ahead, I pulled hard and regained my rhythm. Shafts of sunlight slanted now through the nude-limbed trees on the riverbank. I passed the section of beach where, in the few warm weeks of summer, men sunbathed and cruised among reddening sumacs. Decades of footprints cut the upward-sloping strand into countless switchbacks and risers.

Tom and I had come here almost every weekend in summer, had driven the other men crazy with our aloofness, our conspicuous togetherness. Now I would be free to come alone—as if I wanted to be free. I could try my luck unencumbered—as if I wanted to be unencumbered. But Tom's and my customary place among the sumacs would be one of the numberless commonplace things that would remind me of him and make my heart swell and thrum in my chest.

Just south of the Franklin Avenue Bridge, a complicated stair of wood and steel rose to the street. I passed the stair, passed through the icy shadow of the bridge. Against cliffs of crumbling rock, an asphalt path walked on fat stilts above the surface of the river. A skeletal birch marked the path's sharp inward turning. Beyond, in a little inlet, the boathouse, a homely A-frame of dark wood and multiform shingles, huddled beneath a pair of ailing ash trees.

Shallow waves lapped and silvered the low T-shaped dock. With a flick of the port oar, I nosed the shell toward the longest stretch of planking, the post of the T. Where the dock met the shore, a man in a sheepskin coat stood with his brown-booted feet planted far apart, his arms folded across his chest.

Except for the denim-clad boys, I hadn't seen anyone

Excerpt (cont'd)

all morning. Seeing the man—all the lean length of him—standing there, where I had not expected to see anyone, startled me so much that I nearly tipped the little boat.

The man strode out onto the decking. His boots thumped; the planks sang and squealed. He did not seem to mind the water darkening the round toes of his boots.

Careful now, I drew alongside, pulled to, nudged the port side of the rigger onto the dock. Snatching off his glove, the man stretched out a raw-knuckled paw, his left. I took it. It was warm and damp, the grip strong. He lifted me off the shell and snagged my feet out of the shoes. In his scarred boots he stood inches taller than I was in my sock feet.

“John,” he said. “John Peterson. My friends call me Spike.” He yanked away the other glove. Tucking both gloves under his arm, he enclosed my one hand in both of his. A rough spot on the heel of his right hand chafed the matching place on my hand. It set me on edge, like a crackle of static electricity. “You must be Mike?”

Michael Walton, he must mean, one of the Saint Paul coxswains. I knew him a little—Michael, never Mike—from rowing club meetings where he and his eight rallied like a drove of fraternity boys in matching US Rowing jackets. I never saw them on the water; they rowed before dawn, because the river is never so calm after sunrise as it is before.

I shook my head. “Afraid not,” I said. “I’m Jonah.” Spike didn’t reply. To fill the silence, I said, “My name is Jonah.” I added, “Jonah Murray,” as if my last name explained why my first name was not Michael. At any moment my mouth might disengage from my brain altogether, and I would repeat last night’s weather report.

Frowning, he said, “Not Mike?”

“Michael Walton?”

He shrugged. “Mike something.”

“You were meeting him *here*? Today?” It was—plainly, manifestly, unequivocally—too late in the season to be on the water. I had a reason, if not an excuse. My boat had taken longer than I’d expected to build, and then I’d run short of cash and it had taken much longer than I’d expected to pay for it. This was the first chance I’d had to row in it. If Michael

Walton had intended to row today, then—. Then—plainly, manifestly, unequivocally—Michael Walton must be out of his mind.

Spike nodded. “He was supposed to be here.”

“I guess you’ve been stood up.”

“Were you supposed to meet him as well?” he said.

“No, just getting out on the river. Trying out the boat. Why were you meeting him here, of all places?”

I had a sense of the boat bobbing in the water, drifting. I glanced down at our hands, my right hand still folded in both of his. Dipping as much as I could to my left knee, I hooked the toes of my right foot in the boat’s rigging.

Color bloomed slowly in the hollows of his cheeks. He released my hand. “I’m not sure Mike would want me to tell you about that.”

His eyes were fierce, a glittering Wedgwood blue. Ridiculously, supernaturally blue. I couldn’t look into them for long. I looked instead at his mouth, at the square tuft of black whiskers below his lower lip.

He ruffled that knot, that upside-down mustache below his lip. He squinted into the distance beyond my shoulder. I was not Michael Walton. The hugger-muggery of their meeting had not rocked my world. I must have dropped off his radar.

I dropped literally as well: my foot, wet and cramping, was just losing its grip on the oarlock. Squatting at the edge of the deck, I reached for it, caught it just in time. As I pulled it to, ready to lift it by the gunwales, I felt Spike beside me, his long body hunched parallel to mine. He fumbled for a grip on the crescent moon of the rigging. Abandoning that, he reached around it for the foot stretchers. For a second, I thought he might slip his hand into one of the shoes.

He said, “How the hell do you lift this thing?”

“I can get it. It only weighs about thirty-five pounds.” When I lifted the shell from the water, the effort pulled from me a humiliating, constipated grunt. “Besides, this is the only safe way to hold it.” I wanted to keep talking, to show how effortless it was to hold and carry the boat, but the tightness of my voice belied me.

Excerpt (cont'd)

My socks were sopping and muddy. I hustled the shell along the length of the dock and up a hill of hard-packed earth. Under the steep eaves of the boathouse, I tipped the shell into the cradle of a drying sling.

The western clouds had slouched closer. They hemmed in the left bank, drove clammy wind before them. My body ached from cold. I had to get my socks off, along with my sweat-soaked uni and sweatshirt. The sweatshirt clung to me, chilled me, and I could wait no longer to peel it away. I laid it flat over the shell's upturned hull.

My cap had somehow gotten knocked to the ground. I fetched it and laid it, too, on top of the shell, until I pictured my hair—damp, wild, and as bright as flame. Every redheaded boy has heard himself called “red” and “carrot top” and “orange crush”—every redheaded boy who has ever been in the company of other boys, at least. In seventh grade health class, during a lecture on sports nutrition, Mr. Burns had patted my carrot-orange hair. Look for this color, he'd told us, if you're trying to get beta carotene in your diet. Good for the eyesight. Cures acne. Fights the flu. Carrots, cantaloupe, sweet potatoes, he'd said. Look for this shade of orange. For years after that, my nickname had been Beta Carotene, until Mr. Burns himself had taken to calling me Beta. Sometimes even my mother still called me Beta.

I pulled the wool cap down tight again.

When I moved toward the door to the boathouse, Spike was already there. Inside, we stood looking at each other in the narrow space between the racked boats. He unbuttoned his jacket. Underneath, he wore a shirt of blue and green plaid flannel. The top three buttons were open, showing the white of his undershirt.

I craved the warmth of dry clothes, but he stood between me and my duffel bag. “I don't really know Michael that well,” I said.

“I'll see him tonight.” A smile warmed his face. His front teeth were crooked, one overlapping the other. “There's a beer bash at the Gay Nineties. In the Men's Room? The back bar?”

“I know it. I've been there.”

“How long have you been rowing, Jonah Murray?” His voice, low in pitch, contained a promise of thunder. He lifted my cap from my head, dropped it to the floor. His eyes dipped. “How long to get thighs like those?”

“Since high school.” I blinked. “Rowing since high school. Six years. No. Seven. Yes, seven years.”

“And is rowing the only thing that brings you to the river, Jonah Murray?”

Between us lay a space not quite as long as his booted foot. The warmth of his body crossed the gap first, followed by one ham-pink hand. He laid his thumb in the hollow at the base of my throat. The tips of his fingers were hot and rough on the back of my neck.

“Not always,” I said, or meant to say, or would have said, if my throat had not suddenly filled with cotton. I felt my mouth noiselessly working, and then Spike's left hand joined his right around my throat. His thumbs and fingers met, intertwined. He kissed me.

I plunged my frigid hands into the humid gap between Spike's jacket and his body. Beneath layers of cloth—flannel, waffle-weave cotton, jersey—I felt the workings of muscle and bone.

“Red hair,” he said, his mouth close to mine. He stroked the back of my head, where my hair was cut almost skin-tight. “I have a weakness for red hair.”

Strange, that a compliment can seem cruel. I drew away, but Spike pulled me closer. He kissed the cool place on my neck where his warm hand had just been. His lips and unshaven cheeks were dry and rough. My fingers, warming swiftly, touched the planes and margins of his shoulder blades. My eyes lolled shut.

His right hand was still around my neck. Driving his tongue against mine, with the fingers of his other hand digging deeply into the muscle of my buttocks, he pulled me against him.

But as suddenly as he had drawn me in, he released me. I stood before him, blinking and bereft. Now parted from him, I felt so cold and so naked that my gray unisuit with its racy vermilion stripes might never have existed. He touched the



Excerpt (cont'd)

fabric at my shoulder. With an effortless clutching motion of his fingers, he could have torn the uni from my body. A sense of his power over me crackled like lightning.

“I like what I see, Jonah Murray,” he whispered. “I like it very much.”

“I like you, too,” I said, or thought I said. The moment stretched. “You’re a really handsome man.”

The corners of his mouth turned upward. He drew my body against him. “I want you in a bed.” He kissed me again. “Come with me to my hotel.”

I told him I would go anywhere he chose.

• • •

Bulbous clouds hung low, as if a burden dragged them toward earth. The river, lean and silver, carried crumpled reflections of the sky southward toward the bridge. Spike stood at the edge of the dock, balancing on his heels, watching the water pass underneath the toes of his boots.

Only when my own footfalls rattled on the planks did he look up. “You look even better in real clothes,” he said.

I had changed into jeans and a T-shirt, and a thick sweater that made me feel itchy and hot. Lifting my duffel bag from my shoulder, he slung it over his own.

Until we reached the top of the wood-and-steel stairs, we walked in silence. “Where’s your car? You must have a car,” he said. “Do you want to follow me or ride together?”

“Why not come to my place? We’ll be more comfortable there than in a hotel. It’s not all that far. I can drive.” All these words emerged in a rush.

He smiled, nodded.

I’d parked half a block away. Side by side, we walked along the curving sidewalk. Across the street, amid a thicket of Bush-Quayle signs—a dozen or more lined up along the curb like a fence, dozens more scattered across the sparse and sloping lawn all the way up to the house, a white saltbox with black shutters—a gray-haired man stooped over a silver-headed cane, watching us. He appeared to have no other purpose in mind. Cars passed, and he crossed toward us.

Doors unlocked, opened, we sank into the houndstooth seats of my tan Chevette. Our weight shook the car on its

ancient springs. Spike tossed my duffel bag lightly into the back seat. Somehow, in the same motion, he let his hand come to rest on my thigh.

The old man, the gray-hair from across the street, appeared suddenly behind Spike. Mouth open, hair streaming, he knocked the head of his cane against the window. Spike lurched in his seat, but when he saw the old man—a mere caricature of violence—he laughed and waved me on. “Guess we wore out our welcome,” he said.

In some of the neighboring lawns there were Clinton-Gore signs. I saw no other Bush-Quayle signs, but it was difficult to believe that, after the little gray-haired man had taken his share of signs, there were any left for the rest of the seven-county metropolitan area. “I wonder what the neighbors think of him,” Spike said with a laugh. His hand still rested on my thigh.

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As I turned onto my street, I rehearsed concessions and vindications. The house wasn’t much to look at, one story of often-patched stucco, no off-street parking. Yet it stood on a roomy corner lot, the rent was reasonable, and my landlords loved me like family. But I said nothing. As I drew the Chevette even with the front walk, Spike tumbled from the car and stood in the yard. Arms akimbo, he scrutinized the house as if calculating the windows’ exact deviation from the golden mean.

“It’s home,” I said, walking backwards toward the front porch. “A house of my own. A brick residence, adjoining royal palace.”

He cocked his head. “Royal palace?” he said. “Brick?” he said. “It looks like stucco to me.”

“Sorry. I was listening to *The King and I* earlier. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.”

If he had any idea what I meant, he hid it well.

Inside, I hung his jacket and my sweater in the closet. With a wave of my hand, I conducted a grand tour: a square, low-ceilinged living room with walls the color of warm sand, a curtained window set in a shallow bay, a dark green sofa, an easy chair upholstered in beige tweed worn smooth, in

Excerpt (cont'd)

places, from use. No pictures or mirrors or posters on the walls, no plants in the window.

The other rooms were the same: square, warm, beige, dull, full of used and useful things.

I invited Spike to sit in the easy chair. Under the table next to it lay a brown vinyl case containing Tom's cassette collection, one of the many things he'd left behind. Sometimes I stood in the middle of the floor and stared at the cassette case, or sat in the chair petting its hinges, helpless until the phone rang or a record ended or something shook me out of my stupefaction. The reminders that he'd lived with me—the clothes bunched on his side of the closet, the cheesy 'eighties porn stacked up on the bedroom floor, the unopened packs of Marlboros in the freezer, the cassettes—somehow, these pained me more, even, than his absence.

"Can I get you something?" I said to Spike. "I don't have any beer or anything, but I think I might have some iced tea." Very old iced tea, I remembered, probably as ripe as cheese by now. "Or Diet Coke. I always have Diet Coke around."

Still standing in the entryway, Spike stepped out of his boots. "Water'll do." Bracing himself against the closet door, he tugged at his gray wool socks, straightening the red toes and heels.

When I returned from the kitchen, he was bent over, squinting at the stereo. He punched a couple of buttons, and Karen Holmes leapt mid-syllable into "This Is Love." "—Ate of confusion that makes you see everything plain," she sang.

He took the glass of water from me. Ice cubes cracked and rattled. He didn't drink. "Who's singing?" he said.

"Karen Holmes. A jazz singer—vocalist. One of my favorites." Last night I'd been listening to all of her albums in reverse chronological order, recording them afresh onto cassette. The LP's still stood on the floor, leaning against the subwoofer.

He touched the volume control, edging it up.

"My mother took me to see her in New York," I told him. "A couple of years ago. It was a college graduation present, that trip. It was an amazing night."

An awkward moment passed. How could we get back the

chill-driven intimacy of the boathouse?

"It was at the Algonquin," I said. "We"—that is to say, Tom and I. Having dragged the whole bulk of him into the room on the back of that tiny pronoun, I didn't know how to get him back out again. Spike scratched a bit of smut from the knurls around the circumference of the volume control. "I actually got to meet her, because her son, who was her accompanist for a long time, Patrick—. Patrick Holmes, her son, came to my college to give a lecture."

Spike's attention seemed to be wandering. He turned to the bookshelves, picked up a book, put it down again, brushed his fingers along the rows of record albums in their motley jackets. Admittedly, the story, just begun, was already convoluted. I waved away the rest of it.

He said, "Can I pick something else?"

"Go ahead. I'll be right back."

I went to the bathroom and softly closed the door. I primped: rolled up my sleeves, washed my sweat-roughened hair with hand soap and tepid water from the tap, gargled with Listerine, smoothed the folds of my shirt, hiked up my jeans.

I peered into the living room. Spike sat in the easy chair, reading the back of an album sleeve. A dozen others lay in his lap. Mindful of creaking floorboards, I crept to the bedroom, where I stripped the blankets and sheets and remade the bed with starched new linens. On the way back, I shut the door to the music room, the spare room where I kept towers of music textbooks from college, scores and sketches, and sprawling heaps of staff paper.

By then Spike had put everything back. He stood sipping his water, staring at the spines of my books. Baudelaire and Verlaine in red boards, Whitman in green, Crane in ten-cent paper covers—they stood in sagging ranks. Karen Holmes sang "Easy to Love."

"You have a lot of poetry here."

"I collect it for writing songs—art songs, et cetera, et cetera—." He rolled his eyes. "I'm a composer," I said. But that was too much to claim; my voice faltered. I cleared my throat. "I *wanted* to be a composer. I studied composition in college."

Excerpt (cont'd)

His finger had fallen on Cummings—a scruffy *Tulips and Chimneys* I'd unearthed in a used bookstore. He tipped it forward and slipped it off the shelf. He weighed it in his hands. Over and over he turned it, studying the frayed edges and corners with no apparent intention of opening it.

"A songwriter first, then a composer."

He looked at me sidelong. "What are you, then," he said, "if not a songwriter or a composer?"

"I work for the state legislature. A legislative commission. We're supposed to create a policy that encourages tolerance and eliminates harassment in the workplace."

"So you're the political correctness police."

"That's what everyone says." Sitting on the sofa, I untied my sneakers, slipped them off my feet. "There is something I've been working on since college. A longer sort of composition."

It was called *The River*. "The Mississippi," I told him. "At first it was going to be a tone poem—like *Metamorphoses* or *Má vlast*. That's Smetana. *Má vlast* was Smetana. That is to say, Smetana wrote *Má vlast*. It depicts various—various scenes from Bohemia. Not to be confused with *La Bohème* or anything." Spike raised an eyebrow. I felt feverish. "He was deaf—Smetana was—like Beethoven."

"Him I've heard of."

"That got out of hand, though," I said.

"Which? Smetana or Beethoven?"

"My thing."

He grinned. "Your thing is out of hand?" His tongue darted across his crooked front teeth.

"My tone poem. *The River*. I thought maybe a symphony, like Beethoven's Ninth. You know, where there's a chorus in the last movement?" I sang a couple of bars of the "Ode to Joy."

Spike observed me with an avuncular grin. "Fucking red-heads," he said. He tossed the book into the easy chair.

As if he were my Fred and I his Ginger, he held out his hand; when I took it, he drew me toward him. Nuzzling his bare neck, I pulled his shirt free of his jeans. I tucked my hand between his skin and his belt. His arms were iron

bands around me. Our lips touched.

Releasing me, he said in a whisper, "Bedroom?"

Taking his hand—I was Fred, now—I led him down the hall. I switched on the small, dim light by the bed. When I turned, I saw that he'd spotted the television and the stacks of videotapes. Looking up, he smiled to show that he knew what they contained. Squatting, he pawed through the tapes. The plastic cases clattered and clacked. He chose one and wagged it in the air. I could see that the label was simple black lettering on white, but I couldn't read the title. With a prankish smile, he slipped the tape into the VCR's toothless mouth.

He was a genius with buttons. He punched just two, and tawdry disco music filled the room. On the screen, two men in leather soul-kissed.

"This'll do, won't it? Music-wise?" he said, still grinning.