

—From *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood (pp. 77-82)

But then he hears “Sir!” right behind him, and he turns and it’s Kenny. Kenny has come running up silently in his sneakers. George supposes he will ask some specific question such as what book are they going to read next in class, and then leave again. But no, Kenny drops into step beside him, remarking in a matter-of-fact voice, “I have to go down to the bookshop.” He doesn’t ask if George is going to the bookshop and George doesn’t tell him that he hasn’t been planning to.

“Did you ever take mescaline, sir?”

“Yes, once. In New York. That was about eight years ago. There weren’t any regulations against selling it then. I just went into a drugstore and ordered some. They’d never heard of it, but they got it for me in a few days.”

“And did it make you see things—like mystical visions and stuff?”

“No. Not what you could call visions. At first I felt seasick. Not badly. And scared a bit, of course. Like Dr. Jekyll might have felt after he’d taken his drug for the first time. And then certain colors began to get very bright and stand out. You couldn’t think why everybody didn’t notice them. I remember a woman’s red purse lying on a table in a restaurant—it was like a public scandal! And people’s faces turn into caricatures; I mean, you seem to see what each one is about, and it’s very crude and simplified. One’s absurdly vain, and another is literally worrying himself sick, and another is longing to pick a fight. And then you see a very few who are simply beautiful, just cause they aren’t anxious or aggressive about anything; they’re taking life as it comes. . . . Oh, and everything becomes more and more three-dimensional: Curtains get heavy and sculptured-looking, and wood is very grainy. And flowers and plants are quite obviously alive. I remember a pot of violets—they weren’t moving, but you knew they could move. Each one was like a snake reared up motionless on its coils. . . . And then, while the thing is working full strength, it’s as if the walls of the room and everything around you are breathing, and the grain in woodwork begins to flow, as though it were a liquid. . . . And then it all slowly dies down again, back to normal. You don’t have any hangover. Afterwards I felt fine. I ate a huge supper.”

“You didn’t take it again after that?”

“No. I found I didn’t want to, particularly. It was just an experience I’d had. I gave the rest of the capsules to friends. One of them saw pretty much what I saw, and another didn’t see anything. And one told me she’d never been so scared in her whole life. But I suspect she was only being polite.

Like thanking for a party—“

“You don’t have any of those capsules left now, do you, sir?”

“No, Kenny, I do not! And even if I had, I wouldn’t distribute them among the student body. I can think of much more amusing ways to get myself thrown out of this place.”

Kenny grins. “Sorry, sir. I was only wondering. . . . I guess, if I really wanted the stuff, I could get it all right. You can get most anything of that kind, right here on campus. This friend of Lois’s got it here. *He* claims, when he took it, he saw God.”

“Well, maybe he did. Maybe I just didn’t take enough.”

Kenny looks down at George. He seems amused. “You know something, sir? I bet, even if you *had* seen God, you wouldn’t tell us.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s what Lois says. She thinks you’re—well, kind of cagey. Like this morning, when you were listening to all that crap we were talking about Huxley—“

“I didn’t notice *you* doing much talking. I don’t think you opened your mouth once.”

“I was watching you. No kidding, I think Lois is right! You let us ramble on, then you straighten us out, and I’m not saying you don’t teach us a lot of interesting stuff—you do—but you never tell us *all* you know about something. . . .”

George feels flattered and excited. Kenny has never talked to him like this before. He can’t resist slipping into the role Kenny so temptingly offers him.

“Well—maybe that’s true, up to a point. You see, Kenny, there are some things you don’t even *know* you know, until you’re asked.”

They have reached the tennis courts. The courts are all in use now, dotted with moving figures. But George, with the lizard-quick glance of a veteran addict, has already noted that the morning’s pair has left, and that none of these players are physically attractive. On the nearest court, a fat, middle-aged faculty member is playing to work up a sweat, against a girl with hair on her legs.

“Someone has to ask you a question,” George continues meaningfully, “before you can answer it. But it’s so seldom you find anyone who’ll ask the right questions. Most people aren’t that much interested. . . .”

Kenny is silent. Is he thinking this over? Is he going to ask George something right now? George’s pulse quickens with anticipation.

“It’s not that I *want* to be cagey,” he says, keeping his eyes on the ground and making this as impersonal as he can. “You know, Kenny, so often I feel I want to *tell* things, *discuss* things, absolutely

frankly. I don't mean in class, of course—that wouldn't work. Someone would be sure to misunderstand. . . .”

Silence. George glances quickly up at Kenny and sees that he's looking, though without any apparent interest, at the hirsute girl. Perhaps he hasn't even been listening. It's impossible to tell.

“Maybe this friend of Lois's didn't see God, after all,” says Kenny abruptly. “I mean, he might have been kidding himself. I mean, not too long after he took the stuff, he had a breakdown. He was locked up for three months in an institution. He told Lois that while he was having this breakdown he turned into a devil and he could put out stars. I'm not kidding! He said he could put out seven of them at a time. He was scared of the police, though. He said the police had a machine for catching devils and liquidating them. It was called a *Mo*-machine. *Mo*, that's *Om*—you know, sir, that Indian word for God—spelled backwards.”

“If the police liquidated devils, that would mean they were angels, wouldn't it? Well, that certainly makes sense. A place where the police are angels has to be an insane asylum.”

Kenny is still laughing loudly at this when they reach the bookshop. He wants to buy a pencil sharpener. They have them in plastic covers, red or green or blue or yellow. Kenny takes a red one.

“What was it you wanted to get, sir?”

“Well, nothing, actually.”

“You mean, you walked all the way down here just to keep me company?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Kenny seems sincerely surprised and pleased. “Well, I think you deserve something for that! Here, sir, take one of these. It's on me.”

“Oh, but—well, thank you!” George is actually blushing a little. It's as if he has been offered a rose. He chooses a yellow sharpener.

Kenny grins. “I kind of expected you'd pick blue.”

“Why?”

“Isn't blue supposed to be spiritual?”

“What makes you think I want to be spiritual? And how come you picked red?”

“What's red stand for?”

“Rage and lust.”

“No kidding?”

They remain silent, grinning almost intimately. George feels that, even if all this doubletalk hasn't brought them any closer to understanding each other, the not-understanding, the readiness

to remain at cross-purpose, is in itself a kind of intimacy. Then Kenny pays for the pencil sharpeners and waves his hand with a gesture which implies casual, undeferential dismissal. "I'll see you around."

He strolls away. George lingers on in the bookshop for a few minutes, lest he should seem to be following him.

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In the locker room, George takes off his clothes, gets into his sweatsocks, jockstrap and shorts. Shall he put on a tee shirt? He looks at himself in the long mirror. Not too bad. The bulges of flesh over the belt of the shorts are not so noticeable today. The legs are quite good. The chest muscles, when properly flexed, don't sag. And, as long as he doesn't have his spectacles on, he can't see the little wrinkles inside the elbows, above the kneecaps and around the hollow of the sucked-in belly. The neck is loose and scraggy under all circumstances, in all lights, and would look gruesome even if he were half-blind. He has abandoned the neck altogether, like an untenable military position.

Yet he looks—and doesn't he know it!—better than nearly all of his age-mates at this gym. Not because they're in such bad shape—they are healthy enough specimens. What's wrong with them is their fatalistic acceptance of middle age, their ignoble resignation to grandfatherhood, impending retirement and golf. George is different from them because, in some sense which can't quite be defined but which is immediately apparent when you see him naked, *he hasn't given up*. He is still a contender, and they aren't. Maybe it's nothing more mysterious than vanity which gives him this air of a withered boy? Yes, despite his wrinkles, his slipped flesh, his graying hair, his grim-lipped, strutting spryness, you catch occasional glimpses of a ghostly someone else, soft-faced, boyish, pretty. The combination is bizarre, it is older than middle age itself, but it is there.

Looking grimly into the mirror, with distaste and humor, George says to himself, You old ass, who are you trying to seduce? And puts on his tee shirt.

In the gym there are only three people. It's still too early for the office workers. A big heavy man named Buck—all that remains at fifty of a football player—is talking to a curly-haired young man named Rick, who aspires to television. Buck is nearly nude; his rolling belly bulges indecently

over a kind of bikini, pushing it clear down to the bush line. He seems quite without shame. Whereas Rick, who has a very well-made muscular body, wears a gray wool sweatshirt and pants, covering all of it from the neck to the wrists and ankles. “Hi, George” they both say, nodding casually at him; and this, George feels, is the most genuinely friendly greeting he has received all day.

Buck knows all about the history of sport; he is an encyclopedia of batting averages, handicaps, records and scores. He is in the midst of telling how someone took someone else in the seventh round. He mimes the knockout: “*Pow! Pow!* And, boy, he’d *had* it!” Rick listens, seated astride a bench. There is always an atmosphere of leisureliness in this place. A boy like Rick will take three or four hours to work out, and spend most of the time just yakking about show biz, about sport cars, about football and boxing—very seldom, oddly enough, about sex. Perhaps this is partly out of consideration for the morals of the various young kids and early teen-agers who are usually around. When Rick talks to grownups, he is apt to be smart-alecky or actor-sincere; but with the kids he is as unaffected as a village idiot. He clowns for them and does magic tricks and tells them stories, deadpan, about a store in Long Beach (he gives its exact address) where once in a great while, suddenly and without any previous announcement, they declare a Bargain Day. On such days, every customer who spends more than a dollar gets a Jag or a Porsche or an MG for free. (The rest of the time, the place is an ordinary antique shop.) When Rick is challenged to show the car *he* got, he takes the kids outside and points to a suitable one on the street. When they look at its registration slip and find that it belongs to someone else, Rick swears that that’s his real name; he changed it when he started acting. The kids don’t absolutely disbelieve him, but they yell that he’s a liar and crazy and they beat on him with their fists. While they do this, Rick capers grinning around the gym on all fours, like a dog.

George lies down on one of the inclined boards in order to do sit-ups. This is always something you have to think yourself into; the body dislikes them more than any other exercise. While he is getting into the mood, Webster comes over and lies down on the board next to his. Webster is maybe twelve or thirteen, slender and graceful and tall for his age, with long smooth golden boy-legs. He is gentle and shy, and he moves about the gym in a kind of dream; but he keeps steadily on with his workout. No doubt he thinks he looks scrawny and has vowed to become a huge wide awkward overloaded muscle man. George says, “Hi, Web,” and Webster answers, “Hi, George,” is a shy, secretive whisper.

Now Webster begins doing his sit-ups, and George, peeling off his tee shirt on a sudden impulse, follows his example. As they continue, George feels an empathy growing between them.

They are not competing with each other; but Webster's youth and liveness seem to possess George, and this borrowed energy is terrific. Withdrawing his attention from his own protesting muscles and concentrating it upon Webster's flexing and relaxing body, George draws the strength from it to go on beyond his normal forty sit-ups, to fifty, to sixty, to seventy, to eighty. Shall he try for a hundred? Then, all at once, he is aware that Webster has stopped. The strength leaves him instantly. He stops too, panting hard—though not any harder than Webster himself. They lie there panting, side by side. Webster turns his head and looks at George, obviously rather impressed.

“How many do you do?” he asks.

“Oh—it depends.”

“These things just kill me. Man!”

How delightful it is to be here. If only one could spend one's entire life in this state of easy-going physical democracy. Nobody is bitchy here, or ill-tempered, or inquisitive. Vanity, including the most outrageous posings in front of the mirrors, is taken for granted. The godlike young baseball player confides to all his anxiety about the smallness of his ankles. The plump banker, rubbing his face with skin cream, says simply, “I can't afford to get old.” No one is perfect and no one pretends to be. Even the half dozen quite well-known actors put on no airs. The youngest kids sit innocently naked beside sixty- and seventy-year-olds in the steam room, and they call each other by their first names. Nobody is too hideous or too handsome to be accepted as an equal. Surely everyone is nicer in this place than he is outside it?

Today George feels more than usually unwilling to leave the gym. He does his exercises twice as many times as he is supposed to; he spends a long while in the steam room; he washes his hair.