

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

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Tietam Brown

Mick Foley

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## About the Book

Antietam (Andy) Brown - named for the great-great-grandfather who died on that Civil War battleground - was ten years old when he killed his abusive foster father. Now, after seven years in reform school, he is free to make a new start. But he is immediately thrust into the violent and debased life of his real father (known as Tietam) - an oddly charismatic man who seems addicted to bodybuilding, beer-swilling and 'bareback riding'. Swimming through a morass of crudity and violence, Andy is stunned to find himself pursued by the high school homecoming queen - a born-again Christian. Obsessed with the idea of offering his girlfriend a pure love and driven to find out whether he's descended from a monster or a hero, Andy searches for the truth in the dangerous currents of his father's past and present.

## About the Author

Mick Foley is the author of *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* and *Foley is Good: And the Real World is Faker Than Wrestling*, both *New York Times* number one bestsellers, as well as two children's books. During the course of his sixteen-year wrestling career he was World Wrestling Federation Champion three times. He lives on Long Island with his wife and four children.

ALSO BY MICK FOLEY

*Foley is Good: And the Real World is  
Faker Than Wrestling*

*Have a Nice Day!: A Tale of Blood  
and Sweatsocks*

*For my mother,  
who always thought I could write one of these things*

# Tietam Brown

A Novel

Mick Foley

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



## October 23, 1985

SHE HAD WANTED me to kiss her. No doubt about it. The realization hit me as I navigated my dad's '79 Fairmont through the back roads of Conestoga, New York, a small town about thirty miles south of Syracuse.

To tell the truth, a high school senior with one functioning hand really had no business operating a motor vehicle in the first place, let alone a one-functioning-hand high school senior without a license or even a half a thimbleful of experience behind the wheel.

Unfortunately, my father had refused to drive me. Not out of meanness, however—no, my dad felt like he was doing me a favor. “Hey Andy, a kid only goes on one first date,” he’d said. “You’ve gotta make it count. Besides, kid, it’s kind of tough to cop a feel in the backseat when you’ve got your old man behind the wheel.” Maybe it was that last bit of paternal sentiment that sold me on the driving idea, and at approximately 7:40 p.m. on a cool autumn evening, I held the door open for Miss Terri Lynn Johnson as she slipped ever so gracefully into the cracked burgundy interior of the piece-of-crap Fairmont that my dad had insisted on lending me. No, a feel was not copped on that night, nor was one even attempted, but that didn’t make the night any less glorious, because after all . . . she had wanted me to kiss her. And that was a fact, or at least a pretty strong gut feeling that was worth celebrating . . . with music.

A red light at the intersection of Elm and Broadhurst, only a half a mile from Conestoga High, where I’d met Terri only six weeks earlier, gave me the respite from my driving duties that was necessary in selecting the perfect

postrevelatory music. Unfortunately, even a red-light respite isn't much good when trying to fumble with some clunky old eight-tracks with a hand that hasn't closed, clasped, grabbed, or done anything meaningful since Gerald Ford was in office.

I had barely managed to clear my dad's blue fuzzy dice from the glove box when the light turned green. Yeah, my dad had fuzzy dice all right, only they didn't usually reside in the glove box. No, those bad boys swung proudly from the rearview, and served to separate my dad's machine from all other pieces-of-crap '79 Fairmonts on the road. So with the light instructing me to go, and a late-model Ford pickup truck's blaring horn adding to the urgency of such a moment, I reached into the glove box with my left hand, the good hand, and pulled out the first eight-track I felt. Then, with a hint of defiance, I popped that mother in, pushed my curly dark hair back in the general vicinity of where my right ear used to be, and stepped on the gas, as the opening strains of *Barry Manilow Live* drowned out both the horn of the Ford and the shouts of the driver within.

What's wrong? Oh you don't think Barry is appropriate for such an occasion? Sure, it might not have been my first choice, or even in my top couple hundred. And true, the sky blue jumpsuit Barry sported on the cover of the live album, or eight-track in this case, may have been a tad inappropriate. But don't try denying that "Mandy" and "Could It Be Magic" are classic compositions that still hold up well today. Jumpsuit or no jumpsuit, they held up just fine on that night in 1985, and as my voice joined Barry's in belting out, "Baby, I love you now, now, now, and hold on fast, could this be the magic at last," I reflected back on what was at that point the greatest night of my young life.

Terri was several leagues out of my ballpark. Not that I was a horrible-looking guy or anything, but a missing ear and a useless hand tend to cramp a guy's style at that age, and the style-cramping perpetuated itself in an awkward

shyness that had invited a lifetime of bullies to boost their self-esteem, or at least try to, at my expense. Sometimes they succeeded, sometimes, as I'll explain later, they didn't. Come to think of it, a lifetime of foster homes, orphanages, and juvenile detention centers hadn't done a whole lot for my sense of self, either.

Terri, on the other hand, was drop-dead gorgeous. Just a beautiful creature. Her beauty was beyond compare, with flaming locks of auburn hair, ivory skin, and eyes of emerald green. Actually, that description is straight out of the Dolly Parton song "Jolene," but that was Terri. Statuesque, but not slutty like some of the other girls who graced Conestoga's halls, she carried herself with a maturity that belied her years. It was really only on game days, when the cheerleading squad sported their official blue-and-orange Conestoga cheerleading sweaters, that her physical attributes really screamed for attention. And in doing so, made me think of the word "maturity" in a whole new light.

She literally could have had her pick of any boy she wanted. Any man for that matter. Her father headed up the local Assembly of God, where his fiery demeanor and hell-and-brimstone sermons contrasted sharply with her gentle nature and overall acceptance of everyone not as fortunate as herself—which pretty much meant everyone.

Her father's vocation, combined with her natural gifts, had given birth to a rather unusual challenge that was spoken of in almost reverent tones among the boys at Conestoga High. No one, it seemed, had gotten into Terri Johnson's pants, or for that matter anywhere even remotely close. Personally, I found the whole subject of Terri's pants to be disrespectful. A creature as beautiful as she deserved better than to have her pants, and what was underneath them, a subject of horny teenage speculation, let alone a prize to be claimed.

How we got together is beyond me. It was actually all her doing. It was she who laughed at my first dumb joke in Mr.

Hanrahan's social studies class. It was she who had gone out of her way to say "Hi Andy" in the halls. It was she who insisted on studying together in the library, where she showed off such unique talents as wiggling her nose and ears while I fell hopelessly in love. I know, you're not supposed to fall that quickly, and that the L word should be used sparingly, if at all, during the high school years. But in the fall of 1985 with Terri Lynn Johnson in the library, between the wiggling nose and ears and the sweater, and the wonders that lie beneath the blue-and-orange wool, my heart offered very little resistance. I was a goner. A one-eared, one-handed goner.

And in the one day it took from when Terri asked me to the movies until the entire student body of Conestoga High found out, I went from being a nobody to being the most hated kid in school.

Sure, it was Terri who had laid the foundation for that first date, but in my own defense, it was I who acted on it, and went into overdrive in order to give this vision of loveliness a date she would never forget. The other young lovers were heading to the new mall over by the river, to "the Seven Valley Twelve," as the theaters were officially known, but I had different plans. The Twelve may have been new, enriched with stereophonic sound and equipped with a state-of-the-art snack bar that served different foods from around the globe, but it didn't have the character of the century-old Lincoln Theater, named after, you got it, President Lincoln, who would soon go on to play an unlikely but important role in my life. Yes, when it came to a first date, nothing came close to character as a prerequisite. Except for price, which of course was miles ahead of that whole character thing, especially for a guy who'd come into town with exactly nineteen bucks to his name. My financial woes looked to be easing soon, courtesy of a glamorous minimum-wage dishwashing job at Frank 'n' Mary's diner, a venerable establishment that was home to a myriad of

small-town life-forms, from blue-collar locals, to drunk college kids, to on-the-road truckers who needed a little shot of caffeine or cholesterol.

So with my finances in mind, the Lincoln's 85-cent admission made even the specter of seeing *Rambo: First Blood Part II* on a first date sound pretty good. The Lincoln's price policy, you see, was derived directly from whatever year happened to be taking place. In 1984, the price was 84 cents; in '85, it was 85. Guess what it was in '83? If you guessed 83 cents you'd be wrong. Back in '83 when the Lincoln was still the only game in town, a flick cost four bucks, but with the advent of the multiplex, the ancient cinematic institution was forced to make changes to survive. They stopped showing first-run movies. They lowered their prices. They cut down on the variety of candy and on the freshness of the popcorn. And they stopped doing the little things, like cleaning the floor.

So after spending \$1.70 on two admissions, and the total of \$3.50 on two Cokes and a medium popcorn that we decided we'd share, I escorted the most beautiful girl I had ever seen into a dingy cave of a theater, where she would see a plethora of people perish on-screen in the ensuing ninety-five minutes. But her smile never waned, and she somehow managed to be the picture of class, even as a previously chewed piece of gum formed a bond with her designer jeans, and her slim and gorgeous feet got acquainted with a floor that had known no mop in quite some time.

My mind began to wander at about the time the eleventh person died in the first coming-attraction preview. My father had been so happy for me on the eve of my first date. He had wanted to make sure that everything was perfect. The car had been a very nice gesture, fuzzy dice or no fuzzy dice. "Andy, my boy," he'd said with a big grin and an "I've got a secret" wink in his eye, and a secretive hand held behind his back. "Hold out your hand and close your eyes

and I'll give you a big surprise." So I held out my hand and closed my eyes, and I'll be damned if my father didn't give me a big surprise. "Just a little something to make sure that you and your girl have a good time tonight," he said with a laugh that sounded as if it had been lifted from a used car salesman.

When I first closed my hand around my dad's surprise and felt the rustle and crinkle, I had a premonition that a ten-dollar bill had found its way into my hand. My premonition was wrong. A ten-dollar bill would have placed me and Terri inside the Seven Valley Twelve, where people on the screen might actually do things besides kill each other. A ten-dollar bill would have spared Terri the union of her ass and a wad of chewing gum. But it was not to be.

I moved my foot slightly and found it nearly glued to the floor. At that point I experienced what can only be called a flashback, as the sticking of my shoe at the Lincoln gave way to the memory of the sticking of my shoe at the Pussycat Cinema in eastern Pennsylvania two months earlier, although I'd be willing to bet that the substances causing the stickiness were altogether different.

The Pussycat had been my dad's idea, when he showed up at the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center near Richmond on my seventeenth birthday, after an absence from my life of only sixteen years and nine months. I'd received a postcard a few months earlier that in its entirety read, "See you in a few . . . Dad." A few. I had no idea what "a few" meant, so I waited a few hours, then a few days, then a few months, and then finally, on the day of my release, without a clue as to what to do with the rest of my life, I set eyes on my father, Antietam Brown IV. "Come on, kid," was all he said. "I'm taking you home."

I had no idea the "home" of which he spoke meant Conestoga, New York. Home to me had always been Virginia, with the exception of my life's first three months,

which had been spent in a suburb of Tampa, until my dad got tired of the Mr. Mom routine and shipped me off.

We drove on through Maryland that first night, with my dad insisting that I drink my first beer, and then my second, and so on and so forth until I was so drunk that his words became increasingly incoherent, which was probably a good thing. He said nothing about his work, and even less about my mom, opting instead to spend our inaugural night together regaling me with details about his past sexual conquests. As the miles flew by and the beers, at his urging, flew south, those details became fuzzier and fuzzier, until the fuzzy dice started spinning in unison with my stomach and I mustered the fortitude to blurt out, "Pull over," which my dad did a split second before those birthday beers came barreling up my throat, and into the green grass and wildflowers that bordered that particular section of Highway 95.

"Thatta boy," my dad laughed as the vomiting process reached its conclusion, and a thick stew of spit and puke adorned my chin, like some strange new goatee. "Never let it be said that ol' Tietam Brown doesn't know how to show his son a good time!" Then, after a pause, "I'm proud of you, boy," with a rugged slap on the back for added emphasis.

The Pussycat Cinema was the first thing I saw when I awoke that next day. "Look over there, kid," my dad said as the Fairmont screeched to a stop, kicking up a cloud of dust and jolting me awake to find that I was in the middle of nowhere, with a massive headache and the vile taste of stale vomit to remind me of my Happy Birthday.

"Where?" I asked, which seemed an appropriate response, as from my vantage point, all I could see was a ramshackle trailer enhanced by the timeless beauty of a rusted-out Pinto on cement blocks on display in what passed for a front yard. "Not there, kid . . . *there*," he said, and with that he

was out the door and headed for the Pussycat at a trot. I followed suit, afraid to be seen but a little intrigued.

“Andy, these babies are a dying breed,” my dad said, his voice heavy with nostalgia. “Might as well check one out before they turn it into a hardware store or some damn thing.” And with that I headed into the plush surroundings of the theater itself, my feet sounding like quacking ducks as I made my own way down the aisle, while a lone man in the back appeared to be furiously cleaning his glasses underneath a long trench coat on a hot August afternoon.

There we sat, father and son, estranged no longer, watching a pretty but not beautiful blonde, with a face that was somehow far too sweet for that line of business, having odd deeds done to her while Antietam Brown IV nudged me in the ribs and doled out words of wisdom like “That’s what’s known as the ‘money shot.’”

Two tickets . . . ten dollars. A flat Coke and a box of stale Jujufruits . . . four dollars. Spending an afternoon with your dad in a scuzzy porn theater . . . priceless.

I was jolted back to the present with the gentle touch of a manicured hand on the knee of my tattered jeans. “Andy . . . Andy . . . are you all right?” I glanced quickly at the screen to see a ripped and pumped Sylvester Stallone, who by all accounts seemed to have adapted well to the rigors of chain gang life. “Andy, are you all right,” Terri repeated, and her hand gently squeezed my knee in a gesture of concern. “Yeah, oh, uh, yeah,” I said, and at that very moment, with her hand upon my knee and all her attention directed right at me, the truth was, I had never been better. “I was just thinking.”

“And what, may I ask, were you thinking?” she said.

I opened my mouth, and my voice cracked. Honestly. A legitimate Peter Brady voice crack. Then, mustering all that was left of my pride, I opened up my mouth again and gave that talking thing another try. “Um, um, Terri, I was just



thinking that maybe you would have liked another movie better at another theater.”

She smiled and her gentle clasp on my knee became the softest of caresses. Then she squinted in mock Clint Eastwood toughness, sneered a bit like early Mick Jagger, and said, “First of all, I love Rambo,” and then, with her voice losing its humor, continued, “and second, I don’t care about the theater, I just like being with you.”

My Adam’s apple suddenly turned into an Adam’s watermelon, and I couldn’t speak. Hell, I couldn’t breathe. I think all my body functions stopped. All except my tear ducts, which produced enough water in the next few seconds to irrigate the Sahara. God, I tried not to let those tears fall, as, after all, crying isn’t really crying unless the tears actually leave the eyes. My eyes had welled up many times over the years in Virginia, but it had been ten years since I’d actually let one fall. But try as I might, and believe me, I tried, that ten-year dry streak came to an end at the Lincoln Theater as Colonel Trautman sprang Rambo from the clink in order to aid his country in a double secret mission.

And what a tear it was too. A big fat solitary drop, which made a slow journey from the right corner of my eye down the side of my flushed face. Terri saw it, she had to have, but said nothing, until breaking the silence a good minute later with a simple but daunting request. “Andy, give me your hand.”

Oh no, not the hand. I had sat on her left-hand side, meaning that the hand in question, the hand in demand, the hand she wanted, was the dead one. I panicked, and for a moment thought that the single solitary tear might well be joined by a parade of his brothers, before calming down sufficiently to risk a daring strategy . . . the truth.

“Terri.”

“Yes.”

“Um, Terri.”

“Yes, Andy.”

“Um, my right hand, um, doesn’t work.”

The declaration was met with silence, and surprise, but, turning my head, I was relieved to see, not with disgust.

I continued, “It was an accident when I was little.”

She smiled sadly and said, “The same accident as the ear?” I nodded in silence. She knew of my ear, or lack thereof, indeed it was the subject of my missing ear which had led to her laugh and our first mutual smile in Hanrahan’s class. Hey, if she wasn’t turned off by my stump of an ear, then maybe she wouldn’t mind the dead hand, either.

“Andy?”

“Yeah.”

“How about the other hand?”

“What about it?”

“Does it work?”

“Yeah, it does.”

And with that she stood up, oblivious to the fact that Rambo was now in mortal danger, and, like Jesse Owens claiming Olympic gold in the high hurdles in Berlin in ‘36, deftly vaulted over my lap, pirouetted, and dropped into the seat to the left of me. She then lifted my curly locks and playfully, just a tad seductively, whispered into my good ear, “So how about it?”

I should have known what she was talking about, but I’ll admit right now to being somewhat distracted by the pleasant tingling that her whisper had caused in my penile area. So I said the only thing I could think of. “How about what?”

“How about giving me that hand, big boy,” she said, and before I could reply, her hand was entwined with mine, in what was the most romantic moment of my young life, with all due respect to the two young men who tried to forcibly sodomize me during my stay at the Petersburg Home for Boys.

But on that night, at the dilapidated Lincoln Theater, those two young men, attempted sodomy, and the first seventeen years of my troubled life were a distant memory. Because on that night, the world was right. John Rambo was making the world safe for democracy, and Terri Johnson was holding my hand, her head leaning on my shoulder, with just the slightest hint of a beautiful, wonderful breast touching my arm.

And then I saw it. The mere sight of it repulsed me. It was terrible. The lump in my jeans. No, not that lump, which if detected might prove slightly embarrassing, but not necessarily repulsive or terrible. And truth be told, that lump was not all that prominent. It wasn't the quarters in my right pocket that concerned me either. No, the lump that terrified me was in the left front pocket of my jeans, and if detected, it would certainly spell the end of my one-hour-old romance with Terri. How could I have forgotten to have thrown it out, after my dad had handed it to me? I literally prayed that her hand wouldn't move one inch and a half up and two inches to the right. Terri, I'm sure, could have forgiven me for having a first-date boner while she held my hand at the Lincoln Theater. Forgiveness would not be so easy, or even borderline conceivable, if she discovered that I had brought three rubbers with me on my first date.

Over the years, there have been times I have doubted God's existence, and there have been times I have cursed his very name, but the night of October 23, 1985, I had no doubt that he was smiling down on me, willing Terri's hand not to touch the foil three-pack that housed my dad's Trojans with their helpful reservoir tips and spermicidal jelly for added protection. Yes, God was with me, and not only did he provide protection from my protection being detected, but he seemed to bestow upon me the ability to not be a total bonehead when we got into the Fairmont and headed for home.

Indeed, the conversation flowed inside that crappy car, and I was not only comfortable, but I was funny as well. Actually, I'd always had a decent sense of humor, but I usually brandished it almost as a defense, as if a self-deprecating wit could smooth over the fact that most of my life had pretty much sucked. But on this night, my humor was different. It was irreverent, it was topical, and it elicited genuine laughs from Terri. Big, wonderful laughs.

I wished that ride, like the night itself, could have lasted forever, for besides loving Terri's company, I loved the unique feeling of liking myself. So when I pulled that Fairmont into the Johnson driveway that led to her estate-like home surrounded by her huge manicured lawn, the vehicle seemed to be filled with love. "I had a great time tonight, Terri," I said, and I stuck out my hand. As in the customary good-night handshake.

She stared at me for what seemed like minutes, with a flabbergasted look, then regained her composure, and accepted my hand in the gesture of respect and friendship that it symbolized. And a fine handshake it was at that. "I had a great time too, Andy," she said, while I shook that hand as if I'd just sold her an insurance policy. "I'd like to do it again."

"Me too," I said.

Then the handshake ended and she got out of the car. It didn't dawn on me to open the car door, or to walk her to her house, maybe because dating etiquette hadn't been covered all that well at the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center.

"Good night, Andy."

"Good night."

"I'll see you on Monday, okay?"

"Okay."

And then she was gone, at least momentarily, for as I put the Fairmont in reverse, she reemerged in a flash and headed for my window, which I was kind enough to open. In

a blur of auburn hair, she moved her face within inches of mine, to the point where she was actually leaning into the car. Her breathing was a little labored, as if she'd just run a lap around the track instead of hopping down two steps and walking ten yards.

"Andy," she said, so close that I could almost taste the sweetness of her breath.

"Yeah."

"I just wanted to make sure that you didn't get lost on your way home. Do you know the way?"

"Yeah, sure," I said with a shrug, "I live off this same road. I'll be okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, but thanks for checking on me." And to show her my appreciation, I stuck that left hand out the window and we shared another good shake. She paused momentarily, and I gave her a wink, and then she turned and walked back to her house. And as I watched her go, I couldn't help but wonder, Why would I need directions? Then she turned, waved, opened the door, and disappeared.

Strange indeed. I mean, I couldn't possibly get lost. Sure it was a back road, and sure there was that one fork with the red light to contend with, but it was still the same road. I shrugged my shoulders and headed out, and somewhere between a sixteenth and an eighth of a mile from the Johnson house, I suddenly figured it all out. Oh my goodness. She had wanted me to kiss her!

I was singing along with Barry when I pulled into my own drive, which led to a much less illustrious house, surrounded by a much less manicured lawn. "Now, now, now, and hold on fast—could this be the magic AT LAST!" So I'd screwed up. I didn't kiss her. It was a big screwup, but one that I felt confident I could redeem. Hands down, there had not been a better night in the history of my life, and there was only one way to celebrate it. A half gallon of vanilla ice cream and the scratchy old Nat King Cole Christmas album that still carried

my mother's maiden name on it. Kathy Collins. It was the only thing, memories included, that I had of her to call my own.

Nothing could have ruined that night for me, but the next moment came pretty close. For in that moment, I saw my father's silhouette in our living room window, moving up and down, up and down, doing a steady stream of deep knee bends. My father was "doing the deck," which could only mean one thing.

"Hey Andy," my father's voice called out as the front door opened to herald my return from the world of first dates. "Just a sec, kid, I want to talk to you." Then, with his body continuing its up-and-down motion, he called out the last repetitions of the card he'd drawn. "Fourteen. Fifteen."

With that my father picked up his Genesee Light Beer, to be known hereafter as a "Genny," took a gargantuan swig, and set it down. "Hold on, Andy, sit down, I'm almost through my second deck."

He turned another card, a joker, and let out a loud sigh. "Oh man, they're killing me," he said with a snort, and then commenced to drop down to the ground and reel off twenty-five textbook push-ups, followed by the cracking open of what looked to be about his tenth Genny, which he proceeded to not so much drink as inhale.

"How was the big date, kid . . . any action?" he said, but before I could answer he turned another card, a king, reeled off another fifteen deep knee bends, and just about polished off another Genny.

"No, no action, Dad, but we had a really—"

"Hold on there, Andy, I've only got two cards left to go, and then I want you to tell your dad all about it." He turned up a card. "Three, well damn, that's no challenge." He dropped down, did three push-ups, with a casual clap in between each one, rose up, took a small sip on the Genny, and turned over the last card. A queen.

I watched my dad rise up and down, up and down, as he concluded his solitary ritual. For many years he'd been doing this routine, shuffling his deck of cards and then turning them one by one, alternating between push-ups and what he called Hindu squats, with the numbers on the cards dictating the number of repetitions he performed. I never did the math, but completing a deck meant doing hundreds of repetitions of both exercises. I tried it on my own one day and barely made it through half a deck before my legs betrayed me, turning to jelly during the twenty-five Hindus the joker required of me.

My dad's legs never betrayed him, however, seeming instead to get stronger with each turn of the card, and with each drink of the Genny. With only one huge exception, doing the deck was the only time I saw my dad drink.

Looking at him in action, my dad seemed not so much human as machinelike in function, his sinewy muscles popping through his lean frame like steel cords. The kind of guy who looked almost wimpy in a baggy sweatshirt and jeans, but whose muscles stood out like a relief map of the human anatomy when in the nude. And I should know, for whenever he was "in the deck" Tietam Brown was in the nude. Yeah, maybe I should have mentioned that earlier, because it does tend to alter the perception of his exercise regimen just a bit.

You see, for Tietam Brown, doing the deck wasn't just about exercise. It was about a whole lot more. Exercise, sure. Beer drinking, yeah. But for my father doing the deck was primarily about sex.

Doing the deck was a sure sign that intermission was under way. That the second act of a long passion play was about to commence. "The first one's for them, Andy," he'd told me once, "but the second one is all about ol' Tietam, even though by the sound of things they seem to have a pretty good time too."

I'll say they did. As the inhabitant of the room next door to his, I would say that was an understatement.

Usually the commencement of his ritual would send my dad bounding up the stairs to begin act two immediately, a very sweaty, very drunk, very physically fit, and very horny man. But this night was special. His son had just had his first date and he wanted to spend some quality time right there in the Brown living room, surrounded by the odd potpourri of sweat, beer, and sex.

"So Andy," he said as he dried the sweat off his balding head with a dish towel, "tell me about the big night."

His smile was big and happy, and I had to smile back, not just in reflection of the momentous night I'd just had but also at the walking, talking, drinking, Hindu-squatting contradiction that stood before me.

"Dad, it was probably the best night of my life, I mean we had the—"

He cut me off. "Which means you used the Trojans, didn't you, kid?"

The guy was actually beaming, he was so happy. I considered humoring him, but couldn't bear to stain Terri's reputation with even a phantom sexual encounter. "Actually, Dad, I didn't use any of them." With that the huge smile became a mask of concern.

"Don't tell me you rode bareback, Andy, not in this day and age. You know they've got that AIDS thing floating around."

"No, Dad, I didn't ride bareback, I just—"

He cut me off again. "Oh, did you opt for a little—"

I interrupted him as he was making the universal hand-and-tongue signal for oral sex. "No, Dad, we didn't do anything, we didn't even kiss, but I had a great time, I really like her . . . and she . . . she held my hand."

"Whoa! Ho ho! Whew! Sheeeew!" my dad laughed. "We've got a wild man on our hands. Watch him, officer, he's a hand holder!" Then, in an instant, I saw his



expression change. I can't call it compassion, but it seemed almost to border on understanding. "Andy," he said softly.

"Yeah."

"Do you like this girl?"

"Yeah."

"And did it feel nice when you held her hand?"

"Yeah it did, Dad, it felt nice."

"Well that's what counts, kid. You'll have plenty of time to do that other stuff later." Then he stepped forward, and for the first time he hugged me. I hesitated just for a moment, just to make sure that it wasn't a joke. It wasn't. Then I hugged him back. I hugged my drunk, naked father . . . and how many kids can say that?

My dad stepped away, not embarrassed, but obviously not used to this father-son bonding thing. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm glad you didn't use those condoms tonight, son."

I didn't quite know what to say, so I opted not to say anything. In the wake of my silence, my dad finished his thought. "Because I'm all out, and that broad upstairs would never forgive me if I didn't plow her field another time."

"Hey Dad," I said, smiling in preparation for what I had to say next.

"Yeah, kid."

"I thought you said the second one was all about ol' Tietam."

With that my father grabbed me and tousled my hair the way he might have if I'd been ten and hit the winning home run in Little League, or any other number of reasons that fathers who don't disappear for sixteen years and nine months might have for tousling their son's hair. He then followed the hair tousle with a bit of verbiage that most children won't hear from their dads in their lifetimes. "Now give me those condoms, you little muskrat."

Then he was off, condoms in hand, bounding up the stairs, gold medallion slapping off his chest, middle-aged balls

slapping off his thighs. "Hey Gloria," he yelled as he opened the door, "let's just hold hands tonight!" Gloria laughed.

Gloria, I knew, meant Gloria Sugling, as in next-door neighbor Gloria Sugling, whose cop husband Charlie worked the midnight shift in Cortland, keeping the streets safe while my father, in his own words, plowed his wife's field.

By my own count, this was Mrs. Sugling's third visit to Tietam Brown's bed, which meant, whether she knew it or not, it was also her last, in accordance with my dad's "three strikes, you're out" rule. As I pulled the half gallon of vanilla out of the freezer, I couldn't help but think my dad was right. Over the sound of bouncing bedsprings and the thumping of the headboard, I could hear Mrs. Sugling's voice, and she certainly did seem to be having a good time. Or maybe she was just agreeing strongly with whatever my dad had to say.

I lay down in my little bed with my half gallon of vanilla, and Nat King Cole's angelic voice competing with the not-so-angelic acts in the room next door. It took a couple of flips of the album, but then the headboard and bedsprings stopped, and Mrs. Sugling headed down the stairs and out our door for the very last time, and now Nat had the room to himself. I closed my eyes and listened in the darkness, the last taste of vanilla ice cream still cool upon my tongue. I listened to the beautiful voice sing about "the dear Savior's birth," and I listened to each sacred scar and crack of my mother's old LP, each one as beautiful to me as the music itself. With my eyes still closed, I thought of Terri, her head against my shoulder, her hand holding mine, and even that slightest hint of her breast against my arm. And then, for the second time in ten years, a tear rolled down my cheek. I slipped into a beautiful dreamless sleep with one last thought . . . she had wanted me to kiss her.