

LOUIE MANDRAPILIAS

FLEW  
TOO  
HIGH

**A gay drug smuggler's transcendent odyssey  
in the heyday of Studio 54**



# MANDRAPILIAS

**A SURNAME COMMONLY FOUND IN  
SPARTA, GREECE.**

*Meaning made of stone*



## PLEASED TO MEET YOU, WON'T YOU GUESS MY NAME

**I WON'T TRY TO WEAVE THIS TALE** so you'll like me better, say I was young and naïve, and the big bad wolf seduced me. Even when I was too young to know it, I had one eye on the next scam. When the wolf came knocking, I could hardly wait to let him in, which I did in the searing summer of 1978.

I attended the University of Houston, far from my North Louisiana hometown of Shreveport, where I'd be free to experiment with my sexuality and drugs. Drugs provided an escape from my confused, shame-filled adolescence. I'd taken acid a few times with varying degrees of success. Quaaludes were high on my list, but more than once, I mixed them with beer and blacked out. High on angel dust, I saw *Female Trouble*, a midnight movie on campus. Smoking cigarettes in the girls' bathroom, chief anarchist Dawn Davenport declared, "I'd like to set fire to this dump. I hope I get arrested." That resonated with me. I wanted to go underground.

New York City would provide that portal.

I had just arrived in the Big Apple for a two-week getaway, a postponed

21st birthday gift to myself, before the start of my senior year of college. The gay scene in New York was legendary. After the Stonewall Riots in 1969, when fed-up drag queens led the fight against harassment and forced the police to retreat, enforcement of sodomy laws gradually lax. Almost a decade later, packed, dark bars and steamy bathhouses all but welcomed sexual encounters.

*Just what I'm looking for.*

Even on my meager student budget, I would have enough money for a fun visit—meals, museums, and sundry drugs. I took in the hustle and bustle, as passing buses advertised the latest in entertainment. *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* had just opened on Broadway, a sweet callback to home.

Standing inside the phone booth, I caught my reflection in the glass doors, never comfortable with my large Greek nose and thick lips framed by my feathered brown shag haircut.

*God, just like my dad.*

I dialed the number Ian had scribbled on the back of his business card. Ian, a friend, okay, maybe more than a friend, was a notable art dealer, cultured, and in a not so committed relationship. I used my slim, boyish body as currency, fulfilling Ian's sexual fantasies he never realized with his uptight partner Oliver, in exchange for nice dinners and help with my rent on more than one occasion.

The phone started to ring. It continued ringing. I was about to hang up.

*I can try again later...*

"Hello?" a commanding voice answered.

"Trey? Hey, my name's Louie Mandrapilias," suddenly self-conscious of my southern drawl. "Ian gave me your number. Just flew in from Houston." I had no idea who Trey was—perhaps a stuffy colleague from the world of antiques?

Digging my finger in the coin return looking for change, I heard his deep voice again. "Ian?"

"Yeah, Ian Meckler. Listen, it's my first time in New York City," I started, looking out, itching to explore this new world. "You think we could meet for a drink?"

An awkward pause followed, as the constant stream of pedestrians raced past. "How long will you be here?"

"Couple of weeks. Ian said you'd show me around." That was a lie.

“Why don’t we meet at the entrance of the West Side Y on West 64th?”

“The YMCA?” I wanted to be sure I understood him.

“Off the corner of Central Park West. Say 20 minutes?”

I checked my Casio watch. “Cool. I’ll see you then.”

The phone booth door unfolded like an accordion ushering in the free-form Midtown symphony, the sounds and smells of everything sizzling in the concrete frying pan. Searching through T-shirts and bikini underwear in my red backpack, I pulled out a small map to chart my course.

August. I hated the heat, muggy as only New York in August can be with a hazy gray coat hanging in the air, the collar of my white Izod tennis shirt sticking to my neck. But I was invigorated by the heartbeat of the city, determined to enjoy every moment of the next fourteen days.

Continuing north across East 58th I spotted the Plaza Hotel. So imposing, so stately. Well-groomed bellmen assisted travelers from all corners of the globe with their luggage. The building wrapped around the block and faced out to the park—Central Park.

Staying on the outskirts of the low stone-walled preserve, it seemed too grand to enter. I had to stop at the confusing intersection of tangled arteries at Columbus Circle near the Gulf and Western Building.

*God, too many cars. This is a deathtrap. Which way should I go?*

I double-checked every thruway, then crossed. Exiting a long black limousine, a long-haired mogul type in a bold plaid suit stood alongside two well-heeled women in chic midi-length wrap dresses. Glancing down to check out their strappy sandals, I glimpsed a large rat peeking out of a gutter. What other horrors were hiding beneath the surface?

Walking up Central Park West, a trail of sweaty male gym goers in dancers’ socks and tight short shorts confirmed I was getting close to my destination. Back home at the Houston Y, everyone looked so nice and neat and vanilla in their gym-supplied uniforms. Not here. Everything was real, every flavor, every combination, all the toppings.

Glancing up at the West 64th Street sign, I turned the corner.

*God, is that him?*

Leaning against an imposing cylindrical column, Trey looked like a *GQ* model waiting for the camera shutter to click, one foot resting on a square stone base, his thighs spread apart unapologetically. Six feet tall. A few inches taller than me. Wavy hair, intense eyes filled with darkness and light, reminding

me of Clark Gable in *Gone With the Wind*. Forty and fit with smooth, translucent skin peeking out of his tight red Izod, collar up. We both wore Levi jeans. Izods and Levi's—the all-American gay '70s uniform.

“Trey?”

“Hey Louie,” his voice an octave deeper than when we spoke on the phone. I reached out to shake his hand. A nice firm grip—nothing worse than a limp handshake. “My friends call me Govind.”

*What kind of a name is that? I thought his name was Trey?*

I had to over enunciate his name to get it right. “Okay. Go-vind. What should we do first? The Statue of Liberty? The Empire State Building? I want to see everything.”

I felt his eyes checking me out, but he couldn't be interested in me—way too good-looking, way out of my league—even though months of working out had put a bit of muscle on my 27-inch-waist Jagger look.

“Let's go hang out,” he said, pointing to the urban forest. At the very least, he seemed willing to spend a few minutes with me.

Crossing the busy thoroughfare, we spotted a vendor, his metallic cart covered with a large hot dog photo. “You want anything?”

“I'll have a Coke,” I answered, pretending to reach for my wallet.

“I've got it,” Govind offered. “Perrier, please.”

Cutting through bike paths filled with joggers and roller skaters in rainbow colors, his walk fascinated me. Body movements disciplined but fluid. Not at all feminine, and yet graceful. Govind's mysterious confidence perfectly contrasted my wide-eyed curiosity.

“How do you know Ian?” I asked.

“We were lovers in the '60s.”

“Lovers?” I didn't remember Ian mentioning anything about that.

“He wanted to move to Houston. I went for a visit. And you?”

“We're friends,” I said slyly. “You know, dinner now and then.”

“Dinner? Does Oliver know?”

I didn't feel the need to clarify.

I couldn't grasp the vastness of Central Park. In the distance sat a small, enchanting cottage nestled in the trees. Govind read my mind. “That's Tavern on the Green, a posh restaurant.”

*Posh? You're posh, mister.*

He led me to an open meadow under the shade of bright foliage at its

summer peak. Huge boulders, lush vegetation, so much green under the suddenly big blue sky—open acres of nature corralled by rigid concrete and steel towering above mighty elms three stories tall. “Far out! It’s like we’re in the country.”

Govind remained guarded, somewhat aloof. “The city can be harsh. I come here to recharge.”

“Recharge?”

“I come here and soak in all the energy that exists in nature.”

*Soak in all the energy? I never thought about that.*

Summertime activities filled the park. Shirtless teenage boys tossed footballs and Frisbees. Nannies with baby carriages strolled by. A ragtag band played salsa music, a repetitive tribal beat fusing with the elements. Govind motioned me to sit across from him under a never-ending emerald canopy, shielding his alabaster shell from sunlight. A slight breeze blowing, but still hot and muggy. Twitching from side to side, I pulled at my shirt to let some air in.

“I didn’t catch your last name on the phone,” crossing his legs in a lotus position, the palms of his hands open to face me.

“Mandrapilias.”

“Wait. What?”

Just like Shreve Island Elementary all over again. “*Man-dra-pill-ee-us.*” Why couldn’t I have a simple one- or two- syllable last name? Smith. Allen. No, Mandrapilias.

“Greek, right? Like a Greek god,” uncertain I heard him correctly. “I’ve never met a blue-eyed Greek.”

“My Mom’s are brighter.”

Between my fascination with the park, and this seemingly suave man of the world, I was an open book. His gaze kept pulling me in—I felt powerless to look away.

I spouted out my most pressing question. “Go-vind. Ian said your name was Trey. Why’d you change it?”

He studied my face. “Trey was my name before my awakening. My guru in India gives all his followers new names.”

“A guru?” I never expected anything spiritual to enter our conversation. Not on vacation. Looking for answers, I’d read books by Emmet Fox, and experimented with meditation. Did Govind have wisdom he could impart?

“I’ve been going to Unity Church for the past year.”

“Yeah? What’s that like?”

“I’ve always wanted to believe in something, but not the God from Sunday school,” I said, confused by contradictory messages, even as a child. “Who switched the day of the Sabbath? Why aren’t women allowed to be priests? And what about Leviticus? ‘Man cannot lie with a man,’ but you’re not supposed to eat shellfish, or mix fabrics.”

“Letting go of old patterns. You’re on a spiritual path, too.”

“Baby steps,” I laughed. I certainly didn’t think of myself as enlightened but welcomed a like mind to delve deeper. “Don’t you think there has to be... something. Guiding us. Does that make sense?” He gave no response, prompting me to continue. “Sometimes, I think I’m getting it. Then I go smoke a joint. I wish someone would just teach me.”

*There’s something so familiar about him, like we already know each other.*

I’d had readings with psychics. Been introduced to the occult. “Do you believe in past lives?” How heady I must have sounded. “Jesus,” I joked, “this is *so* deep.”

“Okay,” he smiled. “What’s your sign?”

“Sagittarius.” Discussing one’s astrological compatibility carried significant weight. We all studied our charts during the Age of Aquarius, “when peace would guide the planets, and love would steer the stars.”

He nodded, “Me too. You like adventure.”

I took it as a good omen. All my closest friends were archers like myself. Ian’s birthday—a week before mine. And my roommate Tom’s. There was always an instant kinship with fellow Sagittarians—free spirits who enjoyed exploring the world at a moment’s notice. I was feeling it with Govind. “Tell me more.”

“Next month I start my last year in graphic design at U of H—University of Houston. Painting and sculpture ruined my hands, darling,” flashing my well-manicured fingernails, quickly pulling them down.

*Shit! He’s gonna think I’m some nelly queen.*

In truth, after one look at my design instructor’s precisely trimmed cuticles, I knew I’d found my career path. It wasn’t just vanity that helped me decide. I might be able to make a living at it. Minus sorcery, Darrin Stevens provided an upper-middle-class life for Samantha on *Bewitched*.

“John Waters’ movies. I love that scene in *Female Trouble*, Divine’s photo session where she shoots up. ‘Say it. Say it! Liquid eyeliner! Liquid



eyeliner! I love crime and getting away with it!”

Govind’s face softened. “You like breaking rules?”

“Sure. You gotta break the rules if you wanna have fun.”

“Like your dinners with Ian,” raising an eyebrow. “What else?”

“I sell a little pot, make some extra cash.”

His ears perked up. “You sell pot?”

“Yeah,” I paused. “I drive to Austin once a month to buy a pound of sinsemilla for my regular clients.” Growing up, I watched Dad showing off his guns and trading ammunition in back of his drive-in with several cop friends out of his Cadillac trunk; dealing drugs didn’t seem so dangerous.

I revealed too much, trying too hard to come off hip. Jesus, even boasting about my drug deals. Rookie move. Better change direction. Again. “Ever heard of Patti LaBelle? Her voice—”

“Oh my God,” his eyes bursting wide, “she’s amazing! Her voice opens the heart.”

I had already worn out her first solo album, her vocal range a gift from outer space. “It grabs your soul!”

“How could you hear her voice and not hear God?” he declared.

“Do you have her latest album? *Yes, you, you’re teasing me,*” I sang. “*Let’s start this lesson so I can see...*”

“*All the moves I’m confessing,*” he continued, beaming at me, “*will set your body free...*”

Reaching into his pants pocket, Govind held up two tan glycerin capsules. “There are lots of ways to connect with God. To let go.”

I looked at the capsules. “What is it?”

“A shortcut,” he said, enticing me. “You’ll like it.”

I hesitated but didn’t want to appear uncool—a southern hick. I took one.

“Take both,” he insisted.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s all for you.”

*I don’t even know what this is, but he’s a friend of Ian’s. He’s cool.*

I had brought enough cash to score drugs in New York—Ian’s friend was offering me a freebie—although I wasn’t sure what it was. I put them into my mouth. Tilted back the bright red can of Coke, washing down two hits of MDA—a hallucinogen I had never ingested before—with a big gulp. I had no idea what effect it would have on me. But when in Rome...

As we continued talking on that sultry summer day, before the pills had a chance to kick in, I was already light-headed, sitting in this urban parkland surrounded by green trees, warm air, staring at this hot man. Our entire conversation so far revolved around me. Intrigued by my afternoon host who spoke of song and spirituality, I volleyed back. “So, Govind. What do you do?”

Unfolding his legs, he leaned back on one elbow, posing for me. His other long limb swayed off a pivot point, dangling from his knee, perspiration painting his armpit a deeper shade of red. “I’ve trained in voice and dance for years. I take care of myself.”

“Why aren’t you a star on the stage? I’d buy a ticket.”

*Why am I saying these things?*

Energy building. Undressing him in my head, how would his hands feel on me? And his lips, to kiss him. I felt a tingle. The tablets of love kicked in.

Hot, balmy breezes caused the leaves above to roar. I stretched out like a cat and arched my back. My head spinning, body trembling. I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. Spiked blades of grass turned into plush velvet against my fingertips. Govind’s sinewy biceps teasing me, stretching his ribbed cuff. His deep laugh melted away any remaining inhibitions.

*Man, I have to touch him.*

I reached out, stroking Govind’s forearm. He didn’t pull away, inviting me to go further, resting my own on top and comparing. “Your skin is like milk. I’m always tanned.”

Bird’s chirps grew louder, sharper, cymbals slicing the moist air. Synchronized with beating conga drums nearby, my heart pounded in my chest. Like a hypnotic siren, a woman started singing, crying out to me, luring me deeper into the abyss.

Lunging for him, my fingers grabbed his wavy hair, melting into his skull. Decades later, I can remember the exact words I said to him: “Man, I don’t know you, but I gotta kiss you,” shoving my tongue into his mouth—he welcomed it. My hands let go of his dark crown and traveled down his long forearms.

“Oh God. I want you. I want you now.”

Pulling me against him, he pushed me to the ground. Powerless under his weight, my legs wrapped around his dancer’s thighs. No concern for our environment, we rolled around in the lush green carpet in each other’s arms. Out of the corner of my eye, turning wheels of a baby stroller a few feet away

picked up speed. Were we being indiscreet?

"I don't care who sees. Oh fuck, fuck man. Now!"

Swimming in the humid air carrying rhythmic beats, I clocked it all: his mouth on mine. Grinding groins. Skin against skin. Everything enhanced by MDA.

Govind pulled away. I held on to his hair, staring at his handsome face framed by the deep blue sky, not wanting to let go. "Come on, I don't live far." He stood and held out his hand as we began our *pas de deux*.

*Hurry, please. Please, before he changes his mind. Oh God, please don't let him change his mind.*

Sprinting up Central Park West, car horns and radios blasted, charging oncoming traffic. Coming to a dead stop at the Dakota where *Rosemary's Baby* was filmed, he said, "Welcome home." For a minute I believed him, but he laughed devilishly and resumed running.

Twenty blocks into the West 80s—would we ever get there—I kept trying to take his hand, keep contact with him. It was romantic, far away from home, where I was anonymous, still getting comfortable with my sexuality. Coming out in the mid-'70s was an act of bravery.

*I'm not in Houston, God. Nobody here knows me or my family. I can hold a man's hand.*

We turned left. I read street signs.

*Columbus.*

Another block.

*Amsterdam.*

Row after row of rundown structures, the neighborhood felt a little sketchy, not my Park Avenue fantasies. Taking two steps at a time, we climbed a large multi-step stoop of a five-story brownstone that blended with Govind's neighbors.

High and hyperaware, I made mental notes, entering the vestibule with missing mosaic floor tiles. Intercom next to broken mailboxes, open and unguarded. Passing through a locked door, the interior painted in high-gloss white. Bare fluorescent tubes. No elevator. Thick black metal handrail, journeying up marble steps. Tall windows atop each landing. Inside—an airshaft. No interior decoration. No historical detailing. But clean.

"Fourth floor."

"Okay," pushing his ass upward, "move it."

Almost knocking them down to get past, a Hispanic father and young son headed into their third-floor apartment, zesty cilantro and cumin spilling into the hallway. We bolted up the final steps.

Reaching his apartment, Govind attempted to insert the key as I wrestled his dark shirt over his head, revealing nothing but muscle.

“God, your back.” Michelangelo couldn’t have done a better job.

Before the door closed, I surveyed the immeasurable floor-through apartment. Walls painted a warm ochre, like the clay banks of the Red River in my sleepy hometown. Tall windows on both ends filled the space with light, bouncing off worn wooden floors.

Touch. Kiss. Grab. Who could undress fastest, rapidly inspecting every inch. His dimensions almost looked photoshopped. I couldn’t have designed him better myself. Yin and yang, smooth and fair contrasting with my olive skin, his fingers weaving through my furry legs.

Govind let out a deep laugh and pinched both my nipples. “I’m going to show you everything.”

I’d been with dozens of men, but never anyone like Govind, a Tom of Finland drawing come to life. In that moment, I felt like my life was about to change. Back home, Ian may have thought he was in charge. In truth, it was me pulling the strings, setting the pace, often playing hard to get. Not now.

*God help me, I might not be able to say no to him.*

Entering his bedroom, I quickly inventoried the messy environment, unlike my spotless Houston apartment ready to be featured in *Architectural Digest*. Govind’s unmade mattress lay on the floor. Sharp lines of light framed a wool blanket pinned on the window as a curtain. A box fan on the sill for ventilation. Eight-millimeter projector with a film spool on a pale blue wooden dresser. A cassette recorder next to the bed.

We fell onto the mattress and stayed there for the next ten hours—I’d never been so high with such a perfect 10 to get lost in. Another hit of MDA rocketed my perceived intimacy with this complete stranger. When I looked at him, I saw God. All I wanted to do was worship him.



## THE CHRISTENING

**AS CRISP EDGES OF DAYLIGHT FADED AWAY,** we finally took a break. Govind had amazed me, showing off years of limber stretching. During our lustful acrobatics, I felt watched by a portrait on the wall. It looked like a mystical yogi, balding with long hair, a beard, and deep, powerful eyes. “Is that him?”

Govind smiled. He reverently picked up a brown beaded necklace with a photograph in a small round wooden frame and presented it to me. “Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, my guru in India. He gives you these *mala* beads when you become his disciple,” his words pulling me in. “When you *sannyas*.”

*An honest to God guru. Govind must really be enlightened.*

I first heard the word *guru* when The Beatles traveled to India a decade earlier and studied with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. True converts, they promoted the practice of Transcendental Meditation—met with skepticism in the Christian West. As a kid, Dad warned me if I continued listening to the Fab Four, communism would take over and we would be relocated to Cedar Grove, a

less than desirable neighborhood where he opened his first restaurant venture, Nick's Drive-in.

"Yeah? What does he say? I mean, what does he preach or believe in?"

Govind's palms cupped my jawline, mesmerized by my Mediterranean complexion—I couldn't believe he liked touching me this much. "The kingdom of heaven is within." He pressed his index finger between my eyebrows, trying to open my third eye, something I had read about in Eastern philosophy books. We kept our eyes locked on one another, but I didn't experience anything unusual. No great awakening. He seemed disappointed. "You want to listen to his discourse?"

"Sure. But can we fuck some more?" We were both raw, but I wasn't done devouring him.

We lay in bed holding each other, continuing to kiss. With my limited experiences, I confused passionate sex with romantic love—a pattern that still persists—falling so deep for him.

Govind hit the play button. Taking a swig from the gallon water bottle, drops spilled on his smooth chest. I quickly licked them off. Delivered with hypnotic phrasing, Bhagwan's thick Indian accent came through the anemic cassette speaker. "Sex is divine. The primal energy of sex has the reflection of godliness in it," he stated, exaggerating the last syllable. "It is obvious it is the energy that creates new life. And that is the greatest, most mysterious force of all."

"Sex is divine?" Blasphemy to my trained Christian ears.

Govind replied, "The sacredness of sex."

In an instant, shameful memories resurfaced. Like any good Greek male between 8 and 15, I served as an altar boy on Sunday mornings in the Orthodox Church that Mom's dad, my Pappou Yianni, had helped establish. After arriving at Ellis Island in 1912 with 10 other Greeks he made his way south and ended up building a large Hellenic community amidst Louisiana bayous.

As a kid, the whole church experience was full of gay cues. My gold-and-red-trimmed satin altar-boy robe featured crossed belting in back, like a Bob Mackie gown for Cher. As the choir sang ancient Byzantine hymns, incense burned in the intricately patterned censer, smoke drifting past ornate painted icons of saints—and of course Christ and the Virgin Mary, watching my every move.

Even back then I was beginning to explore my sexuality, curious about

other boys' bodies. Safe from view, I assumed, behind the *iconostasis* gold wall, I tugged at a fellow altar boy's crotch in the most sacred place. Was I being defiant of a God for whom felt contempt? Or a disconnect with a God I didn't understand?

In the middle of the liturgy, stiff wooden pews filled with the congregation united in worship in the Kingdom of God along with departed saints and angels, Father George walked in and saw my boyish foreplay, shouting immediately, "No! *Kako pethia!*" Bad children!

After the service, Father George exposed my scandalous behavior to my parents. The horrified look on their faces, especially Dad, told me everything: I was unholy, unworthy in God's eyes, my natural tendencies evil. All this in my Pappou's house of worship.

Dismissing those old notions, I latched onto the sensation of Govind's fingers running down my spine bringing me back as Bhagwan's voice broke through my painful past. "And the more fully you accept sex with an open heart and mind, the freer you will be of it. But the more you suppress it, the more you will become bound to it. The measure of your acceptance is the measure of your deliverance. The total acceptance of life, of all that is natural in life, will lead you to the highest realms of divinity—to heights that are unknown, to heights that are sublime."

Bhagwan's words threw me. I didn't know how to reconcile church teachings and my sinful desires with the freedom I experienced with Govind—the intensity, this naked lust—while talking about God. Could sex really be a spiritual experience? One that God would not just condone but celebrate? Taught in Sunday school at an early age, the devil would take the most pleasing form, only to seduce you then send you to hell.

Pressed against his hot flesh, the fan provided little relief. The message swirled through my head—was I being deceived, thinking I was entering a holy place, or was this a preview of eternal flames of hell?

The phone rang in another room. Govind got up and left me in bed while Bhagwan's tape continued to play. Through my 21-year-old eyes, Govind appeared so worldly to me.

*Could he be the teacher I've been looking for?*

Waiting for his return, I checked my watch—way past midnight. I hated being covered in sticky film, even Govind's dried fluids. Crossing the hallway,

I entered the spacious bathroom. A large, glazed window above the bathtub allowed the bright fluorescent from the stairwell across the air shaft to spread diffused light, hitting faded pale blue tiles.

A handheld shower hose but no curtain, like the one in the Athens apartment of my Thea Mary, Dad's holier-than-thou sister, where I spent a few summers as a teenager. Dr. Bronner's blue-and-white label peppermint soap and a loofah sponge sat on the windowsill.

Above the sink, a large mirror invited me to reexamine the kid from Houston. Running my fingers over my developing pecs, I followed the faint patch of hair that trailed down past my navel. If someone as powerful as Govind deemed me special, maybe I was? Pulling back my hair, I replayed his words in Central Park: *I've never met a blue-eyed Greek*.

Greek—the only part of my identity I never questioned, the one thing that tied me to my familial past, no matter what laws of nature I might breach. Greek as Zorba, Sophocles, and both Aristotles—the philosopher and the shipping tycoon. No matter that I grew up a million miles from the Aegean Sea, I was still Greek; a blue-eyed Greek with an ancient heritage running thick through my marrow.

I climbed in and squirted a stream of the castile liquid below the faucet and turned the handles. As the water filled the long, deep tub, the filth and grime of the hot day melted away. Besides a change of underwear, all my things were in my suitcase on Lexington Avenue. Old friends from high school, my hosts were probably wondering about me. Too late to call now.

Govind reappeared after five minutes. His mood had changed. Quiet. Somber. Had I done something to upset him, not asking for permission to bathe? “You okay?” He didn't respond. He sat on the toilet and watched me. Staring at me, as if running calculations.

He got up and walked over, his movements so disciplined, a sensuous soldier out of *The Nutcracker*. Stepping in, the water line traced his impressive calves as he lowered himself in. Warm waves enveloped me, and all my walls came tumbling down. MDA had opened me up, allowing years of fear and repression and shame to surface, my tears dropping into soapy water.

Seeming to care, Govind asked, “What is it?”

From deep inside, words erupted. “I want them to leave me alone.”

“Who?”

“All of them. My family. The world. Everyone's rules. Sometimes...



I just want to die.”

Since childhood, death seemed to be the only option to quiet the clamor in my psyche, playing back-to-back reels of bad family memories—Mom uncovering evidence of another of Dad’s affairs, her dragging me and my sisters out of the house in the middle of the night. Seeking refuge with Uncle Gus, Mom’s older brother. Her hysterical outbursts left me with PTSD.

Or my own personal torment—trying to hide from or cope with my sexuality and keep it all a secret. Watching Ron Ely as *Tarzan* on Saturday mornings, lying on my stomach, inches away from the screen, his tall bronze physique arousing me. Dad walking in, sensing my deviant desires, quickly changing the station. All of it stored inside my vault—mounting evidence that I was a bad seed, and death my only option.

Govind pulled me into his smooth, sleek arms, his fingers combing through my long, wet hair. “Bhagwan says, ‘Sometimes birth demands death.’”

“Birth demands death?”

“Part of you has to die, so you can be born again.” I still didn’t understand. I barely understood praying, let alone the circle of life. The MDA kept releasing emotions, as Govind asked the strangest question. “What if you could let go of everything you’ve ever believed in?”

“What do you mean?”

He dove deeper, his fingertips kneading my scalp. “If you could change one thing right now, what would it be?”

The first thing that popped up: my name. “I wish I wasn’t Louie. I hate that name.” I didn’t understand the significance, the basic truth I had exposed: I hated myself. The ammunition Govind needed to begin my indoctrination.

“Yeah, Lou-eee, Jo-eee, Tra-cee, all those ‘e’ sounding names. So weak, like a little boy,” egging me on.

“Mom changed her name from *Aspasia* to Cassie.”

“Cassie?”

“After some 1940s movie star, Cass Daley.” Mom didn’t care for her own given name, so in high school, she informed everyone she would from then on go by the name Cassie.

“Okay. So, who do you want to be?”

I had been baptized with the name Louis, an English version of my paternal grandfather’s name. “How about *Elias*? My name in Greek.”

“What about Eli,” Govind suggested. “That’s a cool name.”

“Yeah, Eli!” Edgy, very New York, a complete change from Louie.

At the same time, we started singing the Three Dog Night lyrics: “Eli’s comin’, hide your heart, girl.” We both laughed out loud and made riffing guitar sounds. “Danna-nana-nana-nana.” I thought we were playing a game of make-believe.

“Ha-ha-ha,” Govind laughed louder.

Mocking Thurston Howell III, I went higher. “Ha-ha-ha! Lovie, darling.”

Govind raised his laugh again, loud, “Ha-ha-ha.”

Louder. “Ha-ha-ha!”

Maniacal. “HA-HA-HA-HA-HAAA!”

His eyes morphed, revealing something sinister. And that laugh—only a madman in movies emitted those sounds. As Govind transformed from Jekyll to Hyde, I convinced myself he merely intended to show off his theatrical side.

No going back now. There in the large porcelain font, I’d been rechristened Eli!

The phone rang again. Rising up like a serpent he stepped out, leaving a wet trail on the wooden floors, further damaging the hundred-year-old planks.

Scrubbing my skin with the peppermint-soaked loofah, I mentally reviewed my trip so far: a charming prince had welcomed me to New York City, we’d had hours of mind-blowing sex, and together we had explored new ways of thinking.

*Thank you, God. What an incredible day. It can’t get any better than this.*

Still wet, Govind returned and posed in the bathroom doorway like Da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, an illustration I often revisited in my *Art Through the Ages* textbook. Light from the air shaft wafted over his shimmering frame, his perfect proportions standing erect with his arms outstretched. Before me stood a masterpiece.

Then he uttered the magic words: “Do you want to go to Studio 54?”



## THE VELVET ROPE

**MY FIRST TIME TAKING THE SUBWAY** felt like stepping onto a brown shag carpet runner—descending unlit stairs covered by a wavy crust of scurrying cockroaches. Being from the swampy South, I’m used to insects, but this species seemed radioactive.

Govind handed me my first Metro token. Pushing through the turnstile, internal metal rollers clack-click-clacked. Few people waited on the platform deep in the city bowels, where the temperature ran at least ten degrees warmer than street level. A homeless man aimed against stained tile walls, adding a fresh quart to the piss-soaked sauna.

Mischievous rats ran ahead of bright lights from the oncoming Number 1 train. Discarded newspapers lifted by the wind tunnel vacuum danced clockwise above the tracks. Everywhere, decades of decay. I didn’t care, delighted to be in this amazing metropolis with my noble escort.

Govind covered his ears seconds before worn metal brakes seized electrified rails, producing an eardrum splitting shriek. The graffiti-covered train

pulled to a stop, its exterior a canvas for oppressed voices. We boarded through waffling doors, too old and neglected to glide.

Inside, unflattering lighting revealed the cabin's wear and tear. Missing advertisements in slots above, a tossed bag of McDonald's fries scattered below, half stepped on and smeared. I couldn't imagine sitting on the defiled benches, threadbare and stained with God knows what. We lurched forward, wrenching a vertical steel pole, clammy with nasty residue, balancing myself as the subway car veered from side to side. I scanned unsavory night passengers, assuming they were all up to no good. We looked suspiciously at one another.

*Street smart.*

Around 2 a.m. we emerged from the underground furnace near Columbus Circle, where I had passed twelve hours before. Now in the cover of night, it felt less dangerous. An odd white building with Palazzo-shaped cutouts stood out to me. A daring design or a bad one?

Headed down 8th Avenue and turned left onto West 54th, picking up speed. My heart raced, navigating through hopeful crowds that halted traffic, creating a gridlock of metal and flesh. Looking up, the stylized marquee in Art Deco type I had seen in magazines, the pavement below my feet vibrating from the disco beat. I had arrived to the place I had fantasized about. It beckoned me. Mecca.

*My God my God my God—who are they? Will I fit in? Can we get in?*

Everybody knew the drill, symbolized by the velvet rope. Almost from the beginning when the nightclub opened in 1977—it was just a disco for God's sake—it became famous for its celebrity guest list, a Who's Who of fashionable debauchery. Being admitted into Studio 54 was a status symbol, and a ticket to the underworld—trendsetting royalty, over-the-top events, unabashed drug parties, all underscored by salacious reporting in tabloids and gossip columns. Who could forget the pictures of Bianca Jagger showing up at the club riding a white horse in *People* magazine?

But beyond all that, was its reputation as a hedonistic sex den. It was like a giant gay petri dish. I wanted to join the experiment more than anything.

Govind spotted his friends, jumping to head of the line, looking back at angry faces. "Guys, this is Eli. First time in the city."

*Did he really call me that? My name is Louie.*

Giving false witness, Govind introduced me by my new name. He lied so convincingly. Then again, they had never heard of Louie. Here in New York,

where no one knew me or my past, I could be whoever or whatever I wanted to be. I became Eli.

“Eli! Hey, baby. I’m Dimitri.” All arms and lips, his curly black hair bounced with every move, his cigarette a baton conducting the entourage. European-chic, he kissed me on both cheeks. “*Eísai kai Éllenas?* You Greek, too?”

More formal but warm, his partner, perhaps his lover, shook my hand. “Hello, darling. Taylor.” He looked like a runway model, over 6 feet tall, high cheekbones, pursed mouth. Was that his natural facial expression? “So, are you ready to have some fun?”

“Oh my God, yes! But can we get in?” It felt like a big tease, so close, music pouring out each time the door opened.

The impassive doorman, a looker himself, didn’t seem in a hurry to let anyone enter. Dimitri feigned impatience—they obviously knew each other. Taking a long drag off his cigarette, he muttered under his breath, “Oh, give me a break.” And then, the velvet rope rose. Dimitri took my hand, adrenaline kicking into overdrive, my feet barely touching the ground as he ushered me inside.

Just beyond the ornate mirrored lobby adorned with vaulted ceilings, we plunked down \$20 before entering the main floor. Restraining my awe, I took my first breath of rarefied air, turning to take in each angle, each face and outfit more glamorous than the last. Boa feathers and leather chaps. Fur-trimmed denim and twirling capes. A little old lady on roller skates whizzed by. This was the place to be—sounds, sights, my skin rubbing against anyone who passed.

I knew it all from *Interview* magazine—the floorplan, the infamous balcony, the dizzying lights. Sweaty chests glistening, an array of shirtless bartenders poured cocktails at the bar. Across the room, Warhol and Liza held court on the sofa. Halston had to be nearby.

Raising my hand to point, Govind hooked my arm, preventing me from embarrassment. I was a hick. I didn’t care.

A few scantily dressed women greeted Dimitri, digging their hands into the most private parts out in public—molesting him. He didn’t mind. Wearing only red satin shorts, a waiter walked up and offered a tray of shot glasses filled with clear liquid.

Dimitri’s voice mixed with pounding fresh tracks. “Who wants a drink?” My initial hookup with Govind was paying off in spades. We all took a glass. Dimitri and Taylor raised theirs and in unison cheered, “To Eli!”

His voice filled with pure seduction, Govind's lips pressed against my ear. "Welcome to New York." Holy cow, if my friends could see me now!

I tossed back my drink—chilled vodka burned my throat. Like the first time I snuck a glass of champagne at my cousin Francis' wedding, alcohol entered my bloodstream, replacing all my secrets and fears with a relaxed confidence.

On the 5,400-square-foot dance floor, the celebration continued—no boundaries or rules, the energy and colors obscuring any trace of certainty. Truman Capote described it best: "This is the nightclub of the future. It's very democratic. Boys with boys, girls with girls, girls with boys, blacks and whites, capitalists and Marxists, Chinese and everything else—all one big mix!"

Govind pointed to the smiling Man in the Moon sculpture as it descended from above. A big coke spoon rose from below and Mr. Moon inhaled white neon powder up his nostrils. Screaming approval erupted as silver diamond dust dropped from the ceiling, fake cocaine raining down on us.

For guys like me, this screamed affirmation and acceptance. I was experiencing something my father couldn't possibly absorb—a social/sexual revolution sweeping the country, all punctuated by disco music, pulsing lights and rampant drug use. And gay men were pushing the agenda. I had arrived.

*God, is this really happening? How did I end up here? It's everything I've ever dreamed of.*

What decadence. What freedom. A world way from Houston. No, farther.

Cracking a glass vial of pharmaceutical grade amyl nitrate, Dimitri rammed it up my nose as 8-foot-tall flashing red cylinders dropped from the ceiling. Sylvester's high-pitched falsettos pierced the night as Govind held me from behind, grinding into my backside. Chemistry, pheromones, whatever, it made me feel so mighty real.

We hadn't been dancing fifteen minutes when Govind looked to the darkened balcony. "You want to go upstairs?" Consumed by desire, I would have followed him anywhere.

He held my hand as we darted up the back staircase—like boyfriends.

We entered the nebulous space, pungent with marijuana. Wide-open platforms covered in black rubber with huge pillows had replaced proper seating. Very Joe D'Urso minimalist design. I began to make out shadowy figures, almost stepping on human bodies. Flashing red strobes flooded the balcony and it became evident we were in an orgiastic scene straight out of

*Caligula*. No privacy, no discretion. “Govind,” my mouth gaping, “people are fucking.”

He pulled my shirt off and pushed me down against padded surfaces. This most spectacular man wasn’t embarrassed to be seen with me, little old Louie. I mean, Eli.

We kept kissing. Passionate kissing. Tongues, hands. Other hands reached over and touched me. First, another man. Then a woman. A quite gorgeous brunette, with long legs wrapped around a man’s head. From the look on her face, wasted or cumming or both. I reached back and copped a feel of her breast, rubbing her nipple, watching her smile and moan.

Trying to pass for straight in high school, I made out with a few girls to keep my cover, turning down several offers to go further throughout my teens. Somewhere along the way, I learned women were supposed to remain pure, and to treat them with respect. I was happy to oblige.

Studio 54 gave preachers reason to pound on lecterns all over the country, quoting from Ezekiel: “I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and their eyes which played the harlot after their idols; and they will loathe themselves for all their abominations.” Yep, this was a hell of an abomination. And I was thrilled to take part.

Lost in time, songs kept changing, I needed hydration. Pulling up my pants, I searched for my shirt on the floor, and walked down to the balcony’s edge, taking in the rapturous sight. Covered in silky sweet sweat, I held onto Govind’s torso.

Looking to my new friend, my sentry, perhaps the one I had been searching for, I couldn’t contain my ecstasy. “Warhol! Can you believe it?”

Govind saw my eagerness. My impressionability. “You want this?” he asked in his deep voice.

“Every night! I’ll do anything.” I wasn’t exaggerating.

His hand on my back, fingers sliding down my spine, he pressed my pelvis to the railing. Leaning closer, his lips brushed against my ear. What sweet nothing was he about to tell me? “If you jump, you’ll be in all the papers tomorrow.”

*Wait. Did he just invite me to kill myself?*

I already idolized this man. I had spent the past twelve hours divulging my deepest secrets to him. What kind of trickery was this?

Unlike Christ in the desert, I had already succumbed to his temptation.

For so many years I had been hungry for this nourishment, this companionship, this lust. And he had used holy teachings to confuse me about sex and God—*sex is divine*.

Now he tempted me to perform some spectacular feat, to raise the enthralled onlookers up to witness my moment of glory. Here in this most sacred place, Studio 54, he invited me to leap from heavenly heights, a sacrifice in this temple of false gods. They would know who I was. They would know my name. Eli.

I looked into his eyes and laughed at his ridiculous suggestion. He was kidding, right? Yet even in my altered state, I sensed danger. But I was smitten. I wanted this man and this life, no matter the warning signs.