what’s going on in town?” Joel Fleischman asked as he walked into his warehouse-turned-doctor’s-office. “There’s people all over that big stretch of land behind the Brick. I didn’t miss one of Maurice’s self-promotional stunts, did I?”

“It’s first grass,” his receptionist said from behind her desk. For once, Marilyn Whirlwind was not knitting anything. She still wore her jacket, and her knitting bag was on the desktop.

“First grass?” Dr. Fleischman shook his head in disbelief. “That again? Do you mean to tell me that everything stops for one whole day every year so people can go outside to, to look at some grass growing?”

“It’s the first grass of spring.” Marilyn rose and took up her knitting bag. “You walk on it.” She walked past her dumbfounded employer.

“Wait a minute, Marilyn, wait a minute,” Fleischman snapped, holding up one hand. “Just, just hold it for a second. This is Thursday, not Saturday. You’re just going to, to walk out on me because of this? What about my calls?”

“You don’t have any.” Marilyn left the office and joined the other people headed toward the meadow.

Joel Fleischman shook his head angrily. Every year since he’d come to this cockamamie town he thought that the springtime madness would end with the ice-crack and the Running of the Bulls (he gave a quick reminiscent shiver at that most recent memory).

But no, every year another quaint old Cicely custom reared its weird head with no warning. First grass. You walk on it. Meshugeneh! He didn’t do grass, he was a city boy; the closest he’d ever come was watching the tai-chi people take over Central Park again some April morning.
 Granted, the idea of seeing green growing grass again after six months of sunless snow, mud, sleet, slush, salt and ash might make some people a bit giddy, a little ershtimmled. Walking on it...well, the smell of crushed grass could be very...

Joel shook his head. Since it seemed that half of his patients were going grass-walking he might as well make himself comfortable. He settled behind his desk to read the latest Microbiology Today. The sounds of the Cicely residents were a muted rumble in the meadow's direction, and then a roar. Joel shook his head and kept reading.

But the next noise made him drop his magazine and bolt upright in his chair, his heart pounding hard. It sounded like a scene from Hitchcock's The Birds. It sounded like a whole flock of mad crows descending on Cicely, cawing at the tops of their lungs.

Joel ran to the window.

It was the town. Men and women tore through the streets from the meadow. They were flapping their arms and cawing as they ran and drove and biked down the single main street.

Good God. Angrily, Joel stalked out, determined to collar somebody about this behavior and—

He leaped out of the way just as a familiar gold Caddy roared past. Maurice Minnefield was at the wheel, his mouth set, his eyes glaring and cold. He did not even turn at Joel's angry shouts and gestures; the Cadillac continued in a savage beeline for the Minnefield mansion.

Mad, the whole town was—

“Dr. Fleischman, Dr. Fleischman! Awk awk awk awk awk!”

Joel jumped back again as the cawing woman rushed up to him. He blinked as he realized it was Shelley Tambo-Vancoeur. The young woman's face was flushed, her eyes sparkling, her blonde hair blown back. She looked beautiful and overjoyed, and she pumped her arms up and down.

“Shelley, it's okay, calm down, I don’t—”

“It's Raven grass, Dr. Fleischman! Raven grass this time!” Shelley said happily. “This is gonna be so bitchin’! I've never walked on Raven grass before!” She yelled, “Hey Melissa! Awk awk awk!” and waved her arms wildly at someone in the cawing crowd.

Joel shook his head in bewilderment (but shaking his head hadn't helped since he'd been here, and he had a feeling it wasn't going to help now). As a dark-haired girl about Shelley's age ran up to both of them, someone Fleischman recognized as Shelley's friend Melissa Kanguak, he said, “Well, if you or Holling would tell me what—”

And then he could only stare as the two young women embraced and kissed each other passionately on the mouth, right in front of him.

Joel blinked, his jaw hanging. He looked around him at the whooping people to see if they noticed what Shelley and Melissa were doing. Only then did Joel Fleischman notice that many people were hugging and kissing each other in the same fashion, jumping and dancing as if at a celebration.

Except that men were kissing men, and women were kissing women.

Fleischman felt as if he'd walked into an ACT UP demonstration. He stared as a big red-bearded logger was dipped by an equally burly and hirsute trucker.

“Oh, this is cool!” Melissa said when she and Shelley separated. “Shel, let's go to Makeout Ridge and do some more stuff, I'll get my dad's car.” She ran off.

“Okay, but just second base and stuff,” Shelley yelled, running with Melissa in the river of cawing townspeople.

“I'm still hitched to the Big H!”

Joel stared after both, his mouth still open. He didn't even react when big black-bearded Jack Jenkins threw his arms around him and kissed him on the mouth before running off.

“All your life,
You were only waiting for this moment to arise...”

A cheerful voice overlay the final sweet warble of the Beatles’ “Blackbird.” “Good morning, fellow Ravens. This is Chris in the Morning at KBHR.

“Well, looks like the old Trickster dropped one on the first-grass yesterday, and we’re all waking up to new and different dance partners this morning.

“Now for all the newcomers out there like me, a temporary bout of reversed sexual attraction can be unsettling, so I've scheduled our morning's readings to reflect our Raven theme. I'd also like to salute Ron Bantz and Eric Hillman who will be carrying the torch of heterosexuality for the rest of us until the grass is over; they'll be providing pointers for us newcomers to their neck of the woods. And don't worry, guys; being straight is just a phase you're going through right now.

“For those who've heard on the rumor mill...yes, it's true. Cicely's own Inspector Javert, Sergeant Barbara Semanski, was caught shoplifting a box of condoms and a bag of Doritos from Ruth-Ann's store yesterday afternoon. When caught, she paid for the items and all charges were dropped over her objections. To those of us who know Barb, this is like catching Sherlock Holmes...
taking a kickback from Professor Moriarty. Sergeant Semanski says she doesn’t know why she felt the urge to break a law; she’s put herself on report and she feels really bad about it. So please, people, if you run into her—don’t try to cheer her up.

“And since it’s Raven grass this year, that means it’s also time for the Great Minnefield Hibernation. Hey, Maurice, far be it from me to dictate your personal life, but I’d think that taking a ride on the lavender elephant would be more fun than getting drunk and pretending it isn’t in the house with you—but that’s just me. Sweet dreams.

“The First-Grass Dance this year will be held next Saturday night in the union hall, starting at 8. Bring your new partner, or come alone and go home with someone new. And you’re all big people, so I don’t have to remind you to bring your latex.

“And just for Maurice, I’m opening with his favorite poet.”

Chris Stevens reached for his dog-eared copy of Leaves of Grass, pushing aside a box of Whitman’s Sampler chocolates with a card inscribed “To Chris—From Ed.” He thumbed open the “Calamus” section and began.

**Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,**
You must be he I was seeking…

Walt Whitman’s gentle erotic verse unrolled over the air. The young deejay who was also the town’s minister kept his eyes focused on the words, his thoughts on reciting the poem correctly. His hands trembled and knotted on the book. He did not look at the unopened box of chocolates, nor at the tufts of grass decorating the windows.

Joel walked into his office, his rubber-gloved hands holding a tray full of petri dishes, to find Maggie O’Connell sitting in a chair near Marilyn’s desk. Both women were knitting. “Well, Marilyn, it’s nice of you to decide to come into work today,” he said sarcastically, his voice muffled by the air-filter over his nose and mouth. “So, when do the cherry blossoms come out and give you an excuse to walk out on me again?”

Marilyn didn’t look up from her knitting. Maggie O’Connell only gave Joel a disgusted look before returning to the large afghan emerging from her own needles.

Fleischman changed his tactic. “When did you get into town, O’Connell?”

“Got in this morning, Fleischman, as a matter of fact,” O’Connell said, looking Joel in the eye. “I always come in for first-grass. I took a walk, and found out it was Raven grass.” Marilyn looked at Maggie as she spoke, then continued her knitting.

“Well, you’re not due for a checkup for another three months, and I know I didn’t have you order any pharmaceuticals. Is there any particular reason you’re in here today?”

“Yes,” Maggie said, and kept knitting.


“Fleischman,” Maggie said disgustedly, “I didn’t come to see you.”

Only then did Joel realize what Maggie meant. He stared at her, at the unflappable Marilyn Whirlwind, and back at Maggie. “I don’t believe this. You’ve got to be kidding. This isn’t anything like you, O’Connell, I know this isn’t! What is this, some kind of joke?”

“Typical Fleischman, you can’t explain something that doesn’t fit your little male-centered view of the universe so you dismiss it. I’ll bet you haven’t walked on the grass yet.”

“Damn right I haven’t, not with this effect on people!” Joel snapped at the angry woman. Marilyn watched them both and said nothing. “This could be any kind of dangerous agent working on people’s systems, and it’s dangerous to succumb to anything this behavior-altering!” He hefted the row of sample dishes. “I’ve got to isolate whatever it is that’s making people react like this, so it can be dealt with.”

O’Connell looked at Joel, and now there was a kind of angry pity in her eyes. “So you can reason it away, and find a shot for it, is that it, Fleischman? You might as well find a cure for spring-fever.

You know, you ought to just hole up with Maurice getting drunk if that’s going to be your attitude. Don’t worry, it’ll be over soon and the town will go right back to nice safe heterosexuality as far as the eye can see.” She turned her attention away from Dr. Fleischman. “Pea soup okay for dinner?”

“I’ll bring bread,” Marilyn said as quietly as if nothing had transpired in the room.

Joel retreated into his office at full speed, leaving the two women peaceably knitting together in his anteroom.

At lunch he confided in Holling at the Brick, trying hard not to notice all the tables filled with men or women holding hands with each other. There was a tuft of green artificial grass in a vase on the table, and a dusty-looking Raven Christmas ornament perched within. “I don’t understand any of this. It’s ridiculous, illogical!”
“Raven grass can be hard on newcomers, Joel,” Holling said soberly, wiping the table as Shelley whisked by him with a full tray of mooseburgers, fries, Cokes and beers. “Especially if you’ve been raised a certain way. It was tough for me the first time, but Bill was an old hand at this and he got me through it. Maurice—well, that’s another story.” There was a sad faraway look on Holling’s face. “Some things you can’t fight, and some back-grounds can’t be alleviated.”

Joel blinked and stared at the man in his mid-sixties earnestly telling him this information. From the corner of his eye he saw Shelley start, turn and scold Jackie White Sky for patting her bottom. He blinked. Dave’s wife? “Doesn’t any aspect of this bother you, Holling? This sudden attack of, of homosexuality?”

“It’s not an attack, Joel,” Holling said as gently and patiently as he would explain autumn leaves to a four-year-old who thinks the tree is dying. “It’s the grass. It’s more like a…well, a toss of a coin. Most times it comes up heads. Most years when you walk on the first-grass….” Holling got a reminiscent gleam in his eye. “Shelley and I don’t come out of the bedroom for a couple of days.”

Come to think of it, Fleischman realized, since he’d come to Cicely it was this time of the year he bought more girlie mags than he did the rest of the year. He felt fourteen again, almost living in the bathroom either in the cabin or at the office, slavishly re-reading every erotic passage in books of old poetry and prose as he’d done in his early teens. Hadn’t Melissa Kanguak come on to him during her checkup last year—and hadn’t he had to restrain himself from climbing on top of her on the table…? He’d been horrified afterwards, all the more so because he’d reacted to her advances as if there was nothing wrong with them.

“Well,” Holling continued, “every ten years or so, the coin comes up tails; those are the years we say it’s Raven grass. The story is that Raven defecates on the new grass as he flies over it, and it makes everyone’s desire topsy-turvy. Raven’s a trickster; he makes things go backwards. That’s why Raven’s the patron of homosexuals; it’s said he’ll put a man’s soul in a woman’s body or a woman’s soul in a man’s body just for fun. Some Indians think homosexuals have special magic because of that.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Joel said, angrily averting his eyes from the sight of Jack Jenkins holding hands with Walt Kupfer at a table. What was worse were the longing looks Walt was giving Holling.

“That may be, Joel,” Holling said gently, “but I’ve never heard of Indians who believe that story waiting outside gay bars with baseball bats and golf clubs, the way some people who quote Leviticus do.”

Joel was silent after that. “Every ten years,” he mused. “Every ten years. That’s a starting place, any way.” He heard Shelley giggle. “Doesn’t it bother you, what Shelley’s doing?”

“No,” the older man said. “I told her about Raven grass, so she knows. She’s curious—but we’re married, Joel, and that means being faithful. And this year, for the first time, I’ve had to tell Walt no for the same reason.”

Joel blinked. He put two and two together. And he understood the longing looks Walt was giving Holling. “Y-you mean you two…”

“Ever since Walt moved out here to become a trapper,” Holling said matter-of-factly. “Bill took me in tow, and I took Walt in. It’s tough on Walt right now. I told him we could date, I offered to take him to the dance Saturday night. But Walt doesn’t need a date, he needs sex—and I won’t cheat on Shelley, not for any reason.”

“Other couples…” Joel stammered. More than one man or woman holding hands in the Brick was wearing a wedding band.

“A magazine!” the other girl chirped, and both giggled.

“Um…” one girl said, and blushed. Her friend giggled and covered her face in her hands. “W-we’d kind of like to, y’know….”

“Like, we don’t need, you know…thingies. You know.”

“The old woman nodded matter-of-factly to dispel their acute embarrassment. “Of course,” she said. “Would you like literature, assistants, or protection?”

“A magazine!” the other girl chirped, and both giggled.

“We’re girls,” the first girl said to Ruth-Ann. “Like, we don’t need, you know…thingies. You know.”

“Do you mean condoms?” Ruth-Ann said sternly, “I said protection. From unsafe sex. There are some items women can use; they’re called dental dams and finger cots, and they’re next to the condoms on the back wall. Read the instructions and decide what you want.”
The second girl tsk-ed. “Guy, that’s such a hassle! I thought being both girls saved us from that stuff!”

“If you’re old enough to have sex, you’re old enough to act responsibly for your own health. It doesn’t matter if you’re both virgins. Do you know each other’s blood history? Transfusions, drugs taken, heredity?” At the blank stares on both faces, Ruth-Ann nodded and said, “Now go on. Take your time.”

Ruth-Ann rummaged among the adult magazines she kept behind the counter as she heard the girls whispering and giggling over the boxes in the back. When they returned to the front, they bore a box of dental dams. They tried to act cool, but both were beet-red.

Ruth-Ann had produced several erotic lesbian magazines and had them spread on the counter. In a matter-of-fact tone she said, “On Our Backs has some pretty rough stuff in it; you might be more interested in Sappho or Labyrinth. Go ahead, check them out. I won’t faint.” She waited as the girls thumbed through the pages—as she suspected they quickly rejected the S/M magazine (with an “Ew, gross,” at a particularly graphic spread) in favor of the softer eroticism of the other two publications. Ruth-Ann rang up the dams and Sappho and handed their change back.

“Thanks, Ruth-Ann,” the first girl said. “My mom and dad would really freak if I talked to them about this—they think I’m like Virgin Mary or something.”

“You’re welcome, dear,” the old woman said kindly. She watched the two skitter out quickly with their purchases, blushing and holding hands in the throes of puppy-love. She smiled reminiscently after them. Then she opened the On Our Backs to the infamous page and continued reading.

The full gynecological spread of the Hustler centerfold lay sprawled in all her glory upon the bed, alongside copies of Snowbound (Alaska’s foremost bondage magazine) and Penthouse.

Ron Bantz stared at his purchases. “I don’t believe I did this. I actually bought a Hustler!” He shook his head and sniffed. “Maybe I should call Dad and tell him—I’ll be welcomed back with open arms.”

“Until the Raven grass is over,” Eric Hillman said practically. He flipped open the Snowbound and whistled. “I didn’t know a Mountie and a wolf could do that.” He picked up the Penthouse and scanned the pages of balloon breasts and butterflied vaginas. “Sure brings me back. When I was twelve, I used to buy one of these and stash it under my pillow to throw everybody off track. Better to get grounded for buying Playboy than have them find out I’d rather buy Playgirl.” He grunted, shook his head and kept flipping. “Now I see why other guys buy these things.”

“And it’s the same damn problem, now that we’re taking a walk on the tame side,” Ron said. “We’re surrounded by people turning us on, and they’re not attracted to us.”

“Wouldn’t do any good anyway,” Eric said firmly. “We don’t trick any more—and I’d say that includes tricking with girls. And we promised each other ten years ago. ‘Forsaking all others,’ remember?”

“If this stupid country, this stupid state, would let us get married!” Ron snarled.

“As soon as it’s legal, hon. Sooner, if we ever get the guts to ask Chris to have us recognized, at least in this town.” Eric flashed the grin that had made his grunts wet their pants. “Who knows? Maybe it would give Maurice a heart attack.” He exhaled, and took up the Hustler again. “Meantime, we buy a few more of these. We spend the next few weeks in the john thinking about Dionne Warwick. And then it’s over for the next ten years, we don’t get out of bed for two days, and these get donated to Dr. Fleischman’s waiting room.” He grinned at his lover. “Maybe we could try cashing in on this. You know, contact one of those televangelists who offer rewards for gays who ‘cure’ themselves. We get on TV, ‘repent,’ take the money and run.”

Ron chuckled. “And get lynched by the guys in San Fran.” With a wry grin he pulled the swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated from the bottom of the pile. “At least there’s a good article about figure skaters in here. Mentions Brian Boitano.”

“That’s good,” Eric said. “We’ll have a reason to keep it when we go back to normal.” He leaned over his lover’s shoulder, looking at the photo spread. “Mmm. Nice conch shells.”

“ ‘Oh! I want to put my arms around you, I ache to hold you close. Your ring is a great comfort. I look at it and think she does love me or I wouldn’t be wearing it.’ “Words of one of our finest First Ladies, Eleanor Roosevelt, in a letter to her very special friend Lorena Hickock. No real secret that Eleanor and Franklin’s marriage was one of friendship rather than passion. These letters indicate that Franklin wasn’t the only one who slept with another woman.”

Chris’ voice wavered a little, and he cleared his throat. “It’s Day 5 of the Raven grass. This morning’s readings have been grouped under the heading Famous Closeted Politicians, and we’ll have more after this.”

Phranç’s version of “Surfer Girl” warbled out over the air.
A small pot of yellow tundra-flowers sat on the desk beside the empty box of chocolates. The card was in Ed Chigliak's handwriting.

Chris clenched his sweaty, shaking hands. He thought he was going to be sick to his stomach; and at the same time he thought shame would swallow him whole. He watched with dull eyes as Sgt. Semanski ran the red light right in front of the radio station.

Deep in the woods, in a small clearing, two big bull moose ate the new grass together in contentment, velvet still covering the big lumps of their regrowing antlers. Occasionally they scratched their chins on the tops of each other's rumps, or nuzzled and butted each other with playful affection. They did not copulate—the mating season for moose was in October—but they were still not immune to the grass. Bull moose were solitary creatures, as a rule; for now these two enjoyed the comfort of a male friendship denied them at all other times.

Joel kept a tree between himself and the placid couple as he dug in the ground, breathing heavily through a surgical mask as he tipped some soil into a petri dish.

"It could be a fungus of some sort, Maurice. Microscopic fungi, dormant nine years out of ten. There's a lot of mind-altering substances in the mycological side of the tree..." Joel tapered off and looked at the sacked-out man before him.

Maurice Minnefield resembled nothing so much as he resembled a sullen bear roused from hibernation. He was dressed in a loose-fitting terrycloth robe over his trout pajamas. He hadn't shaved in a week, and it looked as if he hadn't opened his eyes fully in that length of time either. He smelled of sherry and his half-open eyes glared out at Joel Fleischman from whatever plateau of detachment he'd managed to attain. "If you find a cure for this, Joel," the bear rumbled, "it'll be worth all the money the great state of Alaska's paid you to work in Cicely for five years."

Joel froze a shudder between his shoulder blades. He'd bolted upright in bed that morning, hideously embarrassed about the state of his sheets, and even more so at remembering the dream—featuring himself and Ed Chigliak—that had caused the reaction.

"Afterward..." A faint grin spread over the bear's face. "Let's just say I reward myself by going back to normal with extreme prejudice for two or three days. Women, Joel. Nonstop. Younger the better. No more booze, no more sleeping pills, no Holling in my—I mean no more pervert dreams bugging me, no town full of perverts. Just those two nancy boys runnin' the B & B."

Joel stared at Maurice. He blinked. "Holling—?"

"I never touched him, I NEVER touched him, anything he's sayin' is a damned lie!" Maurice snarled, sitting upright and glaring at the stunned Joel, who had backed off at the flurry. "Twenty years go by and some people's memories get warped. You just tell him that, Dr. Fleischman." The roused, furious bear suddenly collapsed back on the sofa, looking half-asleep again.

"Keep workin' on it, Joel, sounds like a good lead. Cure it, Joel. Find a cure."

Joel nodded, cautiously rose and left the huge house.

Ed was bent over his splicing machine late into the night, fiercely clipping film.

A loud cawing came in from his half-open window. It sounded like laughter.

"I know, Raven, I know," Ed moaned, hard at work on his art. "You don't have to rub it in. Least I'm doing something creative, okay?"

The clock showed a single-digit hour of the night—too deep in the wee hours for either filmmakers or ravens to still be up. Ed kept splicing film. The raven flew off.

Barbara Semanski stopped, shuddered in horror at what she'd done, and dropped the can of red spray paint. But the damage was done. *Vive la loi!* sprawled across the white wall of Dr. Fleischman's office in big red block letters, as did her signature. She compounded her offenses of vandalism and littering by fleeing the scene of the crime.

"Sorry I'm late, H," Shelley said, rushing in to lend a hand with the condiment sorting. She was mussed and rumpled and happy-looking; there was a smudge of lipstick on her mouth lighter than her regular color. "Me and Melissa were at her place watching Madonna videos andakin' out on the couch. It was so awesome. Now I know why studs dig Madonna so much! It's been really hard not to go all the way, but Melissa's boyfriend would kill me for boffin' his chick."

"Of course, Shelley," Holling said quietly. He kept
filling ketchup bottles, remembering when he was twenty.

“Hey. Big H.” Shelley hugged her husband from behind and kissed his neck. “I know it’d hurt you bad, that’s why I really don’t do it. But you’d just get quiet and mad, the way you do. Benny Runsfar’s a goalie. He’d kill me, I mean really kill me. Then Melissa’s got tee’d at him for killing her best friend. And you’d get tee’d at him for killing your chick.”

Holling nodded. His faint hint of pain was gone. Even though they were not attracted to each other right now, they still loved each other fiercely. “Adultery gets very complicated very soon, Shelley. That’s why it’s best to stay out of it completely, once you’re married.”

“Yeah. It’s weird, I used to think getting hitched would feel like a ball ‘n’ chain but it makes this stuff a lot easier.

“But I can still see why a chick would want to do the horizontal polka with another chick. It’s like you know the secret code, y’know? The different stuff studs and chicks like. You don’t have to worry about crossing signals.”

“Exactly,” Holling said. “You know, Shelley, before I met you I used to spend Raven grasses with Walt—and before you were born, I’d go with Bill. It felt like a cross between a hunting trip, and the camp-outs we do.” He smiled.

“Ohhh, yeah,” Shelley reminisced, the same smile on her face. “The ones where we don’t get out of the sleeping bag except to pee?”

“Uh huh.”

“So it’d really be a guys’ night out, huh?”

“That’s exactly how it felt.” Holling looked a little sad.

“I miss that, a little. ‘Course, I don’t go hunting any more anyway.”

“Melissa and me are going to the First-Grass Dance tomorrow night. You gonna go with Walt?”

Holling shook his head and wiped the ketchup bottle necks clean with a damp rag. “Walt needs sex, not dancing. I feel kinda bad leaving him alone, especially now that Ruth-Ann’s with Betty Whirlwind. He doesn’t have anybody right now.”

“He’ll find someone, H. Maybe at the dance. Raven grass is tougher than everybody. ‘Cept Maurice—he is majorly freakin’ out.”

Holling shook his head. “It’s in his nature, Shel. He hates homosexuals, and when he’s temporarily homosexual he hates himself, and all his friends.” A shadow passed over Holling’s clear eyes, and was gone. He gave more attention to the relish squeeze-bottles than they deserved for a few minutes.

Shelley tsk-ed. “Bummer. I thought he was tougher than that. Well, it’s his loss.”

“Yes,” Holling said firmly, a faint hint of old anger in his eyes.

“So, let Maurice get drunk and sleep this out like an old bear. How bout you, H? Checkin’ out the studs?”

Holling laughed. “A little. I can see what Ron sees in Eric, he’s very appealing. I’m sorry for Walt, but I hope he goes to the dance and goes home with someone. And Dave’s offered to go to the dance with me. He’s a good dancer—and he’s bisexual, so Raven grasses are like any other first-grasses to him. I’m sure his wife won’t mind.”

“She’d better not,” Shelley said indignantly, “not after she pinched my butt the other day.”

The Village People shouted and thumped as the younger townsfolk boogied in the union hall, decorated with Raven Christmas decorations as well as with First-Grass banners and tufts of green plastic. Older couples sat at chairs and tables around the dance floor and waited for slower, older songs to appear on Chris’ turntable. Two tables held a punch bowl, beer and sodas, and cookies in baskets full of fake Easter grass. Wallflowers sat or stood, drinking and eyeing each other.

“The noise was not quite as head-splitting as such a dance required; people could actually talk to each other across a table without shouting.

“This is so wonderful, Marilyn,” Maggie enthused, looking around the dance floor from her seat at a table. “Look at all of us out there! There’s Ruth-Ann and your mom, there’s Shelley and her friend, there’s Mrs. Jenkins and Jackie White Sky. This is what being a woman is all about—communing with other women. Unleashing that feminine energy we keep wasting on trying to grab a man. Women socializing with each other, communicat-

ing with each other, being at one with each other. This is what Cicely is all about—the spirit of Cicely and Roslyn! I just haven’t been able to get over it all week!” Maggie turned back to the table with a big smile, and found herself facing a half-full Sprite and an empty seat.

“Marilyn?”

“Marilyn?” Ruth-Ann looked up from her punch at the placid-faced young woman standing before her. Peggy Whirlwind stared at her daughter, puzzled.

“She talks too much,” Marilyn said simply, and sat down with the two older women.

“Macho Man” thundered to a close and sweaty couples applauded. Shelley and Melissa staggered off, gasping for breath, their arms around each others’ necks. Ron and Eric moved off as well, laughing. “Well, we can still steal the dance floor,” Ron said.
Holling left Dave White Sky and approached two tangled male bodies in a corner of the hall; he gently tapped the brawny shoulder of the oil-rigger who had been kissing his way down a co-worker’s body, nearly on his knees before the other glaze-eyed young man. “You two had better go get a room,” he said kindly but firmly. “This is a dance. There’s some motels south of here with special first-grass rates. Don’t forget these,” and he proffered a wooden bowl from the refreshment table.

Sheepishly the men helped themselves to the condoms and left the hall. Holling watched them leave, aching fiercely. Those two beautiful young men had been so lovely to touch, they’d smelled so good…

“Dave,” he called hoarsely, “I’ll be right back.”

“No problem,” Dave said, and gave a little smile of sympathy as his boss stepped gingerly to the men’s room; first-grasses were hell on celibates. “Take you out on the floor when Chris plays a zydeco.”

“Preciate it,” and the door shut.

Jack Jenkins upended his second beer, his big black beard bristling, and set the bottle down with a thump. Walt pulled at his own bottle beside him, his eyes never leaving the men’s-room door.

Ed’s camera circled and subdivided the room, taking the young man behind it around and through the revelry. The camera paused to take a long lingering assessment of the way Chris Stevens’ hands deftly handled the big black LPs and little silver CDs like a jester juggling fragile plates and saucers; the camera moved on, taking Ed with it. Chris looked up as the camera passed him, a 12-inch disc twirling between his fingers as “The Boy in the Bubble” thumped out of Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album.

Sounds of breaking glass and a roar of aggressive rage halted the dance mid-step. The music was cut. The dancers parted to give wide berth to a disheveled, drunken Barbara Semanski. Her neat dress uniform was gone; the big broad woman wore a black sweater and jeans, and her hair hung down in a mussed braid. In one big hand was a broken beer-bottle; brown bits of glass littered the linoleum. “Come on, come on!” she shouted at the blinking dancers, waving the beer bottle. “Take me on, come on! I dare you!”

Maggie’s rhapsodic paean to sisterhood lay still in her mouth.

Ed kept well away from Semanski, but kept filming. Dave edged to the men’s room to get Holling back as one of the official chaperones, and one well-used to dealing with aggressive customers.

Jack Jenkins’ attention riveted on the angry policewoman. “I was afraid she’d be a mean drunk. Stay here, Walt.” The big hairy man got up from his table and walked toward the big angry woman. Barbara was still turning in circles, threatening the dancers with the jagged edge of the beer bottle. People were backing away, not meeting her eyes to avoid triggering aggression.

“Sergeant Semanski,” Jack said gently, receiving both her full attention and the sight of the business end of the bottle. “It’s me, Jack Jenkins. You’re committing a 402. You’ve taken me in often enough on the same charge.”

“Damn right,” Semanski snapped, “wanna make something of it?”

“This isn’t like you, Sergeant,” Jack said, not raising a hand or moving back as the big woman lunged and feinted with the brown bottle. “You haven’t been acting like yourself for ten days. You’ve always upheld the law. You respect the law. You love the law, above everything else in the world.”

A ripple of indrawn breaths swept the hall, around the tightly-focused attention of the two figures at the center. Everyone present knew what had happened to the policewoman; Barbara’s behavior all week was suddenly understandable.

Raven grass reversed the object of your love.

Semanski snarled and thrust with the bottle again, something wild and grief-stricken in her eyes.

“And Maurice is temporarily gay and hibernating until it’s over, so you can’t sublimate with sex,” the logger said gently, and sidestepped another lunge.

In Barbara’s mad, drunken eyes were the beginnings of tears.

“It’s not your fault, Sergeant. It’s only the Raven grass. When it’s over you’ll be back to your old self again. And the extenuating circumstances will exonerate you,” the burly black-bearded man said gently.

She shuddered. Her lower lip quivered. The bottle quivered.

“Please, Sgt. Semanski,” Jenkins said. “Put the bottle down.”

Semanski’s eyes shut tight, hard, blinking away moisture before it could trickle down her cheeks. Her eyes opened. She turned, and put the broken bottle in the trash bin Holling was holding out to her.

“Thank you, Sergeant.” Jack Jenkins walked over and put a big hand on her broad shoulder. “I’m making a citizen’s arrest. Your sentence is to spend the rest of the Raven grass in your holding cell.”

Semanski nodded, turned around and put her wrists behind her back. Her handcuffs dangled from the back belt-loop. “My keys are in the rear pocket,” she said quietly. Jack cuffed her. “Thank you.”
“We’ll take turns guarding you,” Marilyn said, and half the people in the hall nodded.

“I’ll keep an eye on your dogs, Barb,” Walt said.

“Used to have a Shepherd m’self,”

“Thank you,” Barbara Semanski whispered, eyes full of gratitude to the town she had patrolled so faithfully for so long. “Thank you all.” Then she straightened and began to mutter to herself as Jack led her peacefully outside. “You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right…” The doors closed on the little drama and people quietly swirled in to fill in the gap.

Chris turned back to the turntable. “Okay, let’s hit the floor again, people!” he said into the intercom, and seconds later a lively country-western tune stirred up a floor full of line-dancers.

Meanwhile Joel Fleischman was back in his room reading medical journals; the 6-inch high stack of magazines on his desk carried articles that dealt with endocrinology, mycology, spore-carried infections and airborne viruses.

He was trout fishing in a boat on the lake, his line dangling from a peeled hazel wand and his hook baited with a red berry. A massive white-bearded man with a gentle face fished beside him, one arm thrown around his shoulders in the most loving fashion imaginable. An engrossed, massively-Afro’ed young man stared into the water from his other side, the fishline dangling from the neck of an electric guitar.

He looked from Walt Whitman to Jimi Hendrix, these two powerful male influences on his life, and love swelled inside him until he thought he would burst with joy. He embraced Whitman and stroked his white beard, felt a whiskery kiss on his cheek. He leaned over and kissed Jimi on the mouth, tasted his sweat that not even the headband could keep back.

Then he pulled out a double-barreled shotgun, aimed at them and pulled the triggers, one after the other. Their bloodied bodies splashed into the water and were gone.

Chris bolted upright, horror sloshing through him. He thought he was going to vomit.

Throwing on his leather jacket and jeans, he staggered outside toward his motorcycle, hand groping for the keys. The cold night air slapped him awake, opened his eyes wide. But he needed more than wakefulness to banish that nightmare—he needed light, noise, people to drive down the evil worm in his soul, the black pit at his center that had stalked him ever since the grass had crushed beneath his heel.

The Harley roared awake and Chris zoomed off to town.

The Brick was still open, Buddha be thanked—if it was proper to thank an abstaining religious figure for the availability of beer. Beer—was a drunken stupor what he wanted or needed? Was he to take Maurice’s route through this time of reversed sexuality? It was a horrific thought, but if that black worm wouldn’t stop eating at him—

“Shot and a beer, Holling,” Chris said quickly, pulling up a stool and patting his pockets for his wallet. It was just past one; the only people in were Holling cleaning the counter, Eugene sweeping the floor, and Jack Jenkins and Walt Kupfer playing pool.

The shot made Chris gasp and clutch the counter, his eyes watering. Single-malt. Holling knew.

“Oh, hullo, Chris,” Walt’s gravelly voice came over his shoulder. The older man was picking up a mug of beer himself. “Not doing the night shift on the radio?”

“Automatic tonight.” But a night shift on top of the morning show just might wear him out and make him stop dreaming. Tomorrow… “You’re with Jack, Walt?”

The Wall Street broker-turned-trapper shrugged. “He’s here to play pool. I’m here to drink beer. Beats staring at a bathroom wall with a Mandate. At least this way I can look at Holling and remember.”

Chris dropped his head, fiercely ashamed and angry at the ugly little black worm that had just popped up again.

“Chris, is there something wrong?” And that older voice was so gentle, so understanding.

He’s been through Raven grass before, since I was born.

He looked at Walt. He listened to his intuition.

“Walt,” he said tentatively. “Can I talk to you, privately?”

“Of course,” Walt said instantly. “Come on.”

The old man and the young man settled themselves and their beers in a booth as far from the other people in the Brick as possible.

“Walt,” Chris said, and dropped his head. “This is something I’m not proud of. I’ve been trying to fight it, but I don’t know how. Maybe you can help, you’ve been through Raven grass before.”

“Twice before,” Walt said. He sighed. “But Holling’s married now, so I’m sitting this one out.”

The worm loomed. Quick, expose the little bastard to the light—

“I’m homophobic,” Chris blurted. “Enough. Right down at the core. It’s lying there in a little knot, and it makes me angry or sick or disgusted at the thought of men with men.”

Walt watched and was still. Chris continued.
“Women with women doesn’t enter into it for some reason, my mind dismisses them completely, but every time I think of men together there’s this little Cotton Mather inside me chasing me off the grass. I never thought I’d sit out an orgy in my life, with my chemistry. But all I’ve done this past week is stroke my own ego, if you know what I mean.” He shook his head. “And even then, every time I start to think of men, my mind chokes up. I have to conjure up some genderless Annie Lennox/ David Bowie mix to finish the job.” He laughed a little, painfully. “Some hypocrite, huh? Been telling people all week to do what the grass says, and I’m the one acting like Maurice.”

Walt exhaled heavily. “Old baggage. I know that. It’s bad.”

Chris made himself look Walt in the eye. “I thought I was better than that, y’know? But this nurture stuff—I’m from Virginia. In that place, if a boy doesn’t have a gun by the age of five he’s called a sissy.” The word hissed out of his mouth. “The one thing your dad would not forgive you for. You could rob a liquor store, beat up black kids, kill people, no problem—but you were a disgrace if you liked flowers or music.”

“Or poetry,” Walt said gently, and saw Chris’ tiny reaction. “Especially Walt Whitman poetry.”

Chris buried his head in his hands. “I know. That’s what makes it worse. In prison we all knew who the punks were, but that was more a power thing, a King of the Castle, that was okay.

“When I went on retreat a few years ago, Walt, I found myself attracted to one of the monks. I mean sexually attracted. I wanted to kiss him, I dreamed about him. I was angry and shocked. I was relieved when I found out it was a woman disguised as a man. Why is that? Exactly the same thing happened as before I knew—nothing. She was a monk, they take vows of chastity, we did nothing, but I didn’t mind being attracted to a monk any more, once I found out the monk I was attracted to was a woman.

“This is stronger than that, Walt. Far stronger, overwhelming. This is a big part of being human and I’m crippled. I should be dancing on the grass and loving my fellow man, not huddling in my john imagining a music video.” The last words were mumbled in the barely-touched beer. “I feel like a failure as a human being.”

“So you think about sex between men, and you get sick,” Walt said, his gnarled fingers laced together before him, his keen blue eyes missing nothing in the young man’s anguished posture.

“Yes.” One finger traced mug-rings embedded in the varnished table. “I…” Chris took a breath. “Ed’s been sending me signals.”

“Signals?”

“Candy, flowers, a book of poetry, a copy of Babette’s Feast.”

“Signals, all right,” Walt said, nodding.

“…I want to get over this thing. I want to respond to Ed, to make him happy. I want sex that’s gonna knock me sideways and make me see God. But when I start to think of the physical part of it my mind freezes.”

“Well, there’s your problem right there!” Walt exclaimed. He leveled one thick finger between Chris’ eyes, his own eyes under arched brows. “Thinking. If you were to just do it you’d feel a hell of a lot better. You dump a lot of baggage once you’ve got some actual data to compare to the theories you grew up with.” Walt leaned back and cleared his throat, as if he was about to recite a hunting story. “Y’know, Chris, the first time I gave Holling a blow job—”

Chris shuddered.

“Ah ah, you’re thinking,” Walt snapped, tapping the man’s hand with his own in a mock-reproving way. “Don’t think! Don’t picture it, just hear the words. It was the first time I’d sucked a cock, the thought of doing it made me sick. I made myself do it because Holling had done it to me. But once I was actually doing it—making Holling moan with pleasure, feeling that warm skin and that flesh in my mouth, knowing how good I was making him feel because I’d felt it myself—it was the sweetest thing I’d ever done.” The mustache turned up at one corner. “Then I panicked at the last minute and pulled away, I nipped him with my teeth, he yelled loud enough to wake the dead, he lost the hard-on, we had to wait a couple of days before we could try again—but the important thing was that I’d done it instead of thinking about it. And the next time it was wonderful, because my fear was all gone.

“That’s all it is, Chris. Fear. Homophobia—not hatred, fear. And this is something you’ve never done before; it’s always scary to do something the first time, whether it’s flying a plane, conducting a leveraged buy-out, or having sex with someone shaped just like you.”

Chris nodded. He looked very relieved. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, Walt.”

“Just do it, Chris,” Walt insisted. “Do it with someone who won’t make fun of you or treat you badly. Someone who’s had some experience in these things, and can give you some tips. Someone who won’t mind if the first time is awkward or clumsy or a last-minute choke.”

Chris looked at Walt. Walt did not leer, smile, wink or arch his eyebrow; he simply met the young man’s perusal with a frank gaze.
“I’m not offering this out of the goodness of my heart, Chris,” the older man said bluntly. “I do want to help you, but mostly I just want to get in your pants. You’re a beautiful young man.”

Chris blinked and shook his head. “I’m not thinking,” he assured Walt. “Listen, why don’t you try something quick and easy so I can—”

Walt’s hand was on Chris’ crotch under the table before he’d finished the sentence. The hand moved strongly against the tender flesh protected by heavy denim.

Walt grinned to see Chris’ dark eyes glaze over, his mouth hang open in stunned realization. He fondled some more, pleased to feel the cock hardening against his hand, and let go. Chris made a small noise of protest.

“There,” Walt said, as if he’d been teaching Chris how to tie a fishing-fly. “That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

Chris blinked, coughed, cleared his throat.

“Practice is all you need. Didn’t you ever choke when you were at bat with one of your lady friends?”

“Never,” Chris said, still a little dazed. He wasn’t boasting, simply stating a fact.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything,” Walt said. “Interested?”

Chris looked at Walt. He looked, and just saw his everyday friend. But his cock remembered the feel of that wonderful hand. He hadn’t wanted to puke when Walt had touched him; no little black worm had raised its ugly head. “Yes. Follow me back to the trailer? I took my bike—”

“I came in Jack’s truck. Let me tell him not to wait up for me and we can head out together.”

They arose from the table, bringing their half-empty beers to the counter to save Holling the walk.

At the bar Chris said, “Let me try something,” and kissed Walt on the mouth. Walt responded appropriately, and what was begun in haste ended at leisure. When they separated, Chris was beaming. “Nice mustache,” he said sheepishly, and stroked the gray bristle under Walt’s nose before rubbing his own upper lip. “Itches.”

“Come on,” Walt said, in a low tender voice that did not sound at all like his normal gravelly tones. “Let’s go get some preliminaries worked out. Need rubbers?”

“Got plenty. Let’s go before I get cold feet.”

Holling kept wiping the same immaculate spot on the bar, his face neutral. Only when the two men had left the Brick did he let a smile cross his face.

As Walt settled in behind Chris on the Harley, the younger man laughed out loud.

“What is it?” the trapper asked.

“I came out here tonight to find something that would distract me from morbid thoughts.” Chris laughed again. “Looks like I found it!”

They roared off to the lakeside trailer Chris Stevens called home.

“...The shepherds’ swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.”

Chris finished “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” and closed the book. “Today’s reading’s going out to Ron, Eric, and all other good Cicelians who normally share the proclivities of our town’s founders—a dab of token heterosexuality. In memory of Cicely and Roslyn.”

He coughed, and reached up to rub his still-irritated upper lip; he had no objections to being kissed until his lips were swollen, but this was the first time he’d done so with a mustache attached. “Hey, guys, forgive me if I’m a little dazed or unresponsive today. But yours truly lost his cherry last night. That’s right, I have officially gone up the down stair case and am proud to announce my arrival as a fully functional Homo sapiens. Many thanks, Walt.

“I’ve had a little problem all week and it seems to be in full remission.” That was an understatement—Chris and Walt had spent hours attacking his “problem” from every conceivable angle; what the older man had lacked in stamina he made up for in experience, and for Chris vice versa. “In fact, it’s gotten me thinking about other social diseases—racism, sexism, classism, jingoism—that sit inside like malaria; every time you think you’ve got it licked it crops up again. It’s a lot easier than finding answers in that murky moral gray area where we all live; that’s why we do it, we want quick simple answers where there are none. Nothing but steady and constant remedies will solve them. So for all you people out there who have to keep reminding themselves every day not to use the easy answers, my hat’s off to you. Take it from me, cold turkey’s the only way to do it.

“This one’s going out to Ed.”

The Beatles again—this time, “I Wanna Hold Your Hand.”

Fifteen minutes later, a bright-eyed Ed Chigliak showed up outside the plate-glass window of KBHR Station that overlooked the single main street of Cicely. For the first time since Raven grass began, Ed was not carrying his movie camera. His eager face and bright eyes through the window were all the question he needed to ask.

Chris’ answering beam and nod were all the answer
the young man needed; Ed’s grin lit the mid-morning street like a Raven totem pole at Christmas as Bessie Smith crooned “Dirty But Good.”

“Thank you! That’s got to be it!”

Dr. Fleischman stared at the slide through his microscope like a man in red on a horse catching sight of the fox. This particular fox was a scattering of tiny y-shaped formations amid the more conventional spirals and spheres of the microscopic world. Spores he’d never seen before—a new species, maybe even a new genus.

“A dormant spore, acts like a virus, appears on the first growth, affecting the pheromones, airborne, released via physical contact—I’ve got it!”

Joel leaped to his feet, all exuberance, the joy of the detective solving the crime, Helen Keller understanding W-A-T-E-R, DeSoto setting eyes on the Pacific Ocean.

He had to tell somebody. He looked at his office wall-clock, a Hanukkah gift from Maggie in exchange for the Christmas tree. Eleven-thirty-seven at night. Who’d be up? Holling and Shelley would be tending the Brick. Ed—Ed would be up working on his movie, Ed had been helping him in the lab. Ed!

Joel called. Four rings later, he got Ed’s answering machine. He left a message, excited and angry. Probably so caught up in his editing he didn’t want to leave it.

He called Maurice. What the hell, wake him up!

“Mmm. Who was that?” Chris murmured sleepily, lifting his head from Ed’s chest.

“Think it was Dr. Fleischman,” Ed mumbled, blinking, his heart returning to its normal rhythm after the startlement of the phone’s ringing jolting him out of his sated sleep.

“We’ll have to thank him later,” Chris said, and kissed Ed again.

Ed smiled, and his arms came up around Chris as their bodies tangled together again, both blessed with the stamina of young men.

The next day Joel Fleischman was looking at his y-spores in the lab, muttering under his breath. He’d isolated the cause, now he had to find the treatment for it. Find what agent the y-spore worked with, what worked against it, distill it, test it for purity, a few lab mice later and he had a cure. Had a nice ring to it: Dr. Joel Fleischman, winner of the Nobel Prize in medicine for his work with dormant fungi. Well, he could dream.

Maurice had sounded very pleased; there was the definite implication that a successful counteragent for this grass-effect would be exceedingly and personally profitable for Dr. Fleischman. A cure for this viral infection. A cure for this reversed sexual preference. A cure, even, for…?

“Ausgezeichnet, mein kerl!”

Joel looked up at that, and saw a man in a white lab coat behind him. This man looked like the ideal scientist; lean face, keen intelligent eyes behind flashing round glasses, long white hands holding a clipboard. It was he who’d said, “Outstanding, my boy.”

Joel had seen him before, in black-and-white pictures.

“This is excellent work,” the clean man with the clipboard said in approval, bending over to look into the microscope over Joel’s shoulder; he smelled of carbolic and bleach. “This is a neat clean method for removing homosexuals—the Solution takes a great deal of manpower, ammunition, train fuel, and Zyklon-B, even if we do reuse what we can. Even the cost of the ink must be accounted for in the cause of science!” he said with a flash-toothed smile, and tapped Joel’s left forearm. “Why so glum-looking, Jew? This lab work has saved your ass so far. This may even bear your name someday, to honor a cleaner of the Race.”

Joel stared at the pristine man who smelled like a clean, sterile morgue, and who had treated the camps as cages full of tattooed, shorn-headed lab mice—some of whom had worn lavender triangles instead of yellow stars—and who had wanted to make the world neater and cleaner for the right kind of people—

“Kizzisch meine tuchas!” Joel spat at the scientist, and grinned like a death’s-head to see the man rear back, startled. He snapped off the microscope light, jumped off his stool and strode out of his office/lab, past the knitting Marilyn and Lightfeather Duncan who never looked up, and onto the street, his head pounding. Both hands went up to his temple to massage away the throb, and before he could stop himself he’d pushed his left tattooed left forearm. “Why so glum-looking, Jew? This lab work has saved your ass so far. This may even bear your name someday, to honor a cleaner of the Race.”

All right. All right. He’d isolated the fungal virus. His little y-shaped spores could bear his name. And ten years from now, it would still be called Raven grass, and people here would still run cawing through the streets while his dissertation on Sporos fleischmani moldered in a scientific journal. Well, that was the way of it, in science. He’d write up his study and submit it and see what it did for his reputation. But he would not try to
find a cure for it. Let Maurice tear his hair and curse about stifled scientific endeavors, let him talk to the clean man in the white coat…

He took a deep breath again, and held still, trying to think of what he’d smelled. It was lovely: sweet and fresh and strong and wild all at once. It was a homey feeling in the pit of his stomach, like the smell of fresh hot bagels in a white paper bag. Outdoorsy smell like a lawn mower. And the feeling of being fourteen again… He choked on a horrified laugh, and a groan, and covered his groin. Which only made the problem worse, or better.

He looked down, and saw tender green grass squashed beneath his Nikes. He’d wandered out of town and had walked out onto the bright green growth. It was the first time he’d gotten a whiff of the stuff without a mask on.

“Oh, God,” he groaned, clutching himself. The idea of beating off in public was too humiliating to think about—and yet he could think of nothing else. He’d never gotten so hard so fast in his life. Anyone, anything, a hole in a tree for God’s sake, it was like holding his breath, turning blue, needing to inhale, he was drowning—

“Hey, Joel. Where you going with that gun in your hand?”

That gentle voice arrowed straight for Joel’s groin. He turned around.

Right at that moment, Chris Stevens was the most beautiful and desirable human being Joel had ever seen.

“You looked like you needed company when I saw you stagger out of your office,” Chris was saying. “So I put on side A of Jakov Mennen. We’ve got twenty-five minutes till I have to get back to the station.”

Joel wanted to die of embarrassment at being seen by anyone in this state. But whether he’d been caught hunched over clutching at his groin in an unmistakable hold, or whether he had merely been bowed over and his erection tenting his trousers, Joel never could remember afterwards.

Chris advanced on Joel, who could now inhale the man’s clean wild smell. He must have been aware of that smell a dozen times before, performing checkups on the town’s deejay and spiritual leader. It had never before made him moan and bend over like this. It was stronger and more lust-inducing than even the sweet grass; this curled in his guts and wound tendrils all along his nerves till he was pitched at a level nearly to scream.

And Joel remembered the sexual heat Chris insisted he went into twice or three times a year, when he was literally irresistible to every straight female in Cicely; his promiscuity at that time was nothing less than a seasonal mating urge. None of the women had been jealous of each other, any more than does are jealous when one buck mounts them all.

It seemed that the Stevens sexual cycle had peaked in time to coincide with the occurrence of Sporos fleischmani in the grass.

Chris smiled gently at Joel. “You look the way I did a week ago,” he said. “It’s all right, Joel. It’s nothing to be scared of. It’s just sex. It’s life, man; spring’s returning.”

Joel, frozen in his tracks, was gently surrounded, held close. Chris’ smell overwhelmed him, and he whimpered. But then warmth and love and belonging covered his mouth in sweetness, yielding moist surfaces to mingle with his own, joining them together.

To be unraveled, by a kiss…

Chris took Joel by the hand and led him further from the buildings and into the trees. Joel stumbled blindly after; the thought of being separated from Chris was too painful to bear. He found himself pushed to lean against the broad rough-barked trunk of a lodgepole pine. “Let me show you what Walt showed me,” Chris was saying, matter-of-factly undoing Joel’s belt and trousers fly.

“We,” Joel managed, one tiny thread of sanity whirling in the haze of his lust and need, “we need…something, it’s not safe—”

Chris stuck one hand in his jacket pocket and pulled it out in a fist; three condom packets were clutched between his knuckles like shurikens. “Ribbed or regular?” he asked.

Joel stammered something, and soon he was blindly gripping the tree behind him as if bound to it, gasping and moaning. His core of pain was engulfed in heat, supple wetness that twined round his own heat, pulling, sucking him, sucking. Oh God, Chris was eating him alive, eating him, his strong hot hands wrapped around his ass, keeping the tender skin away from the tree bark, and sucking, taking it all down. He cried out as lights flashed in his eyes, lightning gathered in his groin, built to a charge—

One finger slipped in hard, drove in on the downsuck, twisted—

What sounded like an eagle scream echoed back through the town’s main street.

When Joel could think again he stared down at his exposed groin as Chris cleaned him with a moist towelette—stolen from the Brick during one of their rib dinners, no doubt—and tossed it in a crumpled paper bag he’d pulled from his other pocket and in which the condom had been disposed.
“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Chris said, looking up and grinning at Joel as he cleaned his hands with another towelette. “Doing anything tonight?”

Joel blinked, still dazed by the glory of orgasm. He frowned and blinked again. “Don’t—I don’t think so.”

“Now you are.” Chris redid his trouser fly and gave him a brisk, friendly kiss. “See you at eight in the Brick. We’ll have dinner. See where it goes from there. Maybe you can repay the favor.”

Joel nodded. And smiled.

Chris emerged from his trailer and blinked awake in the brisk cold of the Alaska spring morning. The air was biting, the sun a wan presence on the horizon where it would linger for most of the day. In a pallid dawn haze he walked to the end of the dock, dipped his pail in the lake and headed to the circle of stones and charred wood; the year had turned and he could once more cook outside. Another month and he could bathe in the lake again.

The coffeepot was almost boiling when Chris heard a familiar motor. A grin spread across his face and he stood to face the approaching Harley Davidson, and the black-clad figure who pulled up to the trailer. “You’re just in time for coffee, Bernard!”

Bernard cut the motor, pulled the helmet off his head and straightened his glasses. “I ate at the Brick before I came up here, Chris, but I’d love a coffee.” He dismounted and walked over to his half-brother, and they embraced.

“My thoughts exactly,” Chris responded exuberantly. “Let me just get another mug out of the trailer.”

Bernard squatted by the fire and looked at the two mugs already there. “Company last night, eh?”

“And still asleep,” Chris added as he returned from the trailer. He poured and did not offer Bernard the sugar when he sweetened his own cup. He had known Bernard did not take sugar even before they knew each other.

There had been a subliminal bond between the two men who shared a single wandering father ever since they had discovered each other’s existence only two years ago; even before they’d known each other’s identities, they had completed each other’s sentences, responded simultaneously with identical turns of phrase, and had been an unbeatable bridge team. Chris had always thought that he might have a long-lost brother somewhere; Bernard had had the same thought, but had assumed that his sibling would also be black. Bernard had motored up from his native Portland several times since then to visit Chris, and even to lend a hand with the radio show.

For a while the two brothers drank coffee and caught each other up. Chris smiled when Bernard told him that Ann McGrath sent her best to her former lover.

“So, do I know her?” Bernard inclined his head toward the trailer as he drank.

“Yes, you know him,” Chris corrected. “It’s Dr. Fleischman.”

Both Bernard’s eyebrows lifted. “New development?”

“Very new.” Chris beamed. “I’m telling you, Bernard, it’s made me feel more like a complete human being, I’ve gotten in touch with my feminine self, declared myself a person of color, and now I’m a full-fledged bisexual.” He took a deep drag on the powerful coffee he always made after a busy night. “It’s a victory, man, I feel it in my heart, because I’ve overcome the way I was raised. I just don’t know if this will last beyond the grass—but even if it’s just the grass talking, I’m listening to it.”

“Grass?” Bernard was still a little poleaxed. Chris had always seemed a cheerful, easy-going fellow, but had been sexually attracted only to women in all the time Bernard had known him.

Chris explained about the first grass and the Raven Grass. Bernard only nodded and drank his brother’s coffee. He’d once shared a dream with Chris about riding in a truck driven by a one-eyed Carl Jung; it was not such a big step from there to believe that grass could change one’s sexuality.

Bernard tossed his coffee dregs into the fire and walked to the lake shore to rinse his mug. Chris added more water and coffee to the pot, preparing for Fleischman’s awakening. But a moan at the shore caught his attention at once. Chris stood, alarmed at the slightly bent-over figure, and walked over to put an arm around his shoulders. “Bernard? Hey, bro, what’s wrong?”

Bernard moaned again. By now Chris recognized what that moan meant. And he saw the tender new lakeshore grass under Bernard’s booted feet.

Incest revulsion was hard-wired into the human brain to protect the genetic material from contamination. There was no danger of such damage here. And both were adults; there was no coercion or force at work. Raven must be laughing his black-feathered butt off over this one.

For a moment Chris was afraid as Bernard straightened and looked right at him, a piercing gaze of agony. But then he smiled, and so did Bernard.

“It’s all right,” they said simultaneously.

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Chris smiled tenderly at his handsome, bookish-looking half-brother, crooked a finger, and caressed Bernard’s black mustache, his finger pale and
pinkish against the brown skin. Bernard smiled at him again.

A few moments later Chris pulled away and said, “I see what Ann means. You’re a great kisser.” Without another word he set the coffeepot off the fire. He straightened and linked arms with Bernard, and they headed toward the trees, away from the lake.

Only one last shadow tugged at Chris’ thoughts as they reached the thick growth of soft vegetation. “Ann…” She and Bernard were still steady lovers.

“She loves you too,” Bernard replied. “She wouldn’t mind.” He removed his glasses and slipped them into his jacket pocket even as he ground the grass beneath his heel. “After all, you’re just a passing…crush.”

They grinned. And simultaneously they moved forward into another, deeper kiss. They sank into the sweet, wicked green growth. “I’ve got condoms,” both said simultaneously.

Two bull moose stepped carefully around the entwined human bodies on their way to the middle of the clearing for better grazing.

By the time Joel Fleischman stumbled sleepily out of the trailer and was slapped awake by the brisk cold air, both men were at the fire making more coffee, and he gratefully accepted a mug. “Hullo, Bernard,” Fleischman mumbled. “Watch out for the grass.”

“I’ll remember that, Joel,” Bernard said solemnly, and Chris took a long drink of coffee to hide a smile.

Green carpeted the world, peeping through the melting snow everywhere. The grass was tall and strong, darkening under the Alaska sun, flourishing everywhere in that brief sub-Arctic spring.

As easily and naturally, the change had happened in the people too.

At the Brick, the sound of the radio was juxtaposed with muffled laughter and thumping sounds from Holling and Shelley’s bedroom upstairs. Eugene looked up and smiled as he broke open rolls of change into the cash register, and Dave emerged from the freezer with a batch of frozen moose patties to thaw for the lunch rush.

The town’s B&B bore a big sign on the door—CLOSED/GONE FISHING/BACK ON WEDNESDAY. Behind the shuttered window upstairs, Ron and Eric were a single curled ball under the blankets on their bed, sleeping the sleep of the profoundly exhausted.

At Ruth-Ann’s house, a peaceful Walt hoisted his coffee cup. “Here’s to insatiable young men.”

“Hear, hear,” Ruth-Ann agreed, tapping her own steaming mug against his.

Ed Chigliak ran his film and smiled at the fluttering black shape that flitted across his title sequence.

Joel was bent over his word processor, a cup of tea and a donut beside him as he tapped out the prologue for his dissertation on the fungus. His room looked exactly the same as before, except for a print of Michaelangelo’s David now tacked up beside the New Yorker cartoon map of the United States.

“Good morning, Cicely,” a cheerful Chris Stevens was saying from every radio, from the KBHR booth. He looked out over the green blush upon the ground, and the red blush upon Sgt. Semanski’s cheeks as the big beaming woman strode up and down the sidewalk outside the station happily writing out parking tickets for all the overnighters. “Looks like Cicely’s as back to normal as it ever gets. The Raven has flown off, the grass is up and strong, and libidos have un-inverted.

“Brother Bernard is heading back to Portland—have a safe trip, bro. And thanks. Give my love to Annie.

“Dave and Eugene will be running the Brick for a few days, as the proprietors will be reacquainting themselves with each other. Ron and Eric’s place will be closed for a few days for the same reason.

“Observe traffic rules, people—Barbara Semanski’s been sprung by Maurice and it looks like her weekender at the Minnefield Mansion’s put her back in the swing of things.

“So the Raven grass ends for another decade. Hope it’s been as enlightening for you as it was for me. And speaking of growing things, here’s a few words of wisdom from an unlikely source.”

Chris opened his book to a marked page and read.

“’What a lovely thing a rose is! …Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.’”

Chris closed the book.

“Those are the words of Sherlock Holmes. Not the first person you’d think of when you conjure up an image of someone with a poetic turn of phrase. But people can surprise you.

“So surprise each other. It beats the boxes that we normally live in. ‘Normal’—fight it every chance you get, people. Push those boundaries that hold human beings apart.”

The opening riff of The Kinks’ “Lola” boomed out of
the sound system. Chris leaned back in his chair and watched the rosy-cheeked Barbara Semanski move down the sidewalk, a spring in her step and her ticket book in hand, her whole demeanor testimony to the fact that ex-astronaut Maurice Minnefield did indeed have the right stuff.

Far out on the field, where he could just see past the houses of Main Street, Chris noticed a solitary figure grazing the strong spring grass. It was a single bull moose. It moved across the meadow and vanished into the trees. Chris stared after the big loner, inexpressibly sad for him. He was back to normal too.