

THE VALUE OF
X
POPPY Z. BRITE

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Website:

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email:

subpress@earthlink.net

A Wright," said Mrs. Reilly to her eleventh-grade algebra class, "if Y equals thirty-six, who can tell me what X equals?"

Surveying the class slumped in their desks, she could not blame them for their apathy. Though it was only April, the weather was already hinting at another brutal New Orleans summer. For public schools to be without air conditioning in 1990 was a disgrace, but such things were usual in this little corner of the United States that might be more properly called part of the Third World. Mrs. Reilly suddenly felt hopeless and decided to call on her one dependable student. "Gary?"

But this time there was no answer.

"Gary Stubbs? Are you paying attention?"

Gary Stubbs, who in another couple of years would be known to one and all as G-man, didn't even glance her way. He was a tall, rangy sixteen-year-old with eyes so weak and light-sensitive that he liked to wear dark glasses in class when he could get away with it. Mrs. Reilly did not let him get away with it, and today he wore a regular pair of thick spec-

tacles that only somewhat camouflaged his good looks. Thanks to the clear lenses, she could see where his eyes were aimed. He wasn't looking at Mrs. Reilly or at the blackboard. He appeared to be staring at his best friend, John Rickey, an indifferent math student who sat across the aisle a few rows ahead of him.

"Gary," she said again. Some of the other students laughed, but Gary's gaze never wavered. Magnified behind his glasses, his eyes were soft, almost dreamy. Maybe he wasn't looking at John Rickey at all. Maybe he was just day-dreaming about some girl. He looked very much like a boy in love.

Mrs. Reilly walked to his desk and rapped on it with her knuckles. She expected him to jump, but he only blinked rather slowly, then looked up at her. "Sorry, Mrs. R," he said. "I kinda forgot where I was for a minute."

She pointed at the problem on the board. Gary squinted at it, then said, "X equals six."

He really was an excellent student, and Mrs. Reilly decided to let the matter slide. "Try to pay closer attention," she said, returning to the front of the room.

Gary looked at the open algebra textbook in front of him. He wasn't even on the right page — they'd finished with triangles a month ago. Usually he liked math pretty well. Where had his mind been? No, scratch that; he knew where it had been. He flipped to the next chapter and tried to focus on the blackboard. His face felt hot. In another month this classroom would be a furnace. Now it was just warm, tropical...languorous. He found his gaze returning to Rickey's profile, to his straight nose and strong chin, to the longish light brown hair at the back of his neck. He imagined running his fingers through that hair, imagined putting his mouth there, and he shuddered a little. It was so bad. Every day he sat here and had these thoughts, and every day he hung out with Rickey for hours and hours after school and tried not to show any sign that he was having them. He couldn't quite believe that Rickey would *hate* him if he knew, but that was only because he couldn't conceive of Rickey

ever hating him. They'd been best friends since fourth grade. Why was he thinking such things now?

Mrs. Reilly was writing on the blackboard, her back to the class. Rickey turned to look at his friend. Gary wasn't sure whether the thoughts he'd been having could be seen on his face. He was afraid they could, because Rickey's eyes widened as they met his. Rickey didn't look mad, though, only a bit puzzled. Then he smiled. It was a gorgeous, heart-lifting smile, and Gary knew he wasn't the only one who thought so; adults were always remarking on what a beautiful smile Rickey had. It transformed his already handsome face and lit up his blue-green eyes. You couldn't help smiling back, and Gary did.

Rickey raised one eyebrow. With the semi-telepathy they'd developed from spending so much time together over the years, Gary understood its message: *What's with you today?*

He shrugged, hooked a finger into the collar of his shirt: *Don't know. Hot in here.*

Rickey mimed a scrubbing motion, one hand against the other: *You want to go wash dishes later?* They didn't have regular jobs, but the owner of a greasy-spoon diner near the school would sometimes pay them a few bucks an hour to work off the clock.

Gary made a little seesawing motion with his hand: *Maybe.*

"John Rickey!" said Mrs. Reilly, and Rickey swiveled back around in his seat. He couldn't get away with woolgathering like Gary could; he never knew the value of X.



"Sorry, kids," said Sal Keller. "I ain't got no work for you today." Sal had owned the Feed-U Diner in the heart of the Lower Ninth Ward for twenty-three years, and had been cooking there for seven years before that. In all this time, no one could remember seeing him without his dirty white apron or the cigar (currently unlit) that jutted out of his

stubble-ringed mouth. He spoke in a gritty baritone that even the bums who frequented the Feed-U didn't dare argue with.

"We'll check back tomorrow," Rickey said.

"You do that," Sal agreed. He sounded sarcastic, but that was pretty much his normal tone of voice. "Probably I'll letcha take over the grill tomorrow."

"Really?" said Rickey eagerly. He was always bugging Sal to give him a crack at the grill.

"Hell, no. Young kid like you, be liable to burn the burgers, bust the yolks on the sunny-side-up, God knows what. Working the grill takes a talent."

"I got a talent."

"You got a talent for scrubbing grease out my pots. Come back by tomorrow — if I don't hear no more of this smart talk, I might have some work for you."

They left the diner, rode the city bus down St. Claude Avenue, and walked to Rickey's house near the corner of Tricou and Royal Streets. Rickey's mother had left a long list of chores under the sugar bowl. The list ended with the words "Fix Supper" — she was a horrible cook, and Rickey was getting to be a pretty good one. Gary offered to help with the chores, but when Rickey told him not to worry about it, he didn't insist. Truth be told, he wanted to get off on his own and think about things.

His house was only a few blocks away from Rickey's, over on Delery near the Jackson Barracks prison complex, so he took a roundabout way home. There was never much chance of being alone in the Stubbs household. Gary was the youngest of six children. The older ones had moved out, but last year his second-oldest sister had left her husband and moved back home with her two little kids. It was basically a happy place, but it was kind of a madhouse.

Rickey was an only child whose parents had divorced years ago, so now it was just Rickey and his mom living in the house on Tricou. Gary had always been glad of the refuge. He still was, but lately he felt a little weird at Rickey's place. Hanging out in Rickey's room, sitting on Rickey's bed, made it almost impossible to control these thoughts he'd been

having. The last couple of times Rickey had invited him to sleep over, Gary had said no. He didn't want to hurt Rickey's feelings, but he'd gotten to the point where he could no longer stand sleeping on a pile of quilts on the floor, listening to Rickey's breathing, wondering if Rickey was really asleep, wondering what would happen if he just crawled into bed —

Well, this wasn't helping. He shook his head and quickened his pace on the uneven sidewalk. He needed to keep a better eye on his surroundings anyway. The Ninth Ward wasn't as dangerous as people elsewhere in the city believed it to be, but when it started to get dark, you had to watch your back. Particularly if you were a scrawny white kid with Coke-bottle glasses, you had to watch your back.

He glanced at the shabby old houses around him, Victorian gingerbread cottages, camelbacks, doubles. Some were decorated with rusting wrought ironwork, some with Christmas lights even though it was April. One house he'd admired since he was very small had shards of colored tile pressed into the cement stoop, forming an intricate design. People who didn't live here only seemed able to see the trash on the street and the possibility that somebody might ride up on a bike, smash your head open, and steal your wallet. They felt safe in their big Uptown houses and Metairie condom-warrens, but Gary thought his neighborhood was a lot more interesting than Metairie, not to mention friendlier. Everyone here smiled and spoke to you. He'd never seen strangers smiling at each other in the suburbs.

He wouldn't mind living Uptown, though, someday. He and Rickey could get one of those little shotgun houses near the river; the rent was cheap and they'd only need a one-bedroom place...

Damn. The thing just kept sneaking up on him. Thinking about it rationally didn't help; giving it free reign always exhausted him; trying not to think about it was about as effective as willing himself to have 20/20 vision. So what was he supposed to do?

He'd always known, in a rather vague and purposeless way, that he liked boys. He'd learned to hide it early on, too:

growing up in a tough neighborhood, in a Catholic family, you just didn't tell anybody that you had a crush on Han Solo or Michael Jordan. He'd even hidden it from Rickey, from whom he'd never hidden anything else. Every kid they knew thought fags were gross; how could he dare to think Rickey might be any different? The height of devastating wit was to accuse another kid of going to a gaybar in the French Quarter — that was how they said it, *gaybar*, as if it were one word. Insults like *homo*, *queer*, and the strangely popular *doughnut-puncher* had little to do with the perceived sexual habits of the insulted; they worked because that was the worst thing a boy could be. Rickey never said shit like that, but then Rickey had a smart mouth and seldom stooped to garden-variety epithets.

Thinking about it before, when he had done so at all, Gary had told himself he would deal with his sexuality at some unspecified time in the years ahead. His peaceful soul counseled him to watch and wait. He had no taste for conflict; Rickey was the shit-disturber of the pair. Once he got out of school and didn't have to face the same bunch of people every day, he would figure out what to do. He might even go to one of those gaybars — not necessarily looking for anything, just to see what went on there. When he was still only a theoretical queer, he hadn't given that much thought to his future.

But his theoretical days were gone — forever, he was pretty sure. There was that line you could only cross once, the line between trying to imagine a thing — in this case, a touch that would thrill every nerve in your body — and actually feeling it. Gary knew it was laughable that he should feel he had crossed that line, because nothing out of the ordinary had even happened. Nevertheless, he was very conscious of the moment he had crossed it.

The thing had happened after they finished work at the Feed-U one day. They had gotten off the bus and were sprinting toward Rickey's house, excited because of the money in their pockets or maybe just galvanized by one of the last cool spring evenings before another long summer set in. When

their feet hit the grass of a little corner park (really just a well-kept vacant lot) near Rickey's house, Rickey ran up behind Gary and clamped an arm around his neck, pretending to throttle him. It was just horsing around, something they'd done a million times before. Being a little taller, Gary usually leaned forward, lifting Rickey's feet off the ground until Rickey let go. This time a shock went through him, a powerful wave that was more than mere sensation but too primitive to be called emotion. It was as if two things, previously incompatible, had meshed to form a perfect design: he felt Rickey's familiar, playful touch, but all at once he was also conscious of *another body* touching his, a smooth, strong, warm-skinned body that had him securely in its arms, and he didn't want it to let go.

The feeling ended up somewhere in the pit of his stomach, twisting there in a way that was sort of pleasurable but intense enough to edge toward pain. Instead of leaning forward and pulling Rickey's feet off the ground, he pretended to stumble and fall, dragging them both down but managing to hide his sudden, appalling boner.

"Dude!" Rickey had said, climbing off him and trying to help him up. "Sorry about that. You OK?"

"Just lemme lay here a second," Gary had mumbled into the hot grass, wondering if he'd ever be able to get up without giving the whole neighborhood an eyeful of his tented pants.

He'd thought maybe it was just one of those hormone things. His mother was always cracking jokes about hormones, about how foolish they would make him act once he started liking girls. In the past year or so these jokes had taken on a slightly desperate quality. Gary didn't understand exactly what hormones were, but he gathered that they had to do with sex. Maybe they would have caused him to feel that way if any guy touched him, and he'd just felt it with Rickey because he was around Rickey more than anybody else. But he couldn't convince himself. He felt that way the next time Rickey jumped on his back. He felt it when Rickey slung a casual arm around his shoulders as they ambled

through the grocery store, one of the places they liked to go to escape the afternoon heat. He felt sad all the time. Eventually, certain that he would betray himself, he began shying away from Rickey's touch. He did this until he saw the puzzled hurt in Rickey's eyes, and he couldn't stand that, so he started forcing himself to think of basketball statistics every time Rickey's elbow so much as brushed his. Pete Maravich had had a career high of 68 points playing against the New York Knicks. Karl Malone had averaged 27.7 points per game last season. That kind of thing.

It worked, sort of. At any rate, he didn't have to fling himself to the ground again. But now he spent countless hours wondering if the things he thought about before he went to sleep at night, when basketball stats were far from his mind, could ever come true. Was he crazy to think, sometimes, that Rickey might want to be with him? Was anything really there, or was it just wishful thinking?

Only negatives gave him hope. Rickey didn't talk about fags, homos, or doughnut-punchers. Rickey had never had a girlfriend even though he was unquestionably a good-looking kid. That might have been because most of the girls they went to school with weren't interested in white boys, but Gary wondered. Unlike the other boys they knew, who were always bullshitting about pussy they'd had or pussy they'd like to have, Rickey didn't talk about girls. He didn't talk about boys either, but of course you couldn't do that even if you wanted to.

Gary rounded the corner of his block and saw his father sitting on the stoop. That was nothing unusual; only a couple of rooms in their big old clapboard house were air-conditioned, and the family often sat outside as twilight fell. It wasn't the safest habit in the world, but as Elmer Stubbs was fond of saying, you couldn't let the criminals control your life.

"Hey, Daddy," he said.

"Hey, Gary. How you doing? Y'all worked at the diner today?"

"Nuh-uh. Sal didn't have anything for us to do."

"Where you been, then?"

"Just over by Rickey's."

"You seen his momma?"

"She wasn't home yet."

"She's usually home when y'all over there, ain't she?"

"Not always," said Gary, wondering at all the questions. "You know she does the books for Lemoyne's Restaurant. She gets home around six most days, I guess."

"Huh," said Elmer, and leaned back on the stoop to light a cigarette. The flaring lighter illuminated his pale blue Irish eyes and picked out reddish highlights in his close-cropped brown hair. For a New Orleanian, Elmer Stubbs was a skinny man. He had wed Mary Rose Bonano, a girl from one of the city's old Sicilian families, and their first five children had stocky builds, glossy black hair, and a touch of olive in their complexions. Gary looked a lot like his father; all he'd gotten from the Bonanos was his dark eyes.

"How was work?" Gary asked. Elmer managed the shipping department of Tante Lou's Confections, a candy factory near Bayou St. John.

"Aw, the usual shit. Some squirrel calls up from New York City, says, 'Hey, Elmer, I need another case of those PRAY-lines—'"

"He said PRAY-lines?" At this point in his life, Gary had not had much contact with tourists, and this pronunciation was as foreign to his ears as Arabic.

"Sure he said PRAY-lines. What, you think that's how I say it all of a sudden? I say PRAH-lines, like a normal person. Anyway, this squirrel, he goes, 'I need another case of those PRAY-lines but can you make 'em with macadamia nuts instead of pecans this time? We're having a luau party and we think that would be really special.'"

"Jeez," said Gary. "So did you tell him you'd do it?" He knew the answer, but he wanted to keep his father talking about the annoying customer, maybe get him started on customers in general, or his coworkers, or something. Anything would be preferable to another round of questions about whether Rickey's mother was usually home when they were

at Rickey's house. He hadn't liked that at all. It gave him an uneasy feeling in his gut, rather like the feeling he got whenever Rickey touched him, but not as pleasant.

Elmer shot the shit with his son for a few more minutes, then said, "Your sister's making spaghettis. You better go on in, see if she needs any help." As Gary got up from the stoop, his father caught hold of his wrist and looked up at him. Even in the fading light, Gary could see that Elmer's eyes were very clear, almost naked-looking. "Son?" he said.

"What, Daddy?"

"You and Rickey don't go messing around in the French Quarters, do you?"

Oh, shit. "Well," said Gary, trying to sound as if he had no idea why his father would ask him such a thing. "I mean, we've *been* to the Quarter, sure, but we don't go a *lot*. It's pretty far."

"Good. Y'all don't need to be going up there. Your momma doesn't want you to. It's...it's dangerous."

His father's eyes had been locked on his. Now Elmer looked away. Feeling released, Gary went into the house and walked down the long hall to the first-floor bathroom. Only when he got to the sink and turned on the water to wash up did he realize that his hands were shaking.

It didn't necessarily mean anything, all those questions. Nobody's parents wanted them to go to the Quarter. Black kids weren't supposed to go because their parents thought they'd get in trouble with the police, who would assume they were there to pick tourists' pockets. Girls weren't supposed to go because their morals would be corrupted, or something. It didn't necessarily mean his folks thought he had been going to gaybars. But when you'd grown up in the Ninth Ward and your father tried to tell you the French Quarter was dangerous, what else were you supposed to make of it?

He briefly considered calling Rickey up and telling him about the conversation. "I think my parents think I'm a homo," he would say. And then Rickey might say, "Well, are you?" And...what then?

Gary looked down and saw that the bar of soap had turned to mush in his hands. He rinsed it off and went to help his sister finish making dinner. She never put enough seasoning in the red gravy, and it wouldn't be any good unless he got to it pretty soon.



For Rickey, the realization had been somewhat easier. It was not in him to believe he could be completely wrong about anything, and he knew with a clear adolescent fervor that there was nothing wrong in how he felt about Gary.

It was hard to know exactly how to act on his feelings, though. He knew a little more about sex than Gary did — not having been raised Catholic, he had no compunctions about pornography or masturbation — and he had heard about some boys who had gotten drunk and jerked each other off. That much, apparently, could happen. But what if you wanted a lot more than that? Not just in the way of sex, but actual love? There were books about how to be gay; he'd seen them in stores and libraries. Some of them even had diagrams. But there weren't any diagrams about how to fall in love with your best friend and not fuck everything up.

Once or twice he'd almost said something to Gary, but he always stopped at the last possible second, thrown off by a small perverse voice in his head. *What if you're just kidding yourself?* the voice said. *You think he feels the same way you do, but what if you're wrong?*

He had convinced himself of things before, only to find out that they weren't true at all and he'd just believed in them because he wanted them so badly. The thing he kept flashing back to — it was so stupid that Rickey cringed whenever he thought of it — was the time he had convinced himself it was Christmas in March. Five years old, and he'd woken up in the middle of the night with that Christmas feeling, wondering how he had missed all the holiday preparations and decorations but purely certain that it must have just slipped by him. His mother had found him in the living

room at the crack of dawn, glassy-eyed but determined that the tree, the stockings, and the heaps of presents would be making their appearance at any moment. Only when she showed him the calendar and reminded him of the recent passage of Mardi Gras did Rickey believe he was wrong, and even then he had been one pissed-off kid, sure he'd been gypped somehow.

He was pretty sure this was different. After all, he wasn't five years old any more. On the other hand, this was a lot more important than Christmas. So beneath his natural confidence was the fear that he might just be kidding himself. He didn't *really* believe it, but he believed it enough to keep quiet; saying anything to Gary would be the biggest risk he'd ever taken, and he wasn't sure he was ready for that. Had it been anyone else, Rickey was certain that he would have already made his move, gotten shot down or gotten some action, and dealt with it either way. Sometimes he wished he *had* fallen for someone besides his oldest friend. He'd even tried to think about other people, but it didn't work.

Then today he had turned around in math class and seen the look on Gary's face, a look he'd never seen there before, a look he could interpret in only one way. It wasn't the look itself that kicked him in the ass, exactly. It was the thought that, if he didn't do something, Gary might eventually look at another person that way. This was an idea Rickey could not stand, not under any circumstances. He still wasn't sure exactly what he was going to do, but he figured he would recognize his chance when it came to him.

He had finished all the other chores and was chopping onions and celery for a chicken dish when his mother got home. She'd given her hair a fresh color rinse the previous night, bringing it up to a wholly artificial, almost fluorescent orange, and her eyes were nearly as bright as the rhinestones that decorated the upswept corners of her glasses. "Johnnie, guess what!" she said.

Rickey's mother had dropped her husband's name years ago, and now went by her maiden name, Brenda Crabtree. Furthermore, she insisted on addressing her son as Johnnie.

He was resigned to this but not especially pleased by it. Everyone else had been calling him Rickey since the day he'd started kindergarten and found himself in a class with four other boys named John.

"What?" said Rickey, using the dull side of his knife to scrape the chopped vegetables into a skillet.

"Claude invited me to spend the weekend at Grand Isle. He and his brother got them a beach house out there." Claude was her new boyfriend, a nice retired man who seemed to have a little money.

"That's nice, Momma. You gonna go?"

"I sure would like to, babe. I ain't been out of New Orleans in years. But I hate to leave you all by yourself. You think you could stay by Gary's for the weekend?"

"You know how crowded their house is," Rickey said casually. "Why don't I ask him to stay over here? We're old enough to stay by ourselves."

"Well, I don't know..."

"Sure," said Rickey, trying to sound as if he didn't care one way or the other. "We'll be here to watch the house, and I'll have it all nice and clean when you get back."

There might be a little more discussion of the matter before his mother gave in, but seeing the look on her face, Rickey already knew he had won. She loathed housework, and by promising to do it, he had always been able to get almost anything he wanted.