

STRICTLY PLATONIC

John Andrew Gallery



MICHAEL

Michael took off his shirt and shorts and placed them on the plastic chair next to him. One of the reasons he liked coming to this campground was the ability to be naked outdoors whenever he wanted. He liked feeling the warm sunlight on his skin and the way the gentle breezes or stronger winds caressed his entire body. He especially liked walking in the rain without having to worry about his clothes getting soaked. Even though it was often cool at night, he also liked to walk naked in the dark and gaze at the moon and stars, which were much more visible here than in the city.

Each time he came to the campground he took an early morning walk around the lake, then climbed up the trail to this spot halfway up the hill where he could sit in the sun. From this point he could see the entire campground although none of it was actually visible—the lake, the clubhouse and pool, the tents and RVs were all hidden beneath the trees. In the far distance he could see rolling hills; right in front of him was a field of grass and a cornfield separated by the entrance road. Any driver coming down the road only had to look up to see him, but the distance was so great it wasn't likely anyone could tell he was naked. Even so, it didn't matter; the ability to go without clothes was one of the reasons others came here as well.

He liked this spot not only for the view, but because it was secluded. Few people climbed up the steep trail, especially in the morning. He could sit in the sun by himself without feeling self-conscious about his body. He **was** self-conscious and he knew it. But he pushed himself to confront his discomfort. That was also one of the benefits of coming here. After all, there were many men going around naked whose bodies weren't in great condition either. Nonetheless, he often wished he had the gym-toned body of a twenty-seven year old. All his life he had admired men with muscular builds—not overly muscular from excessive weight lifting, but bodies toned by swimming or gymnastics. Often he felt that his life would have been much happier if he had had such a body when he was younger. He would have been more self-confident, more out-going, had relationships with lovers that lasted longer, and even been more successful in his career, although why he thought that would have been the case wasn't clear.

The truth was he was never willing to put in the work. He wasn't prepared to go to the gym four days a week, week after week, month after month for years. He wanted the results to come over night. Sort of like the guy in *Spiderman* who went from being a 98-pound weakling one day to a well-built guy the next after the spider bit him. He wanted it to happen like that, quickly and without having to work for it. In a way, this was a metaphor for his life. He had never worked hard for anything. Instead, he had taken the opportunities that came along and made the best of them. In fact, he had done quite well by them, succeeding in many different positions over the course of his career. But he knew he had taken the easy path; he hadn't taken many risks. It had been a pleasant life, but now that he was nearing its end—he was 70 with all the ailments of a man his age—he felt he had missed out on a lot and it was too late to do anything about it.

Perhaps what he really wanted was a twenty-seven year old boyfriend with a gymnast's body who would wander around the house naked so Michael could admire him, touch him when he wanted, hold him in bed at night. That would be

enough, he thought; there was no need for sex, just the ability to hold and touch such a body would be enough. There were plenty of guys like that at the campground each weekend he came. Right now in fact there were four staying in the cabin next to his. They stood around their campfire naked, talking and laughing with what seemed to be an easy nonchalance about their own and one another's bodies while Michael looked discretely in their direction whenever he could. He'd never had that ease with himself or had friends with whom he could have been so at ease while naked. Even now he longed for it.

What Michael was most self-conscious about was his breasts. His breasts had become enlarged as a side effect of the drug he took for prostate cancer. From time to time he fantasied that someone would comment on this: 'Your breasts are somewhat large for a man,' would be the comment. He would say 'Yes, that's true. It's the result of a drug I take to control my prostate cancer. I can either have enlarged breasts or be dead. Which would you choose?' Naturally the other person would say, 'enlarged breasts' and Michael would say, with a smile, 'that's what I thought, too.' Of course, this never happened, but fantasizing about it made him feel less self-conscious about his condition.

It was this self-consciousness that led him to stay away from such places as the pool where most of the men gathered to lie in the sun on plastic lounge chairs and occasionally swim. Besides, he much preferred to swim in the lake and was always surprised that no one else did. The water was not that cold. He had a theory that it was warmer in the late afternoon having been warmed all day by the sun, but he didn't know if this was really true. However, that's when he swam each day. The water was bracing at first, but wonderfully invigorating once you got use to it. Although he was not a good swimmer, swimming naked was so enjoyable and refreshing that he would paddle his way out to the middle of the lake, float around a bit and then paddle back. It was amazing how different swimming naked was than swimming with a bathing suit. The water seemed to flow around his entire body in a totally different way. He wished he could swim that way more often, even if it had to be in a pool. There was a club in downtown Philadelphia that used to allow men to swim naked when the club was for men only. For a while he thought of joining just for that reason, but it was an idle thought; the membership fee was something he really couldn't afford. He wondered if they still allowed that now that women could be members.

After what he thought was about an hour, Michael picked up his clothes and carried them along the trail that went into the woods. The upper part of the trail was fairly flat and easy to walk. There were tall pine trees on both sides whose subtle

fragrance was immediately noticeable. The trail was mostly in the shade, but about half way along there was a break in the trees and the sun came through for a short distance. He often thought he should bring one of the chairs with him so he could sit there in the sun and enjoy the silence, but he never remembered. Instead, he would just stand in the warm light for a while listening to the silence around him. Could you listen to silence? Perhaps he was just *observing* the silence—and it was amazingly complete. No noise of any kind could be heard, not even the cries of birds. It was so peaceful that he felt he could stay there for hours if he had a chair to sit on.

After a while the trail headed down the hillside. Here it was steep and he had to be careful how he walked for fear of falling or twisting an ankle. He held onto the trees along the edge and took his time. At the bottom the trail followed the creek until it reached a narrow wooden bridge and went over to the other side. What interested Michael most about this area were a series of what he thought of as stone sculptures that had been built in the middle of the creek itself. Each sculpture consisted of vertical piles of rocks balanced one on top of another making towers about two to three feet high. The rocks were so tenuously balanced it seemed as if they had to be held in place by glue or something other than mere gravity. The sculptures changed from time to time, some falling down, he imagined, and new ones being built. Now there were about eight of them in a row in the center of the streambed. One weekend he had spent an afternoon photographing them because he found them so intriguing. Who had made them, he wondered, and why? They looked almost like something American Indian's might have made to mark a sacred spot. That's how he thought of them, as something sacred with a special meaning and purpose that was known only to their creators who had long since vanished.

As he walked back to his cabin, he thought about the weekend ahead. Normally, he came to the campground alone, usually during the week when there were few people around. But from time to time he came on a weekend because there were events he enjoyed watching and sometimes participating in. After he'd made a reservation for this weekend, he had done something he'd never done before. Even now he could not believe he had actually done it. But, he had and there was nothing he could do about it now.

Occasionally, he saw ads on the "strictly platonic" section of Philadelphia's Craigslist M4M website posted by a man who had an extra ticket to a play or a baseball game and was looking for someone to go with him. He had even answered a few and had spent several pleasant evenings at the ballet or a concert although he never become friends with any of his hosts. There was always that possibility, of course, but a free ticket was benefit enough. He wondered if he might find someone interested in

going camping with him in this way so decided to post an ad himself and see what happened.

The ad emphasized platonic—he wanted no misunderstanding. He explained that the cabin had two beds and that the campground was gay and clothing optional. He decided that if he was going to do something foolish, he might just as well be completely foolish and so said that he was looking for someone in the twenty-five to thirty-five-age range. He was tempted to add ‘with a gym-toned body’ but decided that was going too far. To make sure that anyone who answered the ad would know what he was getting into he gave his own age and a few descriptive facts about himself. Not surprisingly he got a lot of inappropriate sexual responses, including a handful of X-rated pictures.

Just when he was about to give up hope, he got a response from someone who sounded interesting. His name was Chris, he was thirty-one and thought the idea of being naked outside was cool (his word) although he’d never done it. A face picture was included that showed him to be an attractive young man even if it didn’t allow Michael to tell if he had a gym-toned body. So, after a series of email exchanges and a brief phone conversation, he invited him along. They agreed to meet at the campground since Michael planned to stay through Monday and Chris could not. Michael knew this was a risk—Texas chain-saw massacre??’ he said humorously to himself, but that seemed melodramatic. More likely, Michael might just find him uninteresting and be bored.

Michael left Chris’s name at the check-in desk so that he would be able to find the cabin and left a note on the cabin door when he went down to the lake for his afternoon swim. It was still there when he returned. He wondered if it was appropriate to be naked when meeting some one for the first time. Just in case he put on his shirt and shorts. He also didn’t know whether to have dinner there at the cabin or to go down to the café in the clubhouse, which would give Chris a chance to see some of the campground. Stop worrying, he told himself, because he knew he worried excessively about trivial things.

When a dark blue car pulled up and a young man got out, Michael recognized Chris immediately from his picture. He couldn’t help observing that even beneath his t-shirt and jeans he seemed to have a nice body. Chris had a winning smile and an outgoing manner. “This place is great,” he said; “I saw so many guys walking around naked just driving in. And all the little cabins are so cool.” He took off his shirt while he was talking, then went back to his car to get his sleeping bag and a box filled with bottles and some food. “I’m a health food nut,” he said by way of explanation. “I take

all these crazy supplements so I brought them with me.” He even had his own electric blender. By the time they were back outside sitting at the picnic table Chris had taken off the rest of his clothes. “I’m going naked all weekend,” he said with a big smile. He had the lightly gym-toned body Michael had dreamed of so Michael had no complaints about that.

They had dinner outside at the cabin because Chris didn’t want to get dressed to go to the café. When they finished, Michael suggested they take a walk around the campground before it got too dark. “What about you?” Chris asked, gesturing to Michael’s clothes. So he took them off in spite of his self-consciousness and they headed for the lake. As they walked along Michael explained that the campground was divided into two sections. One area consisted of the large open fields Chris had passed driving in where people could park their Recreation Vehicles or put up tents. Michael was always amazed at how much equipment people brought. There were outdoor grills, tents for sleeping in and bigger tents to put over the picnic tables to keep the bugs away while eating. Frequently there would be half a dozen tents and at least a dozen guys on a single site.

The second area was wooded with a few sites for tents plus a few cabins to rent and a lot of permanent cabins that were really an RV to which an extra room or a screened-in porch had been added. Michael was always impressed by how much creativity people had put into these places. Of course there were gay flags and gay rainbows all over the place, but there were little water fountains, beautiful gardens, and funny sculptures as well. Most places had some decorative lights; “Its quite magical at night,” he said; “We’ll have to take a look later or tomorrow.”

“What’s that?” Chris asked, as they passed a sign saying Memorial Grove. Michael explained it was a grove of trees where people posted the names of friends who had camped here and had died. “It’s very nice,” he said; “We can take a look at it tomorrow, too, or Sunday.”

Michael pointed out the clubhouse and pool, mentioned the walk around the lake and the stream with stone sculptures in it, and the trail up the hill. When they got back, he lit the campfire and they sat around its warmth answering one another’s questions about who they were and what they did. Chris worked as a bartender at a gay club; he said he’d come out when he was eighteen. His father had died when he was younger and he hadn’t had much support from his mother, who had remarried a man who was pretty conservative and moved to California. He’d moved back to Philadelphia when he was nineteen. “So I’ve been on my own for quite a while. Lots of boyfriends,” he said with a smile, “but nothing serious. How about you?” Michael

gave him a brief synopsis of his life—growing up in Boston, moving to Philadelphia for his first job as an accountant, coming out in his late thirties, having a few boyfriends, but only one long relationship that had ended about twelve years ago.

Gradually they stopped talking and seemed comfortable just sitting by the warm fire as the darkness grew around them. “Man, it’s dark here,” Chris said with a laugh. “Yes,” Michael said, “but then you can see the stars better. Let’s go look.” They walked a short distance to where there were fewer trees and looked up. The decorative lights from the cabins and tents and the many campfires made it a little hard to see, but still many more stars were visible than in the city. “It’s better later,” Michael said, “when everyone puts their lights out for the night. But” he added, “it also gets light early, which is why I tend to go to bed earlier here than at home.”

In the cabin Chris spread his sleeping bag on the single bed. Michael had already taken the double one for the two-person sleeping bag he had bought many years ago when he had someone to go camping with. In the middle of the night Michael woke to pee as he usually did, and quietly stepped outside to go in the bushes. When he was finished he just stood there, mesmerized by the darkness and the silence. All the camp lights were out except for the dying embers of a few campfires. The darkness was so dark it seemed impenetrable. He felt Chris’s body behind him before he heard him. “Man, it *really* is dark here,” Chris said putting his arms around Michael and pulling their bodies together. “This is so cool, it’s amazing.” When they went back inside Chris said, “It’s cold sleeping alone. Can I get in with you? Strictly platonic, of course.” Michael could tell he was smiling even though he could not see his expression in the dark. When he said that was fine Chris climbed in, wrapped himself around Michael’s body and they both fell quickly back to sleep.

Michael was the first to wake in the morning. For a few moments he just lay motionless, feeling Chris’s body pressed against his. He tried to get up quietly so as not to disturb Chris and to allow him to sleep as late as he wanted. But when he returned from the showers, Chris was up and drinking one of his green concoctions. “I usually meditate in the morning,” he said; “I’d like to go find a quiet place to do that for a while if that’s ok with you?” Michael mentioned several possible locations and Chris headed off to see what he could find.

After Chris had left, Michael took his morning walk around the lake and climbed up the hillside to his usual spot to sit in the sun. He left his clothes behind. As he sat gazing over the familiar scene before him he could sense that he was not the same. Normally he felt calm and content while he sat there in the sun. But today he felt more energized than usual. ‘Happier,’ he said to himself and laughed out loud. He

knew this was attributable to Chris and reflected on that. Chris had the twenty-seven-year-old gym-toned body Michael had wished he had at the same age, even if Chris was really thirty-one. He was the out-going, self-confident person Michael assumed he would have been at that age if he had had such a body. But then he realized something he had not consciously realized before even though it should have been obvious. It wasn't his body that made Chris so outgoing and confident, it was his attitude toward life that gave him those characteristics and led him to care for his body not vice versa. "That's your real problem, old man," he said out loud.

As he allowed his mind to reflect on this, he assumed the difference in their attitudes was a result of the difference between growing up in a period when being gay was more acceptable and coming out at an early age was easier than growing up as he had when to be openly gay was not really an option. He had spent his life up to almost age forty hiding his desires, carefully controlling his feelings so that no one would be able to guess his secret while at the same time leading a separate life of anonymous sex with other men that he both enjoyed and was ashamed of. That need to control his feelings had affected his entire life. It felt as if he had built a shell around his heart and what had once been a source of protection had become a barrier to the life he really wanted. There were some cracks in the shell, he knew; he had let some feelings out and others in. But, even though he had been out to friends and colleagues for more than thirty years now, he hadn't entirely been able to overcome his old habits. He still found it hard to let people get close to him and knew that even with close friends, even with his one serious lover, he always held something back.

Chris on the other hand had none of those problems, or so it seemed. He had come out at an early age, apparently accepting his sexuality easily and had, from what he'd told Michael, a network of gay friends that provided support and friendship. That was what Michael really longed for and knew that he had missed out on.

After what seemed to be about an hour, Michael decided to go back to the cabin. Rather than take the long way back, he went back down the same trail and around the lake. Shortly after he had returned Chris showed up too, smiling and relaxed. "It's really nice here," he said. "So beautiful and so quiet. I wonder what it would be like to live out here all the time." After Chris had taken a shower Michael suggested they go to the café for lunch, but Chris said no; he wanted to stay naked and so they had lunch at the cabin. Michael told him about the bonfire and the dance that night. Chris said he'd need a nap if he was going to stay up late after getting up so early. "Do guys dance naked?" he asked. Michael said no and explained that often there was a theme for the weekend—this weekend was Hawaiian. So appropriate dress

would include jockstraps or thongs, or shorts and probably some grass skirts and Hawaiian sport shirts.

After lunch they took a walk through the campground to see what festivities were going on. Many campsites along the way were decorated in a Hawaiian theme and each was serving some sort of Hawaiian inspired cocktail, usually in a small container so you could sample many without getting plastered. Chris said he didn't drink even though he worked in a bar. Many men were naked with lei's around their neck as the only item of clothing; others indeed did have grass skirts and Hawaiian style shirts. Chris leaned close to Michael's ear and whispered, "This is so cool. Some of these guys are really hot."

Back at the cabin Chris took a nap asking Michael to wake him in time to go swimming. Michael sat at the picnic table reading. From time to time he would glance at the young men at the next cabin sitting outside and talking with one another. He realized that he looked with less longing now that he had his own twenty-seven-year-old gym-toned body—well, thirty-one he again reminded himself—to look at. Later, when they walked to the lake, Michael could again tell he was more at ease. Chris swam far out into the center of the lake and back while Michael swam part way and floated around. "Wow," Chris shouted as he got out, "This is awesome. The water is great and swimming naked is an amazing feeling, I've never done it before." They sat on a nearby bench in the sun to dry off. "It's so calm and peaceful here," Chris said. "I'm so glad you invited me to come along." And Michael, feeling much the same, said he was glad Chris had accepted.

There were several canoes tied to a dock on the side of the lake and Chris suggested they take one out. In the center of the lake, Michael could understand why American Indians invented canoes and sign language. The canoe slipped almost soundlessly through the water without disturbing the silence of the natural world that enveloped them. Spoken language would also have been a disruption of that silence. At the far end of the lake Michael pointed out the turtles sunbathing on the rocks that poked above the surface of the water. Chris acted like a child who had never seen turtles before, pointing at them as they scurried off the rocks when the canoe came too close. Back at the dock, Chris lay face down on the wooden planks and stared at the fish in the water with the same childlike wonder. "Look at this one," he said pointing; "it's huge." Michael knelt beside him taking his enjoyment not from the fish but from watching Chris watching the fish.

The bonfire didn't start till ten so it was Michael's turn to take a nap after they ate. Chris decided to wear running shorts, which were brief, and Michael put on shorts

and a Hawaiian shirt he had bought for the occasion. The bonfire had just been lit when they arrived. There were about twenty men standing around it, as well as more seated on benches along the side. Up close the fire was intensely hot, but ten feet away you could hardly feel it at all and the night air was cool.

Eventually everyone drifted into the dance hall adjacent to the café. The DJ was already playing loud music and bright lights flashed around the room as they would at any dance club. Most of the guys were younger, which was why Michael usually only came to watch; he felt self-conscious being an old man dancing alone even though he knew no one would care. Chris insisted he dance, for which he was grateful because in fact he loved to dance. Even though he didn't think he did it particularly well, the mere act of moving around to the beat of the music was invigorating. When he stopped to rest Chris kept dancing and was quickly joined by three younger guys. One moved up right behind Chris, perhaps even touching him, and tried to move in unison with him, another stood in front, another on the side, all with arms extended high above their heads, moving together like a single body. Michael watched with a sense of enjoyment and envy—not envy of Chris or the others, but simply envy of the ability to be so free and uninhibited.

Around midnight he told Chris he was going to go to bed, but that he should stay as late as he wanted. Part of him felt that Chris might want to hook up with one of the younger guys and he wanted to give him the space to do that if that's what he wanted. But at the same time, he didn't want to be around to see it. Strictly platonic, he said to himself as a reminder. He was surprised when, not long after he'd climbed into the sleeping bag, Chris returned and slipped in beside him. "That was so much fun," he said, and once again they fell quickly asleep in one another's arms.

CHRIS

When Michael awoke and tried to get out of bed Chris held onto him and said simply, "Not yet. Stay a while." And so he lay there allowing himself to feel the pleasure of holding and being held. After a while Chris stretched and said lazily, "It's so great just to be able to sleep with someone without having to think about sex. I can't do that with any of the guys I know, they just want to have sex all the time." He paused and looked at Michael.

"Sometimes I think it might be nice to be free from sex entirely. Do you ever feel that way?" Michael smiled. "To be free of the need for sex, maybe. But to be free of desire, no, I'd never want that. Mostly I think what we want is just the touch of

another body, skin to skin, and sex is the only way we can figure out how to get it because we're too shy or embarrassed just to ask to be held."

"That's so true," Chris said sitting up. "Sleeping with you—platonically," he added with a grin, "has been so much nicer than sleeping with a guy for whom I feel I have to perform sexually." He leaned over and gave Michael a light kiss on the cheek as he got out of bed. "I don't have much time this morning," Chris said, "so let's eat something and take another swim in the lake before I have to leave."

While they ate Michael wanted to share some thoughts he'd had while sitting on the hillside, but he was also hesitant to do so. Finally he decided to just go ahead and say what he was feeling. "You are so fortunate," he said cautiously, "to be living in a time when being gay has become so much more acceptable. When I was your age it really wasn't a choice you could make and think you could still have a successful life. Some men did of course and I admire them for it. But most, like me, stayed hidden and somewhat ashamed of what we were doing, of who we were, really." He paused for a moment, looking at the table, remembering how he had felt, unable to look Chris in the eyes for fear his emotion would show.

"It was all just about sex," he went on casually; "there was no idea that you could actually settle down with one guy and to have even thought about marriage would have been preposterous." Again, he stopped, feeling Chris's silent gaze upon him. "I look at you and these other young guys"—he motioned toward the adjacent cabin—"and think how much has changed in my lifetime, how wonderful that is and how fortunate you all are to be able to live so openly, to be able to find someone to love and now even to get married if you want to." He made a gesture with his hands, trying to lessen the slight embarrassment he felt.

"Sorry for the long speech, but this is what I've been thinking as I've been watching and, I might add, admiring you." Chris sat silently looking at Michael for several minutes, long enough for Michael to feel that perhaps he'd embarrassed him or had said something wrong. He was about to change the topic and break the awkward silence when Chris spoke up.

"I don't normally tell people this," he said, "but I feel a strong connection with you that I don't normally get with many people. And certainly not so quickly. Maybe it's the platonic stuff," he said with a smile, then paused and looked down at his hands. "I have acute myelogenous leukemia. AML for short. I've had it for a little over four years and they say five is the normal life expectancy. For the first couple of years I tried chemo but it didn't help, just made me tired and nauseous and dizzy all the

time. I hated it. Finally I said, to hell with it; if I'm going to die I'm not going to spend my last few years in a bed feeling miserable, I'm going to have as much fun as I can instead. And that's what I'm trying to do." Chris looked down again. "Sometimes I think I'm doing it just to prevent myself from thinking about the real situation, cause when I do I get really depressed. But mostly, I know I'm just trying to pack as much living into the time I have left and that's good."

For a moment neither spoke and their silence was filled with the sound of music from a nearby campsite before Chris continued. "I talked to some nutritionists and started making up these super food concoctions that I drink. Does it help? I don't know. But sometimes if you think something helps then it actually does help even though it really doesn't—you know what I mean?" Michael nodded. "Anyhow, the doctors gave me six months six months ago and I'm still hanging in there trying to do as much as I can to enjoy myself. I'm weaker and I tire more easily, but I still try to push myself. That's why I'm here; I've never been naked outside all weekend with other people around and thought it would be something cool to do. And you sounded like a nice guy—and you are by the way—so I just said, go for it, and here we are."

He paused and Michael thought he should say something but wasn't sure if Chris was finished. "We're not much different in a way," Chris said. "What do you mean," Michael asked. "Well, I don't mean to be rude or anything, but you're nearing the end of your life too, right? I mean, you look healthy, but I don't know what you are like on the inside. Like me, I look pretty good on the outside, but inside I'm a mess. Even if you're fine, statistically speaking you don't have many years left, right? So you have the same problem as I do—how to make the most of the time that's left, how to enjoy life before it ends. You must think about that too, don't you?"

Michael smiled. "Not as well as you do I'm afraid." "Well then," Chris said standing up and smiling broadly. "Let's stop discussing this depressing stuff and go have some fun." He pulled Michael up off the picnic table bench: "Get those clothes off old man, we're going swimming naked," and he said word *naked* as if it indeed were something risqué and unconventional.

They walked down the path to the lake, arms around one another's shoulders, then swam as they had the day before. It seemed colder, but that didn't matter to either one of them. On the way back they passed the sign to the Memorial Grove. "I want to see that," Chris said. The grove was at the bottom of a small hill beside the stream that fed the lake and then moved on past it. It consisted of tall pine trees with beds of ferns bright green in the sunlight around the edges of a clearing. There were

strips of wood of different sizes on many of the tree trunks each one with the name of a man and the dates of his life. Some were single strips about two feet long, others were in the shape of a cross and some were smaller rectangles. There weren't many, maybe fifteen or twenty in all, each hanging on the trunk of a separate tree.

Chris walked around looking at each one, reading each of the names and dates. "It's beautiful," he said quietly. "Then he added, "Most people probably think this place is sad, but its not. Think of all the love that's here; think of how much someone must have loved each of these guys to do this. It's just so beautiful." Michael realized he had never thought of it in those terms before. They sat on a bench facing the creek enjoying the silence broken only by the sound of the bubbling water.

"Hey, look," Chris said, pointing into the creek. "There's one of those stone sculptures you mentioned." It was smaller than those in the other portion of the creek so Michael had not noticed it. "Let's make one," Chris said enthusiastically, and, as it had all weekend, Chris's enthusiasm carried Michael along as easily as the flowing water carried the leaves that had fallen into it.

Soon they were both wading around in the water trying to find as many flat rocks as they could. "Its not as easy as it looks," Chris said after their second attempt collapsed. Michael suggested they make two shorter towers, like legs, then put a flat stone across them and a third tower on top of that. They tried that and it worked. When the top tower was about a foot tall Chris asked if he should try one more rock, then decided "No, let's leave it as it is." They stepped back to look at it, arms wrapped around one another's shoulders again, and Michael felt happier than he had been in years. "I hope it lasts for someone else to see," Chris said as they were leaving.

On the way back Michael said he was very sorry to hear about Chris's illness. "Don't be sorry for me, please. It only depresses me. Be happy, that helps me to be happy too." As they were packing Chris's car Michael said he wanted to stay in touch with him. "Me, too," was Chris's response. So they talked briefly about getting together for dinner or going to a movie. Chris told Michael the name of the bar where he worked and invited him to stop by. "Can I come over and sleep with you from time to time?" Chris asked; "Strictly platonically of course," he added with the usual smile. "Of course," said Michael; "no one's using the other half of my bed so come over whenever you want." "Cool. You think I'm joking but I'm going to do that." They hugged for a long time; said good-bye and Chris drove away.

Michael spent the remainder of the day and the following morning wandering around the campground naked feeling quite relaxed and not at all self-conscious. He thought about Chris and the time they had spent together. Mostly he thought about what Chris had said about both of them having something in common—not long to live. He knew that, of course. He knew that he could only hold prostate cancer in check for so long and that there were many other potential mine fields ahead: stroke, heart attack, Alzheimer's, broken hips and just plain old age. He knew he was not using his remaining time as well as Chris was using his. It almost seemed as if he had given up or that he was doing what he always did—waiting for something to come along and find him rather than going after something he wanted for himself. But this time what was coming to find him was death and waiting around for that didn't seem like a good idea. Could I change, he asked himself? Could he have the same positive attitude that Chris had in an even worse situation. Could he stop sitting around and get up off the chair and have some fun for a change. Surely there must be things he would enjoy doing while there was still time and he had the ability. He heard himself say, 'I don't know' and then he heard Chris's voice say, 'Come on old man, let's have some fun.'

Over the following months Michael kept in touch with Chris. He called him just to talk, often stopped by the bar where he worked to say hello, and took him to dinner from time to time. Sometimes they just took a walk in the park near Michael's house. Chris called him, too, and frequently did come over to spend the night—platonically, Chris usually added as if that was a special joke between them. Because he often wanted to come over late, after he finished work, Michael gave him a key. Chris would just let himself in, slip into bed and fall asleep. It was always a great comfort for Michael to have him there, to feel the warmth of Chris's body wrapped around his, so he never minded the late hours or having his sleep briefly interrupted.

Chris invited Michael to his place, too. He had a room in a house in South Philadelphia he shared with five other guys, two of whom were gay. "Just friends." Chris said. Michael came over often enough to meet the other housemates and sometimes, when he and Chris sat in the living room talking, they would be joined by Dan and Pete, Chris's two gay housemates. Chris said they often teased him about dating someone old enough to be his grandfather, which Chris found amusing.

One afternoon when they were sitting on the couch at his house, Michael said he had tried calling Chris during the week but only got his voice mail. "Yeh," Chris said; "I was in the hospital for a few days. It happens from time to time. But I'm ok now." Michael turned to him and said, "Don't ever do that again. Don't ever go into the hospital and not tell me. Promise me you will call me next time so I can help you."

“Ok,” Chris said. “But you have to promise me something, too.” He waited a moment as if he expected Michael to answer. “You have to promise you won’t cry when I die and that you’ll live every day of the rest of your life twice as fully to make up for the time I’ll miss.” As soon as Chris said, ‘when I die’ Michael started crying; he couldn’t help himself. He managed to say, “Ok, I’ll promise you that, but right now I’m going to cry as much as I like.” He rested his head on Chris’s shoulder and just let the tears flow and the sobbing shake his body as he hadn’t done in longer than he could remember. When he finally stopped and looked up he could see that Chris was crying too, even though he was smiling through his tears. So Michael kissed him lightly on the lips and said, “I love you, Chris.” And Chris kissed him and said, “I love you too, Michael.” Then added, “Platonically, of course” with a smile and a big hug.

“No,” Michael said, “not platonically, agapally, if that’s a word.”

“Agapally? What does that mean?” Chris asked laughing at the strange word. “There are several forms of love,” Michael explained. “*Philia* is friendship or platonic love; *eros* is sex and *agape* is the highest form of love. It is a boundless love for all creation that wants nothing in return.” “Ok,” Chris said with his usual enthusiasm. “I can go for that. But we’ll have to get Craigslist to make a new category—strictly *agape*,” and they both laughed and hugged again.

Chris showed Michael how to open a Facebook account and although he seldom posted anything himself, he loved being able to follow Chris’s life. One week there would be a picture of Chris at the Naked Philly Bike ride—discrete but clearly naked. Another week he’d be at a lecture at the Free Library or at a bar playing pool with friends or standing beside the river frozen over and covered with so much snow so that you wouldn’t even know there was a river there if you weren’t familiar with the location. Often Michael thought of asking Chris to invite him along on some of his activities, but he realized Chris didn’t need a tag-along friend and Michael needed a life of his own.

He started to make a list of the things he would like to do or places he would like to go. It was much harder than he thought. In fact, he realized he had no idea what he would really like to do. All the dreams he might have had as a child had been stifled or had died as a result of the conventional, careful life he had led. What were the dreams he had as a child, he wondered, and how might he capture them again? When he looked at each item on his list—a trip to Morocco, Machu Picchu, Parsifal at the Met, a month at that Buddhist retreat center he had once visited near San Francisco—he asked himself if this was something he really wanted to do, really

passionately wanted to do. The answer was generally no and so each day he crossed some items off and added others only to cross them off the next day.

He realized that Chris did not make big plans. Perhaps because he didn't have the resources, but also because he probably didn't know if he had the time to plan a trip three months in advance. Instead he found fun things to do in Philadelphia each week and so Michael started doing the same. He renewed a subscription to the orchestra and took Chris to a performance since he said he'd never been to a concert. He went to the Met's live broadcasts at a movie theater and a tea ceremony at a Japanese teahouse in the park. Often he had to push himself to go, but he was doing more than he had been and enjoying it more as well. Most of the time he was alone, but that was ok, he told himself; if some one new was going to come into his life that would happen in its own time.

Chris seldom talked about his illness but when he did it was brief and indirect. One night he said "I'm losing weight." Michael could tell this both from the way he looked and the way his body felt. Once, when Chris had not come over at night for several weeks Michael asked about that. "I had to stop working nights," Chris said. "I don't have the energy anymore. I cut back my hours during the week to the minimum as well." Michael asked if he was ok financially and Chris said yes, his grandparents had named him beneficiary of both their insurance policies knowing he might need money for medical expenses. It was clear that Chris was declining, but Michael was reluctant to bring it up because Chris was so insistent on staying happy.

When Michael picked up the phone one afternoon in early March he recognized the voice on the other end of the line as Dan, one of Chris's housemates. Dan said that Chris had collapsed at home and they had to call 911 to get an ambulance to take him to the hospital. "He always told us to call you if there was a problem." Michael grabbed a taxi and went immediately to the hospital. He met Dan in the waiting room outside the Intensive Care Unit.

"The doctor wants to talk with you," Dan said. They found the doctor who took them into a nearby office. "Chris is in a coma," he said. "We don't know if he'll come out of it. Right now he's on life support. He listed you" —he looked at Michael—"as his emergency contact when he was in here for his last check-up. He also said he had a life care directive, but we don't have a copy of it. Do you?" Michael said no, Chris had never mentioned it. "I gave him the forms some time ago, but I never knew if he filled them out." When the doctor asked if they might be at home Dan and Chris said they'd go look.

Dan had driven Chris's car so they drove back to the house and Michael went up to Chris's room to see what he could find. When he opened the door he just stood there for a few minutes looking around the room he knew so well from previous visits. The blankets were hanging over the edge of the bed and onto the floor; there were shirts on the back of chairs, books stacked on a table, the familiar posters on the walls. It took him a back for a moment to look at the room without Chris in it. He went over to the desk to see what he could find. Right there on top was a large white envelope with his name on it. 'Michael,' it said; 'For when you need it. Chris.' He took the papers out of the envelope. On top was another note from Chris addressed to him. 'You've made the last eight months one of the happiest periods of my life. Thank you.' Then below that was a PS: "Don't forget your promise." Michael knew what his promise was but he could not prevent the tears from flowing down his cheeks. You're not gone yet, he said to himself, as if to justify that he was not breaking his promise. When he looked at the papers he was surprised to find that Chris had given him the authority to make health decisions if Chris was unable. Again, he could not stop the tears. There was also a list of names and phone numbers including Chris's mother, Delores, and some other papers.

After he got back to the hospital and handed in the forms, he called Chris's mother in California. Her husband answered. When she came on the line Michael explained who he was and why he was calling. "He's in a coma," he said. "He can't talk and won't even know that you are here, but I thought you might want to come." He didn't want to add 'before it was too late' and hoped she understood that.

"Hold on," she said. He could hear a man's voice and a muffled conversation in the background. When she came back on she said she would try to get a plane ticket and would call Michael to let him know when she would arrive. He gave her his cell phone number. It was midnight when she finally called him, but he was still awake, sitting up in bed feeling numb and unable to sleep.

He met her at the airport the following afternoon and drove her to the hospital. On the way she thanked him for calling. "Chris and I haven't been very close for a long time," she said. "It's my fault really. My husband was a wonderful father when Chris was younger, but once Chris told us he was gay, well then Bob couldn't handle it, didn't want him around. That's when Chris came out here to live with his grandparents, his real father's parents that is. But since they died he's been on his own. I tried to get him to come live with us when he was diagnosed with leukemia but Chris knew he'd never be comfortable with Bob and preferred to stay here."

At the hospital Michael let her sit in the ICU with Chris alone then he asked the doctor to explain the situation to both of them even though he had already explained it to Michael. "Only the life support is keeping him alive," he said. "It's not the type of coma that he could snap out of and go on living for several more years. His blood cells are too compromised and his bone marrow too infected." Michael asked how long he'd live once the life support was withdrawn and the doctor said he didn't know. "It varies. Sometimes the body shuts down in a few hours, sometimes in a few days. In this case, I'd say not very long, he's very weak."

Alone in the office Delores asked Michael what he intended to do. "I don't know," he said. "It sounds like there isn't much choice, but I'd feel better knowing you agree with that." Delores said she was flying back tomorrow afternoon and would return first thing in the morning. She was staying at a nearby hotel. "And whatever you decide," she said, "you have my support."

In the morning Michael arrived first and went to sit in the room with Chris. When Delores arrived she asked what he had decided. "I'm just going to sit here for a while," Michael said. "Do you want to be here when....?" He couldn't finish the sentence. "No," she said. "I don't think I could handle it."

After they had sat together for about an hour and a half Delores said she had to leave for the airport soon. Michael decided to let her have some time alone with Chris. Through the glass he watched her sitting beside him, her hand on his arm. He saw her cover her face with her hands then take a handkerchief out of her purse to wipe away the tears, and then he looked away.

When she came out into the hall she thanked him for calling her. They hugged and said goodbye. Michael returned to sit with Chris, moving closer to the bed so he could hold his hand. He was waiting until he felt at peace, or as close to being at peace that he would come that day. Once he had reached that place he went out and signed the forms then came back in and sat down again. The doctor and several nurses came in and disconnected tubes and turned off the machines, including the one that monitored his heartbeat. Michael said he didn't want to hear or see it. They went along with his request, saying it would still register at the nurse's desk.

As the day went on he could sense Chris's breathing slowing down. Early in the evening he felt his hand go limp. A few minutes later the doctor came in and put a stethoscope to Chris's chest. "I'm sorry," he said. "He's gone." Michael waited a moment, fighting to hold back the tears that formed in his eyes, then stood up and kissed Chris on the forehead and left. He called Dan and the manager at the bar and

later he called Delores. Chris had asked to be cremated and to have his ashes spread around the memorial grove at the campground. Again, Michael had to fight hard not to cry when he read that.

In June, Michael went up to the campground on one of the first weekends it was open. Although Chris hadn't mentioned it, Michael had a friend make a wooden sign with Chris's name and dates on it. He took it and the ashes with him. He didn't ask permission, just went down to the memorial grove early in the morning and spread the ashes over a bed of ferns that seemed to be shining in the light. He noticed that the stone sculpture they had built hadn't survived the winter. Just like Chris, he said to himself. He put screws into the trunk of a tree near the river where the sculpture had been and hung the sign.

It rained for the rest of the day and all night and was still raining in the morning when he woke. Almost everyone had left. The fields were nearly empty of tents and RVs and only a few people could be seen walking down to the clubhouse with umbrellas. When the rain seemed to be coming down the hardest, Michael walked out into the almost empty fields, slowly, letting himself be soaked. God's tears, he thought to himself. When he got to the center of the field he stood motionless on the grass letting the rain pour down upon his head, running down his face and chest and legs until it reached his feet. Almost unconsciously, he lifted his arms to welcome it. For reasons he could not explain, it felt as if he was being cleansed—not his skin, but his very self, as if this was a new beginning and all his past worries and concerns were being washed away. He hoped that if Chris were watching he would know that the water streaming down his face was the rain and not tears, and that if he heard a noise he would know that it was not distant thunder but the shell around Michael's heart breaking open at last.

© *John Andrew Gallery 2015*