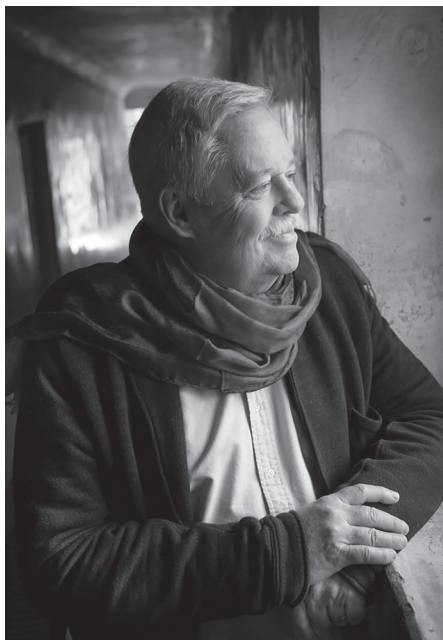


# Armistead Maupin



A TALES OF THE CITY NOVEL

# SIGNIFICANT OTHERS



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**Armistead Maupin** is the author of *Tales of the City*, *More Tales of the City*, *Further Tales of the City*, *Babycakes*, *Significant Others*, *Sure of You*, *Maybe the Moon*, *The Night Listener*, *Michael Tolliver Lives*, *Mary Ann in Autumn*, *The Days of Anna Madrigal* and *Mona of the Manor*. He also wrote an acclaimed memoir, *Logical Family*. Three television miniseries starring Olympia Dukakis and Laura Linney were made from the first three *Tales* novels. *The Night Listener* became a feature film starring Robin Williams and Toni Collette. Maupin lives in London with his husband, Christopher Turner.

For more information on Armistead Maupin  
and his books, see his website at

[www.armisteadmaupin.com](http://www.armisteadmaupin.com)

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# **PRAISE FOR THE TALES OF THE CITY SERIES**

'May well be the funniest series of novels currently  
in progress . . . as engaging a read as you  
are likely to encounter'

*The Times*

'Maupin with his elegance and charm, has found  
a place among the classics'

*Observer*

'*Tales* remains an immensely readable accomplishment  
that wears its significance lightly . . . entertains, illuminates  
and as always leaves us wanting more'

*Washington Post*

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friends and unrealized dreams, of fear and regret, of  
penance and redemption, and of the unshakeable sense  
that this world we love, this life we live, this drama in  
which we all play a part, does indeed go by much too fast'

*New York Times*

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Maupin feels the love and shares it with his readers'

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The characters still compelling'  
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'A book of considerable charm'  
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'Those who loved the last book will rejoice in the  
fact that Maupin hasn't finished with these  
much-loved characters yet. More please'  
***Time Out***

'It's a joy to be reunited with the  
Barbary Lane family'  
***Elle***

'More than enough charm, wit and pathos  
to keep even a Maupin virgin enthralled'  
***Independent***

'Wonderfully engaging, warm and witty'  
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By **Armistead  
Maupin**

Fiction

**MAYBE THE MOON  
THE NIGHT LISTENER**

*The Tales of the City books*

**TALES OF THE CITY  
MORE TALES OF THE CITY  
FURTHER TALES OF THE CITY  
BABYCAKES  
SIGNIFICANT OTHERS  
SURE OF YOU  
MICHAEL TOLLIVER LIVES  
MARY ANN IN AUTUMN  
THE DAYS OF ANNA MADRIGAL  
MONA OF THE MANOR**

Non-fiction

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**LOGICAL FAMILY: A MEMOIR**

**Armistead  
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**SIGNIFICANT  
OTHERS**

*TALES OF THE CITY BOOK 5*



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*For Terry Anderson,  
who took his time getting here*

*For Jane Stuart Maupin,  
who has been there all along*

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If you go down in the woods today  
You'd better not go alone.  
It's lovely down in the woods today  
But safer to stay at home.  
For every Bear that ever there was  
Will gather there for certain because  
Today's the day the Teddy Bears  
have their picnic.

– Children's song, 1907

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### Note to the Reader

The Bohemian Grove is a real place whose rituals I have compressed, though not substantially altered, to suit the time frame of this tale.

Wimminwood is a fictitious entity based on the actual practices of women's music festivals in Michigan, California, Georgia and elsewhere.

I am indebted to my friends in both camps.

– A.M.

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## *Descent into Heaven*

Brian's internal clock almost always woke him at four fifty-six, giving him four whole minutes to luxuriate in the naked human body next to him. Then the Braun alarm clock on the night-stand would activate his wife with its genteel Nazi tootling, and her morning marathon would begin.

Today, with three minutes to go, he slipped his arm around her waist and eased her closer until her back had once again settled against his chest. It was risky, this part, because sometimes she would jerk awake with a start, as if frightened by a stranger.

He pressed his face against her neck, then traced with his forefinger the shallow swirl of her navel. It was smooth and hard now, miraculously aerobicized into a tiny pink seashell. She stirred slightly, so he flattened his hand to keep from tickling her and made sure their breathing was still in sync.

At the two-minute mark, he eased his knee between her legs and tightened his grip around her waist. She groaned faintly, then cleared her throat, so he let his hand fall slack against her belly. She countered by squeezing his knee with her thighs, telling him not to worry, he wasn't smothering her, she needed this time as much as he did.

The French had it wrong about *le petit mort*. If you asked him, 'the little death' was not so much the slump after sex as these few piquant moments of serious cuddling before the demands of Mary Ann's career sent her vaulting over his piss-hardened manhood in the direction of the toilet and the coffee machine.

Another Nazi, that coffee machine. Even now, as he fondled her navel again, it was grinding its beans in the kitchen. The sound of it caused her to shift slightly and clear her throat again. 'Like that?' she asked.

'What?'

'My belly button.'

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'Mmm.'

'Took seven hundred hours,' she said. 'I figured it out.'

He chuckled at the tyranny of numbers that governed her existence. *Everything has a price*, she was telling him. It was her favorite theme these days.

She rolled over in his arms and poked her finger into his navel. 'Hey,' he muttered, uncertain whether the gesture was one of affection or reprimand. She wiggled her finger. 'Watch out,' he said. 'You fall in there and we'll have to organize a search party.'

He waited for a faint cry of protest, but none came. A half-assed 'Come off it' would have sufficed, but all she did was remove her finger and prop herself up on one elbow. 'Well,' she said, 'I guess I'm up.'

He knew better than to argue with this pronouncement. He would only receive the standard recitation of her crypto-fascist morning regimen. Aerobics at six. A bowl of bran at seven. A meeting with the producer at seven-thirty. Makeup session at eight. A meeting with staff and crew from nine to nine-fifteen, followed by promo shots for the next day's show and a session in the greenroom with this morning's guest celebrities. Life was a ballbuster for San Francisco's most famous talkshow hostess.

'So what's the topic today?' he asked.

'Fat models,' she replied.

'Huh?'

'You know. Those porkos who model for the big-and-beautiful fashions.'

'Oh.'

'It's a huge racket.' She laughed. 'Pardon the pun.' She bounded over him and swung her legs off the bed, yawning noisily. 'The book's on the dresser if you wanna take a look at it.'

As she headed for the bathroom, he brooded momentarily about the extra ten pounds around his waist, then got up and went to the dresser, returning to bed with the book. He switched on the bedside light and examined the cover. It was called *Larger than Life: Confessions of the World's Most Beautiful Fat Woman*. By Wren Douglas.

A glamorous star-filtered cover photograph seemed to confirm the claim. The woman was big, all right, but her face was the face of

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a goddess: full red lips, a perfect nose, enormous green eyes fairly brimming with kindness and invitation. Her raven hair framed it all perfectly, cascading across her shoulders toward a cleavage rivaling the San Andreas Fault.

‘What is this?’ Mary Ann was brandishing the roll of paper towels he had left in the bathroom the night before.

‘We ran out of toilet paper,’ he said, shrugging. He could do without her rhetorical questions at five o’clock in the morning.

The alarm sounded.

‘Fuck off,’ he barked, not to her but to the clock, which deactivated obediently at the sound of his voice.

Mary Ann groaned and lowered the roll of towels, banging it angrily against her leg. ‘I specifically told Nguyet to make sure we had enough to—’

‘I’ll tell her,’ he put in. ‘She understands me better.’ She also liked him better, but he wasn’t about to say so. He’d shared a special rapport with the Vietnamese maid ever since he’d discovered she couldn’t tell the difference between Raid and Pledge. His pact of silence about the incident seemed the very least he could do for a woman whose uncle had been killed in an American bombing run over the Mekong Delta.

‘It’s just a language problem,’ he added. ‘She’s getting much better. Really.’

Mary Ann sighed and returned to the bathroom.

He raised his voice so she could hear him. ‘Paper towels won’t kill you. Think of it as a learning experience.’

‘Right,’ she muttered back.

‘Maybe there’s a show in it,’ he offered, trying to sound playful. ‘A dreaded new medical condition. Like . . . the heartbreak of Bounty butt.’

She didn’t laugh.

He thought for a moment, then said: ‘Viva vulva?’

‘Go to sleep,’ she told him. ‘You’re gonna wake up Shawna.’

He knew what she was doing in there. She was reading *USA Today*, briefing herself for the show, learning a little about a lot to keep from seeming stupid on the air.

He picked up the book again and studied the face of the world’s

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most beautiful fat woman. Then he switched off the light, burrowed under the comforter, and slipped almost instantly into sleep.

He dreamed about a woman who had tits the size of watermelons.

The next time he woke, his daughter was conducting a Rambo-style maneuver on his exposed left leg, propelling a green plastic tank up his thigh in an apparent effort to gain supremacy of the hillocks that lay beyond. Shawna invariably chose some sort of guerrilla theater over the simple expediency of saying, 'Get up, Daddy.'

He remained on his stomach and made a cartoon-monster noise into the pillow.

Shawna shrieked delightedly, dropping the tank between his legs. He rolled over and snatched her up with one arm, tumbling her onto the bed. 'Is this my little Puppy? Yum-yum. Puppy Monster eats little puppies for breakfast!'

He wasn't sure how this Puppy business had begun, but he and Mary Ann both made use of the nickname. In light of Mary Ann's distaste for the child's given name, maybe it was simply their way of avoiding the issue without being disrespectful to the dead.

Connie, after all, had named the little girl, and Connie had died giving birth to her. They couldn't just choose a new name the way people do when their pets change hands.

Was that what 'Puppy' really meant? Something that wasn't theirs? Something they had picked out at the pound? Would the nickname hurt Shawna's feelings when she was old enough to consider its implications?

He seized his daughter's waist and held her aloft, airplane fashion.

The little girl spread her arms and squealed.

He rocked forward, causing her to soar for a moment, but his butt made a graceless landing on the toy tank.

'Goddamnit, Puppy. Mommy didn't buy that, did she?'

She managed to keep a poker face, still impersonating an airplane.

He lowered her to the bed and reached under him for the offending war machinery. 'It's Jeremy's isn't it? You've been trading again.'

The kid wasn't talking.

'I didn't buy it, and Mommy didn't buy it, and I know you don't take things that don't belong to you.'

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She shook her head, then said: 'I'm hungry.'

'Don't change the subject, young lady.'

Shawna sat on the edge of the bed and let her head dangle in a loose semicircle. The little charlatan was condescending to cute as a last resort.

'What did you trade for it?' he asked.

Her answer was unintelligible.

'What?'

'My *Preemie*,' she said.

She slid off the bed, hitting the expensive new carpet with a soft thud. 'My Cabbage Patch Preemie.' Her tone indicated that this was a matter of simple laissez-faire economics and none of his goddamn business.

He felt a vague responsibility to be angry, but he couldn't help smiling at the inevitable scene in the condo across the hallway: Cap Sorenson, the ultimate Reaganite, returning home after a hard day of software and racketball, only to come upon Daddy's little soldier playing mommy to a premature Cabbage Patch doll.

Shawna tugged on his arm. 'Dad-dee . . . c'mon!'

He checked the clock. Seven thirty-seven. 'OK, Puppy, go pick out a tape.' This was his usual ploy to get her out of the room while he pulled on his bathrobe. It was no big deal to him, but Mary Ann thought it 'inadvisable' that he walk around naked in front of Shawna. And Mary Ann should know; she was the one with the talk show.

'No,' said Shawna.

'What do you mean, no?'

'No VCR. Go see Anna.'

'We'll do that, Puppy, but not yet. Anna's asleep. Go on now . . . pick out a tape. Mommy brought you *Pete the Dragon* and *Popeye*, and I think there's—'

A whine welled up in the child. She pawed the carpet belligerently, cutting a silvery path through the powder-blue plush. He couldn't help wondering if parenting was an age-related skill like warfare – tolerable, even stimulating, at twenty, but inescapably futile at forty.

He looked his daughter in the eye and spoke her name – her

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given name – to signal his seriousness. ‘I want you to go pick out a tape before Daddy gets unbelievably mad at you. We’ll go see Anna later on.’

Shawna’s lower lip plumped momentarily, but she obeyed him. When she was gone, he dragged himself to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The floor was still wet from Mary Ann’s frantic ablutions, so he mopped it with a damp towel and tossed the towel into the laundry hamper.

He hesitated before weighing himself, then decided that the ugly truth was a surefire antidote for his late-night jelly doughnut binges. The scales surprised him, however. He had lost four pounds in four days.

This made no sense to him, but he had never been one to argue with serendipity.

Shawna threw her usual tantrum over breakfast. This time her yogurt was the wrong color and there wasn’t enough Perrier to make her cranberry juice ‘go fizzy’. Would she ever tire of testing him?

After breakfast, according to custom, he let her pick out her clothes for the day. She chose a green cotton turtleneck with ladybugs on the arm and a pair of absurdly miniature 501s. He dressed her, then left her in the custody of Robin Williams and the VCR while he changed into his own version of her ensemble.

The clock said eight forty-six when he went to the window and peered down twenty-three stories into the leafy green canyon of Barbary Lane. From this height, Anna Madrigal’s courtyard was nothing more than a terracotta postage stamp, but he could still discern a figure moving jauntily along the perimeter.

The landlady was making her morning sweep, brandishing a broom so vigorously that the ritual seemed more akin to exercise than to practical considerations of cleanliness. Later, she would cross the postage stamp diagonally and sit on the bench next to the azalea bed. For all her professed free-spiritedness, she was a creature of blatant predictability.

He lifted his gaze from the courtyard and surveyed their vista, a boundless sweep of city, bay and sky stretching from Mount Diablo to Angel Island and beyond.

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There were no chimney pots or eucalyptus branches blocking their vision, no unsightly back stairwells or rocky rises framing some half-assed little chunk of water. What they had at The Summit was a goddamn *view* – as slick and unblemished as a photomural.

And just about as real.

Sometimes, when he stared at the horizon long enough, their teal-and-gray living room lost its identity altogether and became the boardroom of a corporate jet dipping its wings in homage to the Bank of America building.

Today, the sky was cloudless and the air was clear. No hint of the holocaust raging sixty miles south of the city. There, amid the brittle manzanita brush of the Santa Cruz Mountains, a jagged trail of fire seven miles wide had already blackened fifteen thousand acres and driven five thousand people from their homes.

But not here at The Summit. Nature wouldn't stand a chance at The Summit.

He sometimes wondered about that preposition. Should he tell people he lived *at* The Summit, *in* The Summit or *on* The Summit? Usually, when pressed, he admitted to 999 Green and left it at that.

If he was embarrassed, he had every right to be. He'd lived in the shadow of this concrete leviathan for nearly eight years, cursing it continually. Now, at his wife's insistence – and using his wife's money – he'd joined the enemy in a big way.

They had done it for Shawna. And for security. And because they needed a tax shelter. They had also done it because Mary Ann wanted a glossier setting for her 'lifestyle' (God help her, she had actually used that word) than could ever be provided by the funky old bear of a building at 28 Barbary Lane.

Mrs Madrigal had taken it well, but Brian knew she'd been hurt by their departure. At the very least, her sense of family had been violated. Even now, five months after their ascension, their old apartment on the lane remained empty and unrented, as if something had died there.

Maybe something had.

Life was different now; he knew that. The guy who had once waited tables at Perry's bore scant resemblance to this new and improved postmodern version of Brian Hawkins.

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The new Brian drove a twenty-thousand-dollar Jeep. He owned three tuxedos and a mink-lined bomber jacket from Wilkes (which he wore only while driving the Jeep). Something of a fixture at Pier 23, he knew how to do lunch with the best of them.

When the new Brian went to parties, he usually ended up making man talk with the mayor's husband or Danielle Steel's husband – and once even with Geraldine Ferraro's husband.

OK. He was a consort.

But even that took skill, didn't it?

And who was to say he didn't rank among the best?

When Shawna grew bored with television, he helped her into a windbreaker and briefed her for the trek to Barbary Lane. His basic requirements were two: Don't scream bloody murder on the elevator, and don't point at the doorman and yell 'Mr T!'

She did as she was told, miraculously enough, and they reached Green Street without a hitch. As they trooped along the crest of Russian Hill, his limbs felt curiously leaden; his temples pulsed a little, threatening a headache.

If this was the flu, he didn't need it. There were four major events in the next week alone.

Shawna insisted on being carried in his arms as they descended the steepest slope of Leavenworth, but she squirmed her way to the ground again as soon as they reached the rickety wooden stairs leading to Barbary Lane.

'Anna steps,' she said, already recognizing the boundaries of another duchy. The lane, after all, belonged to Mrs Madrigal. Even the grownups knew that.

There was a bulletin on the landing that confirmed the landlady's sovereignty: *SAVE THE BARBARY STEPS – Insensitive city officials have plans to replace our beloved wooden steps with hideous concrete ones. Now is the time to speak up. Contact Anna Madrigal, 28 Barbary Lane.*

Damn right, he thought. Give 'em hell, Anna.

Nevertheless, he took Shawna's hand as the beloved rotting planks creaked ominously beneath their tread. At the top, where

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the ground bristled with a stubble of dry fennel, he let her go and watched as she pranced between the garbage cans into the musky gloom of the eucalyptus trees. She looked like a child heading home.

By the time he'd arrived at the first clump of cottages, she was already playing havoc with Boris.

'Take it easy,' he told her. 'He's an old kitty. Don't pet him so hard.'

She snatched her hand away from the tabby, cackling in her best mad-scientist fashion, then dashed up the lane again. The path at this point was paved with ballast stones, treacherous even for grownups.

'Slow down, Puppy. You're gonna hurt yourself again.' He caught up with her and took her hand, leading the way toward the smoother, wider portion of the lane.

'You remember Anna's number?' he asked the kid.

Of course she didn't.

'It's twenty-eight,' he said, feeling stupid as soon as he said it.

Why the hell should she have to learn *that*?

Because the house at the end of the lane was all he had to give a child.

It was all the lore he knew, his only storybook.

The door to the lych-gate was open.

The landlady stood in the courtyard, hunched over her largest sinsemilla plant. She was plucking its leaves with a tweezer, coaxing the potency into its blossoms. Her face suggested brain surgery in progress, but she was humming a merry little tune.

Shawna bolted into the courtyard, losing herself in the folds of Mrs Madrigal's pale muslin skirt. The landlady gave a startled yelp, dropping the tweezers, then laughed along with the kid.

'It's the Feds,' said Brian, grinning.

Mrs Madrigal looked down at the creature clamped to her leg and stroked its hair affectionately.

'She's missed you,' said Brian. 'It's been two whole days.'

The landlady's huge blue eyes swung in his direction momentarily. She offered him a dim smile before returning her attention to Shawna. 'I've missed you too,' she said to the kid.

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It was asinine, but he felt a little jealous of Mrs Madrigal's undivided devotion to Shawna. 'I saw your notice,' he said, searching for something to please her. 'Are those crazy bastards really gonna tear down the steps?'

The landlady nodded soberly. 'If we don't put up a fight.'

She said *we*, he noticed; that was something. She still considered him part of the lane. 'Well . . . if there's anything I can do . . .'

'There is, actually.'

'Great.'

'I thought perhaps if Mary Ann could say something on her show . . . you know, just a few words about preserving our heritage, that sort of thing.' She fussed with a wisp of hair at her temple, waiting for his response.

'Yeah . . . well, sure . . . I could mention it to her. They have an awfully rigid format, though.' He was backtracking now, remembering Mary Ann's aversion to what she called 'hokey local items'. Mrs Madrigal's crusade would almost certainly fall into that category.

The landlady read him like a book. 'I see,' she murmured.

'I'll tell her, though. I'm sure she'll be upset about it.'

Mrs Madrigal studied him for a moment, almost wistfully, then began scanning the ground around her feet. 'Now where did those damn things go? Shawna dear, look over there in that ivy and see if you can find Anna's tweezers.'

He thought briefly of begging her forgiveness, then turned frivolous in his embarrassment. 'Hey,' he blurted, 'you should grow your fingernails long.'

Now on her hands and knees, Mrs Madrigal looked up at him. 'Why is that, dear?'

'You know, like those housewives in Humboldt County. Works much better than tweezers, they say.'

She handled this clumsy inanity with her usual grace. 'Ah, yes. I see what you mean.' Falling silent again, she searched until she found the tweezers, then stood up and brushed her hands on her skirt. 'I tried that once . . . growing my nails long.' She caught her breath and shook her head. 'I wasn't man enough for it.'

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He laughed, hugely relieved. In Mrs Madrigal's repertoire, a proffered joke was the next best thing to forgiveness. When her eyes locked on his, they were full of their old familiar playfulness. He saw his entry and took it.

'I wonder,' he said, 'if I could ask a big favor of you.'

She looked at him for a moment, then peered down at the child hanging on her skirt. 'Tell you what, dear. Go into the house and look on the sofa. There's a nice new friend for you.'

Shawna looked skeptical. 'A Gobot?'

'You'll see. Be careful of the steps, now. The door is open.'

As the child toddled away, Mrs Madrigal beamed appreciatively. 'She's just as smart as she can be.'

'What did you get her?' he asked.

'Just a stuffed animal,' came the mumbled reply.

It embarrassed him a little that the landlady spent money on Shawna. 'You really shouldn't,' he said.

She answered with a faint who-gives-a-damn smile, then said: 'What sort of favor?'

'Well,' he said, 'my nephew is coming to town for a few days, and I wondered if . . . if he could stay at our old place.'

She blinked at him.

'If it's a problem,' he added hastily, 'just say so, and I'll . . .'

'How old is he?'

'Uh . . . eighteen, I think. Maybe nineteen.'

She nodded. 'Well . . . there's no furniture, of course. There's a cot in the basement and maybe a chest of drawers.' She tapped her forefinger against her lower lip. Her maternal juices were obviously functioning again. It cheered Brian to know that he could still do this for her.

'His name is Jed,' he said. 'He's in pre-law at Rice University. That's all I know, except that he's probably straight.'

The landlady gave him a sly smile. 'That's what he told you? He's probably straight?'

He laughed. 'Well, he's currently in love with Bruce Springsteen, so I just assumed he was.'

'Now wait a minute.'

'It's Michael's theory. Get him to explain it. He says every

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generation produces one male performer that straight boys are allowed to be queer for. It was Mick Jagger for a long time, and now it's Bruce Springsteen. So I figure the kid's straight.'

'You and your featherbrained theories.'

'It's not *my* theory. I just—' He cut himself off, realizing she'd addressed her remarks to Michael, who had sauntered into the courtyard from the house.

'What have I done now?' asked Michael.

Brian smiled at him. 'I was just explaining your Springsteen theory.'

'It's true,' said Michael. 'Straight boys will go all the way for him.'

Mrs Madrigal turned to Brian. 'Is he including you in this sweeping generality?'

'Sure,' Michael cut in. 'He'd do it for The Boss in a second.' He cast an impish glance in Brian's direction. 'I mean, if he *asked* you, right?'

Brian actually got off on this. It was Michael's way of socking an arm in friendship. 'You're a dipshit,' he told him, socking back in his own fashion.

'I think it's great,' said Michael. 'Springsteen's done wonders for guys named Bruce. There used to be such a stigma attached.' He paused for a moment, then added: 'I'm late, y'all. I'd love to stick around and hash this out, but . . . Wren Douglas cannot be kept waiting.'

It took Brian a moment to place the name. Then her face and chest flickered in his head like a softcore video. 'Oh, yeah. The fat model. You know her?'

'No, but I'm a major fan. Mary Ann got me a ticket for the show today.'

Mrs Madrigal looked confused. 'She's . . . uh . . . heavy?'

'Yeah,' said Brian, 'but kind of hot.'

'Kind of?' yelped Michael, with surprising indignation. 'How about very?'

Brian gave the landlady a you-and-me glance. 'And he should know, right?'

Michael headed for the lych-gate, stopping briefly to sniff a bud of Mrs Madrigal's sinsemilla. He staged a little mock swoon for

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her benefit, then said: 'Better be careful. They're busting people for this now.'

'Well,' said the landlady, remaining deadpan, 'if Mrs Reagan should drop by for tea, I trust you'll give me fair warning.'

Mrs Madrigal agreed to keep Shawna for a few hours, so Brian did some shopping at the Searchlight Market (Diet Pepsi, a box of Milky Ways and the new Colgate Pump) before returning to The Summit. Back on the twenty-third floor, he found Nguyet Windexing the kitchen window with what appeared to be the last of the paper towels.

And that reminded him: He had forgotten to buy toilet paper.

*So what do you use when the paper towels are gone?*

'Uh . . . Nguyet?'

The maid stopped Windexing and looked at him, a nervous smile on her face.

'This afternoon. When you go shopping. Buy toilet paper, OK?'

Her smile faded; he had lost her.

'Toilet paper . . . you know . . . ' He considered miming it, then discarded the idea. Finally, he went to the bathroom and returned with the little cardboard tube.

Nguyet's face radiated understanding. 'Ah,' she said. 'Shommin.'

'Right,' he replied. 'Shommin. Buy Shommin this afternoon, OK?'

She nodded energetically and returned to her labors, watching out of the corner of her eye as he searched the pantry and came up with a box of Melitta No. 4 coffee filters.

Paper product in hand, he headed for the john, only to be stopped in his tracks by the monumental Wren Douglas, peering up at him from the bedside table. His cock stirred appreciatively, so he made a quick detour and took the book with him to the john.

Vanessa Williams would just have to wait.

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## *Wren in the Flesh*

Rising late in her suite at the Fairmont Hotel, Wren Douglas ordered a hearty breakfast, then ambled into the bathroom to take stock of the cornucopia of miniature creams and shampoos that undoubtedly awaited her.

Hotel rooms were really the best part of a book tour. The bathroom bonuses you could stash away for future use. The king-sized beds with their sheets turned back and peppermint patties on the pillow. The thirsty, sweet-smelling towels and silent-flush toilets and TV sets hidden in armoires, ready to offer the transcontinental consolation of Mary Tyler Moore.

This was her sixteenth city in three weeks. Her fat rap had become a well-worn tape, almost too fragile to survive another playing. She was sick of the sound of her own voice and sicker still of the Ken-and-Barbie anchoroids who habitually asked her the same four questions.

*Were you fat as a child? ('I was fat as a fetus.')*

*Do you think American women are being tyrannized by the current fitness craze? ('Not necessarily. Everyone should be as fit as possible, including fat people. The tyranny comes when we're told we should all look the same.')*

*What are your vital statistics? ('Two hundred and two pounds . . . fifty-two, thirty-seven, fifty-seven . . . five feet eight inches tall.')*

*What do you think caused you to become an international sex symbol? ('Beats me, honey. Some guys just go for a girl with thighs in two time zones.')*

All that glibness had begun to catch in her throat like so many dry cornflakes. She was biding her time now, counting the cities – only Portland and Seattle to go – until the final flight would spirit her back to Chicago, to her loft and her cat and her hot Cuban lover with the permanent stiffie.

Not that she had hurt for attention on the tour. There'd been that body-building cameraman in Miami, brick-shithouse beautiful and

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full of surprises. And that cute kid in Washington who'd taken her to dinner, entrusted her with his virginity, and driven her to the airport the next morning, whistling all the way. She'd done all right for herself, horizontally speaking.

She mounted the scales in the bathroom, almost afraid to look.

A hundred and ninety-two! Her worst fears confirmed! Thanks to the rigors of the tour, she was losing weight like crazy. If she didn't shape up and soon, the headline writers would lose their two-hundred-pound sex symbol and she – shudder, gasp – would be out on her ever-dwindling ass.

She savored this preposterous dilemma, then washed her face with a violet-scented English soap.

Soon there would be blueberry pancakes to set things right again.

Forty-five minutes later, she waited for her limousine on the curb in front of the Fairmont. She was decked out in her favorite touring ensemble: a low-necked turquoise sweater dress cinched at the waist by a brown leather cummerbund.

The cummerbund and her boots – Victorian-style lace-up numbers – gave her, she felt, the air of a good-natured dominatrix. As her nerves grew increasingly ragged, she needed all the authority she could muster when she faced her interrogators.

Her driver was a welcome surprise: young and dark, with pronounced Italianate influences and a set of lips she could chew on all night. As he whisked her down California Street toward her rendezvous with today's anchoroid, she asked him what he knew about the show.

'Not a whole helluva lot,' he replied. 'Just . . . it's called *Mary Ann in the Morning*.'

She let out a faint groan. She could picture the little fluffball already.

'My old lady watches it,' said the driver. 'It's real popular. She has on . . . you know, stars like yourself . . . Lee Iacocca, Shirley MacLaine, that kid o' Pat Boone's with the barf disease . . .'

'Right,' she said.

'I saw you on Carson the other night.'

'Oh . . . did you?' She hated it when they left you dangling. What the hell were you supposed to say?

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'You were good.'

'Thanks.'

'We're the same age. I noticed that right off. You're twenty-eight and I'm twenty-eight.'

'No shit.'

He laughed and peered over his shoulder at her. 'My ol' lady's big too, ya know?'

'Yeah?'

'Not as big as you, I mean. Not as big as I'd like her to be.'

'I hear you,' she said.

'I like 'em really big. Like you . . . if you don't mind my saying.'

She found her little egg of Obsession, gave her tits a quick squirt, and lowered her voice an octave. 'Not at all,' she said.

'I didn't wanna sound like I was . . .'

'What's on our schedule this afternoon?'

'You mean . . . after this show?'

'Yeah.'

He thought for a moment. 'Just a personal appearance.'

'Where?'

'You know . . . one of those Pretty and Plump shops on the peninsula.'

She dropped the atomizer into her purse. 'And then we're done until tomorrow?'

'Right.'

'So . . . we've got time.'

She noticed that he swerved the wheel a little, but he recovered instantly and curled those edible lips into a comprehending smile. 'Sure,' he said. 'We got time.'

Things went smoothly enough at the television station until the makeup man tried to camouflage her chins with darker makeup. 'These babies,' she told him sweetly, 'are my bread and butter. What will people think if I'm obviously trying to hide them?'

'It won't be obvious, hon. You'll see. It's Light Egyptian, very subtle. Lena Horne uses it all over.'

'Sweetie,' she said patiently, 'my chins and I are not of different races. If we were, I'd call them The Supremes or something, but

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we're not, OK?' He looked a little wounded, so she added: 'Nice Swatch. Is it Keith Haring?'

He glanced down at his watch and answered with a lackluster 'Yeah.'

'Look,' she said, trying another tactic. 'You can go for broke when you do my eyes. How 'bout that? Turquoise, gold, whatever. There must be something you've always wanted to try.'

As she'd expected, this did the trick. She had offered herself up as a palette, and the artist could not be contained. His eyes grew bright with obsession as he plunged into the depths of his kit. 'I think there's an Aztec Gold in here . . . that on the lips, very lightly down the center.'

'Super,' she said.

'And a little pale purple powder just under the eyes.'

'There you go.'

Sometimes it seemed there wasn't a man on earth she couldn't handle.

An associate producer led her into the greenroom, which was peach and cream this time, with loads of hideous seventies Deco. On the walls were huge framed photographs of the fabled Mary Ann: Mary Ann with Raquel Welch, Mary Ann with Dr Ruth, Mary Ann with Ed Koch, Mary Ann with Michael Landon.

'Make yourself at home,' said the associate producer, backing toward the door. 'There's coffee there . . . and sweet rolls and whatever. Mary Ann will drop by to say hello in a little while.'

'Am I the only guest?' she asked.

He nodded. 'Except for Ikey St Jacques. We're taping him for "Latchkey Kitchen".'

'What's that?'

'One of our segments. Fifteen minutes at the end. Famous kids come on and . . . you know, teach latchkey kids how to cook for themselves while their parents are out working.'

'Come on,' said Wren.

'It's very popular.' He sounded a little defensive. 'We've had offers to syndicate it.'

Wren tried to picture the tiny Black star of *What It Is!* whipping

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up a quick-and-easy tuna casserole. 'He's such a baby,' she said. 'He can't be a day over seven.'

'Uh . . . look . . . I'm kind of rushed right now. I hope you don't mind if I leave you on your own for a while.'

He was flustered about something, she could tell. 'I'll be fine,' she said. 'Are you kidding? Alone with all this food?'

Laughing uncomfortably, the associate producer backed out the door and closed it. She puzzled over his behavior for a moment, then headed straight for the sweet rolls, remembering her dwindling weight. She had downed one and was repairing her lips with a napkin the next time the door opened.

'Awwriiiiight, mama!'

It was Ikey St Jacques, grinning like a jack-o'-lantern and cute as the devil in his tiny red-and-white workout suit. His hands were outstretched, Jolson-style, and one of them held a lighted cigar.

She tried to stay cool. 'Uh . . . hi. You're Ikey . . . right?'

'I knew it,' he said with a husky chuckle. 'That fool lied to me.' 'Who?'

'That candy-ass producer out there. He knows I like big mamas, so he lied to me, the sucker! I knew you was in here.' He took a long drag on his cigar and looked her up and down. His head was no higher than her waist. 'I saw you on Carson. I said to my agent, that is one foxy lady.'

She wasn't buying this at all. 'Look, junior . . .' She flailed toward the cigar. 'Those things make me sick. The entrance was cute, but the bit is over.'

He regarded her dolefully for a moment, then went to the table, reached up and stubbed out the cigar.

'Thank you,' she said, extending her hand. 'Now . . . I'm Wren Douglas.'

He shook her hand. 'Sorry 'bout that.'

'Hey . . . no biggie.'

'I come on strong sometimes. Don't know why.'

She was beginning to feel like a bully. 'Well, it was just that cigar. You ought not to smoke those, even for a joke. It'll—'

'Stunt my growth?' He laughed raucously. 'I'm seventeen years old, lady!'

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