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# THE KING OF CLUBS

by

Howard Goldberg



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**to**  
**jane r. kessler**  
**(1950 - 1982)**

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Dear James,

Well, here we go again. For the hundreth time it looks like I've really stuck my foot in it. I just never seem to learn. Anyway, I have to somehow get my thoughts together, and a letter to you seems like the best way.

About three weeks ago I was in a bar on the upper west side and I met this guy named Bill. He was incredibly goodlooking and built like the proverbial brick shithouse. A hunk. We talked for quite some time and he bought me a drink. One thing led to another and we eventually wound up going back to his place and the rest I will leave to modesty and your imagination. Well, we really got along well and subsequently started seeing each other quite often and within five days I had moved in with him. Quite frankly I don't know why I chose to do that, but I guess at the time it seemed even practical as his apartment was closer to my office than my own. I didn't really think it would be permanent anyway.

He's a real gentleman and genuinely courteous. His concern over both myself and my life is touching and much appreciated. When I talk about the things that are bothering me I'm absolutely amazed by his concentration and attention. I can talk intelligently with him about all aspects of my work and never have the feeling that he is patronizing me. It often seems too good to be true. His life, however, is as closed to me as mine is open to him. He doesn't work. I have no idea what it is that he does. His apartment is beautiful, large, expensive and decorated to the hilt, yet I have no idea whatsoever where his money comes from. He insists on paying for everything and refuses to hear of it when I try to pick up a tab. He spends money like it was going out of style. You know what he does? He works out. Every day he leaves for the gym and works out. He runs, he lifts weights, he trains. Not for anything in particular, he just trains.

In all the time that I've been with him up until now I haven't found one thing in his apartment that would give any indication as to his history (where

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he went to school, where he's from, etc.). He's a real mystery man. I guess his family probably has lots of money and he lives off that. But, the curious part is that he doesn't seem to have the attitude towards money that a guy from a rich background would have. He seems to enjoy spending his money the way a man who has earned it would.

He talks about death all the time. He always wants to know what I think happens after you die. Whether I want to live to be old. Stuff like that. He can get downright morbid. He's about 35 years old. Also, he has scars all over his body. What if he's crazy? I really don't know him all that well. I once knew a girl who was a self-mutilator. She used to slash herself with razor blades and smash her hands through glass doors. Neat stuff like that. Jesus, I hope he's not some kind of lunatic. Did you see "Looking for Mr. Goodbar"? Call my mother if you don't hear from me... I like roses. See what I mean about being morbid? Well anyway, I don't know what the point to all this is other than to let you know about all the neat trash that can be picked up in New York. How are you? How's that guy you were seeing? Anything happening there? Keep in touch and I'll see you soon.

Love,  
John

**B**ill Thomas was halfway across Sixth Avenue when the light turned yellow. He had to leap to avoid the cars which were, as is often the case with New York City traffic, grossly anticipating the light. He was carrying a gym bag and wearing a sweat suit. He entered a large, modern skyscraper through a small delivery port on a side street and took a private elevator to the top floor. As he passed through the reception area he nodded to some people that were lounging around. He went into the locker room. After talking to a couple of the men that he passed, he deposited his bag in his locker and went through to the gym. A tall, powerful looking man smacked him on the back.

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“Hey, Bill, what’s happening?” said the man. “You got anything up this week?”

“Hey, man, how you doing?” said Bill. “Nah, I’m free and clear.”

“How lucky can you get.”

“Yeah, well I’ve got Jones on Monday.”

“No shit... that should be something!”

“Yeah...”

“Hey, good luck, man, I gotta be running.” He smacked Bill on the back again.

“Yeah,” said Bill. “Take it easy.”

Bill crossed the room, found some free mat space and started to do his warm-up calisthenics. He stretched his muscles the way a dancer would. Slowly at first and then finally bending quite supplely. He was finely proportioned and moved very gracefully. A middle-aged man in a sweat suit with close cropped grey hair came over and watched him go through his paces. He looked like he had probably once been a Marine.

“How you feeling, Bill?”

“Hey, Lou, okay. I feel fine... how you doing?”

“Me, I’m okay. You look pretty good.”

“Oh yeah, Lou. I never felt better.”

“That’s great,” said Lou. “Listen, I’d like to see you do about five miles today. You could do a little light weight work, too. Then I got this guy Scharf I want you to do some wrestling with.”

“Okay, Lou, that sounds great.”

“Yeah, why don’t you meet us over in the small mat room about 3, okay.”

“Sure thing, Lou.”

Malcolm Anderson was in the tool and die business. He had been ever since

his father had died and that was quite some time ago. Now, he was the chairman of the board and principal stockholder in a publicly owned business that grossed in excess of two billion dollars per year. He was very well off and always had been. He liked the power and prestige that went with his position. He also liked his family. He liked his home on the North Shore of Long Island and he liked the many things he was able to buy with his money. He had joined the Club in 1959 at the behest of his best friend Dick Alston. He and Alston had been at Harvard together and had known each other since they were children. Their families had both had summer homes in the Thousand Islands during the thirties. Dick had joined the Club two years prior to first approaching Malcolm. He told him at the time that it had taken over six months for the Board to screen him after his name had been submitted as a possible member. He paid the \$200,000 bond and joined. In the twenty-one years that had passed since he had first taken the elevator to the top floor of the Northrop Tower he had yet to lose interest. His fascination with the Club was still as strong as it had been that first day.

Physically the Club was beautiful. It could well afford to be. Its membership roster was filled to overflow with the names of some of the wealthiest and most influential people in New York and, by extension, the world. Off the reception area were common rooms, dining areas and bedrooms. There were computer terminals and stock exchange readouts so that members could keep in touch with their work. The main auditorium had both floor level viewing and balcony seating. There were three hundred members. Depending on when they had joined, they had all posted a bond of between \$200,000 and \$1,000,000. Annual maintenance of their membership was also very high. Generally around \$200,000 per year. They were all members for life.

After he had finished his workout for the day Bill hit the showers. He was glad he hadn't had to work too hard. Lou always planned it that way. Tomorrow would be much heavier and then he would have the weekend off. Monday, just warmups. Lou told him to take a rubdown and whirlpool before leaving. The rubdown he could handle but he hadn't much patience for whirlpools. They left him feeling flushed and sleepy, but he figured Lou knew best. He also had no intention of being fined. More for the emotional aggravation than for the financial blow that it represented. He hated having Lou on his tail. He almost dozed off in the hot water as he ran through his mind what he would tell John when he got back to his place. He was a really sweet guy, but it was time he left. He'd already allowed him to stay at least a week too long. He laughed to himself. Christ, Lou would have a fucking heart attack if he knew about this. All the way to the shores of Tripoli.

John was preparing dinner when he heard the key in the door. He was pretty excited as he had stopped by the half-price ticket stand on Broadway on his way home from work. He had gotten good seats to "A Chorus Line" for that evening and he was going to surprise Bill. Since the tickets were already in his pocket, paid for and ready to go, Bill could hardly object and he would at least be able to feel as if he were pulling a little bit of his own weight. Dinner was to set the mood.

"Hey, Bill... Hi!"

"Oh hi, John, how you doing?" He threw his bag across the room. It landed on the couch.

"Dynamite," he said as he crossed the kitchen to meet Bill at the door. He

tried to give him a hug. The thought repulsed Bill. He realized he wasn't all that thrilled with John's presence any longer, so perhaps the time schedule had worked out just right after all.

"I missed you," said John as he turned back towards the kitchen. He sensed something was coming. It was hardly the first time. Bill went into the bedroom to change his clothes.

"How was your day?" asked John cautiously.

"I can't hear you," said Bill with a note of irritation in his voice. Jesus Christ, he thought, I can't believe the fucking guy is actually making dinner. Boy, this one has got to go. Well anyway, with a little luck he'd be down in the Bahamas next week scheming chicks and catching a little R and R. This part, though, was always sticky. He went into the living room and switched on the tube.

"What're you making?" he asked. He began switching the channels.

"A pot roast... I hope you like pot roast. It'll be ready in ten minutes."

"Yeah," Bill said, "I like pot roast. Hey, you got any beer in there?"

Malcolm Anderson reached for the black phone on his desk as it rang. It was his direct line and only a few people knew how to reach him on it.

"Anderson," he said.

"Malcolm? Dick."

"Hey, Dick... how are you?"

"Fine, fine. How about you?"

"No problems. Can't complain. Hey, where've you been keeping yourself?"

"Mostly behind this desk." He laughed.

"Haven't seen you over at the Club at all."

"I know. It's been absolutely insane over here. I haven't had a chance to do anything. In fact, that's one of the reasons I was calling. Murray told me Bill

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Thomas was up tonight.”

“That’s right.”

“Are you going?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Malcolm smiled.

“Great! How about if I pick you up and we go over a little early and grab a bite?”

“Sounds good.”

“Then I’ll see you later.”

“Fine.” He started to put the receiver down and then brought it quickly back to his face.

“Hey, Dick!”

“Uh-huh?” He was still there.

“Listen. Could you make it about 5:30. I forgot I have a meeting that I’m going to have to cut short as it is.”

“No problem.”

Leon Jones was huge. He was sarcastically known as L’il Leon but the humor was, for the moment, lost on Bill Thomas. The blow that he had just ducked could have taken his head off. He wheeled around swiftly to his right and caught Leon with a kick in the stomach. As Jones bent over from the force of the kick, Bill tried to catch him from above with a punch on the neck. Leon caught it on his forearm. The auditorium was packed this Tuesday evening. Both Jones and Thomas were very popular. Jones mostly for his enormous bulk and Thomas mostly for his speed and style. It was pretty much even odds on the outcome although Bill was clearly the favorite. The auditorium, which was not very large, afforded perfect views and a precarious closeness for all save the balcony spectators. The room smelled of sweat. There was a roar as Jones caught Bill on the upper left arm drawing first blood. They were fighting



with long knives and the double edged hunting knife that Leon was using had left a very deep wound where it had struck. Thomas was obviously stunned and with difficulty stopped a lunge for his midsection at the last second. It probably would have ended the contest. Bill, using the momentum of Leon's thrust against him, pulled the larger man through his central balance and stabbed him in the upper chest under his arm. He could feel the blade glance Leon's ribs. The bell rang.

"These guys are great," said Malcolm Anderson. He and a small group of men were sitting close to the matted section of the auditorium where the two men were fighting.

"Yeah," said Dick Alston, "do you remember that fight that Thomas had last year with Nowicki? Jesus I didn't think either one of them would walk away from that!"

"Hey, Dick," said a small, balding man to Alston's right. "You wanna press that bet or what?"

"You gonna give me odds, Murray? My man's pretty knocked up. He isn't going to be able to use that left arm at all I wouldn't think."

"They'll patch him up as good as new! What're you kidding? I'll give you 3 to 2 on any additional money you want to bet."

"Murray, we'll just make that two thousand more then... and you can just pay that directly to the bar man. Thanks for the drinks, buddy."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" said Murray.

"Naw, I just slipped Jones a mickey, that's all."

The bell. Both men have had the wounds they received in the previous period dressed as best as possible. They are both favoring their left sides. As they approach each other in the center Bill Thomas feints with his knife and kicks Jones in his wounded area with his left. The pain is great and he starts slashing out wildly so that he can keep Thomas off him until he is able to regain his composure. Bill kicks him again. This time in the shins. Jones cuts him on

the calf. It is only superficial however and Bill backs off immediately. As he turns around low to deliver a roundhouse kick he walks right into Jones's fist. It breaks his nose, while the blade of Jones's knife lays open his cheek. They are very close together at this point and Bill thrusts blindly. He stabs Jones cleanly through the heart as he himself collapses.

"Oh shit," says Murray, "I think Jones just bought the farm!"

The crowd is on its feet as a team of aides with stretchers runs onto the mats. Jones is dead. Thomas will live. Lou and a man with a doctor's bag are examining him as Jones's body is placed on a stretcher for removal.

"C'mon you guys," says Dick, "I'll buy you all a drink. It looks like I'm the big winner tonight." He pokes Murray playfully in the ribs. Murray is not particularly amused.