

Catamite, Catalyst, Catamount

Randy Johnson was only twelve when he first met Jackson Stone. And Jackson was an important novelist who'd come to Randy's school to teach a special class for creative writing students carefully selected by the school board as worthy. Randy was black, and the whole school board was white, as white as milk, as white as pale foam on the ocean, as white as winter ermines. Randy liked the image of ermines most, for everyone thought they were emblems of royalty, but he knew from pictures that they had sharp little teeth and were vicious. He lived in a poor neighborhood, true, but one that was near the woods around Hammersville, and he had one day seen a white weasel; that was pretty close to an ermine, with little red eyes and pale lashes.

Randy wrote poems, and from the first, Jackson Stone had lingered near Randy's desk as he wrote, looking over his shoulder, carelessly touching his back before moving on up the row. This attention helped Randy thrive, for he lived with his aunt and uncle, who were always tired from work and who rarely touched him or gave him an encouraging word; they were just too weary. But they managed a smile for him the day he was able to tell them that of all the thirty students selected for the class in the beginning, that he was among the three chosen to publish some of his poems in a book Stone was putting together for a YA collection. Randy was especially proud because he wasn't even a YA yet. The fleeting thought of all the

grudging looks he'd had from the mostly white class troubled him sometimes, especially as both he and the other two chosen to publish were minorities, or what were now called BIPOC, marginalized groups. He asked Monica Lieu and Betsy Hartaso, the other two publicants, if they felt odd about this, their status as representational artists of an otherwise all-white class at a predominantly all-white school.

“Naw,” Betsy sneered at him, in a resentful manner that took him aback, “it’s our turn.” He saw the justice of this, but still felt conspicuous, as if his victory had been in some manner taken away from him.

Monica Lieu just gave him a sunny smile and kissed him on the cheek. “Enjoy it, Randy. Life is hard enough.” He knew that they were equally his peers in intelligence and creativity, that much had been apparent, but whereas Monica’s family was quite poor and lived in the same residential area he did, Betsy regularly brought expensive lunch treats to school, wore the newest clothes, and had what Jackson Stone tolerantly kidded her was a “cotillion” of young ladies gathered around her at all times.

Jackson Stone quite often used unusual words that he compelled his students to investigate on their own, words that Randy reveled in, looking them up with eagerness in the small dictionary his uncle had taken time off to go to the

bookstore and get him one day. Whether his uncle or Randy was the proudest was hard to tell.

One day in spring, after class had met out on the lawn as a special treat, Randy lingered to show Stone a new poem he'd written, one he was particularly proud of. It wasn't long, but by the time Stone had finished analyzing it and given it such cautious praise as he felt it warranted, everyone else was long gone. As they were sitting side by side on the grass, Stone's arm companionably cast over Randy's shoulders, Stone suddenly stared the boy straight in the face as if to get his total attention even away from the wafting spring airs and breezes.

"Randy," he said. It was a statement, a recognition, not a question.

"Yessir?"

"You can drop the sir. Jackson, or Stone, will do. When we're not in front of the others, that is. I want you to do something for me, be something really special for me. Would you do that?" He dropped his direct gaze for just a second, but patted Randy's knee, next to his.

"Sure, Jack—Jackson, sure. What?" This was so exciting to him.

"I'd like for you to go home and look up the word 'catamite.' That's what I'd like for you to do, to be, for me. It's something rather special, and it has to be our secret." Jackson Stone's face was shining quietly in the late afternoon sunlight under the tree. Randy thought he was beautiful then.

“Can’t you just tell me what it means?” Eager to agree, he felt impatient with the restriction to consult his own dictionary in the shabby privacy of his bedroom.

“It’s best if you come to an understanding yourself. You can meet me near here on Saturday for coffee, yes? At the Old Village Café? My treat.”

“Yes, yes!” said Randy, desperately trying with this to signify the other agreement he was prevented from giving until he knew the meaning of this mysterious word. Catamite. Sounded like one of the foreign-based words Jackson Stone—no, now just Jackson—often used. The explanations, the histories of Greece and Rome, of Persia, of India, all the words Jackson made them all love so much, as much as he did.

“Is it being some kind of assistant?” he queried. He thought maybe he could be sure to deserve it if he could guess.

“Good guess! Yes, in a way it is. Many a great and important man has entrusted his affairs and concerns to his catamite. You look it up, be sure you understand. And come to the coffee shop on Saturday around 2 p.m. in the afternoon. If you can, I’ll take you and show you my little nook then.”

Giving Randy a hand to get up, after he himself had already jumped to his feet with the energy of a man of fewer years than the forty or so Randy supposed

he must be, Jackson even gave him a loose hug before tucking his books and iPad under his arm and heading for the parking lot without looking back.

Randy had already missed the bus, but his feet had wings like those in the picture of Mercury that he'd seen on the flower shop display. Jackson had explained to them all about the double role of Mercury, or Hermes, the god of dreams, messages, thieves, and chemistry, among other things. He thought of that now as he raced home.

He couldn't get to his room right away as his aunt had him do some cooking for their dinner. She did part of it, but sometimes she asked him to help, and he didn't want to be ungrateful or rude. As he got through the tasks as efficiently and patiently as possible, hugging the secret in his bosom like a thumb with a splinter in it, so throbbing was the magnificent hurt of having to wait, he thought of one thing: now he was clearly above Monica and Betsy. Jackson hadn't asked either of them to be his catamite. It was like he was in a special circle now, shutting out girls who wrote love poetry and poems about their pets and their parents and their silly vacations. He knew their poetry wasn't bad, but his had been better.

But when he went to his bedroom and looked for his dictionary in its usual place, it wasn't there. In a state first of impatience with himself and then one of feverish excitement, he looked everywhere but didn't find it. At last, though he

doubted the efficacy of this, he ran downstairs to where his uncle and aunt were sitting watching the evening news.

“Have you seen my dictionary anywhere, Unc? Aunt Tilda? I must’ve left it down here someplace.” And with scattered thoughts he started to rummage around in the papers and magazines in the paper holder.

His uncle stirred and reached for something beside him on the end table. “Here it is, son, here it is, don’t get in such a tizzy. I needed to look up a word for my crossword. Sorry to have kept you from your schoolwork.”

“Oh, I don’t have any schoolwork tonight. Not unless I decide to write another poem. It’s just that Jackson—Mr. Stone, only he said I could call him Jackson—has asked me to be some special sort of assistant to him but being Jackson Stone—” and here he rolled his eyes at his uncle in amusement, in jest at Jackson’s special qualities— “he’s told me I have to look up the word for it myself.”

“Oh? Now what is that word? Let me look at it and see just what my boy’s being honored with.” His uncle grinned at him with pride and picked up the book.

“It’s ‘catamite.’ I’ve never heard that one before,” and he waited with impatience for his uncle’s steady but stubby fingers to find the place.

“Now I wonder, do you spell it like it sounds?”

“Try that first. I can look for it if you don’t find it.” He danced a few steps with impatience but stopped when he saw his uncle’s face change from a smile to something less easily definable. “What? What is it? Is it a secretary or something? I do know how to type.”

“Say that word to me again, just exactly what he said to you. Slow, now. And tell me how you would spell it.”

Mystified, but obedient, Randy spelled it as he thought it might best be spelled and pronounced it again.

His uncle’s face folded up. “Son, did he touch you?”

“What? What do you mean? What difference does that make?”

“I asked you, did he touch you? Answer me now and be snappy about it.”

“Okay, don’t get mad. But I don’t see what difference that makes. Sure, I mean, he pats me on the back when I do good work or puts an arm around my shoulders to encourage me. Oh, and today he patted my leg—” he began to understand something, he wasn’t sure what—“I mean—” he started to feel sick but wasn’t convinced for sure about just what his uncle meant.

“Here’s your book, son. You look up that word now. I b’lieve I’d better call Mrs. Granger over to the school office and have a word. She may only be the school secretary, but she has an ear or two in the school.”

“No, not Mrs. Granger!” exclaimed Randy in agony, for what he wasn’t quite sure. “She’ll tell everybody at church.”

“This is maybe the sorta thing everybody at the church gotta know.”

Unable to wait for clarification anymore, Randy came near to jerking the book from his uncle’s hand. He flipped impatiently through the pages until he found the only word that looked like what it had sounded like. To himself he read the definition: A boy who has sex with a man. “Oh.” he said. He said it again. “Oh.”

Feeling punched in the stomach and at the same time feeling his body tingle with a certain unfamiliar thrill, as of a first icy then scalding current racing through him, he flopped down in his chair and looked at the only ignorant person in the room, his aunt, who was still peaceably dozing through the newscast, apparently not having taken in the discussion.

“You go on up with your book now, hear? I’ve gotta call somebody, you know I do; you’re twelve years old.” His uncle paused a minute then gave him a considering wave of the hand, as he often did to help thought along. “Don’t mean you don’t write good poetry, ‘cause you know that you do. It’ll be all right, by and by. Go on up, now.” And his uncle’s kind eyes watched him, he could almost feel them guiding him up the stairs on his way.

Whatever his uncle Robert said to Mrs. Granger didn't seem to get out to the student body. He had worried about that, and then had worried if it made him less than a good prospect for a lover of men that the thing he was most concerned about after the first week was not having his poetry devalued. He wouldn't have welcomed the assumption that he had paid for attention with his body.

The beginning of the very next week, though, they were told that Mr. Stone had been called away by a family emergency, then a couple of days later that he wasn't returning. The special creative writing class was held for a week by one of the regular English teachers, who ran it like a study hall, letting them just sit without guidance except for vague instructions every day on how to write a sonnet, how to write a villanelle, how to. But the school board had been put on its mettle now, it was evident, and within another week, they had an appropriate and even more progressive and acceptable choice for their new creative writing teacher: Clyde Eagle Red Feather, who'd just won a major award from one of the better-known poetry foundations.

The more backward and non-creatively engaged students promptly nicknamed him various things behind his back, due probably in part to his wearing of a few odd bits of turquoise jewelry and colorful pendants with medicine wheels on them; one of these names was Chief Fairy Eagle. The first time David Horton,

the school basketball star, had called this out at him where he could hear it, he had whipped around, given a big happy smile and wave, and called back,

“Oh, it’s you, Chief Bouncing Balls Horton! How are you today?” Not only did he seem to have an instinct for where trouble might come from, he seemed to bear no malice whatsoever, and within a very short time, he was on good terms with the whole school. Less viperous versions of his name, or even the accurate name itself, were called out at him by the shyest of children, due to his ability to give them little titles of honor and consequence in return. He would even address the girls as “Chief” before their names. And though Randy couldn’t prove it, the way he watched the boy made Randy feel that he had been told something pertinent.

On the one hand, he praised Randy’s work when it was good, and he also suggested improvements where it was lacking or needed work. On the other hand, he didn’t make Randy feel special the way Jackson Stone had, didn’t touch much except to slap high fives for good work or help someone up who had fallen, that sort of thing. Randy was starting to feel neglected, and answered shortly several times in a row, refused once when requested to read recent work, showed a sort of disquiet and displeasure with his new teacher.

The last half week before school was dismissed for the year had come, and Randy hadn't written two assignments in a row. "Randy, would you stay, please, after class for a few minutes?"

"Why?"

"Because I am planning an expedition to Mars, and I need your expertise. Seriously, because I want to talk to you about your work. Do you want me to say more, now?"

Sullen but relenting slightly, Randy said, "Okay. I'll stay."

When everyone else had filed out, some looking curiously back at the boy and the teacher, Clyde Eagle Red Feather softened his tone. "I sense that you aren't happy, Randy. Your work is suffering, which is sad, because you are developing into a good poet. Even the last prose essay on poetry that you wrote had touches of real talent. I would hate to have to give you a bad mark, and there's still time to complete the missing work. What do you say?"

Randy felt sorry for himself too at this touch of sympathy from someone who had seemed for a while like the enemy, if only for taking Jackson Stone's place. He said in a piteous tone, "You don't know what I've been through." He felt foolish as soon as he said it, but it was too late to take the words back.

“Yes, oh yes, I do. It’s private information, but the school board had to be notified about Mr. Stone’s—weakness, shall we say? And I had to be told to take special care of my classes and to watch out for problems.”

“Is that all I am, a problem?”

“No, no, you aren’t the problem; a man trying to lure a boy into a sexual relationship is a problem, if the boy is too young.”

Looking at his feet and busying himself with gathering up his tablet and papers, Randy muttered as loudly as he dared, “Maybe I would’ve liked that.”

To his surprise, Clyde Eagle Red Feather laughed. “Who wouldn’t? It would at first seem very flattering. I know more than you think,” and he grinned mischievously at Randy, waiting.

Randy was flummoxed. “You? You, too?”

“Yes, me too. Chief Fairy Eagle. But with men, Randy, with men who are legal in age. Don’t worry, your time will come. There are youth groups, you know, for young men and women who are not of the straight persuasion or cis gender. Look around you. In fact, I can give you a card for one of them here and now. I’ve been saving some cards for anyone who might really need one. I don’t want to cause trouble with your folks, you’d better let them know, if you’re pretty sure. And be prepared for resistance in some places; but you know all that, I’m not

telling you anything you don't have the sense to figure out for yourself. Be careful around people like Chief Horton, for example.”

“Chief Bouncing Balls Horton,” responded Randy, with a fillip of joy in his eyes. “Thanks. Thanks a lot. And I'll get that work in right away. Day after tomorrow at the latest. So, I'm no one's catamite after all!”

“It's a very old and not a particularly complimentary expression. No, I don't think I would want to be called that either. How about instead we call you a catamount?”

“A what?”

“A catamount. A mountain lion. Very brave, strong, smart, beautiful animal. Chief Black Catamount.”

Randy felt incredibly like he might cry for very happiness. He turned away to hide his expression.

“Here, don't forget your card; if you still want it, that is.”

“Yes, I do,” he affirmed, turning back, but he was embarrassed by a tear sliding down his cheek.

“Aw, you know what a mother catamount would do now? Cuff you one, just like this!” And Clyde Eagle Red Feather made a paw of one hand and knocked Randy on his forearm, just enough to put him a little off-balance, not enough to make him fall.

