Petunias

August 1, 1998 By Andrew Holleran

Everyone who worked around the harbor knew he was in love with Ryan before he knew it himself; they could tell, they told him later, by looking at the petunias. The petunias were in two big barrels on the deck of the bar and restaurant he was managing in the Pines that summer. It was a strange establishment—the cook was temperamental, the head waiter on drugs, the customers often obnoxious, and the staff so impatient with them at season's end that by the middle of September, when people called to make a reservation at the hotel, they would say there was nothing available even if the place was empty, especially if the accent on the phone was French. But Morgan was grateful—after an absence of eight years down South—to be given his old job back when he needed it, and to be invited by an old friend who lived in Water Island to live with him. Each morning he walked to work almost eagerly down the beach that separated the two towns, as discreet as an usher at a movie theater, careful not to surprise the men who were, even at that hour, still wandering Burma Road in various stages of intoxication looking for sex. He went in long before he had to, since the place didn't open till one o'clock, to prepare the menu boards and clean, because it got him out of the house and into his own little kingdom, even if it was a tiny restaurant he was merely managing for another man; and part of his kingdom was the petunias.

The petunias were red. The restaurant had a small deck with six tables underneath umbrellas that said Cinzano, the two barrels of petunias and, inside, a bar, three more tables and the kitchen. The cook that year was a young, straight man who was only 23 but already had a 3-year-old son by a woman in Sayville; his girlfriend this summer was a woman his age who worked in the hardware store. The cook was short and stocky and so at ease with homosexuals that he liked to shape the pizza dough into a phallus and then demonstrate his mastery of the gag reflex by slowly swallowing it in front of Morgan. It was something Morgan could no longer do himself. He was not having sex with other people. He had given up booze and sex since becoming unable to have the second without the first. That was why he was back on Fire Island at all, managing a restaurant at the age of 44; he had lost his own business in New Orleans when he could not control his drinking; eventually a woman from the IRS had come down from Baton Rouge on her semi-annual putsch and padlocked his store along with a dozen others that had not paid their taxes. Destitute, he had no idea what to do after the nuns in a rehabilitation center gave him five dollars and drove him to the bus station, so he telephoned his old boss, the man who owned the restaurant in the Pines, and was deeply relieved to be offered the job he had given up when he left eight years ago (to pursue the man he was in love with), and amused to find fliers on all the telephone poles around the harbor when he arrived that said: "Please welcome Morgan back after a triumphant sojourn in the French Quarter!"

The Quarter now seemed to him a sort of nightmare—he was still apprehensive that one day a policeman would enter the restaurant in the Pines with a warrant for his arrest, since, during his last binge, he had collided with another car at a gas station, been arrested and released on bail pending a trial he never showed up for. But as the first summer came to an end, it seemed as if he had indeed escaped—been taken back by his old community; found some sort of employment, even if he was no longer working for himself; and at least survived.

It was hard at first, returning to a town where he had been considerably younger and more carefree—hard not to grow depressed watching younger, more successful men arrive and depart every weekend by the boatload—so hard, in fact, he was intimidated by the thought of moving back to Manhattan when the season came to an end, and was grateful when an old friend who lived all year in Water Island invited him to spend that winter with him.

The man who did this was someone he'd met 10 years ago—a friend who had himself just suffered a loss, his lover of 10 years, an older man who bequeathed him a house on the edge of Water Island; it was in this house that he took shelter that winter and woke up one morning in December thinking this was the only place that made sense to him anymore: Fire Island.

It was a mild winter; he took long walks; they were invited over to dinner with people living in Cherry Grove year-round; he made a point of pretending not to hear when Craig began to refer to the two of them as "we" and make plans that sounded very much like those of a couple. He knew that Craig was lonely since the death of his lover and that he was one of those people, like himself, who did not really like to live alone. Still, he had no intention of their being anything more than friends, and it annoyed him to see Craig presume otherwise simply because he was living in his house. Besides this shared fact they were very different people. Craig worked all day doing carpentry. He was good with a hammer and nails; he talked about pipe and drains and insulation and drywall. He was incurably domestic—and connubial. When he got home in the evening, he loved having someone to talk to. No matter. Eventually it was like watching someone drunk when he was sober—so clearly was Craig in love when he was not. He loathed the fact that as the weeks went by that winter the references to "we" proliferated, and when one day a credit card in both their names arrived in the mail, he felt that was the last straw and resolved to tell Craig he was not attached to him at all.

This point seemed to him important to make, but he didn't know how to do so without being rude or ungrateful or hurting Craig's feelings. So he stayed in his room longer, waited till Craig had left the house each morning before he came down, took walks that lasted all day and counted the days till the restaurant opened; then he went in a week early to clean up the place and planted the petunias.

He bought the petunias at a nursery once owned by a man he had been in love with—a man who was now dead—and put them in the barrels without giving them much thought. It was either petunias or geraniums-and–Dusty Miller, and since geraniums-and–Dusty Miller seemed the choice of most people, he chose petunias. He took pride in making the place charming. He hired three

young men as waiters—an Englishman, a Frenchman and an American, as it turned out. They were all in their 20s. His mood improved. He was away all day and much of the evening in the Pines; he hardly saw Craig at all back at the house; each day they went their separate ways, though Craig was still using the connubial “we.”

He had not been connubial himself in many years—though he had romance always in mind and had no interest in what was called “sports sex.” He had met the love of his life here in the Pines, in fact, on the dance floor of the Sandpiper, the same night that lover was arrested by the police for using poppers; that lover had died years ago, and his successors had never worked out—after him, he seemed to have fallen out of favor with the gods and had lived a loveless life for eight years, the last three in the Quarter complicated by his hiring hustlers. So that when he returned to Fire Island this time—with fliers plastered around the harbor saying “Please welcome Morgan back from his triumphant sojourn in the French Quarter!”—he was resolved to steer clear of the human mess. Not only was the Pines full of ghosts, he felt like one himself.

Occasionally people who recognized him came into the restaurant and gave their names. Most of them he would not recognize. Those he did remember were very few, fixtures of the Pines. Years ago, for instance, he would lie on the beach and watch a sinewy, silver-haired man burned deep-brown by the sun take a catamaran out to sea every afternoon—a man whose stamina and fitness (and indifference to the fact that everyone else was so much younger) he admired and whose solitude intrigued him. That lean, silver-haired sunburned old man was still sailing his catamaran out through the waves; only now he also walked around the harbor talking out loud to himself. The other man he was glad to see lived on a rise that gave his balcony a view of all the boardwalks and the beach below, where he still spent the afternoons watching the people on the beach and boardwalks through binoculars. His flags were still flying in the breeze, his silhouette still surveying the beach parade. But they were the only two. Then one night a man with a silver beard motioned him over to his table in the restaurant and reminded him of a night he had long forgotten when the two of them swam out to the man’s sailboard anchored offshore and made love all night in the moonlight; when the waiter cleared the table, he found the man’s address on a piece of paper with a message saying he would be glad to do it again. Such bouquets thrown up from the past were infrequent, however, and though he was glad of them, he never pursued the invitation. The sailboat was still offshore, but he did not go to it. He was too determined to keep his sobriety, though he was often dumbfounded by the beauty of the young men who still gathered here.

There was disagreement among the survivors of his age and older over the quality of the newest generation. He thought they were quite handsome; they looked to him, at their best, like West Point cadets, in training. He stood in the gymnasium behind his little restaurant, talking with the owner, while the men on the benches all around them lifted weights. With nothing more than the swimmer’s physique he’d developed in high school, he was now too embarrassed to even take off his shirt and go in the ocean. Otherwise nothing on the Island seemed to have changed, except the fact that no one had mustaches, beards or even body hair. When the crowd gathered in its underwear one night, carrying torches, and boarded boats for the Invasion of the Grove, they looked like Hitler Youth. The Morning Party was the same.

That weekend a group of men his age who all remembered him—some of whom he'd known 20 years ago—called him over to their table and asked what he thought of the new crowd and, before he could reply, answered for him. "They're all like Stepford Wives," one said, "perfectly little manicured facades. Though they don't handle their drugs all that well. They have the right haircut and the right shoes and the right muscles."

"But they don't have faces," someone said in a guttural voice. "We had faces. These new guys don't." And they began to reminisce about an era when most male models were gay, and driving out on the Long Island Expressway, you passed, on giant billboards, smoking cigarettes, the same men you would find standing across from you at Tea Dance when you reached the Pines.

At work, he turned over in his mind what they had said, though it sounded, on the surface, absurd to him—that one generation (his) would have faces, and another not. But surely to each other, these young men had faces—faces that were profoundly individual, significant and occasionally heartbreaking.

Three of them, in fact, belonged to his waiters, whom he got to see every day of the week, close-up—quite separate from the crowd walking though the harbor in phalanxes of friends or glued together at the Morning Party, where the uniformity made them all look interchangeable. The Englishman was handsome but had a personality so practical and brisk he exuded little sexuality. The Frenchman was so sexual that halfway through the summer he was hired by an Italian film producer and taken to the Hamptons. That left the American, a 26-year-old from Long Island who had been living with his grandmother while he studied German, a rather shy person who hung around the restaurant on his time off, had no one picking him up after work and seemed to spend the rest of his free time back in his room in Steerage.

Steerage was the waiters' dormitory hidden behind a screen of shrubbery a few steps from the harbor. In a town as visually acute as this one, it was just as well that it could not be seen, since it looked like a decaying old motel—a long, wooden building with rows of rooms on each side, with neither privacy nor charm nor coziness; rusted chairs and tables decomposing on a littered deck to the buzz of radios and TVs that were never turned off. He had lived there previous summers, and he knew how hot, noisy and depressing it all was. Someone claimed the place was kept this way on purpose to discourage people from lingering at season's end; someone else said it was a monument to Love—to the fact that no one was supposed to spend much time there; the assumption being that a young waiter came to the Island to make money on tips, get a tan and spend all his free time at the pool with boyfriends he had met while on the Island. Ryan seemed to fit into none of these expectations; whenever he had to be called back to work because another waiter (recuperating from some sexual binge) had not shown up, he was usually to be found on the bunk bed in the littered room he shared with a cook, reading Buddenbrooks in the original.

Ryan was a bright young man who had, like Morgan, majored in history in school; he had never lived in Manhattan, much less taken drugs, gone dancing and participated in what was called the Circuit. At 26, he was already starting to lose his dirty blond hair and that made him vulnerable,

somehow, in Morgan's eyes. His body was as slender and smooth as his own. He had large blue eyes, a long face, and he exuded sweetness, a quality Morgan valued more than any other. He still did not know what he wanted to do in life—he'd thought of being an actor but had done nothing about it; he wanted to live in Leipzig but had not done that either; he had simply been in and out of college, working in restaurants, living with his grandmother, too shy, if his friend from Long Island was to be believed, to go home with people, interested more in talking than in sex. He did not take Ecstasy and dance, he spent most of his free time reading and was, in short, as sober as his boss, though they faced one another from opposite ends of life on the Circuit.

Morgan wasn't sure what to make of Ryan at first—sometimes he thought Ryan would succeed at whatever he decided to do and sometimes he saw him already dangerously drifting—indecisive, vague, a victim of the same illusions that he had labored under at that age; that there was plenty of Time, and all that mattered was Love. He didn't know how Ryan would turn out. He only knew he enjoyed talking to him and that he was glad to get to work each day because Ryan would be there, even on his day off, hanging around.

He was grateful at the start simply to have someone with whom he could discuss history, or issues in The New York Times, which he read every day with his coffee. Nobody else who worked there would. The one man he knew from Washington, who actually was a deputy-assistant-something-or-other in the Clinton administration, wanted to do anything but that when he came up for the weekend; he stopped in only to ask him where he could get some Ecstasy. Ryan, on the other hand, loved to discuss foreign affairs and domestic politics. That was why the petunias began to flourish; as they talked, Morgan pinched the dead blossoms and leggy stems. Before that the petunias had turned faded and scrawny; bleached by the sun and drought, already exhausted halfway through the season; they had looked merely perfunctory, something put in the barrel at the start of summer and forgotten. Now, looking for something to do with his hands, he started pinching the petunias while they spoke, and Ryan stood there, leaning against the railing, his towel under his arm, watching. Soon the petunias were thicker, healthier, blooming. It was amazing how they bloomed. The two barrels became bright cascades of red that caused people to look as they walked by, while he and Ryan discussed Yeltsin, Clinton, health care, China, affirmative action—everything that was in the Times each morning. He didn't realize the meaning of the flowers, however, till one morning the bartender, looking down at him from the balcony of the Pavilion, said, as he watched Morgan pinching the stems as he waited for Ryan, "Sexually frustrated?" Then he realized the others knew he was in love.

They seemed pleased by the idea, even if he was not. Even the bartender smiled from the balcony and said, "Don't get me wrong, I love your flowers!" People who were themselves drinking heavily that summer stopped, swayed and got teary-eyed as they gazed at the barrels, and then moved on. The reservations clerk raised her eyebrows when she saw them. They seemed to lift the entire harbor up a notch. People asked him the secret of his success. Some took photographs. It was as if he and Ryan had gotten married. The only problem in his mind was: Had they? That is, he now knew what the flowers meant—but did their inspiration?

He couldn't say. Between the hordes of muscular young men displaying their prodigious chests to one another, the condoms in receptacles nailed to the trees in the Meat Rack, the jokes, the drugs, the cook baking penises and swallowing them, the men lifting weights as they dissected in flat, jaded tones one another's body parts and those of their dates, the deputy assistant on Ecstasy every weekend, the Morning Party and the man staring at the beach through binoculars every day for hours, it was not a place one associated with romance; it was an exercise in display. It was a party. A party Ryan seemed to have no interest in, however. "I think it frightens him," Morgan said to his older friend Girard one night at dinner. "The way it intimidated me my first year in New York. The first time my lover took me to the Eagle's Nest," he said, his voice rising in surprise as he recalled it. "I would not even let him leave me to go to the bathroom—I followed him. I was terrified of being left alone for even five minutes with all those men! I think Ryan may just be scared," he said, "and I'm sort of his camp counselor. That's what it is. I'm the nice counselor you take refuge with at summer camp because the rest of the kids are so mean." And they laughed.

It really seemed like that the next day when Morgan said goodbye to Ryan on the dock—he went back to Long Island every Tuesday to visit his grandmother and help fix things in her house—and welcomed him back the next day at the boat. And, when the grandmother came over to the Pines on Ryan's birthday—accompanied by the parish priest—it was Morgan who Ryan introduced them to, and Morgan who served the cake at the end of their lunch and bid them goodbye on the dock later that evening and led the waiters in song as they opened a bottle of champagne afterward and toasted Ryan and walked Ryan to the steps of the Pavilion before going home himself. But that night Morgan could hardly sleep, wondering if Ryan had met anyone; and his heart rose when he walked onto the deck of the restaurant the next morning and found Ryan already at one of the dew-drenched tables, stirring a cup of coffee. "What happened?" said Morgan, secretly thrilled. "You were supposed to meet someone! It was your birthday!"

His birthday coincided that summer with something the radio, magazine, newspapers and television were all proclaiming—the 25th anniversary of Woodstock, which helped Morgan to remind himself it made no sense that Ryan could be interested in him except as an older brother. "He's nineteen years younger than I am!" he cried to Girard. "Ryan was born the summer I went to Woodstock! He was in the bassinet as I was sloshing through the mud!" He could not imagine anything more stupid than falling in love with someone much younger than yourself. "The young require too much maintenance," someone had told him once. They had a sovereign right—to explore—which no older person could fairly deny them. He was not about to take a role in Der Rosenkavalier. Still, following Ryan's birthday he noticed himself becoming possessive in a way he didn't like: Waiting for the boat on the day Ryan returned from his grandmother's, assigning him the tables near the bar, so he could see him while he worked, feeling thrilled when the sliding glass door opened on Ryan's day off and there was Ryan, coming to hang out with him and talk, or have Morgan approve his costume for the Leather Party at the Pavilion—torn jeans, boots and a red bandanna around his forehead. (The other waiters had insisted he go. The next morning he was on the deck watching Morgan pinch the petunias.) Then one day a man in his mid-30s he had never seen before stopped by, and he and Ryan left together to go dancing, and as he went around the restaurant closing up without Ryan, he was aware he had tears in his eyes. Half an

hour later, in the depths of his despair, he heard the only door that was still unlocked slide open, looked up and saw Ryan coming back. “Look,” he said to Ryan—both angry and relieved that he had returned—“I have to tell you something,” he said as Ryan walked up to him. “My feelings for you have become inappropriate.”

“I’m in the same boat,” said Ryan.

“Do you want to go out back?” he said.

“Yes,” said Ryan solemnly.

Out back they lay down on a mat by the pool under the stars and the looming mass of the Pavilion, its outer decks peopled with silhouettes, like the decks of a gigantic ocean liner, and they looked up at the stars till Morgan said: “What are you doing down here with me? Don’t you realize what you’re missing out on with 500 handsome men up there?” And Ryan said to him in a calm and level voice: “I’m not missing out on anything as long as I’m with you.”

At first he kissed Ryan so hard, Ryan drew back and said, “Hey, hey,” as if trying to calm a horse or dog. Then they resumed. They kissed and held each other for three hours. He kissed Ryan with all the pent-up desire and longing, the deprivation, the loneliness endured, the fear, the suffering of friends, the loss of almost everyone he loved, the joy that this was still possible, that it existed, that it was still there. He kissed him with all the excitement that improbability brings when Fate singles you out, because the world he thought was closed off to him forevermore still evidently counted him among the living. He kissed him hungrily, fully, deeply, passionately, with all the years of exile and depression, of faith destroyed and now revived as if it had never been extinguished, his whole body so rigid he was trembling all over, till Ryan drew back, took him by the shoulders and whispered, “You kiss too intensely.” And he said, “Sorry,” and kissed him again, immediately, but gently this time while he willed his body to stop shaking, and they settled into a more normal investigation of each other’s mouths that was for him merely a fraction of what he wished to do but seemed much closer to the parameters of Ryan’s desire and concept of kissing.

When he went home that night, he left by the back way, as if he could not expose himself to the stragglers, the lights in the harbor, the dancers still hoping to find, through motion, effort, the communion of music, what he had just obtained in the dark, and when he got to the dunes he found an empty hollow near the beach, lay down flat on his back and stared up at the majesty and elegance of the stars for another hour, as if they alone knew what he knew now—the secret of the universe. Then he went down onto the beach, took off his clothes and swam till morning, when he got home and found Craig putting up a fence around his lot. “What are you doing that for?” he said. “To keep out the deer,” Craig replied. “So you can grow petunias here. Like the ones you got down by the harbor.”

“Don’t bother,” he said.

“Why not?” said Craig.

“Because I’ll never grow petunias here,” he said. Then he went upstairs to change his clothes. As he clipped his beard, he could hear Craig downstairs, miserably knocking pots and pans about, suffering what was probably in store for him, too, but in some primitive part of himself he could not feel any pity; love was savage, love was combat, love was survival, and he was in love. Each morning of that week when he set out for work and passed Girard’s house, there was Girard, offering him a cup of coffee, insisting he come in and tell him what had been said and done most recently. There was not much to tell. Every night they went back behind the restaurant, took off their shirts, lay down on the mat beside the pool under the stars and kissed. Was Ryan a good kisser? Girard wanted to know. Not really. Did Morgan have a condom? No, Ryan didn’t seem to want to do anything more. (“Welcome to the ’90s!” said Girard.) Where did he think it was leading? He didn’t know. He knew there were those who snickered when they walked by and saw the two of them out front, pinching petunias as they talked; he also knew everyone else was, like Girard, rooting for him, getting off on it. Each day he went in waiting for the dream to end—it had never worked before, why should it now?—and each day, at some point, Ryan said to him, “You gonna hang around afterwards tonight?” and bliss flooded his system.

By the second week a certain element of the routine had entered into their lovemaking; he noticed Ryan refused to turn his head sideways for his kiss; but he was very happy. He began each day with a mixture of suspense and joy that—starting the moment he opened his eyes, including his daily cup of coffee with Girard, extending to that moment when Ryan looked up and asked him if he was going to stay after the restaurant closed—reminded him that only people in love are really living. Then one day, a tall, blond man with pitted skin came into the bar, asked for Ryan, and, when Morgan told him Ryan was visiting Long Island, sat down at the bar and drew a map to his house so that Ryan could find him when he got back. And then, a few days later, when the two of them were left alone, closing up the restaurant, Ryan turned to him, looking down at the coaster he was turning over in his hands, and said: “I don’t know how to say this, but—I think we should stop seeing each other.” It was a blow he had always expected, but recently thought he might be spared; as if in life there really are exceptions to the general rule. But he responded briskly. “You’re right,” he replied in a casual tone. And then he added: “It wouldn’t have worked out anyway, since we’re both tops.”

It was a brusque, dismissive thing to say; Ryan did not reply, and a moment later put down his coaster and slipped out the sliding glass door. He waited for Ryan to be gone for 10 minutes before he went out back beside the pool, knelt down on their mat, and began sobbing—so loudly that he woke the manager of the gym, asleep in the corner, and then the head cook, who came out of his room, drunk, and said, when he’d heard the reason for the commotion: “He was only doing it for his job, you silly goose! How could you think otherwise?” at which point the first sheets of rain from a nor’easter forecast all day slapped down on the deck and drove them inside. He could hear the boom of the dance music; then the rain and wind blotted out even that. He ran out to the front of the restaurant, and began pulling in the clay pots of petunias—the two big wooden barrels were too heavy to move—but it was too late; they were pulverized. “Oh God!” the cook said. “The petunias too!” And he laughed.

The next morning he stayed in bed longer than usual—consoling himself with the idea that at this stage in life one can enjoy the young without possessing them—and when he went downstairs, the storm had passed, flocks of geese were flying south in formation across the sky, the ocean was utterly smooth save for a single line of breakers, and a great, domestic peacefulness lay over everything. He looked out the window at the light. It was the most beautiful day of the season. He put his shoulders back. He felt alive again.
