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STORIES I TOLD MYSELF:
A MEMOIR

by

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B.A. California State University, Chico, 1994

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Stories I Told Myself: A Memoir explores the experience of growing up gay in the 1980s. It is one boy's journey toward self-acceptance set against the conservative backdrop of a rural community on California's central coast. The story illuminates the hunger for a life different than the one being lived, and the ever-present sense of being different exacerbated by bullying and unrequited love. It is a narrative of evolving identity, and includes cultural insights and societal context of the time period. The author poses a fundamental question, "How did I make it out of the 80's alive?" and he explores the answer with poignant humor and self-examination. Mr. Crimmins shows that, beyond the constraints of time and place, the process of coming out remains an important and consistent element of the queer experience.

For those who created the experiences
from which these memories were born

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INTRODUCTION

Tyler Clementi. Sean Walsh. Raymond Chase. These are just a few of the gay teenagers who committed suicide in recent years. There has been a continued and unfortunate rise in the number of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people taking their own lives because of the bullying they endured, because of the ways in which their family, teachers and peers made them feel different. A young person is under a lot of pressure to not only navigate the trials of adolescence, but also to identify, understand, and accept one's own sexual orientation. As I read headline after headline detailing the unfortunate ways in which these young lives came to a tragic end – and all for much the same reason – I thought about my own experience, about what it was like for me to grow up gay in the 1980s in a rural community on California's central coast.

At that time, there was not a broader social discourse around equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. We were a tribe of people living on the fringe, forging our own communities in cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles or New York. If you didn't live in these metropolitan areas, the avenues for connecting with a broader community were substantially limited. Homosexuality was not a topic often seen on the news (and if it was featured in a news story, it most often an exposé or other unfavorable coverage). I didn't often see gay characters on television or in films, and if I did, they were caricatured stereotypes – the effeminate, “queeny” gay male or the masculine, “butch” female.

Because access to information was controlled by what the people read in newspapers or magazines, or saw on television, there were not broader efforts to increase awareness about the gay experience. Reality television was not something that entered the mass media landscape until

1992 with the advent of MTVs *The Real World* series, one that showed gay and straight people living under the same roof. This program gave a generation of young people role models that illustrated how to handle (or not) the conflicts that emerged out of those complex relationships. It showed people engaging in dialogue to better understand each other.

In the 1980s, mass media fueled the fundamental values of the decade: excess, greed, luxury and “more is more.” President Ronald Reagan powered the country’s economic growth with his economic plan called “Reaganomics” (and fueled the strength of the conservative right). We watched shows about wealthy families such as the Carringtons on *Dynasty*, the Ewings on *Dallas*, and the feuding Gioberti and Channing families on *Falcon Crest*. The only reality-type programs we saw at the time were shows like Robin Leach’s *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, expounding on the merits of the wealthy who pursued their “champagne wishes and caviar dreams,” a tagline often used in the program. Another personal favorite was *Style with Elsa Klensch*, which aired on CNN, and highlighted the worlds of fashion, art and design. Because of the dearth of positive, affirming portrayals of gays and lesbians in the mass media, sexual orientation and the fight for equality were not part of the broader social conversation at the public houses and office water coolers of the day. If the topic did come up, it was most likely about the anti-gay tirades of televangelists like Jerry Falwell who, in his later years, made it his life’s mission to fight against, what he called, “the homosexual agenda.”

There were few, if any, resources available. Only large metropolitan areas with long histories had community centers where LGBT people could meet others of like mind and spirit. Not only were these centers social hubs, but they also helped individuals gain access to support services to help them through the coming out process. There wasn’t a gay and lesbian

community center in Salinas, where I lived, and no identifiable and safe place to find people of similar experience. In larger cities, there was a growing network of Metropolitan Community Churches that were inclusive of gay people – but I would not learn about this organization until I moved to Florida in 1994 at the age of 24.

There weren't programs such as GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) at my school to encourage dialogue and foster inclusion. The topic of same-sex attraction was not discussed in sex education classes. It was not a topic addressed in assembly halls or on football field sidelines. There wasn't a sense, from the student's perspective, that a school counselor could or would readily assist a child coming to terms with his or her sexual orientation, or to fight against bullying administered on those grounds.

We didn't have the Internet or social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. We didn't have smartphones that offered a variety of matchmaking and sex-hunting apps such as there are today such as Grindr, Mister and Scruff. There weren't sites like Craigslist on which individuals could immediately post personal ads and shortly thereafter, potentially, receive responses. In the 1980s, if we wanted to meet someone through similar channels, we had to place a classified ad in a printed magazine or newspaper and any interested party had to send a letter to respond (hence the popularity of P.O. Boxes).

I recognize that what may have been perceived as advancements also have their dark underbellies. Serial killers have preyed on people they have met through online forums like Craigslist. And, while positive and healthy connections are made through social media platforms, they have also become stages for bullies to shame and exploit people in front of hundreds of followers with one click of a mouse. The way I was bullied in the late 1980s is

different in some ways than bullying is done today. I had the standard variety name-calling and threat of violence and personal attack sort of bullying. Sometimes relentless, if a bully had it out for you, they would make the biggest scenes on the playground or school bus.

It is a psychological and emotional sort of bullying that appears much more pervasive in today's society. It reaches into social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and seeks to expose and humiliate on a grand scale; success in that regard can be achieved in seconds on a computer or mobile device. Progress is being made, though, with greater degrees of social influence and power being exerted by organizations such as Human Rights Campaign and GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) that are driving more positive portrayals of LGBT people in the media and advancing successful campaigns to support marriage equality.

I assumed that to be gay today would, in a sense, be easier on both personal and sociocultural levels. And as I considered my adolescence, what it was like for me to understand, explore, and eventually accept being gay myself, I asked this simple question: If so many young gay teens were committing suicide in a time of great change and increasing support for equality, as well as a time in which resources for youth and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people were more readily available, how was it that I made it out of the 1980s alive?

The analysis of this inquiry served as the impetus for *Stories I Told Myself: A Memoir*. My intent in writing this book was to explore the experience of being young and coming to terms with my sexuality set in a specific context, time, and place. What was the path I traveled to reach the point of coming out, of traversing the painful and poignant moments of my youth? How did I handle the feelings of isolation and separation, of wanting one life while living another? Who

were the people along the way who helped me and guided me to greater levels of sexual awakening and self-awareness?

The foundation of this work is born of that analysis, of the desire to explore that time in my life, to deconstruct the pivotal moments of my adolescence that contributed to my own journey of self-acceptance, and to understand with greater clarity how exactly I emerged from the 1980s alive and adjusted.

As I began this journey of reliving my gay youth and considering how best to articulate that experience on the page, I examined the methodologies of my queer literary forebears, how they told their stories, and how they developed what would become iconic narratives of their respective generations. Each one wrote under different social constraints and cultural expectations and found their own voices to represent aspects of the gay experience in their respective age.

This exploration began with Christopher Bram's *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*, an examination of the poets, novelists and playwrights who emerged in the fifty years following World War II who began to infuse elements of their personal lives into their work and the resulting public discourse that followed publication.

There is an expansive and rich queer literary history of which I was not aware. Growing up, I was not taught Capote, Isherwood, or Baldwin in school. Writing about my experience as a gay man, I was interested in this overview of the gay literary landscape from 1950 to the present. I did not realize the tumultuous journey that was reality for so many of the authors, both in their efforts on the public stage as well as in their private salons of Manhattan, Paris, or Capri.

One theme that stood out to me was that gay memoir did not have a presence in the landscape until the 1980s (at least as mentioned in *Eminent Outlaws*). Before then, if a gay author was writing about his experiences, they were shrouded under the moniker of autobiographical fiction. When applicable, Bram explains which characters in novels represented which individuals from the author's real life. In reference to Edmund White's *The Farewell Symphony*, Bram writes, "White works chiefly in portraits, exploring the scribbling class in lively character studies: the poet/teacher Max Richards (based on Richard Howard); the critic/teacher Joshua (based on David Kalstone); and a famous poet, Eddie. Eddie is James Merrill" (Bram 286). Despite the controversy of the subject matter, gay authors still found it easier to write about their experiences under the guise of fiction, rather than laying their personal details out for public consumption and almost certain disgrace. Regardless of whether they were fact or fiction, however, it is clear these early works factored a great deal in setting the stage for the generations of gay writers to follow.

The book illustrates the synchronistic fusion of authors pushing social boundaries with events on the national and international stages that brought the discussion about homosexuality and equality to the forefront. Before the Stonewall riots, gay people had remained in the background, either living in hiding, masquerading in heterosexual marriages, or leaving all that was familiar to them to swim in the anonymity of the urban landscape. Although there appears to be more discussion about Stonewall today than there was when it happened (the news media had much more control over what people knew back then), it was still an event that illuminated what can happen when a community of people seeking respect and inclusion no longer tolerates mistreatment. The Stonewall Riots got people talking.

Later, in the 1980's, AIDS would, under unfortunate circumstances, bring the dialogue about homosexuality to the surface. Art and literature provide reactions to what is happening in the sociocultural landscape. We can witness this transition from guilt-laden discrete liaisons depicted in early pulp fiction to the freewheeling encounters we see in *Faggots* by Larry Kramer, to the multidimensional *Angels in America* that demonstrates a spiritual socio-political fantasia asking questions and illuminating the realities of hypocrisy, religion, sexuality, and disease to name a few. This evolution marks the gay author's response to the events of the day, some willingly standing up and speaking boldly, while others were accused of having gay couples masquerade as heterosexual couples on the stage, as in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

After winning the Tony and New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play of 1963, "a trickle of critical remarks became a mudslide falling not just on Albee but on all gay playwrights. Within a few years it became commonplace to dismiss *Virginia Woolf* as a gay play in drag" (Bram 80). It was this and other comments in *Eminent Outlaws* that should not have surprised me but did – the comments that came from literary critics over the years, things that were printed or said on radio or television. The vehement public stance against homosexuality, and the personal attacks against gay authors individually, were evident in these comments. A magazine editor, in conversation with friends, labeled Capote's *Other Rooms, Other Voices*, "the faggots' *Huckleberry Finn*."

Years later, in a heated, televised exchange between Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley, Jr., Vidal made the claim that Buckley was pro-Nazi. As Bram writes, "Buckley delivered the insult heard around the world" (Bram 124). This insult was: "Now listen, you queer. Stop

calling me a crypto Nazi or I'll sock you in the goddamn face" (Bram 124). After watching this exchange on YouTube, it is the virulent anger visible in Buckley's face as soon as he decides to go for the figurative jugular with, "Now listen, you queer," that gives the physical manifestation of oppression its shape and form.

Today, the more notable anti-gay criticisms do not, in my observation, relate to literature, but instead to the very nature of being gay. They are hinged upon the rhetoric of the conservatives, the Right Wing, and the Tea Party, as well as on the unquestioned propaganda being spoken from evangelical pulpits around the nation. They also creep into social media, but when placed in that context, a dialogue emerges and queer people of all varieties respond with urgency and illuminate hypocrisy in 140 characters or less.

What is the long-term impact of these stories being told, of these men standing up and, in their own ways, illustrating that "stories have the ability to take us *inside* all kinds of life" (Bram 299)? As I entered my college years, came out to my family, and began to live more openly, reading books that gave positive, affirming portrayals of gay characters, or showed how gay and straight people could live together, were powerful in their ability to shape not only how I see the world, but Bram also notes this as a larger phenomenon. "Changing times meant a wider variety of stories could be told, yet the earlier plots remained potent and never went away. All of these stories were part of the change, altering the ways that gay readers thought about themselves and the world" (Bram 300). After reading so many books that ignore or negatively portray one's experience, great edification and inspiration can come from reading something in which one sees accurate and meaningful portrayals of oneself. Bram's assertion spoke clearly to me, as this has been my experience as well. There is no longer a need to translate heterosexual stories, their

romances and characterizations, through a queer lens. When reading literature with gay characters in realistic situations, it feels as if the book was written just for me and for people with similar sensibilities. In these instances, filtering to make the narrative and the characters more meaningful and personally significant is not required.

So many gifted and talented writers wrote for their audiences and, as Bram notes, the quality suffered. Though they may not have gotten the public response or critical acclaim that their more mainstream works did, Bram acknowledges that gay writers found their most authentic, crisp, and powerful voices when they wrote about what they knew. I have had this conversation with a friend of mine, D.H. Cermeño, who self-published his first novel, *Rising Sunsets*. At the center of the story is a heterosexual love affair and I asked him why wasn't he writing something more familiar, a narrative with a gay love affair? His response: "Because I want to sell books."

It is the artist's quandary to write for creating art for its social value, or to write for the sake of pleasing one's audiences so they continue to purchase one's work. All factors considered, I think I would rather write as authentically as I can about what is true for me. Reading *Eminent Outlaws* helped me realize that, in my view, writing autobiographical fiction is avoiding the act of telling the truth. I understand decades ago, it was either autobiographical fiction or nothing when it came to crafting the narrative of one's queer life. Although there is still plenty of risk today, and though the masses may not be great fans of gay literature, I would rather write what is true for me rather than allow my life to masquerade as something else on the page.

I would also rather read memoir or fiction that shows a more realistic picture of the world today, and perhaps in what Bram calls, "a plausible Eden" (Bram 306), an "inclusive mixing of

gay and straight characters” seen on television shows who can find their roots in the novels of Baldwin, Isherwood, and Maupin (Bram 306). I can appreciate fostering the ideal of a neighborhood or place in which everyone is gay, in which no pretense is required, in which one can be oneself without censorship or self-monitoring. I, too, have yearned for that feeling, and have found it over the years in my travels to San Francisco and New York. But for literature to accurately reflect the time in which it is created, it must illustrate the reality that gay and straight coexist, lives merge and intertwine, mix with parents and children, friends and lovers.

It is in that world I live, and it is of that world I wish to write.

Eminent Outlaws was my springboard to further explore specific gay authors from the last decades of the 20th Century. I began with Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*, a fictional first-person account of George, a middle-aged British professor living in Los Angeles who loses his younger partner in a car accident and prepares to take his own life in the aftermath. It is a touching tale highlighting the social views around homosexuality in the early 1960s, even in a larger cosmopolitan city. It explores the unfortunate ways in which gay partners were often exiled, not allowed to attend funerals or memorial services. This is the situation outlined in the novel, but the real story in *A Single Man* is George’s personal journey from the desire for death to the desire to live. The novel lays out one day in George’s life seasoned with flashbacks and reflection. The use of first-person point of view gives the reader insight into an experience that is extremely personal, and yet still, in some ways, the narrator maintains a certain distance which, I think, mirrors that same self-censorship that gay people often employ in places where we may not feel safe to authentically express ourselves. George’s perspective also illuminates the

isolation of the pre-Stonewall era queer experience where connections were made in covert ways, and relationships were known but not acknowledged in their rightful sense.

Many scenes in *A Single Man* illuminate the difficulties of gay life during this time period. In the morning, as George gets off the freeway and nears the campus where he teaches, “he consciously applies himself to thinking their thoughts, getting into their mood. With the skill of a veteran he rapidly puts on the psychological make-up for this role he must play” (Isherwood 41). The irony is that just as so much has changed for gay people in America in the past 50 or so years, there are still days when one puts on his “psychological make-up” to blend or pass or simply make it through a meeting, an event, a day in one’s life until returning home to his private sanctuary at the day’s conclusion.

The neighbors have their own opinions about George as well. “Mr. Strunk, George supposes, tries to nail him down with a word, *Queer*, he doubtless growls,” (Isherwood 27), while “Mrs. Strunk, George feels sure, takes leave to differ gently from her husband; for she is trained in the new tolerance” (Isherwood 27). But just when George believes Mrs. Strunk may be coming around to more contemporary thinking, there is an exchange between them illustrating the contrary. “But your book is wrong, Mrs. Strunk, says George, when it tells you that Jim is the substitute I found for a real son, a real kid brother, a real husband, a real wife. Jim wasn’t a substitute for anything. And there is no substitute for Jim, if you’ll forgive my saying so, anywhere” (Isherwood 29). There are implications that the lengthy relationship George and Jim shared was not authentic by society’s standards at that time, and George finds himself defending what he holds dear. Again, in many ways, conversations such as these occur with frequency even today.

Another dynamic mirrored in both the past of *A Single Man* and the present day is the relationship between gay men and straight women. In the book, it is the relationship between George and Charley that demonstrates the complexity of a gay man being good company for a straight woman; the woman becomes attracted to the gay man, and the woman's affections often go unrequited. When George visits Charley's home for drinks and dinner, there is flirting, there is reminiscing about the past, and there are moments in which the lines of sexuality blur between friends. "Something is happening to George. To please Charley, he has started to make magic; and now the magic is taking hold of him. He is quite aware of this – but what's the harm? It's fun. It adds a new dimension to being drunk" (Isherwood 134). It appears as folly for George, but the implication is that Charley has feelings for him, and later as George talks of the possible purchase of a pub he and Jim considered when touring in England, George jokingly introduces the idea of returning to open the pub with Charley. "Oh darling, how lovely! Do you suppose we really *could* buy it? No – you're not serious, are you? I can see you aren't...Let's make plans about it, like you and Jim used to. He'd like us to make plans, wouldn't he?" (Isherwood 145). She struggles to subdue her affection for a man she knows will never love her as she loves him, and though he enjoys the flirtation, it is clear George has no interest, in *that* way, in Charley.

There are some specific elements of craft Isherwood employs I found interesting, effective, and useful for consideration in my own work. The book is written in third person, and periodically, Isherwood includes statements or entire paragraphs set inside parentheses, often reflecting an internal thought for George. Upon witnessing a high-rise apartment building under construction near the beach, George imagines the builder's response to protests, "if there are people who are prepared to pay \$450 a month for this view by renting apartments, why should

you park users (and that includes George) get it for free?” (Isherwood 36). The next paragraph begins, “A local newspaper editor has started a campaign against sex deviates (by which he means people like George)” (Isherwood 36). And in the next paragraph, in noting a recent speech by a Senator, “we must be prepared to sacrifice three quarters of our population (including George)” (Isherwood 37). In this three-paragraph run, each parenthetical notation mirrors the others to become a motif, acknowledging the protagonist’s place in context with the world around him.

In an exchange with fellow college staffer, Russ Dreyer, we see the use of parenthetical notes once again, except in this instance they show George’s personal thoughts on the conversation, walking a line between third- and first-person points of view. “He [Dreyer] visibly enjoys this man-to-man stuff with George. (Does he know about me? George wonders; do any of them? Oh yes, probably. It wouldn’t interest them. They don’t want to know about my feelings or my glands or anything below my neck...)” (Isherwood 51). This not only illustrates the “psychological make-up” (Isherwood 41) being applied, that propensity toward self-monitoring and self-censoring, we also witness a manifestation of queer invisibility referenced a few times in the book. To Dreyer, George is an older man willing to listen and provide affirmation, and the conversation appears to be one-sided at best.

Another interesting device Isherwood uses is beginning and ending the book with references to George not as a person, but with a more scientific tone, to George as a human body. In the opening paragraph, we see a person waking and becoming conscious of his surroundings. “That which has awoken then lies for a while staring up at the ceiling and down into itself until it has recognized *I*, and therefrom deduced *I am, I am now*” (Isherwood 9). We meet George at the

point of his awakening, from the very moment he realizes the new day is beginning and he is still alive to face it all. The book ends with a similar view of George as a body, but with a much different outcome. “For a few minutes, maybe, life lingers in the tissues of some outlying regions of the body. Then, one by one, the lights go out and there is total blackness...this is now cousin to garbage in the container on the back porch. Both will have to be carted away, disposed of, before too long” (Isherwood 186).

By using this device at the beginning of the book, we are coming to the surface of consciousness right with the protagonist, moving from the fuzzy space between dreamscape and reality, and acknowledging who and where he is. In closing the book using this view, it not only returns the reader to the place where the story started, but acknowledges a universal truth which we all must face at one point or another in our lives. It reinforces one of the main themes of the book – we begin and end each day alone in our own bodies, and we never know how the day will begin or end. This gives me motivation for gratitude and an acknowledgement of consciousness, of present moment awareness that is often dulled by the distractions of technology and the demands of the day.

I saw the film *A Single Man*, directed and produced by fashion designer Tom Ford, before I read the book by Isherwood, and as I began the book, I was interested to see the differences in how the story was told originally against how it played out on screen. Tom Ford used the spirit of the Isherwood story and pulled key scenes and phrases, but there are some substantial plot elements in the film that veer from Isherwood’s original book. One of the biggest differences is in the film, George is preparing to commit suicide, and during various interactions with others, including time spent with student Kenny Potter, George can’t go through with it and,

in fact, changes his mind, reaches a moment of clarity, and decides life is worth living. The symbolism of a gun, of the organization of one's papers and instructions, the use of a safe deposit box at the bank are elements not present in the book.

In the film, Jim questions George about his relationship with Charley and George acknowledges they had sex many years earlier. In the book, George visits Doris, a former friend of Jim's with whom he had traveled to Mexico for vacation, and with whom Jim had sex, and the narration gives us vivid insight into the resentment George still holds. "What has it to do with that big arrogant animal of a girl? With that body which sprawled stark naked, gaping wide in shameless demand, underneath Jim's naked body? Gross insucking vulva, sly ruthless greedy flesh, in all the bloom and gloss and arrogant resilience of youth, demanding that George shall step aside, bow down and yield to the female prerogative, hide his unnatural head in shame" (Isherwood 96). George harbors anger and resentment toward the fact the trip took place, and that, in fact, Jim had intercourse with Doris. In the film, when George asks Jim if he's ever had sex with a woman, he says, "No," and acknowledges he never had any interest.

There are scenes in the film that do not exist in the book such as George going to the bank to get documents out of a safe deposit box, and running into Mrs. Strunk and her daughter, Jennifer. It is here Mrs. Strunk invites George over for cocktails, whereas in the book, this conversation takes place on the front porch of George's home on Camphor Tree Lane. Another is when George stops by the liquor store to pick up gin for Charley (in the book she drinks vodka) and he accidentally runs into a handsome young man from Spain, Carlos, with whom he shares some conversation and smokes a few cigarettes. These scenes contribute to the plot, and illuminate the intensifying of George's senses, the colors becoming brighter, the details of eyes

and lips becoming magnified and more closely observed. In the book, the intensifying is mentioned occasionally but is shown more through George's descriptive observations that break away from the conversation or moments in which he finds himself. One example is when he spies two young men playing tennis with, "nothing on their bodies but gym shoes and thick sweat socks and knit shorts of the kind cyclists wear, very short and close-fitting, molding themselves to the buttocks and the loins" (Isherwood 52). These are intricate observations and Isherwood masterfully captures George's attention to this level of detail.

As I consider what I have observed in the book *A Single Man*, as well as the creative differences in narrative between book and film, there are some specific elements I have applied to my own work. The book, as a description of the period, holds a mirror up to society, expressing the pent up anger, resentment, distrust, and feelings of loss and invisibility in one man who represents an entire minority community of that era. It is a gay man's response and reaction to oppression, to his oppressor, and I believe that memoir, too, can illuminate the shortcomings of society in any age. Literature, in its broadest sense, is a reflection of the time in which it is written, and I have approached writing my own memoir with the idea of illuminating larger social themes as evidenced through my own personal experiences. In fiction, that can be more deliberate and the author can address a variety of issues of their choosing through their plot and characters, both of which are malleable. In nonfiction, the focus is on telling one's story as it is or was, and from these experiences are gleaned greater social themes. Writing nonfiction is the conscious act of putting one's life in context with other events taking place at the time, whether on a small or grand scale.

Although much less a form of pastiche than in other books such as *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn, Isherwood successfully fused daydreams, fantasies, political rants, homoerotic imagery, and deliberate dialogue to transform his narrative. As I have experimented with the incorporation of song lyrics into my work, I see how the infusion of various influences and thought processes can work together to not only serve the narrative in an individual scene, but also to help propel the greater story forward.

Reading *A Single Man* not only immersed me in the experience of a gay man living in a different time in our history, seeing his challenges and struggles for what they were, but also allowed me to draw connections to the continued journey of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. As a memoirist today, I draw inspiration from one of the later scenes in the book, as George and Kenny get dressed after a moonlight skinny dip, and as Kenny prepares to walk toward the street still naked. George says, “You’re going to walk home like that? Are you crazy? They’d call the cops!” (Isherwood 164), to which Kenny replies, “Nobody would have seen us. We’re invisible – didn’t you know?” (Isherwood 164). To write a memoir with authenticity and integrity, to acknowledge the celebratory and the inflammatory, to bring together elements of experience infused with impressions of the world around us, this is what we are called to do. It is the responsibility of any memoir writer, but especially for a sexual minority, to put one’s life into print and to tell it boldly, with courage and heart; when we do, we no longer give the world permission to treat us as invisible. Telling my own stories on the page is an active response to society’s attempts to erase my history, silence my voice; it is a response to future generations that states emphatically, “No, I am not invisible. I was here, and this is my story.”

Going from the 1960s to the 1970s, I read Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, the first volume in a series of what now contains nine books. Originally written as a weekly newspaper column, Maupin's *Tales* held a mirror up to changing views of sexuality and to events taking place on both the local (San Francisco) and national stages. At the fictional apartment building, 28 Barbary Lane, a Bohemian mélange of men and women, gay and straight, find their paths intersecting in unexpected ways as they search for love, adventure, and a sense of community. This real-time reflection on current events through fictional narrative gave San Francisco residents various water cooler conversation topics as each installment of the column advanced the story.

First appearing as weekly serial fiction in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1976, and later repackaged in book form, *Tales of the City* uses distinctive structural elements that have specific effects on the reader. Additionally, there are particular ways Maupin uses dialogue, simile, and topical content of the period to generate interest and characterize people and places.

Because of its origins in newspaper columns, each chapter in *Tales of the City* runs approximately 800 words in length. Some have two or three shorter scenes but many are one complete scene. The chapters are not only brief in length, but each one also ends in a surprise, plot twist, or cliffhanger. This approach, translated into book form not only offers a quick read, but succinctly enhances characterization, immerses the reader in different settings, and moves the narrative forward.

I could argue that Maupin's work in the *Tales* series is not explicitly literary. It is, at its core, melodramatic serial fiction. However, it is also wonderfully witty and colorfully portrays a slice of life in late 1970s San Francisco that was not prevalent in popular literature of the period.

The characters are charming, genuine and authentic, and the reader can't help but care for them despite their colorful pasts and personality flaws. The book illustrates a different time in our history when Hippies, lingering from the late 1960s, still wandered Haight Ashbury; when mentally and physically wounded veterans returned from Vietnam; and when gay liberation and the sexual revolution emerged as driving forces of cultural and social change. *Tales of the City* also illustrates what Christopher Bram, in *Eminent Outlaws*, calls the portrayal of a "plausible Eden," a positive, affirming portrayal of gay and straight people living together and redefining the concept of family. For 1976, these were not common topics found in public discourse of the period leading up to the sexual revolution, and were found most often in underground books and magazines. *Tales of the City* broke ground in terms of showing a diverse group of people living with each other despite their differences; the book and the series still entertain today with dry wit, a bit of camp, and a multitude of pop culture references of the time. Maupin also describes the landmarks and historical gems of San Francisco accurately and beautifully.

Lastly, each chapter is not numbered but instead has its own title. Examples include, "Taking the Plunge" (Maupin 9), "A Frisco Disco" (Maupin 14), "Anguish in Bohemia" (Maupin 34), "A Piece of Anna's Past" (Maupin 54), "So Where Was Beauchamp?" (Maupin 119), and "The Diagnosis" (Maupin 183). Some titles allude to the subject matter, such as when Michael's parents visit in "The Tollivers Invade" (Maupin 185), while others indicate a change of setting, as in "Fiasco in Chinatown" (Maupin 162) or "Full Moon in Seacliff" (Maupin 210). Some are cliché, some are straightforward, but considering the use of chapter titles and composing titles as if they were headlines can, I think, serve as an interesting exercise to create compelling chapter or section titles in a larger body of work.

When it comes to language usage, there are some specific elements Maupin uses in *Tales of the City*. The first of note is his use of humorous, campy similes. They crop up with moderate frequency, yet blend so naturally with the surrounding narrative that they are not distracting. Some examples of these similes include: “A half-hour conversation with Binky was like eating a Whitman sampler in one sitting” (Maupin 224), “Would she ever stop feeling like a colonist on the moon?” (Maupin 175), and “Then The Door appeared, gleaming in the sunshine like the gates of Xanadu” (Maupin 135). Maupin uses products (such as the Whitman sampler) and historical terms such as Xanadu (assuming this was a reference to Kublai Khan’s lair versus the movie “Xanadu” that would not be released until 1980), as cultural references to make the narrative more realistic, something with immediacy that forged connections between readers and characters.

One of the craft elements I see as most applicable to my own writing is the way in which Maupin writes dialogue. Trends I observed in the book indicate that dialogue rarely goes past one line at a time, that the speaker is attributed once but after that, it is an exchange between two people and it is clear who is speaking; the dialogue is quick, witty, and natural, lending an authentic tone to conversations portrayed.

An example of the way Maupin uses dialogue is when Jon Fielding and Collier Lane are leaving a dinner party held by the Hampton-Giddes’ in Seacliff (Maupin 219):

“Collier grinned at him. ‘I knew you’d OD, sooner or later.’

‘Shut up.’

‘You’re stuck on that Tolliver kid, aren’t you?’

‘I’m not *stuck* on anybody, Collier. I just get sick of that bitchy talk about twinks. That’s just a queen’s way of being a male chauvinist pig!’

‘Can I send that to Bartlett’s *Quotations*?’

‘Just drive, will you?’

‘The tubs, right?’

‘That’s what you want, isn’t it?’

‘I could drop you off at the twink’s house.’

‘Collier, if you mention that one more...’

‘The tubs it is, milord.’”

The short sentences without speaker attribution keep the dialogue clean, easy to read, and the conversation comes across quick, giving a natural tone to the characters’ exchanges. Lengthy dialogue with continuous speaker attribution or substantial complementary description can grow tiresome, and I appreciate Maupin’s succinct, sharp approach to portraying dialogue, giving a sense of realism and immediacy to each conversation.

I think the format and structure in *Tales of the City* is better suited for fiction as actions can be fashioned to fit the format, and dramatic twists can be included at just the right moment. Unfortunately, life doesn’t always happen like that. I do like the idea of using shorter chapters with a clear point and I think memoir, to a certain degree, can be formed in this way. The colorful, campy similes only reinforce Maupin’s casual, humorous, witty voice and include products or places that effectively ground the reader in time and place. The most applicable attribute of *Tales* to my own writing is the way dialogue is written, and again, if conversations

are remembered as such, I can realistically see the use of the short lines and quick exchanges being used. Another helpful approach will be to let go of the need to attribute each quotation to a character, and instead, allow the dialogue to play out between the individuals in the memoir clearly and naturally.

After reading only the first book in the series, I can see the appeal and found myself finishing the book highly endeared to the characters. The final chapter left me comfortable with the closure achieved, but also made me want to read more as there were still numerous loose ends to be tied. Decades after this first book was published, Maupin continues to charm and entertain, and it is from the elements I have discussed here that I gained the greatest edification and creative inspiration.

From the sexual revolution of the late 1970s, to the 1980s and the horrific impact of AIDS on the gay community, Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* provides an intimate glimpse into the terror of the period. This book captures the strength, joy, and love that existed between Monette and his partner, lawyer Roger Horwitz; it transports the reader to the frontline of the battle against political indifference, social intolerance, media ignorance, and medical insensitivities to the AIDS crisis that emerged in the 1980's.

Borrowed Time is a cathartic journey of an activist, and by attaching a very personal story to an international issue, it is an important chronicle of that period in our history as a nation, but also the history of the gay community. Monette says early in the book, "The story I want to tell is about heroism and sacrifice and love, but I will not be avoiding the answer. I watched AIDS become gossip, glib and dismissive, smutty, infantile. I gossiped myself. It was sometimes the only way to talk about it, but all the same it's a yellow and disgusting way" (Monette 19).

As this is a memoir, Monette presents his dilemma by asking, “How do I speak of the person who was my life’s best reason?” (Monette 9). Beautifully fashioned lyrical prose is the thread that weaves the beauty of the couple’s shared past, their trips to Greece and France, their annual sojourns to Big Sur on the northern California coast. The author reflects, “It was a kind of holy place for Roger and me, like the yearly end of a quest” (Monette 9), with the fear, the anger, the gossip, the reality of death in the present moment, be that Roger’s but also many friends that were lost in advance of and following Roger’s passing. Monette has a way of presenting a favorable interaction with another person, then concluding the scene with that person’s fate such as, “A month later Richard was diagnosed with lymphoma” (Monette 255). In other places, he simply acknowledges that the interaction shown was the last he would share with that particular person before his death or before he excused himself from the author’s life.

Borrowed Time vividly captures the fear of the period, when information about AIDS was shared underground, through personal contacts and discrete phone calls. Medications were being tested, but not until the mid-80’s, long after AIDS had become a tremendous public health threat, primarily to gay men. That was also a time when, “what is now called safe sex did not used to be so clearly defined. The concept didn’t exist” (Monette 4). It also didn’t seem to take very long for everyone to know someone else who had it, and Monette mentions the fact that for power gays of Hollywood at the time who got infections or other mysterious illnesses that showed signs of AIDS-related complications, they would go into hiding, move away and disappear, or simply commit suicide to put off the inevitable public shame until after their deaths. These were strapping men in their 20s and 30s who, within a month’s time, had become wasted and withered, aged and succumbed to the perils of their disease. At the time, there were

few medications available, the most prominent being AZT. It is a heart-wrenching tale of anger and fear, of loss and the love that endures through it all.

The reader is brought along with the author on his journey from joyful lover to committed caretaker and dear companion. Some emotions Monette would express to Horwitz, others he would confide in friends late at night after Roger had fallen asleep to shield Rog from his rants and anxiety. He laments, too, of a time when the disease did not touch their house, on their shared view that assumed they were untouchable by its clutches. “Give us then the bravado of days when we swore we would beat it, for underneath we were scared as ever, and always pleading silently, *Don’t let it come again*” (Monette 104). Beyond fear, and denial, there is anger. First, Monette found himself getting more frequently agitated by ignorant comments of others. “I have oceans of unresolved rage at those who ran from us, but I also see that plague and panic are inseparable. And nothing compares. That is something very important to understand about those on the moon of AIDS. Anything offered in comparison is a mockery to us. If hunger compares, or Hamburger Hill or the carnal dying of Calcutta, that is for us to say” (Monette 83). He also shows the contempt he holds against an indifferent government that was very slow to act as an entire generation of gay men was dramatically reduced at the hands of this disease. “Now we know that stride could have been made in ’82 or ’83 if the government hadn’t been playing ostrich. Spilled milk, people tell me; you can’t undo the past. But can’t we measure the spill?” (Monette 119).

As Horwitz’s illness worsens, Monette shows us the transition of his viewpoint, his philosophy about living, about writing. “I wish I had an account of just the meals we ate, or a log of the calls that came in, for there was where we lived. From now on we wouldn’t be

spending much time on the abstract, not at least as it related to future or careers. Besides, when you live so utterly in the present, the yearning to record it goes away. To write in a diary you have to hope to read it later – or to last long enough to make the appointment two weeks down the road. Right now you are trying not to vomit dinner” (Monette 192). It is a passage indicative of what impending death does to place focus and clarity on what really matters, about the importance of a single moment shared and, for a writer, the ravenous desire to capture the most mundane details of a given day in one’s life.

Monette and Horwitz both were deliberate in journaling throughout the course of their relationship, and Monette uses glimpses into these journals to add texture and haunting reflection on particular moments of the past, juxtaposing them against the reality of what the future would bring. After Monette’s dear friend, Cesar, passes away, he recalls 4th of July, 1976, when they all still lived in Boston, and as Cesar walked out the door to build a new life in San Francisco, he wrote in Monette’s diary: *“If later on, as we read this, we might think ‘How happy we were then!’ at least we’ll have that. That as we lived them, these moments, we knew they were important, and that’s all there is”* (Monette 285). And how true that statement would be as we learn the fate of these young men as they find their way in the world.

Monette also includes clips from Roger’s diary, and recalls one night when he was in New Orleans for a conference, he was unintentionally dismissive to Roger on the phone. After Roger’s passing, Monette went back to read Horwitz’s diary and came across this notation from that night in 1980: *“Paul – the important thing to say is this: with you it’s been the best – the best years and the most love”* (Monette 326). To see this experience from Monette’s point of view, that after this harrowing journey he traveled with the man who showed him love could be found,

he reads his partner's diary to find such expressions of pure love is an effect that may not carry as much weight with it had we not seen the sentiment expressed in Roger's own words.

Another craft choice I saw throughout the book is the limited use of dialogue. Monette does use dialogue, but it is rarely presented in conventional format. Instead, people's quotes are fused with a moment, described in detail, and conclude with a poignant point of commentary from the author. For example, a paragraph begins with, "Paul expressed his angry condolences about Roger's struggle with the herpes, then declared, 'I'll fight this as long as I can.' But he said it with a shrug that wasn't afraid to be hopeless and overwhelmed" (Monette 255). The paragraph goes on a bit, then concludes with, "I love that fatalist's courage – a courage that has cold reality and a sense of the tragic built in" (Monette 255). This is how dialogue appears, for the most part, throughout the book; it is used like additional candles to illuminate the reality of a moment, an interaction, a shared experience.

Borrowed Time is a literary trip to a dark period of struggle and loss, but beyond the grim realities of the time, it is much more a love story, a testament to a man who brought the author out of his personal struggles with accepting his own sexual orientation, a true demonstration of the unspoken and legally unrecognized vow, "in sickness and in health." It is a raw and unfiltered look at the battle on the frontline of AIDS, and what it means to lose the most important person in one's life at its expected zenith. Horwitz passed away in October 1986 at the age of 45, and Monette would later pass away of complications of AIDS in 1995 at the age of 49. To have such an honest reflection of one's life as a legacy to be read decades later is such a gift, not only for Monette's memory, but also for the reader.

Monette knew the historical responsibility he had and acknowledged, “I was writing with a very blunt instrument, but groping at last toward leaving a record – ‘to say we have been here’” (152). And that was precisely what he did.

Where I grew up, we did not talk about HIV and AIDS. I recall reading about it infrequently in our local newspaper, *The Salinas Californian*, or seeing it discussed on the news. My first recollection of hearing about AIDS was after Rock Hudson came out publicly with his diagnosis, shortly after he had shared an on-screen kiss with actress Linda Evans on the television program, *Dynasty*. In 1988, there were many misconceptions about the disease; one myth being that the disease could be transferred by kissing. The media, and entertainment media in particular, rallied around Ms. Evans, concerned for her safety and well-being, noting how difficult it must be for her to wonder whether she had been exposed to the disease or not. The media was not, on the other hand, as supportive of Mr. Hudson, a veteran actor and former hunky hearth throb who was quickly and visibly being battered by the ram of terminal illness.

This exploration of the queer literary landscape was an important exercise for me in the development of this work. Not only did it provide me with inspiration and influence from the past, but it also gave me an opportunity to examine the ways in which the telling of the gay experience has evolved and transformed through the years. By putting this evolution in context with the periods in which particular works were written, I have been able to pull from these influences and develop my own voice in the process. From birth, we are conditioned to learn from and emulate behavior seen in the behavior of others. It was important to me to incorporate exposure to other gay writers because their story is my story, we are part of a larger, greater

historical narrative being fashioned through history, across generations. Their methods and approaches to fashioning queer narrative advanced not only social discourse, but also affirmed the presence of an emerging culture, one moving from the background to the foreground, one ascending from the underground to the mainstream.

Just as John Reid's *Best Little Boy in the World* lessened the feeling of isolation for me as a young man, it is my hope that a century from now, in a moment when a young person wants to put their own experience in a greater, broader historical context, they may stumble upon my work and know they are not alone, that their struggle is our struggle today as it was when the drag queens and deviants of the late 1960s revolted on New York City's Christopher Street just outside the Stonewall Inn.

Writing *Stories I Told Myself* was a cathartic experience. It gave me the opportunity to relive and review pivotal moments of my development, and to assess them with a more critical eye as someone in his forties can do, bringing time and experience to factor in to the equation. It gave me the opportunity to put these moments from my past into a broader context, allowed me to look at them with greater objectivity, and to, in some cases, forgive others who may have caused me emotional or physical pain.

This personal exploration and analysis also illuminated the fallibility of memory for me. As I attempted to recall the smallest details of my adolescence, I found myself restricting the urge to rewrite my youth. I had to contain the desire to incorporate aspects of experience that I would have wanted to happen, rather than simply including only what, to my best recollection, actually transpired. The recollection of memories and details is a fundamental quandary of the

memoirist, and many times during the writing of this book, I found myself doing all I could to recall certain details or simply fill in the blanks as best as I could.

There are some prevalent themes evident throughout *Stories I Told Myself: A Memoir*. The reader will see illustrations of my real and imagined relationships with others. In some cases, as a boy, I used my over-reactive imagination to fashion an ideal future life, one of fantasy and indicative of the values of the era. These delusions would prevent me from living in the present in which I did not have the riches or wealth that popular culture implied was accessible to anyone who wanted it. These fantasies allowed me to, if only for brief moments, forget about the name calling, the exclusive behavior of classmates, and to idealize the life I wanted to live after I left home. I also illustrate how, in my own mind, I would sometimes blur the lines between fantasy and reality, imagining affectional and sexual bonds in places where there weren't any, or where they appeared unexpectedly.

The theme of boy against geography emerges from my growing up in a rural community with its provincial cultural landscape hinged on a primarily agricultural economy. An aficionado of fashion and pop culture, I was an enigma set against throngs of Future Farmers of America, or celebrants of the California Rodeo, an annual week-long event in my hometown. This juxtaposition was exacerbated by the cultural values of the 1980s. It was a decade fixated with greed, money, luxury and wealth. As mentioned previously, we listened to songs like, "Tell Me How to Be a Millionaire," and "The Glamorous Life," and we watched television shows that glamorized the lifestyles of the wealthy. To be young with an evolving understanding of my own sexual orientation in a middle class suburban neighborhood in a farming community was

antithetical to the general perspective of the time and to my own colorful, imaginative little boy dreams.

The reader will also see the evolution of my own perceptions and understanding about what it means to be a gay man. This journey begins from a place of seeing “gay” as sexual attraction and activity only, and as being something of which one should be ashamed. It moves toward a more evolved and holistic identity in which the experience of being gay informs other aspects of identity and self, such as friendships, artistic and creative interests, social activity, dating, cultural pursuits and more. It is a much broader view that integrates my sexual orientation with the fundamental socio-cultural elements of the human experience. In some cases, this broader view evolved outside the boundaries of time placed on this work; however, the beginning threads of an expanded personal socio-sexual context are visible as I begin to meet other gay people and see there are cultural elements to the gay experience that include, but are not limited to: gestures and movement, language and lexicon, dress (each “uniform” designed according to the types of men one wanted to meet), humor, melodrama and camp, activism and commitment to social justice, struggle for acceptance, scourge of illness, connection to geography and gay ghettos forged from the desire to build a sense of community and to live in the comfort of being around others like oneself. Through my interactions with other gay people, and particularly those who were older than me, I was able to expand my view and broaden my own personal context.

This memoir also illustrates the evolution of personal identity from isolationist to independent, from spectator to participant. In part, my being an only child fueled the isolationist and separatist aspects of my youth. At an early age, I took to reading and listening to music, not

only for entertainment, but also for escape. Both media helped fuel my imagination and when the confusion or concern of the day became too much to bear, a favorite song or story provided the right dose of escapism to make dealing with the circumstances more manageable. I was in a place and time period that gave me an opportunity to build character and resilience. I chose life because I believed there was more to it, that it would get better once I could honestly and openly pursue my own aspirations and become my own self-identified person.

Lastly, the reader will see how different and more difficult it was to meet other gay people in the 1980s, in a pre-Internet, pre-smartphone application age. It was an interesting exercise for me as I thought about what we did back then to meet others of like sensibilities, and how very different that experience is today for individuals seeking romance or a one-night stand.

The development of this memoir not only gave me the opportunity to expand my personal view of the queer literary landscape, but to also place myself in it. I enter into this space amidst traditions of storytelling, autobiographical fiction, serial fiction published in newspapers, and the exposition of lives lived in the shadows of mainstream culture. Putting this awareness in context where we are today as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community has helped me appreciate the evolution of the modern gay rights movement to the fight for marriage equality. More importantly, revisiting the beautifully awkward moments of my childhood gave me an opportunity to see my younger self with much more compassion and kindness. In some cases, it helped heal some longstanding wounds. Writing through these experiences has also given me the ability to forgive those who may have hurt me in some way, as I now realize they were all just doing the best they could with what they had. It's also given me an opportunity to celebrate those

who lifted me up, who helped me understand more about what it means to be gay, and how beautiful a relationship between two men can be.

Writing down past experiences, filtering through feelings and thoughts, not only gave me the unique opportunity to develop and strengthen my skills as writer and editor, but the process also fueled a parallel journey of self-discovery and development. In writing this book, I found past experiences of which I held an anchored view or idea of how they occurred, but upon returning to those moments on the page and attempting to recall their specific details, I had one of two realizations. In some cases, I came to understand that a particular moment had been given far too much weight than it deserved, that I had thought it to carry much more significance than it should have. Alternately, I also found with some experiences, the impact was understated and had a much more substantial effect on me because unresolved concerns lingered long after the moment had passed decades earlier.

To record these moments with as much factual detail as one can muster requires a certain degree of vulnerability. In the end, if we don't seize the opportunity to tell our own stories, to assert our existence in this life, what else do we have? Who else will do it?

Brian Crimmins

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PROLOGUE

A large cardboard box sat in the quiet back corner of a classroom at Monrovia Presbyterian Church nursery school. While our teacher attempted to forge order from chaos as students returned from recess, the box drew my attention. A blue and gray striped cotton jersey with a number on the back, one strap of a denim overall, peeked over the box's edge. White lace and tulle captured my curiosity.

“Playtime is over, class!” the teacher declared.

As students sat in small wooden desks, I reached up and pulled on the arm of the bridal gown. As I drew it out of the box, more white lace and embroidery emerged. I liked pretty things. I unzipped the back and stepped into the dress, oblivious to my surroundings. I got the dress up to my waist. All that remained was for me to slip on the bodice and sleeves, and then try to zip it up in the back.

I wrestled with the dress, contorting to get my arms into the sleeves. I gave up on trying to pull the zipper before I turned to face the mirror that hung on the wall next to the box. The wedding dress was a bit large but I tugged on the fabric at my waist and turned to the side, admiring the adjusted fit. I wanted to show my friends how I looked. I felt beautiful and fancy.

“Brian Crimmins, what are you doing?” Mrs. Mills towered over me. She was a tall skinny woman dressed in tan slacks and a brown sweater, and her eyeglasses hung around her neck on a bejeweled chain.

“I’m playing dress-up. Isn’t it pretty?”

“It is pretty, but it belongs on a girl.”

I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong. I looked around and noticed other classmates staring at me, grinning and pointing. Small tears rolled down my face, blurring Mrs. Mills’ frown, her wrinkled forehead.

“Playtime is over!”

I slipped the bodice and sleeves off, and then pushed the waist downward as all the lace and tulle fell to my feet. As I stepped out of the dress, I held the top of the box to maintain my balance; with my other hand I wiped still tears from my smooth pink cheeks.

Mrs. Mills picked up the dress with a swipe of her hand as she leaned over. She tossed the crumpled gown into the brown cardboard box. A silken sleeve with beading on the wrist dangled over the edge as if it were reaching out to me.

STORIES I TOLD MYSELF

On Sunday nights, I ran the hottest bath I could handle. Steam filled the second floor bathroom of our two-story townhouse. Just before stepping in, I turned on the radio at 8 p.m. to hear that familiar theme song full of guitar riffs and the chimes of Big Ben. The radio show's British host called out, "This ... is Rock Over London." The program played two hours of popular music from the United Kingdom.

The songs, the spoken accents of the show's host and guests, helped me fantasize about my future. I imagined a life outside of middle-class suburbia, beyond the borders of that farming town. It also signified the end of another weekend and with that, the inevitable return to school the next day.

The heat and steam from the bath calmed me. Sometimes I would add bubbles or scented oil to the water. I lay back, and stared up at the one window that looked out over townhouse rooftops. White tile and countertops glistened around me. Sunset's hues of marmalade and pomegranate shattered through frosted glass.

I'll move to London after graduation. I will tour royal palaces like Buckingham and Windsor, stroll through blooming gardens vibrant with color, and shop at Harrod's. I will share an adorable flat with... the man I love. The trip across the Atlantic would be long, but I would enjoy the freedom from scrutiny, from obligation, from pretending. I would be so far away from anyone here. I could live my life without pretending to be someone I'm not.

At sixteen, I began to acknowledge how I felt about other boys my age, about the models I fawned over in the fashion spreads of *Gentleman's Quarterly* magazine or the underwear pages of the International Male catalogue. Men in speedos or underwear were particularly interesting to me, and because it was clothing, rather than pure porn, I could pass it off as ordinary.

My boyfriend's name will be Miles. Laura Ashley prints will decorate our flat – British style, lots of floral prints and tassels. French doors will lead out onto a small patio and a garden bursting with ivy, with flowers in shades of pink, yellow and periwinkle. In that garden, we will enjoy afternoon tea and eat shortbread cookies or petit fours from the bakery around the corner. We will talk about the lives we left behind. We'll discuss the people and their provincial thinking. Miles will look like George Michael, be of Greek origin, will be tan and hairy in all the right places. I will be in heaven.

I grew up in Salinas, California - a city of 150,000 people, famous for its agriculture and the annual California Rodeo, a weeklong festival of cowboys, country music, and cattle roping. I watched television shows like “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” “Style with Elsa Klensch” and “Dynasty.” They were all about the life I wanted to live. I aspired to a life of luxury, of excess, of glamour.

I found other boys attractive. I am an only child, and made great effort to hide my feelings, to avoid risking exposure of what was becoming my truth. In 1986, there were few, if any, places to connect with other young gay people. The only time I saw something gay on TV was a brief mention of the San Francisco Pride Parade each June.

Once when my parents and I visited my grandparents and we were all gathered in the living room, just such coverage came on the news. I watched the television to catch details of shirtless men dancing on the back of flatbed trucks.

My grandmother, poised in her La-Z-Boy recliner with yarn and crochet hook in her hands and her glasses perched low on her nose, looked up just as two glittery, plumed drag queens marched in high heels down Market Street.

"That's unnatural what they're doing. They all just look ridiculous," she said in her deliberate Missouriian drawl.

My father headed toward the kitchen. My mother buried her face in a magazine, her eyebrows raised just above the pages. Grandma looked down again at her own hands, as cotton string, manipulated over her large freckled hand, with the help of a tiny crochet hook, transformed into handcrafted lace. I stared at the television without distraction, trying to soak in everything I could from the news report: a shirtless man in a leather jacket, another in a harness, both muscular and covered in hair. These masculine archetypes intrigued me, and admiring them made me feel differently than I had ever felt when looking at women. There was an obvious spirit of celebration, sprays of balloons lined floats and framed dancers and local celebrities. Rainbow flags waved up and down the parade route. All of this unfolded a few hours from Turlock, where my grandparents lived.

Then I heard, "In other news tonight..." and the moment was gone. The grandfather clock on the wall kept time with my disappointment. I was left alone with my youthful craving for what I had just seen despite the fact others were in the house with me. I walked into the kitchen and cut myself a piece of Grandma's homemade coconut cream pie.

Maybe I'll find a way to celebrate this part of me someday. I want to enjoy that moment when I can dance in the streets with my friends and we can hold hands and kiss and laugh and be.

As the bathwater cooled, I drained some of the tepid water, then refilled the tub with only hot water to bring it back to the point at which it gave me a subtle sting, that drew a line on my leg between the cool flesh that rested above the water, and the poached flesh below.

Miles will speak with a British accent like the radio host. He'll sound smart and sophisticated. He will bring me a bouquet of flowers every Friday, which he will buy on his way home from work. We will go to the pub on the corner to meet friends for dinner. We'll walk back home holding hands, laughing, a little drunk.

#

When I was in second grade, my parents and I lived in Monrovia, California, a suburb of Los Angeles, in a bungalow built in the 1950s. The two small patches of front lawn were always manicured, and in front of each of the two windows that faced the street sat sturdy birds of paradise plants that grew taller than me. My father was a California Highway Patrolman who worked nights and slept during the day. Kids at school always asked me if he was like Erik Estrada on the television show *CHiPs*. I told them my father didn't ride a motorcycle but that his biceps were bigger than Estrada's. My father performed his daily exercise ritual without fail, repetitions of sit-ups, push-ups and crunches.

My bedroom was in the back corner of the house. One window looked toward Hannah and Kermit Johnson's house next door. The other looked to the backyard, manicured lawn and shrubbery, a clothesline, a covered patio. On the main wall of my bedroom, opposite my bed, hung a very large poster of actor Parker Stevenson, star of television's *The Hardy Boys* with co-star Shaun Cassidy, who was also attractive but not as dreamy to me as Parker. At 8 years old, I didn't understand why I thought of a grown man as dreamy or why those thoughts even occurred to me; I only knew I felt an inexplicable draw to him, that his blue eyes and full lips made it difficult for me to look away.

One day, my mother and I were shopping at Sav-On, a local drugstore. I stopped to look at a display rack of different posters, mostly actors and musicians.

"Here's one of The Hardy Boys!" I shrieked.

"Keep your voice down, Brian. What is it?"

"A poster of Parker Stevenson and Shaun Cassidy. I want it."

"You know what your grandmother says. *Put want in one hand and shit in the other and see which one gets full first.*"

I stared at the poster, and then looked up at my mom. "C'mon, please?" She agreed.

We pulled one of the rolled up posters from the rack. I carried it with me instead of putting it in the shopping cart to avoid any risk of bending the poster's edges.

When we got home, Mom wanted to unload all of the groceries she had purchased before she did anything else. I paced in our small kitchen, circling her as she put items in the pantry, the refrigerator. I could think of nothing more than getting the larger-than-life image of my idols affixed to my bedroom wall.

“Help me put the poster up, Mom!” We carefully unfurled the heavy paper scroll, and placed small pieces of rolled tape behind the top two corners. Mom reached up to put the poster in place.

“A little to the left. Center it above my record player, please,” I asked. She rolled her eyes at me, smiled, and shifted the poster’s placement accordingly.

I rolled up two more pieces of tape and attached the bottom corners of the poster to the wall so the corners wouldn’t curl up.

“You’re all set!” mom said, returning to the kitchen to unload her other purchases, and leaving me alone in my room.

I sat on the bed for a while after that moment, trying to read a book, but very distracted by the poster. I was mesmerized by Parker’s gaze. There was a golden glow around him.

At the height of my Hardy Boys phase, my uncle Tom, aunt Laurene, and cousins Paul and Gail from Kernville (a village about an hour outside of Bakersfield) came to Southern California for a visit. The day after they arrived, we planned to visit Universal Studios in Hollywood.

"Do you think we'll see Parker and Shaun?" I asked my Mom.

"I can't promise you that, but we'll watch for them."

I didn't sleep much that night. I thought about riding the tram past the large soundstage where they filmed *The Hardy Boys* and imagined seeing Parker and Shaun walk by. Perhaps they would approach the tram to say hello. I would die if they approached us, if I got to just shake Parker Stevenson's hand. He had such beautiful blue eyes in my poster. I guessed they would be even brighter in person.

I loved to see him on the show, especially in scenes with a lot of action, or those filmed on the beach, Parker shirtless in trunks, a dream. I read about him in *Tiger Beat* magazine, and stared at the poster on my wall for long periods of time.

The next day we woke up early, got ready, and drove to Hollywood. I was a boy high on adrenaline for all the wrong reasons. I didn't want the thrill of getting attacked by a robotic bloody shark, or being threatened by an automated earthquake or choreographed flash flood. I wanted to see Parker Stevenson.

The tour tram drove through the tunnel that gave visitors a glimpse into where film actor costumes were made. We drove past a hill on which sat the famous house from the Hitchcock thriller *Psycho*. Then we turned the corner to proceed past some large industrial sound stages, all painted beige, each with its own number.

Above one of the doors, a sign read: *The Hardy Boys*.

My heart raced and my eyes darted left and right, scanning the immediate area for any possible glimpse of Parker and Shaun. The tram paused. *This is it. This is the moment when Parker will come out from the soundstage and come up to shake my hand.* The tour guide continued his spiel.

"Although the show is not in production today, you can see here to your right the parking spots for Mr. Cassidy and Mr. Stevenson."

I glanced over the edge of the tram. There, on two adjacent cement blocks, were painted white in stenciled lettering, "SHAUN CASSIDY" and "PARKER STEVENSON." Parking spots. That was it. That was the best I could get. I took a picture of the personalized spaces. I saw

where they parked their cars, where they stood, where they once waved to more fortunate fans who had happened to ride by in a tram at just the right moment.

I tried to appear enthusiastic and concerned when the robotic shark got too close to the tram. I may have screamed, eyes wide open, but it was all an act. I wanted to see Joe and Frank from television, The Hardy Boys. Instead, my little boy dream went unrealized.

Later that night at our house, when everyone else, exhausted by the long day's adventure, was asleep, I lay awake in my bed as ambient light filtered through the window. I stared up at Parker's gigantic face, his massive head of wavy brown hair, his blue eyes the size of small moons, the light layer of arm hair that looked like wheat waving gently in a field. This altar I had constructed lacked only a few candles covered in the images of saints, and a small silver chalice of Holy Water.

#

My best friend Jeremy was tall and slender with sandy blonde hair sun-kissed from long afternoons practicing for the golf team. We met when we were sophomores. I was the class vice-president and he hosted the homecoming float construction party at his house.

I was a little nervous, and a bit socially awkward, but I thanked him for hosting the group who assembled the diorama on the back of a flatbed truck to be driven across the football field at half time.

"Maybe if we put the tape here, it won't show so much," Jeremy suggested as he and I worked together on a section of the float. He sat close to me while we worked.

"Hey, you like going to movies?" I asked. "We should check out a movie some time if you're game."

"Sounds good, man."

As the day passed, I thought of little else but sitting close to him in a movie theater, brief contact made on a shared armrest, one elbow brushing the other.

Our float, "We Built This City on Rock & Roll," was a conglomeration of cardboard boxes taped together, covered in aluminum foil, and peppered with small yellow squares cut out of construction paper to resemble windows. A stuffed gorilla from Jeremy's bedroom hung from the top of the tallest "building," and we had a battery-powered cassette tape player that broadcasted the Starship anthem to passers-by.

"You guys, that was awesome!" Jeremy rallied the group. "Looks like we're set!"

Jeremy and I began to spend more time together, and we would, as many teenagers often do, sleep over at each other's homes. The first time I slept at his house, we opened up the sofa bed in the living room and put two sleeping bags on top of it. While I slept in shorts and a t-shirt, covering up what parts of my body I could, he wore a pair of workout shorts and slept shirtless.

"How're your classes going?" I asked.

"I'm glad I have golf."

"You're so committed to it."

"Speaking of commitment..."

Will this be the moment he'll ask me to be his boyfriend? It would be our secret. We can get matching rings or necklaces. We can have date nights at the roller skating rink in Monterey, or hang out at Northridge mall.

“You know Amy and I have been seeing each other for a while.”

“Yes.”

“I think I’m going to ask her to be my girlfriend.”

“Oh. That’s...great.” I knew my smile was not convincing.

“I’m pretty excited about it.”

“Hey, I’m getting kind of sleepy. Let’s call it a night?” I said.

He sat up to turn off the end-table lamp, revealing his toned back and shoulders. I stared for as long as I could, admiring his strength, until the room went dark.

The next morning, I woke up before Jeremy did. I listened to his steady deliberate breaths. I kept my eyes closed, and pretended I was still asleep. Only streetlight filtered through the thin draperies. I rolled over to be close to him and pretended to still be asleep. My head was not on his shoulder, and we remained separated by the sleeping bags that kept the boundaries clear. I was closer to him now, and felt his warm breath on the side of my face. The soft comfort of the sleeping bag’s cotton lining kept me warm. I wanted to unzip mine and climb into his. There was comfort in our shared silence, in his presence. I was not isolated, and the solace I found in our proximity was unfamiliar and exhilarating.

What if we had more mornings like this? Once we graduate, we could move away together. San Francisco, perhaps. I could write on the road and travel with him on his professional golf tours. We could be so happy if we just got out of this farm town. Waking up every morning with him would be heaven. Wouldn't it?

"Brian?" he whispered. "You awake?"

"What?" I turned my head toward him, and tried to appear in a dream state. I realized just how close I was to him. He hadn't slipped away, even an inch, and his ease in being so close comforted me.

"You sleep okay?"

"Oh, sure. It's so peaceful out here. I live across the street from a major highway, remember?" I liked the background noise at home, but the steady rhythm of Jeremy's breath was much better company in the darkness.

We lay there, while everyone in the house still slept or remained sequestered in their respective bedrooms.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do after graduation?"

"I'm going to college to become a CPA," I replied.

"Why?" Jeremy asked.

"Because I want to make lots of money, live in a big city, wear nice clothes, and eat in fancy restaurants."

"It sounds like you have it all planned out."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I want to make golf my career."

"I'm sure you'll be great at it. You're always so disciplined and committed to practicing. I respect that about you." I was trying to compliment him without being too sappy, *too gay*.

"I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry. How about some breakfast?"

I agreed. I could have stayed on that sofa bed all day, each of us sealed in our sleeping bags.

His shirtless torso towered over me as he sat up. He hesitated and stretched, yawned, looked out the window to the front yard. *Was this what he usually did when he climbed out of bed? Was he teasing me?* My eyes traveled from his waist to his neck, his body was so toned and firm. It was perfect compared to my stockier boyhood build.

He stood up, stretched again to show the silhouette of his morning erection in his athletic shorts. He put on a t-shirt he had tossed on a nearby chair the night before, walked into the bathroom down the hall, and shut the door.

I rolled over and put my head on his pillow, closed my eyes and took deep breaths of his scent marked in feathers and cotton. I pulled the pillow close to my face, almost smothering myself. *Click.* The bathroom door opened and I retreated to my side of the sofa once again, out of balance, the other side now feeling so empty.

"Eggs or pancakes?" he called from the kitchen.

"Which is easier? Both sound good."

We are both out of college and he is home from a golf tour. It's nice to have him home in San Francisco. We live in The Castro, nestled in a valley under fog, above the famous street where Harvey Milk led his marches and rallies. We can see the Castro Theater from our small patio seasoned with hydrangeas and ferns. Jeremy cooks breakfast for me, the smell of bacon a divine pleasure. I get up and sit at the table when he calls, "Breakfast is ready!" It's so good to have him home and he knows that also means it's nice to have him in bed with me again.

"Pancakes with sausage on the side!"

"This is quite a way to wake up in the country," I replied.

"Only the best for you, my friend."

#

Labor Day, 1984. I was fourteen years old. My neighbor, Betsy, was driving me two hours north to the Oakland Coliseum to see a concert event called “A Day on the Green.” The opening acts were Katrina and the Waves (“Walking on Sunshine”) and The Pointer Sisters (“I’m So Excited”). I was most excited to see Wham! (“Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go”).

The night before the concert, I selected the Wham! pins I wanted to wear to the concert. The small collection sat on my dresser just under a large centerfold of George Michael. He wore a white speedo under a shower of water that cascaded down his hairy body.

On the morning of the concert, I got myself ready and put on jeans and a purple and blue madras print shirt left unbuttoned and layered over a “Make It Big” album cover T-shirt. George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley lay close to each other on the floor, and smiled into the camera. I looked at myself in the mirror, and admired the photo on my shirt.

Before putting the plaid shirt on over the t-shirt, I placed each Wham! pin on my shirt so they were in a disciplined row along the top of the pocket. I put the shirt on and did another survey in the mirror.

George and Andrew today. A freshman at North Salinas High School tomorrow!

“Brian! Are you almost ready?” My mother called from downstairs.

“On my way!”

After one last review in the mirror, I barreled down the stairs to find Betsy already there.

“You ready for the big concert?” Betsy asked.

“Oh yeah! I’ve been waiting all summer for this!”

We got in Betsy’s sedan and made the drive north on Highway 101. I made a mixed tape of Wham! music to play in the car on the way up. Betsy knew some of the lyrics, but I knew every word.

“Thanks for taking me to this concert, Betsy.”

“Should be a fun day.”

We made it to the Oakland Coliseum and parked. Walking toward the venue, we saw trailers set up selling Wham! merchandise as well as food and drink. We needed to get in the line that had already started forming to be sure we were able to get close enough to the stage. We had general admission tickets.

We got in line and struck up a conversation with three girls in line behind us.

“Like, oh my god, this concert is going to be awesome,” said one of the girls.

“For sure,” another girl said, a common affirmation of the day thanks to Moon Unit Zappa’s hit song, “Valley Girl.”

“Looks like you’re a big fan,” the tallest of the three girls asked me.

“Wham! is definitely my favorite band of all time!” I paused, then continued. “Do you like these pins? I ordered them from the U.K. I like the larger size than the very small ones, but I have a lot of those, too.”

“Wow, you really are a fan!” one of the girls said.

“I like other bands, too. Duran Duran. ABC. Tears for Fears. But Wham! is definitely my favorite.” I caught myself and toned down my over-zealous gestures.

“Yeah, like Wham! is cool and all,” one of the girls said, “but we’re excited to see Katrina and the Waves.”

We talked about music and movies for a while.

“So, like, *are you gay?*” the oldest one asked.

The question hung in the air. I didn’t know how to respond. No one had ever asked me flat out before. Usually, people just called me gay, or, more often, fag. They never asked me for my own confession. I turned with relief to see Betsy in the distance, still in the merchandise tent queue, and out of earshot.

This stranger just put the question right out there in front of everyone. Including my neighbor. Who did this girl think she was?

My face grew warm and my gaze went towards the ground. I had to respond to the question. If I just left it hanging, people would assume I was gay.

After what seemed like hours, I said, “I’m not gay.” I did my best to respond with clarity from a space in which there was none.

I turned around and faced the entrance, hoping to curb any further conversation with the girls behind us. Betsy returned from buying souvenirs.

“Looks like the line’s starting to move,” I said.

“Oh yeah, they’re letting people in! You ready for the big show?” Betsy asked.

I hated the fact the girls saw through my meager attempt at masquerade and wondered if Betsy did, too. I took a deep breath, ignored the girls who whispered behind us, raised my chin high, and entered the coliseum to see my idols on stage.

#

There were two parks in our neighborhood. The one we called, “Little Park,” had an intimate patch of lawn, a sandy area with a slide and swing set, and a couple of benches. The other, a few blocks farther from my house, we called, “Big Park.” It had lawn, sand, and playground equipment, as well as a volleyball court and a sidewalk path that led bike riders on a circuitous route across the three or four streets that intersected with the park.

One Saturday morning, I took a bike ride to Big Park. Bright colors peeked out from small flowerbeds along my route as birds greeted each other in their special way. I pedaled past stucco suburban townhouses painted brown, beige, or olive green. There was a slight chill from the morning coastal fog. I enjoyed cooler temperatures, but still pulled up the zipper on my sweatshirt.

I stopped on the sidewalk bordering the park and caught my breath. George, another boy from school, approached me.

I sat up straight on my bicycle and put both hands on the handlebars.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Just riding my bike.” I gripped the handlebars.

“Is the little fag out looking for a boyfriend?”

“Shut up, George!” My angry outburst surprised me. I heard blood pumping in my ears, as my palms grew sweaty.

“What did you say?” He moved closer and gripped the metal between the two handles of my bike.

“Just stop. I don’t bother you.”

“You do bother me. You were checking out my ass as you rode up here.”

“I wasn’t. Why would I?” But I had checked him out. I admired his toned body, and how his ass looked in a pair of jeans when I saw him at school.

“Because you’re gay!”

“I’m not like that, George.” I positioned my feet on the pedals to go in reverse. “Leave me alone.”

“Now you listen here...”

At the point George lifted his fist to swing, I ducked and pushed hard on the right pedal to back the bike away from George. Swift action gave me just enough time to back up, release the handlebar from his grasp, and jump my bike off the sidewalk and on course toward home.

I looked behind me and saw him still running, at one point getting too close. I pushed harder on the pedals.

“You better watch out, fag! I’ll get you next time,” he yelled, his taunts became a murmur in the distance.

I got far enough away from the park that I was convinced George wasn’t following me anymore. I paused for a moment to catch my breath.

I haven’t done anything to him. I mind my own business. I don’t understand. He’d never raised a fist at me before.

My heart raced and my breathing was labored. To regain my composure before I got home, I stopped again, watched a few cars pass by, and felt my breathing return to normal. I couldn’t let my mother see me upset because she would ask me what happened.

Well, you see, Mom, George grabbed my bike and tried to swing his fist at me after calling me a fag and asking me if I was looking for a boyfriend.

I could never say what happened.

I checked my surroundings to make sure George had not followed me. I rode at a slower pace up Seville Street, turned right on Cherokee Drive, then left onto our cul-de-sac, Cadiz Circle.

“That was quick!” My mom was in the kitchen baking cookies.

“I just rode to the park and back. Nothing exciting.”

“Did you see any of your friends?”

“No, it was pretty quiet. I’m going upstairs to read.”

“You ok?”

“Yeah, just catching my breath.”

If I told Mom what George did, maybe she could do something about it. But what could she do? If I had to tell her what he said about me, it would raise suspicions that may or may not already be there.

I went upstairs to my room, put on my headphones, and played some music.

#

I sat in my favorite armchair, reading news headlines on my laptop. They told of the rising number of young gay people who killed themselves because they couldn’t endure persistent bullying, because they thought they weren’t normal, because they were told they were

going to hell. They were committing suicide because the pain of dying was less than the pain of living with the constant harassment, the persistent judgment, and the torment from others for loving someone of the same gender.

How did I do it? How did I make it out alive?

I told myself stories to fashion life as I hoped it would be one day. I fed myself the inspiration of fantasy to believe there was more waiting.

Fantasy led to the belief in possibility and I knew it was possible that my secrets and my circumstances could all change. They could, and they would.

But until they did, it was the stories that kept me going. I crafted a different life in my imagination and when real life became too complicated. When the pain of keeping secrets became too much of a burden, I looked forward to having tea with Miles in London, or breakfast with Jeremy in San Francisco. The future looked promising if I could get through the present.

I am here because of the stories I told myself.

FRIENDS & FAMILY

I preferred to read and listen to music in my room instead of playing outdoors, running, kicking or throwing a ball around. As a result, I was a chubby boy. I went out in the front yard to practice my somersaults required for my Cub Scout physical fitness badge.

I was afraid my big body would fall on my head and crush it. I got halfway into the move and my ballast shifted, completing only half of a maneuver before rolling on my side. After a few failed attempts, I decided to stand in the middle of the lawn, look up at the sky and the tall old trees that lined our street. I spun around in circles until I could no longer stand, until I fell onto the thick blades of grass below me.

The world kept spinning after I stopped. I tried to make it all stop but I couldn't. Trees and clouds. A breeze. I was grounded with no space between the Earth and me.

My parents realized that the fate of the Cub Scout physical agility badge hung in the balance. They also wanted to ensure my personal safety, so they enrolled me at Bud Lyndon's Swim School. What horrified me the most was not the idea of learning to swim, but more so the thought of having to take my shirt off in front of others.

“I don't want to go!” I would say to my mother. “I'm too fat!”

“Stop it, Brian. You need to learn to swim,” she said.

“The other kids will laugh at me.”

“It's a private lesson. Who cares about the other kids?”

That was easy for her to say. Still, we spent Saturday mornings at the swim school so I could take my lessons.

My instructor, Blaine, was of college age, sandy brown hair highlighted by his time spent in the sun. He had a toned body and there was hair on his arms and chest.

"We're gonna start with getting you used to kicking in the water. Put your hands on my shoulders and I will lead you around. All you have to do is kick," he said.

I placed my hands on his muscular shoulders and felt connected to him. He was tan and his eyes were crystalline against the water's reflection. As I struggled to stay above water, he would use his strength to pull me up until I had time to catch my breath. I found comfort by gripping onto his hairy arms, pointing my face toward the sky, inhaling to catch my breath.

"You're doing good, buddy. Keep it up!"

Blaine flashed a Colgate smile just a few feet away, encouraging me to paddle to him at the pool's end. He stretched his arm out, extending it toward me as a goal post. A small group of children gathered in a semicircle at the opposite end of the pool around another instructor, a woman. I felt luckiest of all the students there.

I returned home from my lessons, and listened to some of Dad's 45s on the record player. I lay on the living room floor, looked up at the popcorn ceiling. I think it may have sparkled. I thought about Blaine's hand on my shoulder, his atta-boy pat on the back. I loved how he suspended me in the water as I learned to breathe, paddle, and kick at the same time. I felt safe.

#

We had to live where the transfers were available because my father worked for the California Highway Patrol. Up to age nine, I lived in Monrovia, California, a suburb of Los

Angeles. After that, in 1979, my parents and I moved to Salinas, near Monterey and Carmel on California's central coast. This put us just a few hours away from the rest of my Mom's sisters and their families (who all lived no more than one hour from each other).

We took long weekends to visit family, most often staying with my Aunt Bonnie and her second husband, Paul. His family was well known in Sonora. His parents and grandparents played a significant role in the history of the community. They lived on top of a hill, with a long straight driveway running from the main road up to their house. Their sprawling California Ranch style home was long with a sunken family room and formal living room, as well as three bedrooms.

Paul was Italian by culture and restaurateur by trade, the consummate entertainer. Anyone who sat at his dining table would enjoy large plates of cheese and charcuterie to snack on. Later, platters of pasta drenched in homemade sauce dotted with slivers of fresh Parmesan were served. We always used cloth napkins - even for a simple snack. I always felt fancy when we visited Bonnie and Paul.

One afternoon, I went swimming with my cousins Frank and Mary, and Mary's boyfriend du jour, Tom. I took an interest in Tom, as he was tall, slender, with beautiful tan skin and shoulder-length brown hair indicative of his Native American heritage. I enjoyed standing by the edge of the pool and watching him as he swam. He got out of the pool for a bathroom break or to smoke a cigarette. His wet swim trunks clung to his body and outlined his crotch. I was a mystified twelve-year-old boy. I did not know why I was so fascinated by his beauty (and I used that word to describe him). I thought I was minding my own business, and going unnoticed.

"What are you looking at?" Frank asked.

"We don't have trees like this where I live."

"You like looking at Tom, don't you?" Frank moved closer to me in the pool.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do."

And then the splashing came. First, it was a clipped singular wave formed from Frank's hand against the water's surface, aimed right at me. I turned away, as I hated water on my face, and in particular, in my eyes.

"Stop it."

More splashing.

"What were you looking at?" Frank yelled.

"Give the kid a break, Frank," Tom said.

Frank moved closer, slapping water in my face. He was using both hands to bring waves of water toward my head. Frank was athletic and strong, so the force he built up behind each splash was inescapable.

As I tried to move away from him, he moved closer to me. I worked my way to where the edge of the wooden deck met the pool's edge. I climbed out, grabbed my towel from a nearby chaise, and ran into the house, crying, hearing laughter from both Frank and Mary. Tom stood there, silent.

Later, we all sat around the dining table, enjoying some fine cheese, Italian meats, and crackers. I was quiet and looked down at my plate.

"Did you have a nice swim this afternoon?" Bonnie asked.

"I caught Brian checking out Tom when he got out of the pool."

"I was not!" I stared down and used my fork to move pieces of penne pasta, a mushroom, from one side of my plate to the other.

"Lay off," Tom added.

"What's your point, Frank?" Paul asked.

"Maybe he'll grow out of it," Frank replied.

My face grew warm as I continued to stare at my plate. I hoped silence would fall on the table, that everyone would fill their mouths with charcuterie so they could not speak.

#

Italian, tall and slender, Paul had a large smile and big hands, fingertips yellowed by nicotine. His charisma and charm were well known around Sonora, the small town where his family had lived for generations.

In my aunt and uncle's California ranch-style home, the master and guest bedrooms were at the far end of the hall. One afternoon, I sat in my cousin's room across the hall from my aunt and uncle's bedroom. I read a Tiger Beat magazine, scouring articles about the latest heartthrobs. I heard the shower go on in the other bedroom, and since he had walked by moments earlier, I knew it was my uncle.

My mind wandered and I could no longer focus on what I read in the magazine. I got up off my cousin's bed and approached the door down the hall, saw no one, and heard no activity. I leapt across the hall and was then in my uncle's bedroom. The master bathroom had a sliding door, and as I got closer to it, I noticed it was ajar. Blood pumped in my ears. I tried to be as

quiet and discreet as possible. I kept my eyes on the bathroom door, and at least one ear listening for anyone at the bedroom door.

I put my face up near where the door was open. I peeked into the bathroom and there was my uncle, naked and drying off. The hair on his body was moist, his long wavy hair tousled at the towel's mercy. The view enthralled me as my eyes went from his head down to his crotch. He was well endowed in both length and diameter. I admired his body, a man in his mid-50s, so masculine, so Mediterranean.

I stared through the cracked door until he took his first step out of the stall-style shower onto the bathmat. I got up off my knees. Even though I was on carpet, I tiptoed back into my cousin's room and sat on the edge of her bed. I returned to my magazine as my uncle stepped out of the bathroom.

"Hey Brian," he said, standing at his dresser with a towel around his waist.

"Hi," I tried not to stare.

"What are you reading?"

"Just a magazine. Tiger Beat."

As long as he stood in front of his dresser, I had full view of him. He opened one drawer and pulled out a pair of undershorts. He then pulled off the towel hanging low on his waist and stood there naked. He turned toward me so I stole one last look at him, and tried not to be obvious.

He stepped toward his closet to finish getting dressed. He returned to the hallway fully clothed in jeans and a polo shirt, and stood by the door to my cousin's room.

"How about a snack?" he said.

We walked down the hall. My throat was dry and my face was flush. I didn't know how to think about what had just happened. He did nothing inappropriate, and my visceral response was based not on seeing him naked, but on how the experience made me feel. I didn't know how to make sense of my fascination with men, and with my uncle. He made no innuendo and was so nonchalant about exposing himself to me. He was comfortable and confident, which I also found captivating. I wondered if I would ever walk naked with such confidence and swagger.

I never considered spying on my cousin Mary, or my aunt Bonnie. None of that interested me. It was for the opportunity to see my uncle Paul in full masculine grace that I took such a great risk. I soaked in the moment, relived the mental images over and over again.

#

I am the youngest grandchild on my mother's side of the family, and my cousin Jim is a year older than me. He was a boisterous young man, loud and brash, raised in the country. When we were 10 or 11, we took a trip up the California and Oregon coasts into Washington. My uncle Dick drove a big motor home with aunt Barbara, my cousin Jim, my grandparents, Jim and Mildred, and me. We explored sea caves, tide pools, and misty redwood groves. We stayed in rustic campgrounds, and ate in diners along the way.

A few years later, when my parents and I visited Dick and Barbara at their home in Don Pedro, California, Jim and I camped out in their motorhome. My aunt and uncle kept the large vehicle parked in front of their house. It was close to the house with all its modern conveniences.

One evening, when I was about 13 and Jim was 14, we were in the motorhome talking and laughing as we often did. He wasn't particularly sports-minded, nor was I. We talked more about the subjects we liked in school, our friends, the games we liked to play. Games. Like Truth or Dare.

"Have you ever played it?" he asked.

"I've heard about it, but haven't played it."

We both sat on the sofa in the motorhome.

"I ask you, 'Truth or Dare?' and then you say one or the other. If you say 'Truth,' then I ask you a question and you have to tell me the truth. If you say 'Dare,' I give you a dare and you have to do it, no matter what." I nodded agreement to the rules.

"So, Truth or Dare?" he asked.

"Truth."

"That's the easy way out!"

I sat confused in the glimmer of streetlight through the window. He sat next to me on the sofa; my knees shook.

"Okay. How often do you jack off?" he asked.

"Every few days."

"You don't do it every day?"

"No, just when I feel like it."

"Now it's your turn to ask the question. Dare me to do something risky."

"Strip down to your underwear and walk back and forth a few times."

He took his shirt off. There was already hair on his chest, and he was muscular. He was a more active boy than I was; he spent more time outside. His shoes were already off, so he removed his socks. Then pulled off his jeans to reveal a thick hard-on in his white briefs. He walked to the back of the motorhome, and then returned to the front of the coach area by the driver and passenger seats. He did the walk again with no shame, and his confidence impressed me.

As he put his clothes back on, Jim asked, "Truth or Dare?"

"Dare," I replied.

"Strip naked and do the same thing I just did."

"Take off everything?"

"Everything."

I removed my clothing. I dreaded being completely naked. I had a few extra pounds on my frame. I got down to my underwear and paused.

"Come on. I said get naked."

I pulled my briefs off and put my hand over my crotch.

"Stop hiding things. Just walk." I enjoyed how my cousin took charge of the situation and was quick to provide direction. I walked back and forth a few times, and as I put my underwear back on, Jim said, "Just keep the underwear on. I'll do the same."

"Why don't we both just get naked?" I asked.

His willingness surprised me. He didn't balk at the idea. He pulled his clothes off this time and soon we were both naked, sitting on the sofa in the motorhome. He was hard and well developed. He was confident and knew all the rules. Or, had he made them up as we went along?

"You like this?" he asked.

"Yeah, I guess I do."

He put his hand on his cock and did a few strokes, rubbing the head with each movement.

"Man, that feels good," he said.

I heard blood pumping in my ears, my face warmed.

"How about Dare this time?" I warmed up to the game.

"Show me how you stroke," he said.

I stood there completely naked and exposed in front of my cousin, and I, too, became erect.

"I'm a little embarrassed."

"That's the idea. Now do it."

The motor home's interior was warm and small beads of sweat formed on my forehead. I kept a fixed gaze on my cousin, while I listened for any sign someone might interrupt us.

"Now let's play the game in the dark," he suggested. Moonlight filtered in through the motorhome's windows, and gave me shadows of Jim's naked body to admire.

We only chose Dare. We remained naked, he lay on the sofa, and I was on top of him. My arms wrapped under his shoulders. We began grinding our crotches against each other; the friction was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I had never been this close to another boy, and had not felt something so natural, something that felt right. He smelled musky and I inhaled with my eyes closed to register the moment in my memory. As we both reached climax, me first, him second, the intensity eroded into shame and I lay still for a moment to catch my breath. It felt safe in one respect because he was family; for the same reason, it felt dirty and

taboo. From what I had heard from kids at school, being gay was not good. A boy being sexual with other boys was frowned upon. Here I stood in just that kind of situation.

After we cleaned up, he crawled into his sleeping bag and I, mine. I lay there listening to his slowing breath. I looked out the window at the moon, caring and not caring that it was my cousin. I worried the kids at school were right. Perhaps, I was a homo. I didn't want them to be right. I didn't understand what that meant.

#

Justin and I sat on the lawn outside his family's home in a quiet neighborhood. Our fathers were both in law enforcement. His father, Salinas Police Department; my father, California Highway Patrol. We were sitting on the grass when his neighbor and a fellow student of ours, Norman, joined us.

"What are you guys doing?" Norman asked.

"Just talking," Justin replied.

"About what?"

"Drawing and stuff. Nothing major."

"Let's talk about girls," Norman said.

"What's there to talk about?" I asked. Norman's presence felt like an invasion.

I needed to be on guard.

"Like, why don't you have a girlfriend, Brian?" Norman asked.

"What's it to you?"

"Justin has a girlfriend. I have a girlfriend. What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem, Norman." How was it that everyone around me could see that which I thought hid in a deep, dark place?

"Well, boys are supposed to have girlfriends, so it sounds like a problem to me."

"I haven't met the right girl."

"You haven't tried. Have you?"

"Norman, lay off," Justin came to my defense.

"No, I'm not going to lay off him, Justin. Something ain't right with this one."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked, as I sat there, paralyzed by the growing reality that my secret was more evident to others than it was to myself.

"I mean he's a fag, Justin. When he grows up, he'll be nothing but a big faggot."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"I've seen you check out guys in the hallway at school. I've seen it, and everyone else has seen it, too. Just accept the fact you like dudes."

"That I like dudes how?"

"Like you want to make out with them and let them do you up the ass."

"Norm, that's disgusting," Justin tried to stop the conversation. "Let it go, man."

"Fine - but remember this conversation because someday you'll see what I say is true."

Norman walked away with his head held high in triumph. He put me in a category, one that, at the age of 13 or 14, I was not prepared to accept. I didn't even understand what it meant. I hated Norman for what he said and for the assumptions he made about who I would become.

"I better go home," I said.

"Don't feel like you have to rush off. He's full of shit."

"I just don't understand why people think that about me."

"You're good, buddy. Don't worry about it."

I took my time walking home, winding through cul-de-sacs before heading back on the main drive that squirmed through our neighborhood. There was order in the manicured lawns and monochromatic facades of the tract houses I passed. I wondered if the people who lived in those homes had issues of their own.

I relived that horrid conversation in my head. What was it I did or didn't do that made Norman, and others, think things like that about me? I wanted to be like everyone else, but I felt separate from others. I was different and that difference kept me at a distance.

I cut through Big Park. Two girls rocked back and forth on the swing set while two boys kicked a soccer ball around. I walked along the winding concrete path that traversed the park's length. I thought about talking this over with my mom when I got home, telling her what Norman said and how it made me feel. What if that only introduced the idea into her mind and she started to think the same things about me? I was cautious and worked hard to be perfect with grades. I kept my room clean, and participated in the right activities at school. I didn't want to tarnish my parents' perception of me.

I walked in through the front door. My mom folded laundry in the bedroom.

"Did you have fun at Justin's?" she asked.

"Yeah, we talked about drawing and he showed me some of the sketches he's been working on. He's really good at it."

"Go wash up. Dinner's almost ready."

I thought about sharing what happened one more time.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

I thought of the consequences of sharing what kids at school thought of me. I was their only child and wanted to be perfect, wanted to do everything the right way. I didn't want to be a disappointment or an embarrassment to them.

"What's for dinner?"

"Meatloaf tonight."

I ran up the stairs and into my bathroom. Turning on the tap, the sound of the water echoed in the pristine space silencing my quiet tears. Whatever I may have to struggle with, I would have to do it on my own.

#

A few months after Jim and I played our first round of Truth or Dare, my family made another visit to Dick and Barbara's house. Their town was remote, the houses were far apart, and there were open spaces in which we could enjoy peace and quiet. One day, my cousin Jim and I found a utility shed that belonged to the local improvement district. There was no one around, and it was far off the main road. It looked like a great spot for relaxing in the sunshine.

"Truth or dare," he asked.

"Dare."

"Strip completely naked and sit here in the sun for a while."

"How about you do the same?"

"Deal."

Since that first night we played the game, our comfort with each other had grown. I was not as nervous, and it was easy for us. We were naked and relaxed around each other.

We took off all our clothes. Jim's body was firm, with hair on his legs and chest. I felt a sense of togetherness with him at this moment, two boys in middle school, enjoying some naked time in the sun. Not having any brothers or sisters of my own, this feeling of camaraderie was unfamiliar to me, but I enjoyed it.

"I like these times we have together," he said.

We remained quiet, enjoying the peace of the place. We were both sitting on the edge of the cement slab that supported the utility shed, naked, our eyes closed, enjoying the sun.

A crunching sound in the dry grass.

"You hear that?" I asked.

"Yeah. What is that?"

Another crunch.

"Hey boys, what're you doing out here?" A man approached and came upon us.

We each reached for a nearby piece of clothing to cover our crotches.

"Just enjoying the sun, sir," Jim replied. While I didn't recognize the man, he could have been the father of one of my cousin's classmates.

"Well, you better put some clothes on and get outta here."

"Yes, sir."

I got dressed, my undershirt on backwards, my undershorts inside out. I was both embarrassed and excited at the same time, and glad I wasn't alone at a moment like that.

"Let's head back to the house," Jim said.

When we returned, some of the adults napped. I sat in the living room doing search-a-word puzzles. The room was decorated shades of gold and brown; a crocheted afghan (most likely made by my grandmother), draped over the back of the sofa, covered my mother's legs as she slept. A mismatched collage of family photos hung on one wall – graduations, weddings, school portraits. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. An antique clock sat atop the large television set, its ticking, a metronome with the deliberate breathing and snoring of those around me.

"Dad, Brian and I are going out to the motor home to play Monopoly or something," Jim said.

"Ok," Uncle Dick replied.

Once in the motorhome, both of us still sweaty from our time in the sun, we didn't waste time with the question of truth or dare. It was no longer a dare, but a desire.

This time I tasted more of Jim than I had before. There were no instructions, only instinct.

"Do you do this stuff with guys in Salinas?"

I was 13 and would never even suggest it, not with Norman's accusations to my face and behind my back. My cousin lived far from where I did, so there was anonymity, a kind of safety that geography provided.

"Never. Just with you."

"Cool."

"Do you?"

"Not really."

We lay naked next to each other on the sofa, the warm afternoon heating the motorhome's interior. We held on to the other with one arm, and the opposing hand we used to stroke ourselves, or to touch the other doing the same. There was no judgment, and there wasn't a sense we were doing something naughty or dirty or wrong. It was exciting in a way that no girl at school had ever made me feel.

We both came at the same time, our youthful strength emerged in an intense embrace, sweat dripped down our foreheads.

After only a moment of recovery, we heard the front door of the house shut and then footsteps. We both leapt up and grabbed for clothes, the second time on this day getting dressed with such haste that garments were twisted inside out, only this time, the underwear stuck to our torsos, glued there by our shared experience.

"Hey guys!" my mother opened the motorhome door and called to us without entering the cabin. "You about ready for lunch?"

"Yeah, that sounds great!" I said.

"You are both sweating - you shouldn't sit out here when it's so hot outside. Come in the house, have some lunch, and cool down in the air conditioning."

"Be there in a sec, Mom."

She shut the door and we watched through the blind as she returned to the house.

We grabbed a couple of paper towels to clean up what mess hadn't already been absorbed by our underwear.

"That was close," Jim said.

"Too close."

That would be the last of our encounters. The risk, once assessed, became too great for either of us. Perhaps we became more mature and knew better. Perhaps our interests went in different directions - Jim, towards girls; mine, towards other boys. Or, it may have been that getting caught twice in the same day was just too much for either one of us to handle.

I fooled myself into thinking these were boyhood games. I denied there was any greater degree of significance in what we did other than we were two young horny boys who enjoyed the rush of exhilaration when we played our own version of Truth or Dare.

I wasn't excited by the way girls at school lightly brushed their boyfriends' necks or arms with their long fingernails, their soft kisses tainted with berry-flavored gloss, the way they melted into their boyfriends' arms. This delicate tenderness was uninteresting.

I preferred the firm embrace of a boy like me, a little hair on his chest, scruff and stubble against my face, a strong hand against my back.

#

I first met Robert in a hallway at North Salinas High. He was tall and slender with smooth tan skin and Asian features. He was soft-spoken and always had different colors in his

hair. He listened to New Wave music and spent time with Janet and Lisa, his closest friends, who often wore black, dyed their hair black, and painted their fingernails black.

One Friday afternoon, Kevin, CJ, June, Jeremy and I sat on wooden benches in our section of the main courtyard at school, surrounded by small gardens, and half of a Viking ship painted in blue and red. We had our spot and others knew not to sit there.

“What do you guys think of that guy, Robert?” Kevin asked.

There was a mix of, “Don’t know him that well,” to “I think he’s kind of gay looking.”

“We should toilet paper his house,” Kevin suggested.

“Yeah, that would be fun,” C.J. agreed.

“I know where he lives. It’s just down the street from my house,” I said, pleased this sort of attention was being directed at someone else instead of me.

That night after dinner, the guys came over to my house and we all had ice cream and watched MTV. After we were done with dessert, I put the dishes in the dishwasher.

“Where are you guys going?” my mom asked.

“Going over to Jeremy’s for a while,” I replied.

We piled into my ’76 Toyota Corolla, armed with toilet paper we bought earlier that day that was stowed in the trunk. Rolls and rolls of it.

“Man, we’re gonna cover that fag’s house, aren’t we?” Kevin said.

Even when I was trying to play at being a bully, I still felt like an outsider. I didn’t want to believe I heard the stinging phrase, but to avoid the risk of not being one of the group, I affirmed, “Hell yeah!”

We drove slowly along Cherokee Drive, music turned up, laughing. We parked a few doors down from Robert's house. It was late, and lights were off in the house. Turning off the car, I noticed my legs were tense, and my knees shook.

We climbed out of the car and went to work. I crept toward the bathroom window that faced the street. I tore off long sections of the paper and draped it over the nearby shrub, my back to the rest of the activity in the yard. Something didn't feel right about this, but, although Robert had nothing to do with it, I somehow felt vindicated for the abuse I had tolerated for so many years by dishing it out to someone else, even if that person was innocent.

Like streamers at a celebration, all of the shrubs in the front yard, the lawn, the door, the front of the house, and the light that hung near the garage were all covered in toilet paper. Even the young tree in the yard's center was wrapped vertically and horizontally creating the illusion of plaid.

With the last roll in hand, I spelled out "F-A-G" in paper against the dark green of his front lawn. We threw the cardboard tubes to the side, ran to the car, and drove off to Jeremy and Kevin's part of town, about ten minutes away.

"Man, we sure got him, didn't we?" Kevin said.

"Oh yeah! That was awesome," I said. The rush of the moment, our euphoria, shifted to silence as we drove to Jeremy's house. Our energy slowed and it was late. The transmission gave its grinding whir each time I sped up to shift gears. Wind blew through the rolled-down windows.

"Wish I could be there in the morning to see the reaction when he wakes up," Kevin said.

“Yeah, I wonder if he’ll cry. He seems like the crying type.” I knew all the right phrases to say. They’d been used on me for years. When the toilet paper flew, it felt good to be the bully for once. It gave me strength and made me feel powerful. It was nice to be giving, rather than receiving. But almost, as soon as the deed was done, I regretted all of it.

On Monday, again in our usual spot in The Mall, Robert walked by with Janet and Lisa.

“How was your weekend, Janet?” Jeremy asked.

“Someone toilet papered Robert’s house.”

“Bummer,” I said, looking down at my grilled cheese sandwich.

Robert stood there as we talked about him. His shoulders were slouched, his head down, his gaze directed at his shoes. He said nothing, and instead let Janet speak for him. His hair was long in the front and swept in front of his eyes. His upper lip twitched. He kicked a pebble, the grit of stone against the soft sole of his espadrille made a scraping sound on the cement.

Lisa and Janet brainstormed possible suspects, and we all feigned ignorance. I heard little of the conversation, distracted. Robert looked up, and his eyes were drawn to me. We made eye contact and there was a knowing between us, some sense we had a shared experience. Not the kind of knowing as he knew I was involved in what happened, but the instinctual inner sense that we were aware of each other’s suffering, that we were connected in some way.

I drove home from school that afternoon; I put my bag in my room, and then left again on foot. I walked down Cherokee Drive and stood for a moment across the street from Robert’s house. A sheet or two of toilet paper lingered under a shrub. A soft breeze swelled and one sheet floated from a flowerbed onto the sidewalk.

As I stood there, his front door opened. Robert reached outside the door to get the mail. He stared across the street at me. I wasn't sure whether to acknowledge him or keep walking. Our eyes met so I waved and he waved back. He returned a smile, and closed the door. The sheet of toilet paper that had jumped onto the sidewalk teetered in the wind, and dove off into the gutter.

I took a deep breath and continued walking along Cherokee Drive to Big Park.

LAYERS

Lisa and I felt it was appropriate that we should accompany each other to the Senior Prom. She did not have a boyfriend, and I, also having no one significant, agreed we would go as long-time friends. We would celebrate the evening and enjoy ourselves as two people who had known each other since fifth grade. I waited as long as I could before I asked her, wondering if she would get an invitation from someone else.

“I’ve been thinking about Prom,” I said one day as we sat in the school courtyard, in our group’s usual spot.

“What about it?”

“Well, I was wondering if you had a date yet. I mean, not a date as in romantic date, but even like, you know, someone to go with?” Why did this feel awkward? I wasn’t asking her out on a real date.

“I don’t have a date. It would make sense we go together. I mean, if that’s what you were going to ask.”

“Yes, you read my mind,” I said.

“As usual.”

My preparations for the evening began early in the afternoon. I paid deliberate, almost obsessive attention to every last detail of my appearance. Even selecting the right music to play in the background was important. Wham!, Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet. *Gold – always believe in your soul – you’ve got the power to know, you’re indestructible, always believing ‘cause you are gold!*

My rented tuxedo (without ruffles, thank God!) was pressed and laid out on the bed.

The second floor of our suburban townhouse was my domain. With the radio turned up in the bathroom, I dried my hair, which was then styled longer in the front, trimmed short in the back. I carefully shaved my smooth, youthful face, trimming my (unfortunate) moustache. At that time, we young men had them if we could grow one as a symbol of burgeoning maturity. It was a keen grooming oversight in retrospect.

An array of hair products surrounded me on the bathroom counter – gel, spray, pomade, brushes and combs – and a hair dryer that could generate quite a breeze with the press of a button. I danced and sang in front of the mirror, brush in one hand, dryer in the other, interpretive movement intertwined with a spritz here, a zhoosh there. I felt fully present in that moment.

An hour to get ready was a good day. But this was a big day, and after all this time of knowing her, I thought about kissing Lisa that night. There was a comfort I had with her, and it felt like what I should be doing, what I should want to do. I didn't think about going farther than a kiss, but felt like at this point in our lives I would take that next step. A kiss was progress and that's all I was hoping for.

There wasn't any real sexual attraction, but I felt open with Lisa. My optimism balanced her cynicism. She didn't have serious boyfriends, which allowed us to spend more time together. Perhaps it was all a fantasy of having my high school friend become my girlfriend, and then later, my wife, just as my parents had been for each other. Words like *girlfriend* and *wife* didn't create any kind of stir in my heart. I only had two or three girlfriends myself, and all relationships were short-lived. While all were nice girls, there was an absence of the electricity that I felt when I was around Jeremy. I sensed that gap, that difference but I tried really hard to

make myself believe it was what was right for me, for us. I couldn't disregard those deeper feelings, those experiences I had shared with other boys in my life.

Those moments were few in number but, at some level, they gave me a deeper understanding of the feelings I did not want to feel. In some ways, I felt worse because I sensed they did not feel the same way about those experiences that I did. To them, these moments were experiments, but not indicative of transformational choices to accept what was already deep within their souls.

My parents circled the living room like proud birds waiting for their young to leave the nest in a stretch limousine.

"Are you almost ready?" my mother shouted from downstairs, her earlier entreaties being drowned out by the lilting tones of British pop singers.

"I need help with my tie," I yelled back.

Both Mom and Dad came upstairs and while Mom adjusted my tie, my father, with military precision, took one last swipe of the lint brush to my jacket. I now had a squadron of dressers, personal valets fluttering about and all that was required of me was to simply stand still. I thought about my first ride in a limousine, our dinner plans, kissing Lisa for the first time.

Mom's assessment of the finished look – "Perfection!" – brought me out of my daydream. Dad draped the jacket onto my then slender form and the look was complete. I brushed past them to go into the bathroom so I, too, could check my reflection. Hair styled. Face smooth. Nails clipped. Tie straight; me, perhaps not, but that would be determined later. For now, I was pleased to live in this look, a fantasy of luxury, if only just for one night.

I returned to my now empty bedroom, my parents having gone downstairs. I waited anxiously for the limousine's arrival. Glancing out my window, I looked down to the street. Spandau Ballet continued my soundtrack. *Only when you leave, I need to love you, and when the action has all gone, I'm just another fool enough to need you, fool enough to love.* I had not felt love in that sense, nor did I even think it important. But I sang these lyrics with the fervor of one whose affections were unrequited. *So give a little passion to a stranger and take this soul away.* Give a little passion. The night I shared with Jeremy was the closest thing I had felt to passion, what I knew of it at that time in my life. I tried not to think about it.

The long, black car pulled up in front of our house and I ran downstairs to get the evening started. By the time we got outside crowds of neighbors came out of their homes to wish me well. I walked out the front door to see the chauffeur, a man in his 30s with blonde hair and firm stature, standing near the passenger door to the beautiful, shiny black limousine.

"I'm Jeff. I'll be your driver this evening."

We shook hands. He had beautiful blue eyes. "Give me just a moment to take a few photos and then we'll be on our way."

My parents began snapping pictures, and then a few neighbors joined in with their own cameras. Being the first to be picked up, I had all this attention to myself. I stood there by the car, smiling, posing, "Look this way!" one would say. "Now over here, Brian!" Cement and suburbia were my red carpet.

With a check of the watch, I realized it was time to go. We still had two stops before making the half-hour trip to Cannery Row for dinner. Jeff opened the door and I gracefully

climbed in (I had seen this happen plenty of times on “Entertainment Tonight,” “Style with Elsa Klensch,” and “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”). One last wave to my parents and I was off.

I got comfortable and looked around the car, its plush leather interior, the minibar that was clearly not stocked for such an occasion as a high school prom. Between where the passengers and chauffeur sat, there was a tinted window that could be raised or lowered, either for the driver to speak to the passengers, or for the passengers to make a request of the driver, or simply to maintain privacy between the two. The window was down for the moment as Jeff and I reviewed the evening’s agenda.

“We’ll pick up Lisa first, then Kevin and Susan, and then off to Neal DeVaughn’s on Cannery Row. After dinner, we’ll proceed to the Sheraton.” I tried to sound official, using words like *proceed* as I had heard in behind-the-scenes documentaries about the British Royal Family, as equerries reviewed plans with event organizers.

“Do you have a tape player?” I asked. Music was very important to me and I was careful to have the right music for every occasion.

“Yes, I do. Do you have music for the evening?” Jeff asked.

“I’ll give you a cassette when we get to Lisa’s.” The tape was in my jacket pocket and I wasn’t about to try to navigate the extended passenger cabin in my formalwear to reach the driver as the car was taking the curves and turns of the Salinas suburbs.

We pulled up in front of Lisa’s house. I patted my forehead with a handkerchief I pulled from my jacket pocket; though I didn’t perspire, there was something about this role I was doing my best to play that heightened my anxiety. I wanted to do the right thing.

I grabbed the plastic container holding a wrist corsage fashioned with two large gardenia blooms and small green leaves, its fragrance filling the car and conjuring visions of the islands. Lisa, along with Jeremy, Kevin, CJ and June would all be going on our Senior Trip to Hawaii after graduation. Perhaps tonight would be the beginning of something more between Lisa and me. Maybe the moonlight over Monterey Bay, or just this milestone moment would mesmerize us. Perhaps I was fooling myself as I focused my thoughts on these heterosexual ideals that were clouded by my true feelings. I played these mind games to convince myself I was not who I was becoming.

I got out of the car, pulled the cassette of party music out of my pocket and handed it to Jeff. I picked up the corsage off the back seat, straightened my jacket, and walked up to Lisa's front door.

Lisa was shorter than me, and petite in frame. Her brown hair came to her shoulders and she had her bangs curled and sprayed up high. She veered from convention, as I would have expected, by not wearing a full-length gown. Instead she wore a black cocktail length dress, with nothing covering her shoulders. Her heeled shoes brought her up to my shoulders. I took a sigh of relief when I walked into her family's home as she stood there looking more radiant than I had ever seen her before. *We've come a long way since fifth grade*, I thought.

"You look amazing!" I exclaimed.

"Thanks," she said. "You know I'd rather be in jeans and a t-shirt."

We stood and stared at each other for a bit like two children emerging from a dressing-up box, familiar faces in unfamiliar costumes.

She looked down at the corsage in my hand. "Is that for me?" she asked.

“Oh, yes, of course!” Lisa’s mom held the plastic container as I carefully opened the lid and removed the corsage, releasing an intoxicating perfume into her family’s modest living room; I don’t recall any other color but brown, and perhaps, rust.

“That smells incredible,” she said, as one always fascinated with both flora and fauna.

I knew her dress did not have shoulders, so the wrist corsage was the right option for her. I took the satin ribbon bracelet attached to the floral display and carefully put her hand through it. The elastic inside the ribbon contracted slowly and held the corsage firmly in place on her wrist. It was subtle and unassuming, much like Lisa herself, and was a lovely complement to her outfit.

After another photo session with Lisa’s mom and dad, we were on our way to pick up Kevin and Susan at Susan’s house.

When we arrived, Lisa and I both got out of the limousine, always conscious to say, “Thank you” to Jeff as he opened the passenger door.

Kevin was outside, watching for us to arrive, while Susan finished her last-minute preparations. “Look at you two!” he exclaimed as we got out of the car. “Let me go in and get Susan.”

Lisa and I stood chatting briefly, the sun beginning to set, a slight chill in the air. When the front door reopened. Susan walked towards us with the grace of a princess, and a dress equal to such a royal rank. I had never seen so much chiffon and tulle in varying shades of lavender as I did that night. Though the bodice formed nicely to Susan’s shape, the gown from the waist down appeared to expand as she approached.

“Wow, that’s a lot of dress,” Lisa whispered under her breath.

“You can say that again!” I agreed.

We got to the door of the limousine, Jeff standing there patiently, as we determined the right strategy to pile in.

“Lisa, Kevin and I should get in first,” I suggested. “We don’t want to wrinkle your gown, Susan.” We all chuckled, for a wrinkle or two would have gone unnoticed in the many yards of fabric surrounding her.

“Okay, we’re in, Susan. Time for you!” Kevin exclaimed.

And then the process began. Susan carefully eased back to sit on the seat nearest the door. After she was sure she was on firm foundation, she pulled her legs in and, with Jeff’s assistance, the remainder of her dress. A mountain of lavender piled high in the center of the car and all of us were buried in a cloud-like layer of fabric.

“Thanks for keeping us warm, Susan,” Lisa laughed. “It was starting to get chilly.”

“Oh, very funny, Lisa.” Susan wasn’t amused. This was why I asked Lisa to the prom. She was understated. She was never one for being the center of attention. She didn’t take herself seriously.

We settled in for the short ride to the coast. The mix-tape played in the background. I glanced over to see Lisa’s small hands. Was she wearing a ring? The scent of the fragrant gardenia hung in the air; the layers of Susan’s dress making it almost too warm in the passenger cabin. We sipped sparkling apple cider, and we all took a collective deep breath and savored this moment for which we had spent months planning.

The car’s interior temperature was elevating, and Susan’s complaints reached a fevered pitch. I cracked the window, which then released an gale of wind inside the car. Almost

immediately, layers of chiffon began flapping and waving, Kevin and Susan's faces a blurred mirage through the fabric. We all attempted to grab hold of Susan's dress and subdue it. I rolled up the window quickly and we all grew quiet, preoccupied, a teenage tableau.

I watched the dunes of Seaside and Marina whisk by, thought about who Jeremy was bringing to the Prom, and wondered if he was thinking about being with me, just like I was wishing I was with him in that limousine, our own Prom date. That was unheard of in 1988 – two young men attending prom together as a couple – but I had that thought, then tried to push it away, tried to focus and be in that moment, tried to tune back in to the conversation, tried to not appear distant.

We finally arrived at Neal DeVaughn's feeling fancy as Jeff dutifully opened the car door, and I, being the first out, offered my hand to help Lisa. Not that she moved awkwardly any other time, but there was something about the grace with which she exited the car that made me think we were both growing up. "Thank you," she said and smiled, looking up at me as she gained her footing. I straightened my posture and lifted my chin. She had become a woman, and I, a man. Even if I was nervous, and terribly unsure, I at least wanted to show others nothing but signs of confidence.

We ate well (steak, I think, or perhaps seafood, being right on the coast; a decadent chocolate dessert), and laughed much in that beautiful restaurant with fixtures of brass and glass, with an expansive view of Monterey Bay. Such a lovely moment, but my thoughts were not of the friends and food in front of me, but rather the anticipated pinnacle of the evening – The kiss I planned to share with Lisa. Did I have the courage to go through with it, and would she respond well to my advances? Was it an act of obligation, or was there genuine desire?

The *porte cochere* of the Sheraton was full of activity, a mélange of big hairstyles, and full ball gowns in greens, blues and reds. Many of the other boys appeared uncomfortable in their tuxedos, “Can’t stand this straight jacket,” one would say. “Can’t wait to get out of this thing!” another exclaimed. I was quite comfortable, pondering that perhaps in a past life I wore clothing like this more often, and perhaps I was a man of position with a countess at my side. I would have had more interest in my valet or the first footman than I would the countess. At that moment, however, I felt fancy and being dressed up lifted my spirits.

We entered the ballroom that was draped in silver and blue fabrics, balloon arches, and crepe paper. After we got in, Susan and Kevin went off to meet with a few other friends, while Lisa and I joined our circle and their dates – Jeremy, Kevin, CJ – they were all my good friends, Jeremy the best of them.

He came up to me. Leaning over to speak in my ear over the music, “Can you believe this? It’s our Senior Prom. This is it, man.”

“It *is* hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“You and Lisa look great.”

“You clean up well yourself,” I said, trying not to make my crush on him too evident, even to myself. There was no disputing I wished I were his date instead of the girl he was with, faceless in my memory.

Familiar synthesizer sounds tempered the pace of the evening. A slow dance was beginning to form under the spell of Exposé’s song, “Seasons Change.” *Some dreams are in the nighttime, and some seem like yesterday. But leaves turn brown and fade, ships sail away. You long to say a thousand words but seasons change.*

Lisa appeared reluctant as we approached the dance floor. We found our spot, and as I went to put my arms around her waist, she took my left hand, and held it out, making us look more like we were prepared to waltz than to slow dance at a high school prom. We were more Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers from a classic Hollywood musical than we were the couples of the day: Brigitte Nielsen and Mark Gastineau, Don Johnson and Barbra Streisand, Burt Reynolds and Loni Anderson.

No, our dance felt incredibly formal. *Seasons change. People change.* I didn't think I had come on strong, though I may have attempted to flirt with her, trying to enjoy the evening, taking in a moment when I felt like I belonged, even if that sense of belonging was built upon false pretenses. *I'll sacrifice tomorrow just to have you here today.*

The song ended, the DJ faded into "Open Your Heart" by Madonna. Lisa and I stepped back from each other, our friends joined in closer to create a circle. We danced, and laughed, and I tried hard to forget about what had just happened, the slow dance that wasn't. Why was she so distant from me? What did she see that I didn't? *Open your heart to me, baby, I hold the lock and you hold the key. Open your heart to me, darlin', I'll give you love if you, you turn the key.*

It wasn't much later when Lisa walked up to me and whispered in my ear.

"I'm getting a little tired. You think we could head out soon?" Lisa asked.

"Sure," I said, noting it was only shortly after 11 and I had the car until 2 a.m.

We checked in with Kevin and Susan to see if they wanted to leave as well and they decided to get a ride home with someone else. My last lingering memory of that evening was when we pulled up in front of Lisa's house.

Driving up the hill to her street, my heart began to beat faster, my palms moistened. This would be my opportunity to kiss her. Despite her distance at the dance, despite my own awkwardness and trepidations, I would not let this moment pass without at least that. As horrible as it sounds, I did not want to let myself down, and only reinforce the truth lurking just under the surface, waiting for me to accept it.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Did you have fun?” I said, seeking affirmation. “I really tried to make this evening special.”

“And you did!”

“Sorry I wore you out – it’s still so early.”

She took a deep breath. “It’s just been a long day with a lot of activity.”

A long day with a lot of activity? Are we eighty?

We approached her front door, and stood there facing each other, much like a moment in many a young person’s life, when two long-time friends stand on the side of a mountain, preparing to jump.

I stepped closer to her and when she came toward me for a friendly embrace, I moved my face to hers, closed my eyes, and the image of Jeremy in his tuxedo came to mind, his smile, his blue eyes in the DJ’s strobe lights from earlier that evening. I moved closer to Lisa, thought I smelled Jeremy’s cologne – was it Paco Rabanne? I took a deep breath. As my lips neared hers, another thought of Jeremy – how his kiss tasted that night he slept over – and when I returned to the present moment, I realized Lisa had turned away, without subtlety or discretion, presenting to me only the side of her cheek to gently peck.

“Good night, Brian.”

A glimmer of golden light crept onto the porch as she opened her front door, the night-gowned silhouette of her mother visible behind her. The door shut.

I stood there for a moment. I didn't want to walk shamefully back to the car and face the humiliation I just endured in front of the sexy blonde chauffeur. I didn't want to accept the night was over. I didn't want to accept that I stood there on that milestone evening I was rejected without even a kiss to claim.

I took a deep breath and wiped tears off my cheeks. This was not how it was supposed to be. I walked back to the limousine, Jeff standing there prepared to open the passenger door. I straightened my posture, and held my head up, looking him in the eye. He flashed a sympathetic smile.

Once in the car, I rolled down the window that separated driver from passenger.

“What time is it, Jeff?”

“Just after midnight.”

“I don't want to go home right away – will you drive me around?”

“Of course.”

“Do you want me to play your mixed tape?”

“Radio is fine.” I stared out the window. Her house faded behind us, merging with other suburban homes, all flipping past like drawings in an animated cartoon book. It was kind of a joke. Who was I trying to fool? Had she done me a favor? Had I made her feel like an experiment?

I came back to where I was, to that moment, lights and downtown businesses passing by, and the radio. That damn radio. *Where do broken hearts go? Can they find their way home?* Whitney Houston at the most inopportune moment.

“Why do they do that?” I asked Jeff.

“What’s that?”

“Make you think they like you, and then won’t even kiss you.”

“Is that what happened up there on the porch?”

“Yes. Total rejection. I mean, I wasn’t expecting anything beyond a kiss, but for as long as we’ve been friends, and for the evening we shared, she could have given me at least that.”

“It’s tough when you like someone who doesn’t like you in that same way.”

“Have you ever had that happen to you?”

“Of course. It happens to all of us. But sometimes things play out for a reason – we just don’t know what that reason is at the time.”

There was a comfort I felt as we talked. Fragments of the Hawaiian fantasy I imagined for Lisa and me began to break away. The evening changed how I thought about our upcoming senior trip to the islands. I didn’t even want to go.

“Sometimes things don’t work out the way we planned,” Jeff said.

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“Something even better is waiting for you out there, Brian. Be patient.” He was an optimist, and I was trying to be one, too.

I took off my tuxedo jacket and lay it on the seat next to me. Leaning back, I looked up at the streetlights that sparkled as we passed them. Watching the nighttime lights out the window hypnotized me. The feeling of disconnecting my mind from the moment comforted me.

“Jeff, would you turn the radio off?” Then, silence.

“It’s almost time to finish the night,” he reminded me.

“Please take me home.”

#

Ric, my boyfriend who owned his own kitchen & bath design firm, took me to a meeting of the Monterey gay professionals networking group. It was held at someone’s house on a hill in Pacific Grove that looked out over alternating layers of rooftops and cypress trees that led the eye to the ocean’s edge. I had just graduated high school one year earlier so most of the people in the room were older than me.

This was one of the first gatherings of gay people I had experienced. I wasn’t old enough to go to bars, so I had to rely on responses to personal ads placed in gay newspapers. My eyes were wide open, and I noticed the variety of handsome men working the room. While Ric was off chatting with someone he knew, leaving me alone with my soda by the fireplace, I noticed a familiar face.

“Have we met?” a man in his 30s with blonde hair and firm stature asked as he approached me.

“Your name is Jeff, and you drove my limousine to the North Salinas High prom last year.”

“Yes, that’s right! If I recall, that night didn’t end quite as you expected.”

After a chuckle of acknowledgment, I replied, “No, it didn’t. There was a lot more I needed to figure out.”

“We manage to get to where we need to be, eventually,” Jeff smiled.

“Thank you for that night.”

“For what?” he asked.

“The evening wasn’t what I had thought it would be, but having someone listen to me helped me walk in my own front door, smile, and tell my parents it was a good night.”

By that time Ric had joined us and I introduced him to Jeff. We laughed at how people intersect in life, but I was still too young to appreciate how true that is.

“You about ready to go?” Ric whispered in my ear, seizing the opportunity to kiss my neck.

“Yes!” I put my soda down on the kitchen counter.

Ric put out his strong, hairy arm as if he was going to escort someone of society for a walk in the park. I proudly locked my arm in his, looked up at him and smiled.

In the car driving back to Ric’s house in Marina, a neighboring town to Pacific Grove, we passed familiar places that made me think of prom night all over again, the person I was then, and how hard I tried to be someone I wasn’t.

I took a deep breath of ocean air through the open window, I smiled, and put my hand on Ric’s thigh.

“You okay, cutie?” he asked.

“Couldn’t be better.”

CHANGING SUBJECTS

I was afraid of motorcycles. My father, a California Highway Patrolman, told my mother and me stories of road chili – gruesome accidents involving people riding motorcycles. But one Saturday afternoon in Salinas, shrouded by coastal mist and a slight chill, Jeremy offered me a ride on his mo-ped. We didn't go along the main road, but instead went into the lettuce fields across the street from his house.

We rode along a dirt path, the wind in our faces. I felt the freedom of thrilling speed. Riding a moped with Jeremy allowed me to assume a certain pose, an acceptable position behind him, my chest against his back, arms wrapped around his torso, safe. Yes, I was safe. I had for so long wanted my arms around him, to feel his body next to mine.

He never resisted, he never told me to back away, and he drove us for some time on that small, light blue contraption, until we were surrounded by fields of dirt and bits of lettuce left behind after harvest. We did not dismount when we stopped. We had our feet on the ground as my hands moved to Jeremy's waist.

"Isn't it beautiful out here?" he asked.

I looked around, my chin resting on his shoulder. Manicured rows of blooming lettuce on rolling hills, the morning fog beginning to burn off, sunshine breaking through. The landscape was serene, and I found pleasure in being so close to him. I imagined saying things like, "What makes this so nice is being with you," like, "I love the way I feel when I'm around you."

Instead, I remained silent, and took deep breaths of the fresh coastal air, of his cologne, of the rich soil.

"Ready to head back?" he asked.

I put my arms around him and lifted my feet off the ground and onto the moped. Wind tousled Jeremy's blonde hair, while mine was sprayed so stiff a tornado could not have disturbed it. He sped up and I held him tighter. He never pulled away or gave me any sign I was holding him too close.

That moment, the closeness, meant different things to each of us, but riding that moped with my arms wrapped around his muscular core, being so close to him, alone in that field, free and safe in the wind, made that one of the best Saturday afternoons ever.

#

I was on my bed, and Jeremy was on the floor. I leaned over the side of the bed and looked down at him.

"Look up at the ceiling. I have a question but it's easier to ask if you aren't looking at me." I rolled onto my back and stared up at the popcorn shadows above.

"Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to be with a guy?" he asked.

I spent so much time over the past few years thinking about this, about my deeply rooted, unexpressed attraction to other men. To him. "Have you?" I asked.

"I have wondered." I did not sense an accusation.

"Would you want to..."

Blood pumping through my ears muffled his inquiry. I was unsure I heard what he was saying. I had wanted him for so long.

"...try it with me?"

I didn't want to appear eager, but I leaned over the side of the bed, looked at him, smiled, and nodded my head up and down.

He stood up and turned off the bedside lamp. Into the beams of light from the street through the window, I sat up, and he sat next to me at the foot of my bed. I let him take the lead.

He took his shirt off, shadows of his defined torso guiding my hand. I closed my eyes and felt his breath close to my neck, then a kiss, and our lips joined, his tongue met mine. He tugged at my shirt, encouraging me to take it off. It was dark, so I didn't mind. I led his hands to the most flattering parts of my body, the ones that did not remind me of my flaws.

We continued kissing as his hands reached for the button on my shorts. I followed by reaching for his. I released the strength pent up in his white briefs, and he, mine. He gently guided me to lie down on the bed, then moved closer to taste me. I had imagined this experience many times before, but I could not have anticipated the intensity of the actual moment when my best friend and I would be together in this way.

After he tasted me, I followed suit, enjoying his sweat, his salt, inhaling deeply through my nose. His rhythmic breathing guided me until he put his hand under my chin, lifting my face toward his.

“Lay next to me,” he whispered.

Our naked bodies adjacent, my head resting on his shoulder as one arm wrapped around me. We began together, kissing, breathing, sweating, stroking. Jeremy's knees trembled. We moved closer together, licked each other's faces, breathed heavily in tandem, and came together.

#

I got off the plane in Honolulu, humidity blanketing my skin. There were beautiful tropical flowers in vivid pinks and yellows everywhere. At the airport, a hostess greeted my friends and me with fragrant floral leis, symbols of love and hospitality. We were the Class of 1988 and this was our Senior Trip.

“Let’s get to the hotel so we can dump these bags and get to the beach!” Jeremy said. I dreaded the idea of taking off my shirt in public, scars of a childhood surgery to remove a benign growth under my left nipple a constant reminder of my physical imperfection. However, I was excited at the prospect of seeing Jeremy without his shirt, whether on the beach or in our shared hotel room.

Our group walked along Waikiki Beach that evening, then went to the Hard Rock Café for dinner.

“We should rent mopeds and ride up the coast. I hear there’s some great surfing!” Jeremy was more comfortable navigating on one than I would have been, especially on congested, unfamiliar highways. I wanted to ride on one with him again, though, to feel that close to him.

“What about snorkeling?” Lisa’s idea. Before we left California, she told me how much she was looking forward to exploring coral reefs.

Loud music played in the background, as the indoor restaurant merged with an outdoor patio through walls made of windows wide open. Palm leaves made soft rattles against themselves in the humid, balmy breeze.

“We’ve got the Polynesian Cultural Center on Thursday, but I bet the best part will be dinner. Roast pig!” June, of Korean descent, expressed his excitement by raising his voice above his usual monotone.

“And what about I’olani Palace?” I interjected.

Blank stares.

“A palace? Like a museum? Why would we want to spend time indoors?” Kevin said.

CJ rolled his eyes. “Sounds fascinating.”

“Another round of drinks?” the server asked. We nodded, regretful we had to settle for virgin cocktails.

“And there’s Ala Moana Center!” I was excited about visiting this famous shopping center not only for its expansive size, but also for the opportunity to find interesting local treasures, t-shirts, and collectibles. My parents gave me a thousand dollars for this trip, and I was going to spend it.

“We can go to a mall anytime,” CJ said.

Voices merged with the sound of ice being shaken at the bar, shrieks from a nearby group of collegiate drunk girls, a plate hitting the floor, applause. I began to plan my own schedule, anxious about the prospect of driving my own moped on congested highways, of being shirtless on a public beach. Perhaps I could sit under the shade of an umbrella in t-shirt and shorts, appear to read a book, but secretly watch Jeremy run along the beach in a bathing suit, splash in the waves, as his blonde highlights brightened under the Hawaiian sun.

I wished Jeremy were on my side in these planning discussions, that he wanted to do more of what I wanted to do. I wished the trip were just for the two of us.

I did have some activities I wanted to do and hoped, despite their apparent boredom, I could get my friends to join me. I was excited and wanted them to be excited, too. In addition to Io'ani Palace and Ala Moana, I would spend one afternoon up in Kaneohe with some of my parents' friends.

With full stomachs we took a different route back to our hotel. My friends walked in pairs except for me, straggling behind the group. Whispers were exchanged, giggles, CJ and Jeremy checked their watches as if to synchronize. It was late and we had an early start the next day. I was unsure where the group had landed in terms of plans, but it had been a long day and I knew I would get briefed in the morning.

After a good night's rest, I lay curled up in bed, facing the window; the warm sun cascaded through the drapes too thin to shield light. I was in Hawaii. It was our first full day on the island and though I was anxious about going to the beach, I was still looking forward to spending time with my friends. I rolled over to check the time and noticed that Jeremy's bed was empty, bedcovers rustled in a clump, leaving a space where he had slept.

"Jeremy?" I called.

No answer.

I got up and checked the bathroom, but he wasn't there either.

I picked up the phone and called CJ and Kevin's room.

No answer.

I looked around to see if there was a note about a meeting place, a plan. Perhaps they ran to get breakfast? Nothing. No note. No indication of where they may have gone. I looked out the window, trying to spot them on the street from our room high above, only to see a mass of

bronze oiled twigs moving about in organized patterns along sidewalks, crossing streets. I had no way to contact them. They were out for the day and I was alone.

I turned from the window, glanced back again at Jeremy's bed. I thought about the previous night when I was already settled in, when I read a magazine, and watched him do repetitions of push-ups, watched him brush his teeth wearing nothing but a pair of work-out shorts. Why would he go off with the group on our first day, and not even tell me where they were going? My eyes moistened as I sat on the edge of the bed and figured out what to do.

After sitting for a few minutes, sulking at my circumstances, I knew I couldn't spend the whole day pouting about this. I was hurt, yes, and nervous because it was so early in the trip. I hoped it wasn't going to be this way the rest of our time on the island. I was afraid it was going to be a very long, solitary week.

I stood up, got ready, and headed out for a day on my own.

#

I first saw *Hustler* magazine in a neighbor's bedside table. While checking on things during a housesitting gig, I discovered not only a drawer of magazines, but also an assortment of Polaroid images of Bob, the cop, naked, hairy and masculine, thick moustache, very hot; of Linda, curvaceous and statuesque, holding Bob's nightstick that may have previously struck a suspect into submission, the tip of it gently wedged into her. I went back to the Polaroid of Bob, lingered on his image, and thought about how I wanted to be naked with him, to have his muscular arms wrapped around me.

My attention switched to the stack of magazines. First, *Playboy*. Only women. And articles. Boring.

Then I pulled out *Hustler*, which had photos of muscular men with full hard-ons posed with women. Though I found the women uninteresting physically, I realized that if I was caught looking at porn, I could play it off like I was looking at the women, even though I was enjoying the men.

One night, Jeremy, Kevin, CJ and I were bored. Jeremy turned 18 before any of us. We went to the liquor store on the corner of North Main Street and Alvin Drive, next to Safeway, to have him go in and buy a dirty magazine.

“Get *Playboy*,” Kevin directed. “That’s a classic!”

CJ was quiet, always a bit shy.

“What about you, Brian?” Jeremy asked. “What’s your vote?”

“How about *Hustler*?” Everyone looked at me.

“How do you know about *Hustler*?” Jeremy asked.

I regaled them with tales of my adventures in housesitting. They were intrigued by Linda’s use of Bob’s nightstick as a sexual device, while I tried to make *Hustler* sound like the most intriguing work of literature ever.

“The models are in really hot poses.” I knew my audience. I made eye contact with Jeremy as I described the magazine and its typical images.

“Alright, *Hustler* it is!” Jeremy went to open the car door. I grabbed his arm to stop him, slipping him a ten-dollar bill.

“I’ll pay for it,” I said, “but then I get to keep it after we look through it tonight. Deal?”

Collective agreement was gained.

Jeremy was in the store for ten minutes and we wondered what he was doing, what was taking him so long. Trying to stare at a distance through the front window of the store, the neon sign that read, “Open” burned into my eyes allowing me to look elsewhere, blink, and see the word flash again and again.

“He better get *Hustler* with my ten-dollar bill,” I said.

He returned to the car with a bag, and had not one but two magazines, a standard and a special edition *Hustler*. We moved the car under a streetlight in the lot. In pairs, we shared each magazine, scouring the pages. CJ and Kevin sat in the back, while I sat in front next to Jeremy. While the backseat boys made silly comments, Jeremy turned each page as we leaned toward each other, meeting at the console between the driver’s and front passenger’s seats. The car windows frosted with steam from our warm breath. Jeremy’s shoulder touched mine and though my initial instinct was to move away, I held my position, testing him to see if he was comfortable with closeness. He didn’t flinch.

My attention was drawn only to the men, to their strength, their muscles, the dark-haired ones even more interesting to me. Their confidence. The way they held their cocks in hand. My gaze shifted below the magazine’s pages, and noticed an emerging erection in Jeremy’s khaki shorts.

My own pulse rushed through my ears, muffling the commentary. The men in the magazine. Jeremy’s erection, visible only to me. I rolled my window down. I needed air.

#

Walking out of the hotel, I headed directly to I'olani Palace. My fascination with royalty and royal families began when, at age eleven, I stayed up all night to watch Prince Charles marry Lady Diana Spencer, to witness live the festivities celebrated around the world. I later had a greater understanding of the origin of this fascination when, in my senior year, a psychic did a reading by drawing from the energy contained in my class ring. She knew nothing about me, and I had carefully put my ring in a Ziploc bag to maintain its energetic charge. Her handwritten report came back acknowledging I had been a prince or nobleman in a past life and I wanted to believe her.

On this particular day, I heard the story of the Hawaiian royal family, an unfortunate colonization tale when, in 1895, Queen Lili'uokalani was framed, tried for treason, and imprisoned in her palace until she eventually abdicated, thus dissolving the Kingdom of Hawai'i. I related to the Queen's circumstances, to her community turning against her. I was impressed by its Victorian style and grand rooms, and disturbed by the truth of its circumstances.

Leaving there, I walked along King Street toward Kalakaua Avenue. I stopped along the way for a hearty Chinese lunch of Lo Mein and Kung Pao Chicken, wondering what my friends were doing at that same moment. The fusion of Asian and Polynesian cultures was exciting and interesting to me, the scent of grilled meat and exotic spices filled the streets, ladies' dresses and accessories in vivid jewel-toned silks with golden embroidery, dragons, characters in Chinese, Japanese, or perhaps Korean. I was not informed enough to know the difference, but from the signs translated in English, I knew all three cultures were represented.

With map in hand, I found my way to Ala Moana Center. I was eighteen with a pocket full of cash, and I was ready to shop. I found plush soft cotton T-shirts with Hawaiian-inspired designs on them; a multitude of surf and skateboard stickers with funky designs and catchy slogans; a couple of books on Pidgin, a creole dialect of English and Hawaiian. I followed my own bliss, immersing myself in the cultural aspects of the place – and dreaded my walk back to the hotel to face my friends who had deserted me.

“What happened to you guys this morning?” I asked. Everyone was gathered in the room I shared with Jeremy when I returned to the hotel. The sun began to set over Diamond Head.

“We took mopeds up the coast,” Kevin said. “It didn’t sound like you were interested when we talked about it yesterday.” I couldn’t disagree with him there.

There was a silence that lingered in the air as they exchanged glances.

The others went to their rooms to shower and dress for dinner, leaving Jeremy and me alone together.

“I just wish you would’ve told me you were leaving this morning, or at least left a note.”

Jeremy looked down at the well-worn carpet.

“We should probably get ready for dinner,” he said, laying out a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt to wear. “I’m sorry about this morning.”

I wanted to see the regret in his face. I thought we were better friends than that.

A few minutes later he emerged from the bathroom with just a white terry cloth towel suspended around his waist, slender, smooth, toned. I wanted to be mad at him, but his almost naked presence was such a distraction.

I wondered if he knew what he was really doing to me.

#

The deserted mornings, barren of friends planning the day's activities, continued. With just a day or two remaining in our weeklong stay, we all piled onto a bus headed to Laie, the home of the Polynesian Cultural Center. We boarded the bus that waited for us in front of our hotel. The others got on first; I trailed behind.

I spent the hour-long ride to Laie, located on the northern end of Oahu, listening as my friends revisited previous days' adventures. Moped rides to a small bay famous for its surfing waves. Snorkeling among the colorful coral reefs. Hanging out at the beach, buttered bodies in coconut oil. What a waste of time with so much to see. And not once did they ask about what I had been doing, how I spent those earlier days alone.

I visited Io'lani Palace, and Pearl Harbor, and I ate authentic Korean food, and drove up to Kaneohe with my mother's Maid of Honor and her family.

I saw how pineapples grow in thorny ground-bound bushes.

I visited Ala Moana Center not once, but three times, and purchased souvenirs for everyone I have ever known.

I sat in a café drinking Kona coffee from a French Press, wondering where the hell you all were. Where Jeremy was.

I walked along Waikiki beach, blinded by the pink explosion of the Royal Hawaiian hotel on Waikiki.

I spent one evening watching the sunset, a group of shirtless surfers reliving the afternoon's best waves, honeymooners making out, friends laughing together. I realized that evening nobody else was alone. Except for me.

Nobody was interested.

Instead, I stared out the window, admired the coastline, quiet and reflective, thinking about this trip, about getting home.

We arrived at the Polynesian Cultural Center and piled out of the motor coach to begin our day. The center, operated by students attending nearby Brigham Young University, came from the various islands of Polynesia like Samoa, Tonga, and Tahiti. The center had various cultural displays and exhibits, a strolling path through different villages set up just as they would be in the native lands of those who work there.

What I enjoyed most, more than the how-to-climb-a-tree-and-pick-a-coconut demonstrations, the entertainment, or the beautiful landscape, was the fact that most of the young men of college age working at the center were shirtless and smooth, their golden bronze skin. Every village had its cultural representatives, and in most cases, the men wore shorts or a piece of fabric wrapped around their waist.

“In our land, it's easy for us to get a snack,” one athletic young man said. “Let me show you how we do it.” He wrapped a piece of bark between his feet to create friction between his feet and the tree he was about to climb. He began maneuvering halfway up the tree, the developed muscles in his torso tightening, his calves grasping around the tree. I heard nothing after that, and only sat entranced by his defined physique scaling the arbor.

We moved on from village to village, more beautiful half-naked men on display. They danced and I watched every curve, every muscle. Some were slender and muscular. Some were stocky, with some meat on their bones. I examined each of them from afar, noting their strength, imagining their embraces. These handsome exotic men were my respite from a day on which I said little, on a day when my friends walked feet in front of me, far enough away to shroud their whispers, close enough to amplify their giggles.

“Do we really have to stay for the show?” Kevin asked.

“Where can I get a hamburger around here?” CJ inquired.

“This is boring,” Lisa said.

“This is the best day I’ve had all week,” I said, smiling.

The evening culminated with a buffet of flavorful dishes, and a spectacular show called, “This is Polynesia,” where the music and dance of the islands represented at the Center came together on a stage that included an erupting volcano. *This is Polynesia, home of the people proud.* The stage filled with over a hundred performers, each representing their home island, dressed in vibrant fabrics and tropical flora. *Come to Polynesia, we come from the Islands.* I leaned to one side to ensure an unobstructed view of the stage, of the strong and vital young men in particular, smooth, nearly naked in some cases. *This is Polynesia, our voices sing aloud.*

All I heard on the bus for an hour on the way back to Honolulu were voices. “That was boring.” “I hated that food. I want a hamburger.” “It was okay, but I would have rather gone to the beach.” I may have been the one to suggest this activity to the group in the first place and that only seemed to fuel their annoyance even more. Perhaps they resented the fact I had locked them in to an all-day activity. While they may have found it mundane, my adolescent senses came

alive that day in Laie, my appreciation of masculine beauty emerged in new and exciting ways. While the women at the Center were beautiful, too, I had tunnel vision, my attention was drawn only to the bronze strength of the Polynesian man in his many forms. And to Jeremy's face lit by the stage lights, as flaming torches flew high in the air.

Come to Polynesia, our home. Tomorrow, I would be home.

#

"Brian, it's for you!" my mom called to me upstairs. "It's Jeremy."

Jeremy? I thought everyone had cut the cord since our return from Hawaii. It had been just a week but it was clear to me as we got off the bus in front of North Salinas High School, as our parents waited there to pick us up. We would rarely, if ever, speak again; I would use this trip to mark the culmination of friendships that carried us through our high school years. "Best friends forever," our yearbooks read. "Keep in touch."

There was no erasing what had transpired in Hawaii, and as I moved closer toward accepting my attraction to men, I wondered if this moment was to be not a finish line, but a starting point.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hey. What are you up to?"

"Just reading. You?" I put my book down on the desk.

"Can we talk about Hawaii?"

"What's to talk about?"

“I feel bad for the way we treated you.” He had that soothing tone in his voice that made it easy for me to follow his lead.

“I just don’t know what I did to you all to make you turn on me like that.” I attempted to maintain my composure as my voice raised slightly.

“May I come over?”

“Now?” He really did want to talk about this. I wondered if there was a chance our friendship would continue, if it would become more, and if it really weren’t over as I had suspected.

“I would like that,” I said.

Jeremy arrived about a half hour later. My parents were occupied with entertaining our neighbors in the dining room downstairs. Jeremy and I could go upstairs to my room to talk, uninterrupted.

We sat next to each other on my bed. While I was sad about what happened, I was so glad to see him; out of the whole group, he was the one who came to apologize. It made sense. It felt right. He wore khaki shorts like those he wore the night he bought *Hustler* and our shoulders touched in the car. His t-shirt fit perfectly to outline his sculpted chest. He smelled like outside.

“I’m really sorry about what happened.”

“It’s done now.”

“I know, but we are better friends than that and I feel bad.”

“Then why did you leave me to wander the streets of Honolulu on my own?”

“I was going along with the group, which is not a good reason at all.”

He moved closer to me on the bed where we both sat. He reached over and turned out the bedside lamp and whispered in my ear.

“I really am sorry.”

He kissed my neck and with only my instincts to follow I put my arms around his torso, pulled him closer to me. His mouth moved to mine and we kissed. He tasted like Juicy Fruit gum.

We fumbled out of our shorts and t-shirts. I was grateful for the dark, a kind shroud of sorts hiding my doughy torso from his athletic gaze. Instead he lay on his back, and I on my side, sitting up on one arm, my hand on his chest, exploring his stomach down to his crotch.

He took control, moving me onto my back, kissing me again. He held me close as we both began to stroke ourselves.

Had this not happened once before, I would have been surprised. We had spent many nights between each other’s homes. When I’d stay over at his house, we’d bundle up in two sleeping bags on a living room sofa bed. I’d often wake before him, keeping my eyes closed, nestling my head onto his shoulder, making believe I was sleeping, dreaming.

But on that night after Hawaii, that night when I felt so vulnerable, he approached me in a state of contrition, seeking forgiveness, giving me what would be one last bit of shared pleasure with him.

“I’m really sorry about last week.” It was a sincere apology. I wanted to believe him. While in that moment I still did not understand why they abandoned me, why they criticized every idea I offered to the group, why they rolled their eyes at things I said, why they ignored me, I felt like I didn’t need that explanation. Not then.

We got dressed and put ourselves back together. I heard dining room chairs shuffling on linoleum flooring downstairs and knew my neighbors were preparing to leave. Jeremy leaned over to me as we stood there in my second-floor suburban bedroom in that townhouse on Cadiz Circle in Salinas, California, in the United States of America. No one could see our history from space. Covert satellites could not interpret enough data to generate an accurate image of our embrace.

We walked downstairs. Jeremy said goodbye to my parents as I opened the front door.

“See you around?” he said, then walked out the door and down the driveway to his car. I waved.

We would see each other in the fall when we started Hartnell Community College. We would swap smiles and nods of acknowledgement. I saw him once or twice in passing and it would be over twenty years before we would exchange messages on Facebook, before I would see he is married, that he has a family now, before I learned we took different paths. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to ask him about Hawaii again, not because I was still angry, but simply because I remained curious even with the passing of time.

I filed away that time in my life as one fueled by the emerging expression of my sexuality, by my friends' shifting perceptions of me as they realized I was not the person who was their friend through high school. I wasn't the person I had pretended to be. Had I really pretended, or had I done the best I could? Perhaps they saw the masquerade was drawing to a close, the mask beginning to slip, to reveal a half-smile, a wanting glance. Did this make them uncomfortable? Did they feel betrayed so they chose to repay me? Did they differ in interests to

such an extent they figured they would band together and do whatever they wanted, leaving me to explore Honolulu on my own?

Typing the lingering question to Jeremy via Facebook, I told myself this would be the last time I would ever ask. I waited patiently for him to type his reply.

He changed the subject.

METAMORPHOSIS

Saturday mornings at our house were often reserved for cleaning. My mother was diligent in managing a spotless household and I was responsible for maintaining my bedroom and the upstairs bathroom. I would wipe the sides of the tub down, the toilet. I'd wash the mirrors with glass cleaner and run a cloth over the sink and shelf. Afterwards, there was an inspection.

"Did you wipe the sink?" she asked.

"Yes, I wiped the sink, the tub, the toilet."

"Did you scrub the tub?"

"I wiped it down."

"So you didn't scrub it?"

"No, I guess I didn't."

"The windowsill looks dusty. Did you clean it?"

"No, I didn't."

"Give me the sponge." She took it from my hand and scrubbed the counter, the toilet, the tub, the spots I already cleaned.

"It's already been cleaned, Mommie Dearest." I knew the Joan Crawford reference would get a reaction.

"Stop saying that!"

"I don't know why I bother to clean," I said.

"If you did it right the first time..."

Doing things right the first time was a rule I tried to live by. After 7th grade, I didn't handwrite my homework – I typed it. I was the president of the Old Time Radio Club at Washington Junior High School. I was sophomore class vice president, junior class representative, and in my senior year, I became the first male Rally Commissioner at North Salinas High School. Later in the year, when pep rallies for football and basketball were complete, the Associated Student Body Vice President was impeached for not meeting academic requirements, so I took that role on as I finished the school year. I was also the co-chair of Seniors for Disneyland, a group that raised money for our trip to Grad Night at the historic theme park. And while horrible at it, I played a season of tennis because I also wanted to letter in a sport and I assumed tennis was the safest option.

Being ranked 24 out of 25 players did not put me on the coach's radar. He had his star players and he spent most of his time with them. One afternoon, on one of the school's farthest tennis courts, I practiced with a fellow team member who had a much stronger grasp on the strategy of a tennis game than I did.

First, he hit the ball to my side, having it land closer to the net. I raced for it and scooped it up with my racquet, hitting it back to my opponent. He then lobbed the ball to the back of my side of the court.

Do I turn and run back to try to catch the lob and hit it back over to the other side of the court? Do I just let it go and lose another miserable point?

I did neither of these. Instead of turning to run as I should have, I decided to sprint backwards. As I did so, I increased speed and moments later found myself coming back to consciousness lying flat on the tennis court.

The coach did not come over to assess my well-being. Instead, I got up and limped my way over to him. In addition to my head throbbing, I had also done something to my knee. My knee hurt worse than my head.

“Crimmins, what’s wrong with you?”

“Coach, I tried to hit a lob and ended up falling.”

“How do you do that in tennis, boy?”

“By running backwards.”

“You ok?” Coach Steinbach was very tall with brown curly hair. He looked down at me, trying to gauge the extent of my injuries.

“My head hurts and I’m walking funny.”

“You walked funny before you fell.” There were a few chuckles from nearby team members. “You should probably go and have that checked.”

I grabbed my racquet and called my mom to come pick me up and take me to the doctor. I did not have a concussion, but did have a headache for the remainder of the day. I had also stretched a ligament in my leg. I completed the season and got my letter but it was not my proudest moment.

Months after my tennis debacle, I walked in the door after school one day and I was met with the request, “Let’s play some catch.” My father and I had played the game before. I knew who would lose before we began. By the time I put away my schoolbooks, he was already in the backyard with two baseball mitts and a ball.

We lived in a row of townhouses, each one with its own rectangle of backyard, small patches of grass and cement surrounded on three sides by 10-foot stucco walls that could have

enclosed a prison yard. At one end of our yard was mom's flowerbed full of roses; opposite that, my father's shed full of gardening tools and supplies. The lawn was manicured and the patio was spotless.

Dad wound up for a throw.

The ball left his mitt, whooshed and whirled through our small yard, and smacked swiftly into my mitt. My palm burned. I showed no emotion, and threw the ball back to him.

"Give it some power!" he yelled. "Let me feel that pitch," he called as he tossed the ball back to me.

"Ouch!" I cried. I wanted to remain silent and accept that pitch, no matter how painful, but I couldn't. "Stop throwing so hard!"

The next pitch was the same. A tingle pulsed in my palm, extended through my forearm to my elbow.

"I asked you to stop throwing so hard."

"You have to learn to take it. You won't always get people to lighten their pitch just to make it fun for you to play."

"I'm serious. Keep throwing like that and I'm done playing catch with you."

He said nothing, only softened one throw before he resumed his forceful pitches.

"I'm done!" I threw the mitt on the ground, opened the sliding glass door and ran upstairs to my bedroom. I lay on my bed, headphones on, listening to the radio. George Michael looked down at me from a multitude of pin-ups on the wall. The lemon scent of Pledge hung in the air.

My hand continued to sting well into the middle of dinnertime. We sat around that oval table, as we did every evening. I focused on my food, meatloaf, a green salad.

“Looks like you should stick to tennis,” he said before taking a bite of meat loaf.

I looked down at my plate, picking at a tomato. Forks tapped against Corelle dinnerware. A ring of green daisies bordered each plate.

“And I’m not even good at that,” I said.

“Maybe playing sports just isn’t your thing?”

He was doing what he knew how to do and tried to teach me the lessons he learned as a young man. But all of the equation’s variables were different and they just didn’t add up.

#

Junior High physical education classes were awkward as our bodies began to change. Some of us remained chubby from childhood; others grew skinny and gangly. I held on to some of the weight from my early years and begged my mother to order my P.E. shirt a size too large to hide any outline of my stomach or my chest.

Outside of P.E. class, I wore collared shirts over t-shirts, lots of layers, un-tucked and flowing.

I spent evenings sitting at my bedroom desk, staring out the window watching the evening fog roll in while I listened to the radio, and imagined my future. Robin Leach spoke of “champagne wishes and caviar dreams” on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. I wanted to be one of them. I wanted a body like the men in the magazines. I wanted to have the money to afford the

clothes I craved, to travel to exotic destinations. I wanted to go to an Ivy League school on the East Coast, and I wanted to finance my education with a successful career in modeling. Staring out that window, I had a clear idea of how I wanted life to unfold.

As I got a little older, a lump grew on my chest. At first, I ignored it. Then it grew and, if my clothing was tight enough, its outline taunted me. The oversized clothing and my hunched posture hid the growth but raised my mother's suspicions. Soon after she noticed this change in my behavior, we visited Dr. Lawler's office to discuss surgery.

"We make an incision near the left nipple, remove the growth, and close him up with a few stitches," Dr. Lawler said. "He'll be as good as new." He made it out to be an innocuous growth, though it puffed up the nipple's flesh, creating the visible shape I tried to hide.

The doctor and my mother spoke as if I was not in the room. The lump would be benign, but what I heard the doctor say was: "We make an incision to create an enormous crater to consume an Ivy League education that was supposed to have been financed by a successful career in modeling. Then after we sew him up, he'll be physically imperfect for the rest of his life."

#

The dream of modeling came after I got my first subscription to *GQ* magazine at the age of 13.

The tailored suits, vivid colored fabrics, the Ivy League fantasies of the fashion spreads only helped fuel my daydreams, only confirmed my instinct I was not in a town where I belonged, that I was misappropriated at birth to a rural farming community on California's central coast, far from the avenues of Manhattan or the boulevards of Paris.

The summer preview of *GQ* was one of my favorite issues - bright colors, bold stripes, the muscled torsos of the male models. Page after page, bronze figures with chiseled features sported mirrored sunglasses and speedos; one reclined on a chaise lounge, another on a beach towel, a small spray of sand adhered to a strong thigh covered in just the right amount of dark hair. I also enjoyed the cologne advertisements with flaps I could peel back to smell each fragrance. I wondered if the models smelled like the pages of my magazine, and imagined they did.

My intrigue with summer menswear failed to wane as I moved on to high school, and only intensified after my father took me to see my first fashion show at Macy's. It wasn't uncommon for us to spend an afternoon shopping in Monterey and lunching in Carmel. However, I was excited about this particular Saturday.

The show was on a small runway, set in an open area near the Men's Department. I watched the clock as we took available seats. I was nervous and excited and, while some would consider this event provincial, this moment made me feel like I was living the glamorous life.

Right on time, music began to play through portable speakers. The first model came out, his shorts constructed with a vivid Madras plaid of pinks and blues, a solid short-sleeved shirt that was completely unbuttoned. I learned the language of fashion from *GQ*, and now its models jumped off the page to the stage in front of me.

The next model came out in board shorts, barefooted, blonde highlights and a smile reflecting light like a disco ball.

Another model emerged, and another, and I found it difficult to take note of the clothing as my attention became more focused on the models.

As the finale approached, *he* emerged – the bronze Italian with the hairy legs and the white speedo. He looked like the one I saw in a magazine spread, the Mediterranean vision in which I had pictured myself two years earlier, before I was scarred by the surgeon's scalpel. Part of me hungered to be on the pages and on the runways as he was; another part of me wanted to be next to him on the beach in Capri or St. Tropez, his arm around me, sharing deep kisses in the sunshine, sweat fusing with Calvin Klein's Obsession cologne, something heavy, spicy, masculine.

I tried not to look as if I were enjoying the half-naked men parading in front of me. My father checked his watch. I was enthralled by the show. I focused on the hard features of the models, the definition of their muscles, their confident swagger as they took their turns on the runway.

As soon as the last model walked away and the music faded, Dad directed us out of the store and back to the car. I wanted to linger. I wanted to get another glimpse of the models as they stood around after the show.

As I put on my seatbelt, I replayed the show in my mind, and tried to remember each model in detail, what they wore, their faces and bodies. I felt the sticky residue of Armor All on the armrests, as the pine tree air freshener hanging from the driver's side window crank released its fragrance, the car warming with the clearing of morning fog.

“Time for lunch?” Dad asked.

“We can watch the planes come in.” The Monterey Airport diner was a favorite spot.

We said little on the way to the airport, and once at lunch, we spoke not of models and muscles, but of aviation and patty melt sandwiches, of movies and television shows, of homework and chores and extended family.

#

I stared out the sliding glass door into the back yard. We lived in that town house for ten years, and the yard's high stucco walls kept me safe and contained. They were shields to the life I wanted to live outside of that neighborhood, that farming town. I prepared for Mom and Dad to return home from picking dinner up at McDonald's.

It was going to be a delicate conversation. Should I come right out and say it? Do I give them context, take the time to describe my struggle of personal acceptance, and create a big buildup to the truth? Do I tell them about Bobby?

They may have had their own suspicions, but I rarely spoke of conversations shared with classmates in those mornings at the bus stop, on the playground during recess, or at lunch in the cafeteria.

"You'll grow up to be a homo someday."

“Why don't you get yourself a boyfriend?”

“Get out of here, faggot!”

I was 19 and I had heard things like this for much of my young life. On those days when the taunts emerged, I couldn't wait to get home, put on my headphones, and listen to music. The

lyrics helped me conjure notions of a life far away from this place. George Michael's lilting voice in my ears, singing about foreign skies, made me think about leaving the country, moving to London, anywhere far away. Perhaps New York, or Miami, anywhere I could forge a life on my own terms, without worrying about what others thought of me.

When the boyhood teasing first occurred, and epithets were thrown, I didn't really understand what it meant to be gay. The harsh tones used to put me in my place were not friendly, and I didn't want to be the horrible thing that others told me I was, or was going to become. I tried to convince myself it wasn't true.

As I got a little older, I began to understand what it meant to be gay, but I wasn't sure it had to be a bad thing, or why it was spoken in hushed, sharp tones. I had few role models to show me how good it was to be gay, especially before I met Bobby. I knew where my attractions lay, and realized that it was not a choice I made to be that way, but more a choice to accept the reality of how I felt and of the person I was becoming.

I tried to imagine myself married to a woman, having children, being like everyone else. It sounded easy because it's what everyone expected. The idea of that life was attractive, but I could not ignore the nagging sexual urges toward men. I was attracted to men, and that attraction felt exciting and wonderful and I couldn't understand why others made it sound so ugly.

Sitting in that living room with its vaulted ceiling and tall brick fireplace, I thought I must find the words. I had no books or pamphlets to coach me, and had only the secret conversations I'd shared with Bobby from which to draw inspiration. I paced back and forth, practiced my lines, and thought about how my life had changed the past few months. Oh, how it had changed!

#

J.M. and I met in September, 1989. I was 19. My parents went on a weekend getaway and I stayed at home to attend classes at Hartnell Community College. A teenager home alone on a Friday night, I decided to go to the only place I could go to cruise, to meet someone for a connection, possibly for sex. I headed downtown to L'Amour Shoppe, the adult bookstore which had a large space full of magazines, videos and other sexual accessories, as well as an arcade of private video booths, where I could sit behind a locked door, put change into a video player, and have instant access to 20 or 30 channels of porn. While the majority of the video channels were of men and women, there were a couple of gay channels I liked to watch. Walking in, I was overpowered by the strong smell of Pine-Sol, every corner of the store was diligently sterilized.

I walked up and down the aisle, pretending to look at magazines such as "Honcho," "Hombre," and "Freshmen." Some of the issues were wrapped in plastic so I could only look at the covers, but had to consider which ones I would buy and hide under my mattress at home.

I looked around at the other store patrons to see if any of them were looking at me. Cruising, the act of flirting or connecting with the intent to find a partner for sex, was not something that was taught or modeled for me. I learned it in that adult bookstore. I watched others and how they responded to me. A man made eye contact with me, appeared to look at a magazine or video cover, then looked back up. Then he moved closer to me, and I smiled to indicate I was interested. The cruiser motioned to the door with a nod, a gesture, and then exited the store, and waited for me to follow him.

It was a dance, an exchange among rows of low cabinets of merchandise, covert glances, following one another from aisle to aisle, perhaps a subtle crotch rub to indicate arousal, concluding with the mutually agreeable exit. It was not taught to me, but instead, was a cultural tradition, behavior learned from observation, acquired through practice during clandestine trips before or after one of my college courses, an opportunity for diversion, for a thrill, for release.

On this particular night, the bookstore was busy and the video booths were full. As I waited for an opportunity to get into one of the booths, I walked around the store, and gravitated toward the gay section, the magazines that were more interesting to me. I stood at a place where I could watch the back entrance, which was the only entrance customers used. There was a front door through which you could enter directly off Alisal Street, but most often, people parked in the back and came through the backdoor. I kept an eye on that entrance and took note of customers as they entered.

One was too old.

Another staggered in, drunk.

Then a very handsome Latino man entered the store, tan skin and dark hair, stylish and put together. He wore jeans, a collared shirt, a leather jacket the color of a Burnt Sienna crayon. I was intrigued and as he did a scan of the shop, I made eye contact with him and flashed a closed-mouth smile. He smiled back. This was a good sign.

He walked toward me, and came close enough to read some of the titles I was reading, too. He was attractive up close, and smelled of leather and Dior's Fahrenheit cologne, as I recognized it from my own collection. He had smooth hands. He continued to look over at me.

We did our tribal exchange around the store, one taking a step away or going to another row, the other following.

We spent a while in this back-and-forth, making it obvious that we were interested in each other. I was shy and new to all of this, unsure how to take the first step, looking to him to do so. As I looked up at him one last time, he nodded toward the back exit, pointed toward the door, and then waved for me to join him in the parking lot. I stepped outside with him. We exchanged pleasantries and I asked him his name.

“J.M.” I thought the use of initials was for discretion.

“What are you up to tonight?” I was 19, and here was this older man showing an interest in me.

“Just out and about,” he said. “You’re very cute.”

“Thank you. You’re handsome, too.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Do you have some place for us to go?” he asked.

“My parents are out of town. I have the house to myself.” This man was a complete stranger. I knew nothing about him. He could be interested in nothing more than slitting my throat.

“Want to follow me?” I asked.

The streetlights sped by as I drove home, watching in the rear view mirror to ensure J.M. was still following me, that there were no second thoughts, that he didn’t change his mind and opt for a detour, or perhaps, return to L’Amour Shoppe for something better, someone older.

We got to Cadiz Circle and he parked his pick-up truck on the street in front of my house. I hoped neighbors would not see him coming inside, or, notice a stranger's vehicle parked in front, or that they would report any of this suspicious behavior to my parents upon their return. We walked into the house and climbed the stairs to my bedroom.

“Have you ever done this?”

“I've met people, but never brought anyone home.”

He took his jacket off and draped it over a nearby chair. He sat back down next to me at the foot of my bed. Even being this close to him made me excited and comforted. He put his arm around me and we looked into each other's eyes. He moved closer to kiss me and I complied. It was natural and instinctual and I knew this was how it was supposed to feel, what everyone growing up talked about. A strong man with his arms around me, an urgent kiss, cologne with traces of wood and spice, and the lingering smell of his leather jacket in the air.

“You sure you want to do this?” he asked, as we both lay naked on the bed.

He was kind and slow and I was hungry and wanted it so badly that I surrendered to him, to join with me in a connection I could not have anticipated. His body, for that moment, was a part of mine, and the pleasure was extraordinary and unexpected.

We lay together in our recovery.

“You doing ok?” he asked.

I was wide eyed, exhausted from the physical intensity, the emotional rush of having sex with a stranger in my family's home. I didn't want to let go of him. I inhaled deeply and ran one hand along his sweaty spine.

“I should probably get going,” he said.

“I was hoping you could spend the night.”

“I have to work in the morning.”

I learned the lesson that sexual pleasure only yielded more yearning, a hunger for more contact.

“You want something to eat?” I asked.

“No thanks. I’m just going to clean myself up.”

I lay flat on my back as I heard the bathroom door close. Specks in the popcorn ceiling wore heavy shadows against the streetlight pouring in from the curtained window. If sex was so good, why was I left with that feeling afterward, that sense of being used, of being abandoned? The faucet ran. I looked over at the bedside alarm clock. 3:30 a.m.

He came back in my room and got dressed.

“Can I see you again?” Already, I was hungry for more, and because he was the first man to have intercourse with me, my perceived bond with him was indelible.

“We can do that.”

After he dressed, I stood there in a t-shirt and nothing more. He walked over to my desk and quickly scribbled his telephone number on an index card, along with his initials, J.M.

“Sorry I have to leave so soon,” he said.

We walked downstairs to the front door. He turned to kiss me. I took a deep breath, taking in the smell of his leather jacket, the sweet spice of his Fahrenheit cologne, our sweat that forged together in what was my first honest and true sexual encounter with a man, a grown man, a real man. I was gay and I knew this without a doubt now.

“Good night,” he said.

I shut the front door and watched him walk away. I ran upstairs to look out my window, watched him get into his truck. Headlights. An engine's hum. Acceleration. I watched him follow the curve of the cul-de-sac causing him to pass in front of my house once again. I stood in the darkness of my room and watched as long as I could until the light of his truck faded. I thought about waving as I stood in the darkness but realized it was a useless gesture.

I walked over and turned on the stereo, put in an Expose cassette. *Sometimes, people play with love. Falling in love is just a game. Don't think I don't know love. You'll never be alone again.*

I sat on the side of the bed, a tender sensation, a smile. If he knew he was my first complete sexual experience with another man that wasn't under the guise of a game, J.M. might expect my interest would endure. He had to believe that I would not just let him walk out the door after a few hours of fun and not understand my longing to keep him at my side, if only until the nighttime surrendered to the dawn.

I lay back down, the sheets cool and moist against my back, still damp with sweat. His scent, our shared perfume remained on my pillows. I inhaled deeply with my face buried in cotton.

I looked up at the popcorn ceiling, its ups and downs. I fought to keep my eyes open, as I relived the evening over and over in my mind, replaying key scenes, from eye contact to body contact. My stomach cramped briefly. I rolled onto my side and spooned with one of my pillows.

I eventually dozed into the remaining darkness and drifted off thinking not only about when I might see J.M. again, but also planning when my schedule would allow me to follow the

hypnotic lure of sex, of chasing and being chased, when I would again visit L'Amour Shoppe and start the game all over again.

#

I entered the Spanish-style bungalow just down the street from one of the original California missions founded by Father Junipero Serra. Chorizo and sandalwood seasoned the air. Patsy Cline sang in the background. Once in the living room, J.M. introduced me to Bobby. His jet-black haircut in a flat-top style, his chocolate eyes, his smooth olive skin got my attention. The three of us spent the day eating lunch in an outdoor cafe, and touring Mission San Juan Bautista. Bobby and I covertly brushed arm against arm, close enough to smell the other's cologne in the breeze.

I photographed the places we visited. That was my alibi. My father's underused Canon camera found new purpose as I learned its varied functions, and with the printed images I took, I made greeting cards. I used this hobby as a reason to take day trips to San Juan Bautista, to visit Bobby.

It didn't make much difference to me that he was 15 years older. I enjoyed my time with him, and he seemed to like spending time with me, too. Bobby wasn't bothered when I'd put my hand on his arm, or push my leg against his like J.M. was, but without my encounter with J.M., I would not have met Bobby.

We nestled on the couch in his farmhouse surrounded by budding Christmas trees. John Denver sang "Annie's Song" in the background.

"What if they kick me out?" I asked.

"You'll be fine." His arms around me, he stroked my hair.

"What do I say?" I wanted to know that what I was doing was right, that I was going about it in the best way.

"Just tell them the truth."

Bobby got up and walked into the kitchen. He served up two small bowls of ice cream for us. As he stood there naked, I sat on the couch in a similar state and admired him. I watched his every move. His physique reminded me of the cliff divers of Acapulco, muscular, tan, punctuated with dark hair, fearless.

#

As little goblins and ghosts in search of candy strolled the streets outside, I paced back and forth in the living room. My breathing sped up, my palms were clammy. I inhaled slowly to calm my nerves, but when I was, at last, centered, I heard the grinding growl of the automatic garage door opener and I knew the window for rehearsal had come and gone.

My hands shook as I pulled fast food out of a white, red, and gold paper bag. A McRib sandwich for my mother. A salad for my father. We sat at the oval dining table covered in a plastic tablecloth sprinkled with small flowers in shades of brown and gold, an autumnal display.

"Are you okay?" My mother asked.

My breathing was labored. I took a sip of soda to subdue the dry-mouth, and inhaled.

"I have something to tell you both."

Mom and Dad looked up from their meals and right at me.

"You've always told me that as long as I am doing what makes me happy, you'd support me, right?"

"Of course," Mom said. Dad continued to quietly eat his salad.

"I am attracted to men."

Mom took a sip of her soda, Dad looked down at a flat container of wilted lettuce, industrially sliced vegetables with consistent dimensions; a cherry tomato drenched in dressing rolled off the plastic plate, unconstrained.

"You haven't had any girlfriends. How do you know you like *men*?" Mom asked.

"I have a boyfriend."

"You what?" Dad asked.

"I'm seeing someone. I can't lie to you - you didn't raise me that way. The trips to San Juan Bautista to take pictures for my cards are the same trips I've gone to visit Bobby."

"What have I done?" Mom asked, as tears filled her eyes.

"You haven't done anything," I said.

"I must have spoiled you too much."

Dad methodically took a lettuce leaf, placed it in his mouth, chewed at least twenty times. Was he counting?

"Maybe this is just a phase?" Mom asked.

"I've been dealing with these feelings for years."

We sat in silence as my father continued to eat. I took a sip of my soda.

"I have never felt anything for girls at school. They don't make me feel the way Bobby makes me feel."

"Who is Bobby?"

"My boyfriend."

More silence, more chewing, tears.

"I just wanted to tell you both the truth."

I got up from the table and walked upstairs to my room. Sitting at my desk by the window, I looked down on the street sprinkled with trick-or-treaters who sported masks to hide their identities. They haunted the cul-de-sac, hunting and gathering under false pretenses.

#

Mom stayed home from work for three days, lying in bed, crying. After the second day, my father came to me with an ultimatum.

"If she doesn't stop crying, you're going to have to leave."

Over the weekend, mom's tears dried and the sun shone again on Cadiz Circle. My parents made an appointment with a psychologist. The Yellow Pages helped them find a woman in Pacific Grove, about 30 minutes from Salinas, where we lived. The distance reduced the likelihood someone we knew would see them going into the therapist's office.

I knew this was a new experience for them, but it was new for me, too. There was no gay community center nearby. I had only just read John Reid's *The Best Little Boy in the World*, having ordered it from an independent bookstore on the opposite end of town from where we

lived. I spent hours in my car before community college classes discreetly reading the story of a young man's journey towards self-acceptance.

My parents returned from their appointment with the psychologist.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

"Fine," my mother replied. "She'd like to see you."

"Why? So she can 'fix' me?"

"She wants to talk with you. It will help her when she meets with us again."

"You're going back?"

"We have another appointment. She seems to think we have more to discuss."

A week later, I drove myself to the therapist's office. It was a cloudless day that offered spectacular views of Monterey Bay along the highway that hugged the coastline. I drove south from Marina, past Seaside, into Monterey and then to Pacific Grove. I got out of the car, stood and took a few deep breaths. Growing up near the ocean gave me the indelible appreciation for the refreshing qualities of ocean air.

The reception area of the therapist's office was not fancy. It was decorated in calming earth tones; a few chairs and a small desk were placed strategically in the intimate space. At the top of the hour, the therapist came out to welcome me.

"Please come in!" she said.

We sat in two plush chairs next to the window. As we spoke, thoughtful glances to my left afforded me a stellar view of the peninsula.

“As you know, your parents had a session with me last week, and I thought it would be helpful for us to speak, not only to make sure you’re doing okay, but also to help me in my work with them.”

“It’s nice to talk about myself to someone. I don’t do that very often,” I replied.

“I understand you recently came out to your parents.”

“On Halloween.”

“Why Halloween?”

“I thought, on a day when everyone else puts masks on to hide who they are, I chose to take my mask off.”

“How did the conversation go?”

“I said what I needed to say. There isn’t really a way to soften the message. I’m attracted to men. I’m gay.”

“How did you feel when it was over?”

“I held this in for so long and resisted accepting it for so long. But when I finally did, and I eventually shared it openly, it made me feel free.”

“Free of what?”

“The pressure of trying to be someone I’m not. I’ve done that my whole life.”

“How did your parents react?”

“My Dad just kept eating his salad, looking down. My mom started crying and blaming herself and second guessing all the things she should have done to make sure I turned out ok.”

“But you did turn out ok. They told me about all the things you’ve accomplished at school and the things you’ve done. You should be very proud.”

“I thought if I could be perfect in every other part of my life, then this one little detail about being gay wouldn’t matter. But in just one moment, it blew up into this large thing that overpowered years of work. All of those accomplishments didn’t seem to matter anymore.”

She wrote notes on a yellow legal pad as we spoke.

“Mom was off work for three days, and just lay in bed crying. Dad told me that if she didn’t stop crying, I’d have to move out. I just have a few months until I move up north to go to Chico State.”

“Has she stopped crying?”

“Yes, thank goodness. But the tension is thick. I’m just focusing on my classes and I spend a lot of time in my bedroom.”

“Have you met other gay people?”

“A few. I have a boyfriend now. Bobby’s really helped me through this. I spend a lot of time on the weekends with him.”

“And how do you feel about yourself at this point?”

“I can stop judging myself. I’ve done a lot of that. Whenever I’d have a feeling or thought about another guy, I’d immediately shut myself down, tell myself those thoughts are dirty and that I shouldn’t have them. But now, now that I know who I am, it’s different. I think to myself, *that guy is hot*, and that second voice isn’t there anymore, it doesn’t follow-up with a judgment. It’s a nice feeling.”

I spoke with confidence, my head up, with a smile.

“We’re almost out of time, Brian.” The therapist glanced at a round wooden clock on the wall. “It sounds like you are acclimating well to this transition in your life. Unless there are additional things you want to talk about, I don’t think we need to have another session.”

She walked with me out into the reception area, shook my hand, and wished me well. I walked out of the office onto the street and took a deep breath of fresh ocean air, as the sun bolted through scattered pillows of clouds.

I got in the car and felt warmth surround me like an embrace. I drove along the coast peppered with rock formations and tide pools; waves reached up to greet me along the highway. Nineteen years. It took that long to figure this out.

I sat up in the driver's seat, corrected my posture, puffed my chest, and raised my chin. It was the first time I felt like a man defined on my own terms. In the distance, near the water’s edge, a pair of otters frolicked in the salty foam; my mix tape played on my Walkman speakers. Christopher Cross provided the afternoon’s soundtrack.

It's not far to Never Never land, no reason to pretend, and if the wind is right you can find the joy of innocence again ... sailing ... takes me away ... to where I always heard it could be. Just a dream and the wind to carry me ... and soon I will be free.

#

To get to Chico, my parents and I took Highway 5 to Highway 99, both flanked by rolling brown hills, seasoned by the occasional produce stand or small farm shop. Winding through cities large and small, we stopped at Casa de Fruta, a rest area with a food market and a

restaurant that was a popular attraction for people crossing over Pacheco Pass. The market had everything from homemade popcorn flavored with cayenne or caramel, plump cherries ripe and deep red, and bags of pistachio nuts sprinkled with sea salt. There were jams and preserves, fresh produce, and other treasures from the central California region.

“Now, when we get there, let’s try to park as close as possible to make it easier to unload his things,” my mother said to my father who nodded in agreement.

There was a moment, right after I came out to my parents, when I wondered if mom would stop crying, if dad would stop blaming me for her tears, if they would ask me to leave home before the move to Chico.

“Now when does registration start?” Mom asked in the car.

“Not sure of the exact date. They tell us what to do in orientation.”

These questions came in waves. After a few were asked and answered, conversation in the car would die down and I looked back out the window again, watching small farming communities, orchards, fields in full bloom blur past us. I was looking forward to living in what was called “a multicultural hall,” where students from various backgrounds were purposefully placed together. I thought about living in the dorms, and about my potential roommate. I secretly hoped he would be of Hispanic descent, and that he would be attractive.

We rolled in to Chico, and found a convenient parking spot. My parents and I walked up to the hall to check in. A guy wearing a tie-die shirt and Birkenstocks rolled a beat-up suitcase through the lobby to the elevator. A young woman had borrowed a cart from the school, on which was stacked a multitude of plastic bins.

“You brought so much stuff, Jana,” her mother said.

“I needed my clothes, and my make up, and my styling brushes, and ...” she went on, listing out the essential purpose of each item she had packed as she and her parents continued down one of the first-floor wings.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to get a cart?” one parent asked his daughter who insisted on carrying large bins, one at a time, from their distant parking spot.

“We totally have to check out this mixer tonight!” said one girl to another.

I wondered if anyone nearby was going to be my roommate.

My parents and I signed paperwork and one of the Resident Advisor’s gave me a key. We walked up the stairs to the second floor, took a left and went all the way to the end of the men’s wing. There was a small card on each of the doors with residents’ names on them, and as we approached my room, I saw the card on the door that read:

Welcome to Lassen Hall!

BRIAN CRIMMINS

ALFREDO HERNANDEZ

My first instinct was excitement, anticipating what Alfredo might look like, how he might behave. Part of me was anxious, concerned if he would be supportive of having a gay roommate. I had to play it cool until I got some indication from him as to whether he was open-minded or not. We walked in the room and it appeared he had already arrived and unpacked on the left side of the room. Both halves of the dorm room were equal in proportion, each appointed

with a closet, a desk, a bed and nightstand. I was happy to take the unused half of the room and make it my own.

My mother organized pens, spiral notebooks, and ink pens in my desk drawer; my father put pants and oxford shirts on hangers and placed them in the closet; in the dresser, I stacked underwear, t-shirts, shorts. As I stood by the window, I looked outside to see my second floor room had a perfect view of the volleyball court, and in late summer's heat, shirtless men leapt and shifted in the sand as the white ball floated from one side of the net to the other.

While I set up my desk and put things away in my half of the dresser and my parents sat on my bed chatting, Alfredo stopped by the room.

“Hey, man, I’m Alfredo, but everyone calls me Sleepy.”

“Nice to meet you.” We shook hands. “What are you up to today?”

“I’m meeting up with some of my fraternity brothers. I’m in Epsilon Sigma Rho.”

Heaven help me, I thought. That’s all I need are blow-out frat bashes in our dorm room and hyper-masculine robots coming in and causing problems or calling me names.

“Ah, ok. I guess I’ll see you a little later?”

He exchanged pleasantries with my parents and was on his way again. If his fraternity activities took place elsewhere, he wouldn’t spend a lot of time in the room. Growing up an only child I never shared a bedroom with anyone, so that was going to be a new experience for me.

“That should do it,” my mom said with accomplishment in her voice.

“Wow, fast,” I said.

“Team work!” Dad said.

My parents and I locked the room and took a walk across campus into the downtown Chico, the more charming part of the city and not the expansive, suburban sprawl that appeared more toward the north of campus. We would have lunch and then they would head back to Salinas.

Settling in at a little café called Perché No, I would have the first of many crunchy granola waffles with real whipped cream and syrup, and my appreciation for lattes and cappuccinos would cause me to question any interest in basic brewed coffee again.

“Do you have everything?” Mom asked.

“I can walk to the grocery store. If I need to go to the mall or something I can always give Dave and Beth a call.” My cousin lived in Chico with his wife, Beth, and two daughters, Alicia and Erica.

“We can send things from home, too. Let us know once you settle in.”

“You’re roommate seems like a nice guy,” Dad said.

“Seems like it.”

“The campus should be very pretty in the fall when the leaves change,” Mom said.

“Lots of places to walk and hike.” I did enjoy hiking along mountain trails and there were, I had heard, some excellent places to do that in Chico.

“What are you going to do this afternoon?” Dad asked.

“Probably walk around campus, get my bearings.”

We finished up at the restaurant and strolled back through campus to the dorm. We stood out front while Mom smoked a cigarette. My parents used the restroom in Lassen Hall, and then it was time for them to set out on their return to Salinas.

“Thanks for driving all the way up here to get me settled in,” I said. For an act that seemed so natural, one that parents would perform without question, I still felt the need to be sure they knew I appreciated what they had done. And now, it was nearly time to say good-bye.

My dad shook my hand.

Small round tears began to well up in mom’s eyes.

“I’ll be fine.”

“We love you, Brian,” Mom said, “and we’re very proud of you.”

Mom and I hugged one last time and she got in the car with dad. As the Toyota pulled away from the sidewalk, Mom waved through the closed passenger window. I watched the bustling street until my parents’ car was no longer in view.

I walked back to Lassen Hall, picked up some fliers at the front desk promoting campus activities and clubs, and returned to my room. I stood at the window and looked out at the large grassy area that separated Lassen and Shasta Halls.

I was on my own now. I took a moment to soak it all in, reliving the day’s events, the road trip with my parents, the unpacking, and our lunch. I rewound further to that afternoon when George Chavez threatened and taunted me, to my closest friends turning against me in Hawai’i, to coming out to my parents, to leaving Bobby behind at home.

I spent little time lamenting over the past. Instead, I focused my attention on the possibilities of time and place, found ways to get involved in campus life, discovered there was a gay bar (the only one in town) just nine blocks away and that I could walk there on Friday nights and then stumble all the way home.

My adolescence was over. I had survived. Now, I was my own person, making my own decisions. I was free to live life on my own terms.

I lay down on the metal cot that would be my bed for the school year, putting my head on the cool pillow. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

A LETTER TO MYSELF FROM THE FUTURE

Dear Brian,

In your early years, you wonder why you feel like a spectator of life, and not a participant. You wonder why you feel separate from others, and not part of the group. Even among friends, you have this quiet sense of solitude and are never quite able to explain it to yourself or anyone else.

Others misunderstand you. Your pizzazz and your personal style, while not outlandish, are not the basic t-shirt and jeans uniform of those around you. You wear the latest styles from Chess King, Structure, and Merry Go Round, and style your hair with diligent effort and excessive product which makes you stand out from the rest. You are a stylish gay boy, a product of the 1980s. You hear others gossiping about “homosexuals,” pontificating on “the evils of the homosexual agenda,” but won’t yet think they are referring to you.

Often, that point of view conflicts with the mundane and provincial mediocrity that surrounds you. But amidst this, you must stay strong and perseverant. You must proceed without fail, without pause or delay. While you may not incur physical damage, you hear slights on many occasions that pain you, that hurt your heart.

You hunger for companionship, and you feel an inexplicable draw to other boys, a tingling movement of energy within, and you will not, for some time, be able to interpret these sensations. Enjoy these feelings, but say nothing. People around you will not be prepared to give you the space to evolve. You eventually find people who support you and accept you for who you are. You eventually fall in love.

You resist the predictions of those around you. Some foresee you coming out, accepting your authentic self, and having a boyfriend. Some paint a dim picture of your future. You resist any hint from others that you are gay, and you play a number of mind games with yourself to avoid accepting this reality. You try to convince yourself that kissing a girl excites you, but your efforts will not be effective. You believe that straight porn turns you on, even while your attention focuses on the man in the pictures. You wait until your nineteenth year to accept the desires of your heart and to share your truth with others. Before you emerge from the closet into a culture riddled with masculine archetypes and internalized homophobia, this will happen:

You, 12 or 13, find a lump forming under your left nipple. You adopt an odd posture with your left shoulder and back hunched forward to hide the embarrassing lump. You sport unflattering and démodé styles to hide your body in layers of loose fabric that show no form, shape or outline of your youthful body. Your mother notices these odd poses and clothing choices. When she asks, you tell her what is happening.

There is surgery. You spend much time fantasizing about your future modeling career, about living a life of luxury in Manhattan or London or Paris. Ah, Paris. You won't become a model because you will have a Cubist design carved into your nipple. Still you hold on to the delusion that you could still be a model and you can insist that your agent get you jobs that require full outfits, no swimsuits.

Along with the scar, your chubby body embarrasses you, and the other children call you names. You gather with your seventh grade physical education class in the gym, and watch your classmates run towards a gymnastics horse, bouncing their feet on a springboard so their bodies fly up and over the apparatus. You race toward it, and crash into its side. Your second attempt

gets you up and over, but you flop back to strike your head on the horse. You hear your classmates' snickers, and as you regain your bearings and visual focus, you see them point at you, laughing.

You are modest in the locker room. You move to a corner of the dank open space, and change from gym clothes to day clothes. Still, one day when Mr. Miller substitutes for your usual gym teacher, you are required to shower with the other boys. You strip naked and Norman, fully clothed in the linen room near the tiled cavern, hands you a towel and looks you up and down, grinning. You find a corner shower and face the wall. You retreat with your towel wrapped around you above your chest. You walk back to where your clothes are and, again, facing the wall, you slip them on. You turn around to look out into the locker room as you tie your shoes.

Many days you come home from school after being called "Fatso," "Faggot," or "Homo," and retreat to your room. You escape through music, and as you listen to George Michael, Duran Duran, or Michael Jackson, you imagine the life you want to lead, one of luxury: living in cities like London or Paris; drinking champagne and enjoying fine cheeses on baguettes sitting on the bank of the Seine; radiant Eiffel Tower sunsets; high-rise hotels in New York or San Francisco; clothes made of fine fabrics with European names on the labels; afternoon tea at Ladurée, at Harrod's; a chauffeured car; decadent meals with rare game and black truffle shavings; living out the "champagne wishes and caviar dreams" Robin Leach spoke of on his television program, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

Music expresses your deepest feelings when you haven't the words. It shields you and diverts your attention from doing something more drastic after an encounter with a bully. Still, you consider how you might do it, but you hang on. The music keeps you focused on your

fantasies about the future, as you lie there in your room, the open window welcoming a cool coastal breeze, amplifying the motored humming of Highway 101 traffic, a stretch of road separating your neighborhood from the brown and green lettuce fields beyond.

Your first sexual experiences take place under the guise of a Truth or Dare game. These encounters are contained in a recreational vehicle, in summers, in silence with a boy your age. The secret game will continue for two years. Your eyes, your mind, and your soul open, and you understand and accept the way it feels to be intimate with another boy.

Your first crush will be Larry. You will be a freshman; he, a senior. He will be tall and handsome with a moustache and dark hair. Joelle is the mean girl in drama class who will tease Larry and call him “fag,” trying to embarrass him in front of you and the other students. You wish he would notice you sitting in the school theater during lunch, while he rehearses a scene, or practices a song. This crush subsides come summer as crushes often do. In autumn, you meet Jeremy. He becomes your best friend.

He does not tease you. He treats you with respect. He is kind. He offers you a drink from his soda, invites you over to his house for sleepovers. He is tall, with hair highlighted blonde by the sun, lead blue eyes, and a slender athletic build. One night in your senior year, he asks you if you’ve ever had sex with another guy. You turn off the light, and end up naked in your bed together while your parents entertain neighbors downstairs. Jeremy says it feels weird. He gets married, has children, and lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

You fool yourself into thinking you are not attracted to men, until one day, after high school, you meet a man who loves you and cares for you. You realize this is how a relationship

is supposed to feel. He helps you understand your history, and helps you find a way to come out to your parents.

A month before you come out, you drive to the opposite side of town to a small independent bookstore to order John Reid's *The Best Little Boy in the World*. You leave home to take night classes at Hartnell College. Before class, you lock yourself in your car and read this book. You do not take it out of your bag in the library or anywhere else because you don't want someone to ask you what you are reading: a story about a man, much like you, who found his way toward self-acceptance. You sit in your car for hours reading, absorbing page after page. This is the first book you ever read about being gay. It is the last time you hide in your car to read a book.

On Halloween night, when you are nineteen, you sit your parents down at that big oval dining table with the beige plastic tablecloth dotted with small white daisies, and have the talk. You like men; you have a boyfriend; you're a pole smoker; you're a butt pirate; a homo just like the kids always said. You tell them you are 19 and he is 35, but you don't tell them you've been seeing him for a couple of months; you don't tell them you met him through another man you had sex with, a man you found while shopping at an adult bookstore; you want to ride off into the golden California sunset in the family's silver Toyota Camry sedan, off to a university, to reinvent yourself.

You don't dream of meeting someone with whom you'll spend many years. You don't dream of ever marrying.

But you will.

READING LIST

Creative Nonfiction

A Childhood: The Biography of a Place, Harry Crews
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Dave Eggers
Adderall Diaries, Stephen Elliott
Another Bullshit Night in Suck City, Nick Flynn
Angela's Ashes, Frank McCourt
Anthropologies: A Family Memoir, Beth Alvarado
At Least in the City Someone Would Hear Me Scream, Wade Rouse
Blue Nights, Joan Didion
Boyhood, J.M. Coetzee
Consider the Lobster, David Foster Wallace
Comfort, Ann Hood
Daughter of the Queen of Sheba, Jacki Lyden
Domesticity, Bob Shacochis
Eminent Outlaws, Christopher Bram
From Our House, Lee Martin
I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory, Patricia Hampl
Jarhead, Anthony Swofford
Just Kids - Patti Smith
Maus, Art Spiegelman
Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Mary McCarthy
Provence, 1970, Luke Barr
Reality Hunger: A Manifesto, David Shields
The Boys of My Youth, Jo Ann Beard
The Bucolic Plague, Josh Kilmer Purcell
The Next American Essay, John D'Agata, ed.
The Immaculate Invasion, Bob Shacochis
The Liar's Club, Mary Karr
The Lifespan of a Fact, John D'Agata and Jim Fingal
The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry, Jon Ronson
This Boy's Life: A Memoir, Tobias Wolff
Townie: A Memoir, Andre Dubus III
Wild, Cheryl Strayed

Fiction

A Single Man, Christopher Isherwood
A Visit from the Goon Squad, Jennifer Egan
Aliens in the prime of their lives, Brad Watson
Anthills of the Savannah, Chinua Achebe

Battleborn, Claire Vaye Watkins

Fiction (cont'd.)

Benito Cereno, Herman Melville

Half a Yellow Sun, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie

Little Raw Souls, Steven Schwartz

Middle Passage, Charles Johnson

Mumbo Jumbo, Ishmael Reed

My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles, Jane Bowles

Netherland, Joseph O'Neill

Once Upon a River, Bonnie Jo Campbell

One D.O.A., One on the Way: A Novel, Mary Robison

Remainder, Tom McCarthy

Selected Stories, William Trevor

St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves, Karen Russell

Tales of the City, Armistead Maupin

Tenth of December, George Saunders

The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel, Amy Hempel

The Dead Father, Donald Barthelme

The Hours, Michael Cunningham

The Human Country: New and Collected Stories, Harry Mathews

The Interrogative Mood, Padgett Powell

The Rings of Saturn - W.G. Sebald

Tumbledown, Robert Boswell

Two Thousand Seasons, Ayi Kwei Armah

Up From the Blue, Susan Henderson

We, the Animals, Justin Torres

Why Did I Ever, Mary Robison

Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys

Willful Creatures: Stories, Aimee Bender

Stage Plays

Angels in America, Tony Kushner

Books on Craft

Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction - Charles Baxter

Flash Fiction Forward - James Thomas & Robert Shapard, ed.

How Fiction Works, James Wood

The Art of Friction: Where [Non]Fictions Come Together, Charles Blackstone and
Jill Talbot, ed.

The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting,

Charles Baxter, ed.
Truth in Nonfiction: Essays, David Lazar, ed.