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## Michael Tolliver Lives

### Armistead Maupin

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#### Confederacy of Survivors

Not long ago, down on Castro Street, a stranger in a Giants parka gave me a loaded glance as we passed each other in front of Cliff's Hardware. He was close to my age, I guess, not that far past fifty—and not bad-looking either, in a beat-up, Bruce Willis-y sort of way—so I waited a moment before turning to see if he would go for a second look. He knew this old do-si-do as well as I did, and hit his mark perfectly.

“Hey,” he called, “you’re supposed to be dead.”

I gave him an off-kilter smile. “Guess I didn’t get the memo.”

His face grew redder as he approached. “Sorry, I just meant . . . it’s been a really long time and . . . sometimes you just assume . . . you know . . .”

I did know. Here in our beloved Gayberry you can barely turn around without gazing into the strangely familiar features of someone long believed dead. Having lost track of him in darker days, you had all but composed his obituary and scattered his ashes at sea, when he shows up in the housewares aisle at Cala Foods to tell you he’s been growing roses in Petaluma for the past decade. This happens to me a lot, these odd little supermarket resurrections, so I figured it could just as easily happen to someone else.

But who the hell was he?

“You’re looking good,” he said pleasantly.

“Thanks. You too.” His face had trenches like mine—the usual wasting from the meds. A fellow cigar store Indian.

“You are Mike Tolliver, right?”

“Michael. Yeah. But I can’t quite—”

“Oh . . . sorry.” He thrust out his hand. “Ed Lyons. We met at Joe Dimitri’s after the second Gay Games.”

That was no help at all, and it must have shown.

“You know,” the guy offered gamely. “The big house up on Collingwood?”

Still nothing.

“The circle jerk?”

“Ah.”

“We went back to my place afterward.”

“On Potrero Hill!”

“You remember!”

What I remembered—all I remembered after nineteen years—was his dick. I remembered how its less-than-average length was made irrelevant by its girth. It was one of the thickest I’d ever seen, with a head that flared like a caveman’s club. Remembering him was a good deal harder. Nineteen years is too long a time to remember a face.

“We had fun,” I said, hoping that a friendly leer would make up for my phallogentric memory.

“You had something to do with plants, didn’t you?”

“Still do.” I showed him my dirty cuticles. “I had a nursery back then, but now I garden full time.”

That seemed to excite him, because he tugged on the strap of my overalls and uttered a guttural “woof.” If he was angling for a nooner, I wasn’t up for it. The green-collar job that had stoked his furnace had left me with some nasty twinges in my rotator cuffs, and I still had podocarps to prune in Glen Park. All I really wanted was an easy evening with Ben and the hot tub and a rare bacon cheeseburger from Burgermeister.

Somehow he seemed to pick up on that. “You married these days?”

“Yeah . . . pretty much.”

“Married married or just . . . regular?”

“You mean . . . did we go down to City Hall?”



“Yeah.”

I told him we did.

“Must’ve been amazing,” he said.

“Well, it was a mob scene, but . . . you know . . . pretty cool.” I wasn’t especially forthcoming, but I had told the story once too often and had usually failed to convey the oddball magic of that day: all those separate dreams coming true in a gilded, high-domed palace straight out of Beauty and the Beast. You had to have witnessed that long line of middle-aged people standing in the rain, some of them with kids in tow, waiting to affirm what they’d already known for years. And the mayor himself, so young and handsome and . . . neat . . . that he actually looked like the man on top of a wedding cake.

“Well,” said Ed Lyons, stranger no more, now that I’d put a name to the penis.

“I’m heading down to the bagel shop. How ’bout you?”

I told him I was headed for my truck.

“Woof!” he exclaimed, aroused by the mere mention of my vehicle. <x> I must’ve rolled my eyes just a little.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s not that butch a truck,” I told him.

He laughed and charged off. As I watched his broad shoulders navigate the stream of pedestrians, I wondered if I would find Ed’s job—whatever it might be—as sexy as he found mine. Oh, yeah, buddy, that’s right, make me want it, make me buy that two-bedroom condo! That Century 21 blazer is so fucking hot!

I headed for my truck (a light-blue Tacoma, if you must know), buzzing on a sort of homegrown euphoria that sweeps over me from time to time. After thirty years in the city, it’s nice to be reminded that I’m still glad to be here, still glad to belong to this sweet confederacy of survivors, where men meet in front of the hardware store and talk of love and death and circle jerks as if they’re discussing the weather.

It helps that I have Ben; I know that. Some years back, when I was still single, the charm of the city was wearing thin for me. All those imperial dot-commers in their SUVs and Hummers barreling down the middle of Noe Street as if leading an assault on a Third World nation. And those freshly minted queens down at Badlands, wreathed in cigarette smoke and attitude, who seemed to believe that political activism meant a subscription to Out magazine and regular attendance at Queer as Folk night. Not to mention the

traffic c snarls and the fuck-you-all maître d's and the small-town queers who brought their small-town fears to the Castro and tried to bar the door against The Outsiders. I remember one in particular, petitions in hand, who cornered me on the sidewalk to alert me that the F streetcar—the one bearing straight tourists from Fisherman's Wharf—was scheduling a new stop at Castro and Market. "They just can't do this," he cried. "This is the center of our spirituality!" We were standing in front of a window displaying make-your-own dildos and dick-on-a-rope soap. I told him my spirituality would survive.

The dot-commers have been humbled, of course, but house prices are still rising like gangbusters, with no end in sight. I'm glad I staked a claim here seventeen years ago, when it was still possible for a nurseryman and a nonprofit reservationist to buy a house in the heart of the city. The place hadn't seemed special at the time, just another starter cottage that needed serious attention. But once my partner, Thack, and I had stripped away its ugly pink asbestos shingles, the historic bones of the house revealed themselves. Our little fixer-upper was actually a grouping of three "earthquake shacks," refugee housing built in the parks after the 1906 disaster, then hauled away on drays for use as permanent dwellings. They were just crude boxes, featureless and cobbled together at odd angles, but we exposed some of the interior planking and loved telling visitors about our home's colorful catastrophic origins. What could have been more appropriate? We were knee-deep in catastrophe ourselves—the last Big One of the century—and bracing for the worst.

But then I didn't die. The new drug cocktails came along, and I got better, and Thack worked up the nerve to tell me he wanted out. When he left for a job in Chicago in the mid-nineties, the house became mine alone. It was a tomb at first, filled with too many ghosts, but I exorcised them with paint and fabric and furniture. Over the next eight years, almost without noticing, I arrived at a quiet revelation: You could make a home by yourself. You could fill that home with friends and friendly strangers without someone sleeping next to you. You could tend your garden and cook your meals and find predictable pleasure in your own autonomy.

In other words, I was ready for Ben.

I met him on the Internet. Well, not exactly; I saw him on the Internet, and met him on the street in North Beach. But I would never have known who he was, or rather what he was looking for, had my friend Barney not modeled for a website catering to older gay men. Barney is forty-eight, a successful mortgage broker, and something of a muscle daddy. He's a wee bit vain, too. He could barely contain himself when he stopped me on Market Street one day to tell me that his big white marble ass was now available to World Wide Wankers for only \$21.95 a month, credit card or online check.

Once upon a time, this would have struck me as sleazy, but the Internet has somehow persuaded half the world to get naked for the enjoyment of the other half. Barney is a fairly sexy guy, but I squirmed a little when I checked out his photos on the site. Maybe I've just known him too long, but there

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was something incestuous and unsettling about it, like watching your Aunt Gladys flashing titty for the troops.

At any rate, there was a personals section on the website, so once I'd fled the sight of Barney's winking sphincter, I checked out the guys who were looking for Sex, Friendship, or Long Term Relationships. There were lots of geezers there—by which I mean anyone my age or older—regular Joes from Lodi or Tulsa, smiling bravely by their vintage vehicles, or dressed for some formal event. Most of them offered separate close-ups of their erections, artfully shot from below, so that doubtful browsers could find their way past the snow on the roof to the still-raging fire in the furnace.

What surprised me, though, was the number of young guys on the site. Guys in their twenties or thirties specifically looking for partners over forty-five. The one who caught my attention, and held it—CLEANCUTLAD4U—was a sandy blond with a brush cut and shining brown eyes. His actual name was not provided, but his profile identified him as thirty-three and Versatile, a resident of the Bay Area. He was lying against a headboard, smiling sleepily, a white sheet pulled down to the first suggestion of pubic hair. For reasons I still can't name, he came across like someone from another century, a stalwart captured on daguerreotype, casually masculine and tender of heart.

So how did this work? Did I have to submit a profile or could I just email him directly? He'd want to see a photo, wouldn't he? Would I have to get naked? The young can keep a little mystery, it seems to me, but the old have to show you their stuff. Which, of course, is easier said than done. Sure, the right dick can distract from a falling ass, and some people actually get off on a nice round stomach, but who has any use for that no-man's-land between them, that troublesome lower stomach of sloppy skin?

Maybe I could pose in my dirty work clothes with just my dick hanging out? (I could call myself NICENDIRTY4U.) But who would take the picture? Barney was the logical choice, but I had a sudden gruesome flash of him directing my debut and thought better of it. Who was I kidding, anyway? CleanCutLad probably got hundreds of offers a week. It was wiser to stick to my monthly night at the Steamworks, where the goods were always on the table, and rejection, when it came, was instant and clean.

And that's the way I left it, aside from printing out the guy's Web page and posting it above my potting shed. It stayed there for ages, curling at the edges, a pinup boy for a war that would never be waged. I might not have met him at all if my friend Anna Madrigal hadn't called to invite me for dinner at the Caffe Sport.

The Caffe Sport is on Green Street, way across town in North Beach, a gaudy Sicilian cavern that dishes up huge creamy mounds of seafood and pasta. Anna had been going there for over thirty years and often used its peasantry charms as a way of luring me out of my complacent nest in the Castro. At eighty-five, she was convinced I was growing too set in my ways. I needed some excitement, she said, and she was the gal to provide it.

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So there we sat, awash in colors and aromas, when the impossible happened. Anna was adjusting her turban at the time, consulting the mirror behind my back as she fussed with wisps of snowy hair. Yet somehow she still caught the look on my face.

“What is it, dear?”

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“Well, you must have an idea.”

A cluster of departing diners had moved toward the door, obscuring my view. “I think I saw someone.”

“Someone you know?”

“No . . . not exactly.”

“Mmm . . . someone you want to know.” She shooed me with a large gloved hand. “Go on, then. Catch up with him.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Yes you do. Get the hell out of here. I’ll be here with my wine.”

So I sprang to my feet and shimmied through the tightly packed crowd. By the time I reached the door he was nowhere in sight. I looked to the right, toward the fog-cushioned neon of Columbus, then left, toward Grant Avenue. He was almost at the end of the block and picking up speed. I had no choice but to make myself ridiculous.

“Excuse me,” I yelled, hurrying after him.

No response at all. He didn’t even stop walking.

“Excuse me! In the blue jacket!”

He stopped, then turned. “Yeah?”

“Sorry, but . . . I was in the restaurant and—”

“Oh, shit.” He reached reflexively for his back pocket. “Did I leave my wallet?”

“No,” I replied. “Just me.”

I had hoped that this would prove to be an icebreaker, but it landed with a dull thud, missing the ice completely. The guy just blinked at me in confusion.

“I think I saw you on a website,” I explained.

Another blink.

“CLEANCUTLAD4U?”

Finally he smiled. There was a fetching gap between his two front teeth, which only enhanced the fuckable Norman Rockwell image.

“I could’ve sent you my profile,” I told him, “but I figured it was easier just to chase you down the street.”

He laughed and stuck out his hand. “I’m Ben McKenna.”

“Michael Tolliver.”

“I saw you inside with that lady.” He had held my hand a little longer than actually required. “Was that your mother?”

I chuckled. Anna would love to hear that. “Not exactly,” I said.

“She looks interesting,”

“She is, believe me.” We were rapidly veering off the subject, so I decided to take the bullock by the horns. “I have to get her home, as a matter of fact. Would you mind giving me your phone number? Or I could give you mine.”

He looked almost surprised. “Either way,” he said with a shrug.

We went back into the restaurant for pencil and paper. As Ben scribbled away by the cash register I looked across the room and saw that Anna was watching this transaction with a look of smug accomplishment on her face. And I knew this would not be the end of it; something this juicy could amuse her for weeks.

“My, my,” she said as soon as I returned. “I hope you carded him.”

“He’s thirty-three. Cut me some slack.”

“You asked him his age?”

“I read it online.”

“O Brave New World,” she intoned melodramatically. “Shall we head down to the park, dear? Before we call it a night?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” I said.

So I walked her down to Washington Square, where we sat in the cool foggy dark and shared a quick doobie before bedtime.