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# STEP

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# ON A

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# CRACK

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by ANDREW VACHSS

1

**W**hen we were all little kids together, Bobby was the bravest. He was the first to go from one end of the Projects to the other over the rooftops. I remember following him, all of us in a line. The last jump was the worst — the wind was blowing hard and there wasn't room to get a long running start. Bobby lit a cigarette and took a drag. Then he threw the pack over to the other side. He took another drag and snapped the cigarette over the side of the building.

"I'll have a smoke wherever I land," he said to us.

"It's too far, Bobby," Rodney said.

"I don't care," Bobby laughed.

You could see he didn't. He went over the gap between the rooftops like it was nothing, soaring.

Everybody cheered. Nobody followed.

If I knew how to voice such things then, I would have said that I loved him.



## 2

Me and Bobby were ten then. We were born almost on the same day. Bobby would stay at my house sometimes. Sometimes he would even tell other kids we were brothers.

He was very brave, but he was cruel and ugly too. He threw a cat off the roof once. He liked to set fires too.

Even when we were real little kids, he was like that. You know how kids have their games ... their superstitions? Step on a crack, break your mother's back? Bobby saw Joey skipping down the sidewalk one day and he called him a girl for it. Joey got mad, but he didn't want to fight Bobby. Nobody did. Anyway, he explained it to Bobby ... he wasn't skipping like a goddamned girl, he was just making sure his mother was safe.

Bobby said it was okay. He even said he was sorry for calling Joey a girl.

## 3

My mother was giving me cocoa the next morning like she always does when it's cold.

"I saw your pal Bobby early this morning, Jason, when I first got up. He was practicing."

"Practicing what, Mom?"

"I don't exactly know ... it looked like hopscotch to me."

Bobby hadn't said anything to me about practicing. I knew he wouldn't play hopscotch ... only girls did that.

I couldn't sleep that night. I know Mom always got up real early. It wasn't even light outside sometimes. She had to do everything in the house before she went to work.

I was up even before Mom the next morning. I looked out the window but we were up too high to see much of anything. I put on my coat and went downstairs. Bobby was there, all right, just like Mom said. He was running down the sidewalk, back and forth, but he was running funny, like he was drunk.

"What are you doing, Bobby?" I asked him, stepping out.

His face got all red. For a minute, I thought he was going to come at me.

"It's a secret, Jason."

I walked over to him. "Tell me, Bobby. You know I'd never tell. You're my pal."

"You'd tell," he said.

I didn't say anything — I just walked away. The wind was cold — it made my eyes water.

I heard him coming after me but I didn't even turn around. I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jace."

"I never told, Bobby. Not about anything. Not even about the cat ..."

"Shut up. I know. I said I was sorry, didn't I? Stop crying."

"I'm not crying!"

"You are!"

I punched him in the face and then he did come at me. I was doing good for a while but he was stronger and finally he got me down.

"You give?" He held his fist right over my face.

"No!"

But the punch never came. He got off me. After a while, I got up.

"It was a tie," Bobby said. "Even up. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "You want to come up for some cocoa?"

## 4

Upstairs, my mother looked at my clothes and asked me what happened. Bobby told her some other kids jumped us and we fought them.

"I don't like you to fight, Jason," Mom said. "But it's good you and Bobby stick up for each other."

She washed my face and put orange stuff on the cuts. She washed Bobby's face too. He didn't try to stop her.

After Mom went to work, we had some cookies and then we went in my room so I could put on my school clothes.

"Jason ... "

"What?"

"You know what I was doing this morning?"

"You don't have to ... "

"I want you to know. I want somebody to know. You're my pal, like you said. You know what I was doing out there? Trying to step on every single fucking crack in the sidewalk."

It was the meanest thing I ever heard anyone say.



## 5

Later, I asked my mother. She told me it was just a stupid superstition — it didn't mean anything. "Bobby could step on every sidewalk in the city, honey," she told me, "and it wouldn't break his mother's back. It's just a saying, not a truth."

Me and Mom lived alone together. My Dad was killed. In the war. The stupid war, my Mom always called it. Bobby used to tell the other kids that his father was killed in the war too. Right next to mine. But he told me that he didn't know who his father was. His mother always had men living with her. One after the other. I asked Mom once, why she didn't have boyfriends like Bobby's mother. Mom said maybe she would, someday. Right now, she didn't have time for that stuff.

## 6

Bobby started to hate queers about the same time I knew I was one.

There was a place near the Projects, right near the river. We called it the Pier, but no boats came there any more.

Fags would meet down there. There were some buildings, empty now. Sometimes they even did it outdoors. If you snuck up real quiet, you could see them.

Bobby and I were watching one night.

"I hate them," he whispered. Like a snake's hiss.

I said I did too, but I could feel things in me and I knew I didn't. I couldn't.

I was scared, but I knew I would try some day.

## 7

It was just past our fourteenth birthdays when Bobby came over to my place one night. He said he had something real good for us to do. In the basement, we all got together. Seven of us. Bobby passed out the stuff we had stored down there: bicycle chains, tire irons, a couple of sawed off baseball bats.

We thought it was the Uptown Tigers coming down here again, but Bobby said no, it wasn't that. We were going to drive the fags out of our turf. Stomp them down to the Village, where they belonged.

We marched over to the Pier like an

army. They ran when they saw us but it was too late for a couple of them. We busted them up good.

## 8

Joey told on us. He didn't mean to, but he was talking to his girl. The police came to the block and they took us all in.

My mother got me alone in the station house and she asked me if it was true. I tried to lie to her but it was no good. She didn't hit me or anything. She sat down and lit a cigarette. Her hands were shaking.

"I am so ashamed of you," she said.

I didn't care what happened to me after that.

## 9

We all went to court. My lawyer had long hair. Bobby said he was a fag. Everybody said they were there, at the Pier, but they didn't do anything. Except Bobby. He said he bashed the queers himself. Both of them. He told the judge, they didn't belong in his neighborhood ... they made him sick.

We all got Probation, except Bobby. They sent him away, upstate. I took a bus up to see him once. He was happy to see me, but he said not to come again.

"It don't look good, Jason," he said. "Having a man visit you, you understand?"

I didn't understand, but I told him I'd do what he wanted.

## 10

It was almost two years before he came back. He was the same, I guess, but quieter.

Bobby never came back to school. I finished up, finally. Mom wanted me to go to college, so I enrolled at City. But I never liked it much.

Bobby went to prison for stabbing a man. The next week, I came out. I told Mom first. She was like I knew she would be. She gave me a kiss. My lover was outside, waiting downstairs. He said he wanted to go with me. In case Mom didn't take it like I meant it. But Mom said to bring him up. We all talked together.

## 11

I kind of staggered through college,



passing my courses, but none of the things my friends wanted to do were for me. I could tell that things just didn't feel right.

I was walking up Christopher Street with Dave when I saw Bobby the next time. He was bigger, huge in his upper body, wearing a red T-shirt. He had tattoos all over his arms. Bobby walked right up to us, taking away all the air, like he always did. He looked ready to spring.

"I'll see you later," I told Dave, so he'd leave us alone. Dave's small, kind of delicate-built, but he's got a heart like a pit bull. He looked Bobby right in the eye. "Maybe I'd better stay," he said.

"It's okay," I told him.

Finally, he turned and walked away. He looked mad. I couldn't tell at who.

"This is you now?" Bobby asked, reaching one hand out to touch the earring in my right ear.

"Yes."

"Why, Jason?"

"It's in the genes, Bobby. It's how I was born."

"Bullshit! I seen guys come in the joint straight, and come out faggots. They can turn you into a woman in there real quick."

"It's not the same."

"Sure. I never figured you for this, Jason. We came up together."

"I'm the same man, Bobby."

"You ain't a man at all, punk. Better check your equipment again."

I tried to explain it to him, but Bobby wasn't listening. Finally, he put a hand on my chest, pushing me back a little bit.

"You remember the time we had the fight?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Still think you could come out even?"

"No, but ..."

"But what, pussy?"

"But I'd still try."

He made a move with his lips like a kiss but the sound was a snarl. Then he was gone.

## 12

Dave was at the cafe, waiting.

"Well, what did Mr. Macho want?"

"An old friend ..."

"And now he's a hustler, I see."

"He's not a hustler, Dave."

"What then?"

I didn't know.

## 13

It was Dave who convinced me to join the police force. I didn't believe there were any gay cops in the city until he introduced me to one at a party. The man was out, too. Right in the open. "They'll test you," he said. "And some are stone freaks. Fag bashers themselves off-duty. But you'll have brothers inside, I promise."

The written test was easy. They physical stuff wasn't much either. And there wasn't that much trouble on the job. Two fights, one pretty serious ... but I always try and I never quit. Once they saw that, it was all right.

## 14

One night in Brooklyn, I was working a radio car with a big fat Irishman named Peters. Everybody called him Sarge. He'd been on the job since forever — he was too much a brawler and not enough of an ass-kisser to get out of uniform and into plainclothes — that was my ambition, but I didn't discuss it with anyone. We went up four flights of stairs to answer a Domestic Dispute call — the worst kind, Peters said.

He was right. The woman was beaten half to death, but she wouldn't make a complaint. There wasn't anything we could do.

"Reminds me of home," Peters said on the way down the stairs. "Your people ever brawl like that?"

"My dad was killed in the war," I told him.

"There's some who'd count you lucky," he said, lighting one of his stubby cigars.

I only got three blocks before he told me to pull over to the curb. There was an after-hours joint on the corner.

"I need a drink," he said.

"Maybe we should wait till we're out of this neighborhood ...?"

"Ah, don't be such a fucking sissy — the monkeys make any noise, I'll throw them a banana."

"Sarge, you know what the Watch Command said about staying out of the clubs. Come on, we'll ..."

"Keep the motor running, sonny," he said and stepped out the door.



I sat there waiting. I smoked a cigarette almost to the end when I heard the shot. I hit the front door. Sarge was on the ground, face down, blood all over the back of his uniform. I went right over his body into three of them. One had a machete — I shot him in the chest. Something ripped at my left arm. They kept coming. I backed up until I was right against Sarge's body, firing at the far wall where they hid behind tables. Somebody shot back. I ran out of bullets. I was pulling my nightstick when I felt Sarge moving next to me. He forced himself onto his elbows, tugged his pistol free. I snatched it from him, kept blasting away while Sarge barked 10-13's into his walkie-talkie.

By the time the precinct cops came charging in the door, I had one bullet left in Sarge's pistol.

## 15

I woke up in the hospital, a red haze all around me. After a while, it faded to pink, and I could see the tubes running into me. I knew I would live.

Sarge was sitting there, next to the bed, white bandages wrapped all around his head. He had a "little fracture" of the skull, he told me, and he needed some stitches across his chest. He held up two lumps of metal.

"They took these out, my boy. Out of you. One from the arm, one from the thigh. You wasn't wearing your vest like a good little soldier, you'd be in the meat locker right this very minute."

I didn't say anything — there was a plastic thing in my mouth.

## 16

Other cops came in. Some people sent flowers. The mayor came by long enough to get his picture taken.

They moved me to a big, private room with a window and I got better. One day, Dave came in. The room was full of people. He leaned over the bed and kissed me on the mouth. One of the cops made a snickering noise. Dave turned red.

"You got something to say, you better say it outside. Say it to me, you think you're tough enough."

It was Sarge, shoving his fat finger in the

chest of the cop who had made the noise. I didn't even know he was there.

I made Detective Third from that. I didn't feel much like a detective — I got to wear nicer clothes, that was really about all. But Mom was real proud at the ceremony where I got my gold shield. Dave was too.

## 17

They found the first body at the bottom of an elevator shaft, nude. The coroner couldn't tell if it was the fall that killed him, or the beating. There wasn't any doubt about the next one — his throat was cut.

When the body count got up to five, the mayor appointed a task force. But they kept dying. Gay males, all of them.

That's when the Commissioner called me in. I went undercover, working in the bars, but it didn't help. People recognized me — it isn't every day one of us gets his picture in the paper for a shootout with criminals. Nobody even tried to pick me up.

## 18

I talked it over with Dave. The killer wasn't working the bars — he went one-on-one for his pickups, got the victims alone, and did what he did.

There were no letters to the newspapers, no phone calls. We set up a hot line for tips and we got a lot of leads ... but they didn't amount to anything.

Mom still lives at the same place. With rent control and all, it wouldn't pay to move. Besides, she knows all the neighbors — she feels safe there. I go over every Thursday night, never fail. Sometimes Dave comes with me.

I was there when the phone rang. When Mom said, "It's for you, Jason," I knew who it was.

Maybe I knew all along.

"What's up?" he asked, like it was me who called him.

"You know," I told him.

"I'm tired," Bobby said. "I'm real tired."

"You want to come in?"

"No. I don't want to come in. I want it to be over."

"Just tell me where you are."

"You gonna play it straight, Jason? Just you and me?"



"Just you and me, Bobby," I promised him.

"At the Pier, then. Tomorrow midnight."

"Where it started."

"That's not where it started," he said. Then the phone went dead.

## 19

First Dave didn't want me to go. When he saw that wasn't going to work, he wanted to go with me. I wouldn't let him. I didn't say anything to anybody on the job.

A few minutes before midnight, I stepped onto the Pier. It was empty now, deserted. The killer had scared everyone off ... nobody was cruising — they stayed inside the clubs. Safety in numbers.

One of the pilings was spray-painted with a swastika in white, the number 9 big above it. Nine bodies so far. Whoever the killer was, the skinheads loved him.

I walked toward the back building, sitting all by itself way out to the edge of the Pier. It was so quiet I could hear the water lapping beneath my feet. The boards creaked, some of the space between them big enough to fall through.

Step on a crack ...

## 20

The door was slightly open. I could see a flickering light inside. A candle, it turned out to be. A squat white candle on a table, burning. Standing next to it, a brown shoebox.

"Just stand there a minute, Jason."

Bobby's voice. I kept my hands at my sides, waiting.

"Just wanted to see if you really came alone," he said, stepping out of the shadows.

"Like I promised."

"You got the place surrounded?"

"No."

He lit a cigarette, handed me the pack. I lit one too.

"Big hero. I read about you in the papers while I was upstate. Think you could take me now?"

"No, Bobby. Not then, not now."

"I bought you a present, Jason. Look in the box."

I took off the cover. A couple of watches, a signet ring, an ID bracelet, a wedding ring, some piece of paper. I held it close and read

it ... a driver's license. A social security card. Something that looked like a little, gnarled piece of sausage.

"What is this stuff?"

"Trophies. One from each of the queers I took out. The little thing you're holding up, that's a finger — the miserable fag didn't have a thing on him when I wasted him."

"Jesus, Bobby."

"They oughta make you chief behind this, right?"

"I don't know."

He drew on his cigarette. The tip glowed. His face was all lines and angles, a skull painted in fleshtones. "Why'd you do it, Jason?"

"Do what?"

"Turn queer. Why'd you turn out like them?"

"Bobby, it wasn't a choice ... it's just the way it happened."

He stood still as a rock. I could feel him watching, but I couldn't see his eyes.

"You ever fuck boys, Jason?"

"What!"

"Boys. Little boys. You ever do that?"

Vomit boiled up into my mouth at the thought — it was the ugliest thing I'd ever heard a person say. "Are you crazy, Bobby? Where'd that come from?"

"That's what you do, right? That's what happens."

"Bobby ..."

"When I was a boy. A little boy, real small, one of my fucking whore mother's boyfriends, he did it to me. It hurt. Like fire inside me. I was bleeding. I told my mother, when she came home. You know what I got, Jason? A slap in the mouth. From my mother. She knew. When I still believed in God, I prayed for her to die. It didn't happen to me, you know. I never got queer. I'm a man. Ask anybody about my rep. The jailhouse or the alley, it's all the same. Bobby Trainor, that's a man."

"You always were, Bobby."

"Yeah. Well, now I'm done. Almost done, anyway."

He walked around in a little circle, hands at this side. And then I saw the gun. A silver automatic. He held it up, so I could see it in the candlelight.

"I was always jealous of you, Jason," he said.

"Me? Why?"





"I wished I had your mother."

"Bobby ..."

"Shut up. We're all done now. Here's the deal. Let's find out. You and me. You got a gun with you, right?"

"Yes."

"Take it out. Slow."

I unholstered my revolver, pointed it at the ground the way he had his.

"I'm gonna count to three, Jason. Just like in the movies. When I get to three, I'm coming up blasting. I kill you, I'm picking up my shoebox and walking out of here. You got a ring, Jason? Something I can take with me. Maybe I'll take your badge. Your pretty cop badge."

"Bobby ..."

"I'm not playing, Jason. You know I never play. You get me first, it's all yours. You don't ... well, another dead queer ain't gonna change things much."

"There's another ..."

"One!"

"Bobby, don't be a ..."

"Two!"

I tightened my hand on the gun.

"Three!"

My first shot took him low in the stomach. He went down to one knee, brought the pistol up and I fired again, twice. He hit the floor, the gun rolling out of his hand.

I dropped down next to him, my hand feeling for a pulse in his neck.

"You're a real man, Jace," he said. And he died.

I waited for the sirens, holding Bobby's cold hand.

## 21

Much, much later, Dave stood next to me on our balcony, looking out at the city.

"Good thing you were wearing your vest," my lover said to me.

I didn't say anything to him, just held his hand. Thinking about Bobby. About our last fight. About what he said. About how I picked his gun off the floor. That deadly silver automatic ... with the safety locked on.

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