

# Golden Gate Dreams

A gay memoir of San Francisco

**BY ALEX STEWART**

# GOLDEN GATE DREAMS

*Alex Stewart*

GOLDEN GATE GREAMS  
Copyright © 2022 by Alex Stewart

**All rights reserved**

The Copyright Act prohibits (subject to certain very limited exceptions) the making of copies of any copyright work or of a substantial part of such a work, including the making of copies by photocopying or similar process. Written permission to make a copy or copies must therefore normally be obtained from the publisher in advance. It is advisable also to consult the publisher if in any doubt as to the legality of any copying which is to be undertaken.

# PROLOGUE

---

I was back in San Francisco.

Arriving from the airport, I walked straight into the Gay Day Parade. I immediately felt disconnected, as if I had entered into this world from another time. The City was no longer mine, and I did not feel like celebrating. The next day I began walking down Market Street toward Café Flore, where remnants of the party hung from poles and were caught in the gutters, clinging to the drains.

I glanced across to Castro Street and saw fresh-faced young people, wrapped up in their lives, coming up from Eighteenth. The street seemed so normal. A hip couple, boy and girl, ran arm in arm to catch the MUNI downtown. Another couple stood with a child and studied a menu in the window of The Cove café. One or two single men walked either side of the two famous blocks. It looked like any other street in The City.

*I guess this is all we wanted back then, a place for everyone to live together in safety and in peace.*

I remembered Richard's long, hard kisses on Corona Heights. I remembered how in love and in lust with him I was, how I always wanted to have sex with him. It had been a serious addiction.

Now most of my friends were dead and long buried, while I had finally found a different kind of peace. On my last trip, I only stayed a few days before I hurried on to New York for business. The memories were still too raw.

The last time I had seen Gary, in 1997, he was curled up in his bed, angry with me for leaving, at the end of ten awkward days at Twentieth Street. It was torture to watch him slowly dying, his face distorted as he desperately clung to life. He now had a Catholic priest visit him. He had once told me he always hedged his bets about the afterlife.

I do not consciously suffer from survivor's guilt. But I felt a pang every time I left the house on that visit, and with relief, go off to meet my friends who were still well — somewhere, anywhere but there. I had just begun to take the protease inhibitors that were now saving our lives. I was living with new hope, tentatively thinking about having a future.

For Gary, the protease inhibitors had come six months too late. The first sight of my best friend in that state was overwhelming. He looked up at me from the couch out of one eye, the other swollen, half-shut, ravaged by some ghastly, opportunistic infection. Neither of us knew what to say to each other. I babbled on about the long flight, and eventually, through his pain and small smiles, he turned back, exhausted, to the college football game he was watching.

I hefted my luggage up to the top floor, where I stood looking out at the rooftops to the north, sobbing uncontrollably. I was furious with myself for breaking down. For a second, I could not move. I did not want to go back down.

Now — with the exception of Phillip — Gary and the rest of the Twentieth Street house, along with so many of the guys I had known, were gone. Some buried here in San Francisco graves, or out at sea, or in faraway graveyards around the country. Gary had been taken back to Iowa City by his caring parents and buried in their family plot.

It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky, the fog held back somewhere out beyond the Farallon Islands. Standing at the top of Market Street, looking down toward the Bay, I understood the meaning of bittersweet. I could taste it in my mouth.

On this lovely day, I was in two cities. Mine lay below the surface city I could see around me. I was an old man in this crowd, maybe a local but probably a tourist. New generations now owned San Francisco. I hoped they knew something about its past.

Standing at the corner of the gay world, I again looked down Market, taking in the little piece of the Bay at the bottom of the street. I could see and feel that everything was in its right place. Just for a moment I could pick out the businesses and bars that once held sway over our fabulous lives, and I could see and hear the multitudes of men who had crowded the pavements. Harvey Milk's bullhorn oratory sprang into my mind. Excitement and possibility had always hung in the air in those days. Now my memories were all safely buried under the reconstruction and refits of new shops and bars. The ghosts had settled under them, just as they had for all the generations before mine.

# TABLE OF CONTENT

Prologue	IV
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	5
Chapter Three	11
Chapter Four	16
Chapter Five	21
Chapter Six	28
Chapter Seven	30
Chapter Eight	36
Chapter Nine	42
Chapter Ten	44
Chapter Eleven	49
Chapter Twelve	53
Chapter Thirteen	63
Chapter Fourteen	75
Chapter Fifteen	81
Chapter Sixteen	104
Chapter Seventeen	109
Chapter Eighteen	113
Chapter Nineteen	121
Chapter Twenty	127
Chapter Twenty one	130
Chapter Twenty two	134
Chapter Twenty three	142
Chapter Twenty four	155
Chapter Twenty five	172
Chapter Twenty six	184
Chapter Twenty seven	201
Chapter Twenty eight	219
Chapter Twenty nine	235
Chapter Thirty	247
Chapter Thirty one	265
Chapter Thirty two	278
Chapter Thirty three	291

I first arrived in San Francisco by car from Denver. I was travelling with Sarah Lachlan, a friend from my student years at the Australian National University in Canberra. It was 1974, getting dark, and our car slid down a steep street into an intersection. Fortunately, we pulled up just before we rolled into oncoming traffic. The roads were slick from a fine mist that had been gently falling for some time.

As we waited for the lights to change, I looked around, and something in me thrilled. I had heard so much about San Francisco over the past few years. I had read about the Barbary Coast and Jack London and the years of recovery after the Great Fire of 1906. I had also read about Jack Kerouac and the Beats, and, of course, I knew, somehow, that this was a city for personal exploration, a place for people to live out secrets like mine.

All around were tall, white apartments. People rushed, heads down to get home for the weekend. I wanted to grab someone's arm, be taken home to a ritzy apartment nearby and settled in for the night. I saw myself rugged up, well fed, looking out through one of the large, long windows at the bay we'd first glimpsed when we approached the city from Highway 101. I wanted to be hugged by someone strong, just as I had fantasized.

Sarah and I were heavily influenced by the extraordinary music that came out of the Haight and Golden Gate Park. We had a soft spot for Janis Joplin and Big Brother, Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead. We could not wait to find a concert, walk in, stop for a moment, and quietly smile at each other, knowing we had finally made it. Music, we had agreed, was the greatest thing in the world.

We drove carefully down to the next intersection into Chinatown. We had been on the road non-stop from Denver for two days and were smelly and hungry. We stopped at a Chinese restaurant on Grant Street, a place where the owner famously yelled out where you should sit and what you should order. If some of the other patrons had not told us this was a local tradition, someone in our group might have started a fight.

Later, we made our way across downtown and up Market Street, the main street dividing north from south. We arrived at Susan's at the corner of Sixteenth and Guerrero streets around 9.30 p.m. It was raining steadily now, and we were relieved when Susan's smiling face greeted us at the door. She was wearing a long, tie-dyed skirt and blouse, with her blond hair held up in a red bandana. Watching the chains with bells around her ankles flutter and jump, we followed her up into the second-storey apartment.

A couple were in the kitchen washing dishes, and a guy with shoulder-length blond, crinkly hair and moustache was sitting on the floor rolling a joint. He looked up to greet us with his handsome, wide face, and for one bizarre moment, I knew somehow I had met him before. I went over and shook his hand. This was Gary.

Everyone was cool about us crashing for a week or two, so we settled into beers and joints and told our stories. Gary was recovering from hepatitis. He'd come up from Los Angeles, where he had been staying with his sister and her family in Palos Verdes. He knew Jen and Steve, the couple at the sink, from his days in Michigan, where

they had all worked in the Vista program in poor areas of the city . He was not sure of his next move but knew he wanted to live in San Francisco.

“What attracts you to it?” I asked, trying to get comfortable on a well-worn cushion on the carpet: I was never good at the lotus position.

“I’m gay,” he said, looking directly at me, “and San Francisco is becoming the new safe place to live if you are.”

*Wow, I thought. This is the first openly gay person I’ve ever met. And I feel like I already know him.*

“You okay?” he asked.

I had frozen mid-thought. “Yeah, of course!” I laughed. “I’m just processing everything new in our lives, that’s all. We keep having ‘firsts’ all the time, and you’re a first for me. I’ve never met an openly gay guy before.” We looked at each other and smiled.

The following morning, we were taken up onto the roof of the building. This is what everyone did back then—to get some sun, have some peace, maybe have sex, smoke a joint, and sometimes throw a party. The rain had stopped in the night. The sun was out, and the air was warming. I came up with Gary, Sarah, and Susan with a tray of coffee and a carton of half ‘n’ half. We put towels down, and Gary rolled another joint. I noticed his tanned upper body, his big, muscled arms and full, lightly haired chest. We were all in cut-offs, the girls in halter-tops. I sat down with my back against a pipe that rose above the building. As I settled in and looked downtown, my heart leapt, and my brain fizzed.

For a moment, I was back on the beach at Point Lonsdale, reliving an intense vision from my past. Slowly, I swept my eyes back and forth, connecting the present with the past. I let out a small whistle and quickly looked around. But no one was looking at me weirdly.

“Do you want a hit?” Gary asked.

I smiled and leaned back against the pipe with the joint. Something in me shifted. I knew two things there and then: that I had to live in this city, and that I could have a really good friend in the man sitting next to me. I could not have explained it to anyone, and I did not want to right then, but I knew I had to live in San Francisco.

## 2

---

Point Lonsdale, a small coastal town inside a bay in the state of Victoria, Australia, was founded in the middle of the 1800s, mainly from the need for a lighthouse. We had a wonderful long stretch of beach, called the ‘back beach’ both by locals and the holidaymakers who came down in droves during the warmer months. This mile of golden sand and tussocky dunes faced Bass Strait, our local sea. Around the rocky point, inside the bay, we had a lovely small beach, safer for children and families to swim and sun through the balmy, summer days. I grew up in a family guesthouse opposite the beach. The town itself had grown along the first part of the crescent, which curved off past the cemetery and ended up three miles away in Queenscliff. Our neighbouring town had its own lighthouse and a military fort built in the 1890s to stop the Russians taking us over.

I was about eight when Mum first decided she would advertise in Melbourne for summer waitresses. I was a gangly kid approaching eleven when, in 1959, two new girls came down to work at the guesthouse. They answered Mum’s ad in the paper and would waitress over the summer months to get money for their first year at university. I thought them very sophisticated and worldly. For a start, they were from Melbourne—the Big Smoke—and secondly, they were exotic and beautiful, each physically striking in her own way.

Jenny was tall and willowy with long, bright blond hair that fell straight down her back. Joey was shorter, with a voluptuous figure, olive skin, and long, brown hair. They were eighteen years old, and they represented the first wave of young, post World War II urban women who wanted greater freedom and more say in how they managed their lives. In the big kitchen after dinner had been served, I listened with fascination and rebellious intrigue as they argued with Dad, marvelling at how they stood up to this tall, overbearing, seemingly knowledgeable man. Mum loved it too. I could see it in her eyes as I watched and listened to them debate The Bomb and the politics of the day.

Joey, the more outspoken of the two, had an answer for all of Dad's "What if?" questions. She looked toward a time when women had more representation in parliament and politics in general, and I knew this was something Dad could not abide. I watched him get agitated, leaning back in his chair, cigarette smoke swirling around his face, trying to get out of a position she had cleverly steered him into. It was always Mum who, sensing the girls might have come too close to the limit of his ability to recover, closed everything down for the night, with everyone laughing and agreeing to disagree.

The girls came back the next year, and I was so excited to see them again. By then I was twelve and mightily confused and sickened by my attraction to other boys at school—and now to the older men on the beach in the summer months. I knew I could never talk with anyone about how I felt, but somehow I knew I could share my thoughts about a lot of other things with Joey and Jen. They listened and included me whenever they went to the surf beach to swim, sunbake, and flirt with the hot, young lifesavers, now a permanent fixture on all the beaches around Australia's coastline.

The burning issue when they arrived that year was not immediately about politics, but from the fact both girls had embraced the new swimwear, the bikini. This was the European bikini, which was cut

small, tight, and brief and came in fluorescent colours that looked wonderful on sunburned young skin. I thrillingly found out from the post-office mistress that the whole guesthouse—in fact the whole town—was gossiping about it.

Mum asked the girls to at least wear a shift when they walked through the town on their way to the back beach. “We must represent the guesthouse at all times, girls!” she exclaimed. A show-off myself by this time, I loved it, because it caused controversy. If there was anything I could be part of that was different, I was in.

I proudly walked down to the surf beach with the girls every afternoon, after they had set up the dining room tables. They carried towels, a new transistor radio, and plenty of coconut oil to slather on their bodies to deepen their tans. Joey went almost black after two weeks on the coast, but Jenny and I took longer and ended up with a more golden colour by summer’s end.

These were heady days for me, as they were for all the kids who spent summer holidays by the sea. Everyone was free from the grind of work and school studies, and all people wanted to do was get into the water, lie on the beach, hook up with old friends, eat, play, or watch sport. It seemed this was how most of Australia lived, from the start of the school holidays in December until February, when kids went back to school. It became the new norm for a society emerging from the severity of the post-war years, one beginning to feel the pleasure of more money and greater social and cultural freedom.

Often, in this second year, the girls wanted me to stay with them the whole afternoon. But there were times they asked me to scoot off and meet up with my other friends. They were on the prowl and wanted to meet guys.

There were two particularly hot young men who were in the lifesaving club at Point Lonsdale. The girls already knew them from Melbourne. One of them was Simon Simpson. He was tall

and had classic private schoolboy good looks, with jet black hair, a great swimmer's body, and an even greater sense of entitlement. He'd scorned me at first sight and openly wondered why a twelve-year-old boy was hanging out with these two gorgeous women. I'd stared back at him silently, feeling ashamed, hurt, and desperately excited looking at this beautifully built young guy, a trail of fine black hair running from his navel into his tight-fitting blue Speedos. I pretended scorn, looked away, and rolled over. I always started to get a hard-on when one of these guys came too close, and this just added to my growing confusion. The girls agreed to hook up with him and other friends at the surf club that Saturday night. The venue was called the Surf Sway and was the only summer dance in our small beachside town.

The other guy was Bill Hudson. He was a god in my eyes and more friendly and open. He was not aloof, and somehow this made him more of a real man in my eyes. He was a superb sportsman and had just signed up with one of the big football clubs in Melbourne. I had seen him at the coast for years and had always found him incredibly hot. He was about 5'11", with big arms and a big chest. But the thing that set him apart from other good-looking guys was how hairy he was. He had perfectly patterned dark brown hair covering his chest, arms, and legs—the mark that, for me, set him aside. Somehow it defined what a man was and became my sexual totem for the rest of my life. I didn't want a gorilla, but I could come fairly close. I would lie face down but turn my head and watch him—every bit of him—through my very dark sunglasses, as he sat down on the edge of my towel and flirted with the girls.

Toward the end of the season, on her day off, Joey and I set out for the back beach with a picnic lunch and towels. We had decided to spend the entire day sunbaking and swimming. As we came over the enormous sand dune and stood looking at the glorious scene below us, a strong wind hit us hard, so we found a spot in the small dunes off the back of the beach to stay warm and protected.

There, Joey did two things and said one thing that gave my life real, imaginative shape and hope for the next ten years. She offered me a Peter Stuyvesant cigarette and a plastic cup of claret. Then, after watching me closely and listening to me prattle on about my hidden angst, she said: "Al, my friend, I think you'll have to leave Australia to fulfil your dreams." Looking directly at me through her oversized sunglasses, she pushed on. "Some of us need to leave this backwater and get to another world before we can find what our destiny's about. Australia doesn't necessarily have all the answers."

Something in me upended, and I looked at her with hope in my heart: "Do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do," she said, looking straight back at me. "Get yourself to university in Melbourne and then follow me overseas."

Feeling sick from the cigarette, I put it out in the sand but continued to sip the claret as we looked out at the waves crashing on the shore. I was ecstatic having my first adult conversation, and to know that someone, other than my local friends and family, loved me enough to help show me a way out of a world where I now realized I did not fit in.

In the days after the holiday-makers had all left the coast, I had a vision as I was walking alone along the beach late one night, feet kicking gently in the shallow water. I was scared and confused, pondering my sullied existence, begging God to allow me something better than what I was beginning to visualise as my probable future. I saw nothing ahead but a tortured, singular life without any friends, and possibly no family. Society would shun me when they learned the truth.

Suddenly a vortex opened up in the black of the night, and in brilliant light, I saw a beautiful shining city with white buildings stretching for miles, and a pyramid set majestically in the middle. Off in the distance were green hills, blue skies, and puffy white clouds. It

seemed God was showing me heaven, but in my heart, I knew it was a place I needed to find on earth, to learn more about who I truly was. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone, and I was left on the beach with the moon slowly coming up over Mount Martha, on the other side of Port Phillip Bay.



San Francisco, or The City, as it was called by the locals, was a jewel box. I had never seen a place in the world so beautiful. The box itself was a little scruffy and faded round the edges, especially with the current state of the Haight. But when you were on top of one of the seven hills and took a moment to pan the view, you could see a city and a landscape more fantastical than anything Walt Disney could have designed. Sarah and I could not get enough of it.

Haight Street, which we knew was the centre of the hippy movement, was dead. When we walked up from Fillmore Street later that day, Sarah had someone take a photo of us standing under the Haight and Ashbury intersection street signs. We wanted a record of finally making it there, of being a small part of the hippy movement, now slipping into history. Every shop looked shuttered, and we half expected to see tumbleweeds float up from the aptly named Panhandle. There was no one else on the street. The sixties were over. People had moved up to communes and cults in northern California, found homes in Mendocino or along the Russian River, or gone home to Mom and Dad. Or they had gone into a mental ward somewhere, or perhaps moved into the Castro District, or better parts of the Haight. But one exciting thing did happen to us there. We found a poster stuck on an electric pole for a Dead concert

the following weekend at Fillmore West. We tore it off to see if we could get tickets.

In October 1973, no one was walking the streets after 4 p.m. With the on-going horror of the Zodiac Killer, a string of random shootings throughout the Bay area going back to the sixties, and with the racially based Zebra killings just started in The City that month, residents were extremely cautious about being out at night. There was a real possibility we could be randomly shot on our walks through the Fillmore District. We didn't know that, until Gary put a stop to our night-walking escapades, and we started to go to venues and events with him and his friends.

But we were the only ones who went to the glorious Dead concert at Fillmore West the following Saturday night, oblivious to the disintegrating neighbourhood we walked through, knowing nothing of corrupt city politics, the push for neighbourhood redevelopment, or the plight of the Fillmore District's African American residents. City Hall and its wealthy developer friends wanted to bulldoze great swathes of the neighbourhood and force the Black community into other areas of San Francisco or across the Bay to Oakland.

At the concert, we walked into a festival of light and colour. Huge banners and material were strung from the rafters of a cavernous space, and lights played over the walls and musicians all night. We smelled pot everywhere and saw people coming onto acid. A glam group called The Tubes, the opening act, got a bad reception. We were shocked: we liked their new, funky sound. But we could see most of the audience was still wholly in hippy-land and only wanted the music of The Dead. We were mesmerised, too, when The Dead finally came out and played for what seemed like four or five hours. We would hear and see more of the glitzy Tubes' sound soon enough, as artists like David Bowie, the Bee Gees and Elton John started to take hold of the mid-seventies mainstream.

Gary and his new friend Joe Vigil took us to North Beach the following Saturday. Gary had introduced us to Joe one night at the Spaghetti Factory on Castro Street, and I could see Joe had an unreciprocated crush on him. Gary had told me about the kind of guys he liked, and chubby Joe did not fit the bill. But they were becoming good friends, and Joe offered Gary a way into a wonderful group of gay funsters. These were the men who ran the gay theatre scene and the big balls held in the city on significant dates throughout the year.

North Beach was the Italian district. Next to the back end of Chinatown, the district spilled down from Columbus Street, past St. Mary's Square with its lovely white Catholic church, out onto the Bay. There was a restaurant every few feet and lots of wonderful cafés and shops selling designer furniture and home-ware. A part of me wanted to get a job, find an apartment in this gorgeous neighbourhood, and live there forever. This happened every day in some part of The City, but I kept it to myself.

North Beach was still emerging from the sixties. It was hip in parts, but still clung to entertainment best suited to men moving into their forties. You could see an older generation still hanging on to the Sinatra days in the Columbus Street strip clubs. GIs would come down the stairs of the titty bars, their hair cut way too short. We still remembered the marches and getting beaten up by police, and these guys represented our continued opposition to the Vietnam War. Gary told me quietly he found some of the boys in uniform very hot. I had to silently agree.

Sarah and I had visited City Lights Bookstore within days of arriving in The City. It was a holy place for the Beat generation and hippy era. With some awe, we'd pushed into the shop and looked through the books still helping define our generation's thinking. We couldn't wait to write to our friends back in Canberra and Melbourne and tell them where we had just been. Somehow, after

the disappointment of the Golden Gate Park scene, in the bookstore we felt we were touching the real roots of the movement.

But that had been during the day. Now here we were, in North Beach on Saturday night—and what a different world it was! It was 11 p.m., and Joe was rushing us along the street, past the weary-looking dolly girls and hustlers outside the bars and strip joints, past the cafés and restaurants catering to older tourists still looking to hang on to their youth, on to a new dance and cabaret venue called The City.

It was a huge building with two levels. There was a seedy bar downstairs with a cabaret at the top of steps leading up from a side street called Montgomery. Through another short, wide corridor, we entered the big open area that was the discotheque, replete with massive glitter-ball, splashed with coloured lights high above our heads.

This was our first foray into the dance world and disco music. It was just beginning to replace bar culture, where you spontaneously jumped up and danced to live musicians or, in some parts of America, jukeboxes. Barry White and The Pointer Sisters and Bette Midler were changing all that. Most people drank beer, gin and tonics, or screwdrivers, and we could smell pot coming from the darker corners of the room. We saw a few couples move out on the dance floor. We had been brought up on Soul Train and Motown, and now here were the lush sounds of strings and brass, and Barry White's voice inviting us into a more open, sexualised possibility of movement, a hint of a new kind of freedom.

When Love Unlimited played, I grabbed Sarah and moved onto the floor, and was surprised when Joe and Gary joined us and slid into our dance space. I had never danced with a man before but found myself freeing up and watched as other gay men did the same thing with their friends. As I moved to the music, I found I could

not tell who was straight and who was gay. It was such a liberating feeling to be in such a safe place, to let myself go. I felt a tug on the back of my jeans, and Joe pushed something into my left hand. He smiled and leaned in and told me it was a quaalude. Sarah had one too, and she watched me as she smiled and popped it into her mouth, washing it down with a swig of Gary's beer. We had not done any pharmaceuticals since arriving in the USA, but it seemed right to us both to do it then. I stayed close to Sarah, as I still wasn't sure how 'to be,' and I still wanted to project a straight image. I looked at Sarah fondly. She was having a great time.

"What are you smiling at?" she yelled over the music.

"Just thinking how lucky I am to have you with me on this crazy journey."

"That's the quaaludes talking, but I know what you mean," she said. "I couldn't think of a better place to be right now, could you?"

We both laughed so much we had to pull off to the side to catch our breath. By then the dance floor was packed with the most eclectic group of young people you could imagine.

"I feel like we're on Soul Train!" Sarah yelled.

And as we watched Gary fall into a dance line doing the LA Shuffle and Joe starting to chat up some young blond kid beside him, we fell into each other's arms and hugged hard.

On a beautiful, late summer afternoon, we rode home past the cemetery. Through the trees, we caught glimpses of the sea. We were in our first year of high school and were discussing the Profumo scandal. An English cabinet minister had been caught having an affair with a model.

“She’s a prostitute,” Ian said confidently, pushing hard on his pedals to come up over the rise of the hill. We relished the fact we were talking openly about a taboo subject. We stopped our bikes and took over the road, and lent in to revel in the salaciousness of the latest reports. There were few cars in the countryside of Australia in 1961.

Johnny said Christine Keeler had had sex with a Russian spy. Apparently, she’d sat on him on a sofa in some secret apartment. In court, she called him her hairy Russian bear. I was stunned. My insides turned as the image burned into my brain. The others were chortling about photos of her in a bra. She had big tits. None of this really meant anything to us: We knew little about sex, except we were all turning thirteen and beginning to feel the tug of wet dreams. I felt a strange, sick desire take hold of me, and I went red as I imagined the Russian, his hairy legs spread wide, bouncing her up and down on his cock.

On the beach over the past summer, I found myself looking at the surf life-saving boys standing round their beach station or watching men make out with their girlfriends, walking with them at the edge of the surf. I liked the way the hair sat on their chests, arms, and legs—and I definitely knew by the start of that first senior school year I was not attracted to girls; I was secretly attracted to their boyfriends instead. Now I had this terrible knowledge seeping into the fabric of my being, beginning to permeate every aspect of my life. It was horrifying, shameful, wrong, and as addictive and compelling as a drug.

We heard an engine and swivelled our heads to see a car coming down the small hill from town. On the other side was a sweeping view of the bay. My home was on the right, opposite. In a flash, I remembered something that happened to me when I was young.

I was about six, walking away from my parents' guesthouse. As I ran up and over the small rise on the tree-covered footpath to Nana's house, I suddenly stopped and experienced the first existential dread of my very short life. A terrifying feeling crept over me, like a storm coming across the sea from the west. In that prescient moment, I was not just six, I was every age. I knew something about life that transcended my sweet six years: it was, somehow, an experience connecting all the lives I had lived over millennia. In that moment, riding past the cemetery with my school friends, that feeling of inner terror came back into my life.

Outside the cemetery, in the stillness of that autumn afternoon, I suddenly felt alone and frightened, aware of some new thing emerging within me. Why would I have such a sick, powerful sensation about a Russian man? I looked quickly at the others and realised I was slipping away from them into a place I divined I could never come back from. I had a monster growing in me. I had no idea what to do about it, and instinctively, like that little boy going up to his Nana's, I knew I could not talk to anyone about it.

The guy in the car honked his horn to hurry us off the road. Ian shot him two fingers, and we laughed—me with relief—as we set off home down the middle of the road, a sweet snapshot of young teenagers on their bikes, seemingly without a care in the world.

Through these early teen years, other things set me aside from my friends, and even from my family, especially my older brother Andrew. He told me to act tougher, especially around his mates. I became theatrical by thirteen, a bit of a show-off who loved a stage. By fourteen, most people knew I was going to be a world-famous actor, and I began to give small impromptu performances whenever I had an audience; I quickly learned not to do it in front of any group of boys in town or at school.

I was given five pounds by a very generous aunt for Christmas. Most of it went into my bank account, but I was allowed to buy anything I wanted with the rest. After hearing their voices on the radio, I decided to get Barbra Streisand's and Joan Baez's first albums. Knowing it could get my head punched in, I played them over and over at the back of the house on a small, portable record-player, singing and sometimes weeping at the lyrics. I could not understand why others were not as blown away as me! Of course I went crazy for the Beatles and the Stones, but I always had a soft spot for the torch-song women. Later, my crush for them would take me into some of the great performance halls around the world.

When I turned thirteen, I began to see that because I was attracted to men and boys more than to women and girls, I would have to somehow change into a woman. This inevitability confused and frightened me. The year before, in the middle of summer, I went across from the guesthouse to swim. I took off my shirt as I crossed the road and noticed my nipples were swelling. That day, I knew I was turning into a girl. The weird thing was my dick was getting bigger. So when would *that* fall off?

I learned from the standard dramas on our grainy TV that only women kissed men. Men were buddies and, besides an occasional slap on the back, they never touched one another. That summer, toward the end of the holidays, I went to our local town hall—which, excitingly, became a cinema over the school holidays—with some of the waitresses from the guesthouse. We watched a film with John Gavin, a gorgeous Hollywood star, playing a romantic lead opposite Jane Wyman. Lying together on a beach, he leaned in to kiss her. In my hormone-induced romantic stupor, I became Jane on the screen: I felt him press himself against me and kiss me on the mouth. I knew that night, walking home along the beachfront, that I was definitely caught between two worlds. John Gavin, along with Robert Horton from *Wagon Wheel* and Clint Walker from *Cheyenne*, fuelled my boy-into-girl teenage fantasies for the next eight years.

As fourteen turned into fifteen, I began to drop the idea I was physically changing. Instead, I battled to become more of an acceptable man. By then I knew it was wrong to be seen as feminine by the men in my house and the boys out on the playground. I stuffed this side of myself down and only allowed some play in my fantasies at night, riding off into the American West in the arms of a cowboy. Also, I knew from Sunday school that my immortal soul was in danger of being thrown into eternal hell fire for any impure thoughts about young guys in tight swimsuits. It was at this time I knew, and became obsessed with, finding a cure.

In the early sixties, the only role models for gay youngsters like me were the exotic creatures who changed the dresses on the mannequins in Melbourne's department store windows. One day, Mum and I went by bus and train to town, very early, to buy me new school shoes at Buckley's. We had breakfast at a little café called Gordon's, down a laneway near the major stores. I begged her for a milky cappuccino: they were new, European, and very sophisticated. Mum did not realise she had gone into the only café catering to the

hip and alternative crowd who worked in the city. As we sat at our small table, waiting for our food and coffee to arrive, two screaming queens burst through the front doors and grandly took seats at a table near us. Mum told me to stop staring, but I could not help it. My antennas were up.

She leaned in with a very disapproving look on her face, held my eyes, and told me under her breath: “These are homosexuals, men who like other men. It’s very sad.” My heart raced. *Is this what I have to become like?* I thought, clutching my soggy ham, cheese, and tomato toasted sandwich. I hardly ate. One of the guys had blue-pink hair twirled up into a bouffant affair, and I saw he wore makeup. The other guy was blond and whippet-thin. His hair was pushed back off his forehead and teased up at the front, giving him a wave that looked like it was about to break away to the left side of his face. Both had enormous multi-coloured, plastic rings on their fingers. To my horror and secret delight, Blondie winked at me with a look of defiance and amusement. I sipped my coffee as I quickly looked away.

## 5

---

Everyone we met was thrilled about the approaching Day of the Dead. Susan and Jen talked excitedly about their harem costumes, and Steve was *umming* and *aahing* about being put into pasha pants and a turban. They were heading off to a party in North Beach with some members of Susan's dance troupe.

We went to a Halloween party as Joe's guests that same Saturday. He was the Paramount film distribution manager for Northern California and had access to wonderful sixteen-millimetre reels of all the old movies from the thirties and forties. His house parties on the Haight Panhandle were legend. Joe was second generation Mexican-American. He was good-looking, with great skin and a smile that could knock you over. He was into musical theatre, film, and anything entertainment-related and was the first man I ever met who wore a large fake diamond brooch on his coat lapel. Somehow it looked right on him.

As we hurtled up Market and then up Castro Street, he talked non-stop about the great friends of his we were about to meet. After finishing a joint in his car, now pointing 45 degrees down the street, we fell out and walked two houses down to the party. Suddenly I felt nervous and knew I was sweating.

Both Sarah and I felt completely underdressed. Everyone was in some sort of amazing costume, and the raucous strains of Bette Midler could be heard above the hubbub. As we came into the heaving party, we were met by a gorgeous drag queen coming down the stairs from the first floor. She offered a gloved hand as Joe introduced us. “This Is Bette Davis from *All About Eve*,” he said admiringly.

The hair, the dress, all of it matched perfectly. I was stunned by the authenticity of the look.

“You’re a vision in green,” I said, quickly touching the glove. *All About Eve* was one of my favourite films.

“And who are you two?” Bette arched back.

We explained, and an eyebrow shot up.

“Well, my foreign darlings, get in line for a bumpy afternoon and evening.” And within seconds, she was gone, in a swirl of fifties skirts, flashing teeth and tossed, auburn hair, pushing back down the hall through a throng of bodies.

“This is amazing, Joe!” Sarah and I chorused.

Everywhere you looked, there were magnificent outfits and costumes.

“This is San Francisco at its best, my dear,” said Joe, close to my ear.

I could see both Gary and Sarah were just as stunned as me. We made our way down the hall and into the kitchen. It was busy, but at least you could move. Standing by the stove stirring something that smelled inviting and spicy was a guy dressed in tight, white flared pants and a huge, frilly Copacabana shirt. His face was made up, and he had enormous false eyelashes splashed with glitter, and a turban on his head. Just like Joe, he wore a large diamond brooch, but his was stuck in the middle of the turban.

“Come meet John,” Joe invited us. “He rents this house with his partner Duncan.”

Soon we held big margarita glasses, telling our travel stories again over the whirr of the drinks blender. Huge flagons of tequila, bags of limes and ice, and a punnet of salt sat at one end of the kitchen counter, where a very thin, tall drag queen, long black gloves slipping down her hairy arms and a black veil falling in front of her bearded face, was furiously turning out endless batches of booze.

“This is amazing, John.”

“I guess it is.” He looked around with a small smirk on his face as he continued to check on the chili he was cooking. “We decided after being here a couple of years, it was time to show off and let loose for Halloween. We call the house Café Ole.”

And he waved his spoon around above his turban. The kitchen was a fifties deco dream, with a pink flamingo neon light on the wall and neon product signs on top of the fridge.

Duncan, a wonderful looking redhead with very white skin and limpid eyes, had rushed in with dirty glasses in his hands.

“How long are you guys staying in The City?” he asked, settling back against the wall next to the stove. He wore a black pirate shirt, with flared grey high-waisted pants. I saw he wasn’t wearing any underwear. He had on platform shoes that reminded me of the pair the leader of The Tubes wore at Fillmore West.

“We’re here for October,” Sarah told him, lighting a cigarette, “and then we’re heading back to Colorado to work and ski.”

“Why San Francisco?” John asked.

He and Duncan slowly turned and looked at me.

“We’ve wanted to come here for years, haven’t we, Sar? Mostly because of the music. Janis Joplin, The Dead, Fleetwood Mac... But we have to say we’re disappointed seeing Haight Street the way it is.”

“Thank God that world’s gone!” John exclaimed, spoon again in the air. “Aquarius is still strong in all of us, the spirit still lingers on, but we all want a new, better way to live.”

Others in the kitchen nodded their heads.

“And the changes happening in politics and the new revolutionary movement,” Sarah added. “And Alex wants to look at doing post-grad at university here rather than in England.”

I felt I was under a spotlight. “California is beginning to be a place to come to from Australia,” I explained. “We’re in the first wave.”

“Are you two together?”

A big man with red curly hair, wearing a large green and orange kaftan, had just come into the kitchen.

“No, no,” said Sarah, smiling and hugging her large glass. “We were at college together and decided to travel for a while. I’m going to meet up with my sister in Canada, but that’s not for another six months.”

“I’m Kreemah,” he said, pushing between Sarah and me.

He offered a large white hand with three enormous rings. He went on to tell us he also lived at Café Ole. His immediacy was off-putting, and I realised he thought I was gay.

“Well! Great!” said Duncan, and seeing my discomfort, diplomatically moved us on. “Welcome! Come out the back and see the balcony and meet who you want. You’ll see some characters you know—and,” he whispered conspiratorially, “some you don’t.”

“Perhaps I’ll see you later too,” said Kreemah, batting his extended lashes as he took a drink from an outstretched, black-gloved hand.

Gary meanwhile had slipped away on his own. I found him out on the balcony talking with a good-looking guy in a plaid shirt and tight Levi’s, just like him. Sarah had stayed inside with Joe and was being introduced to other guests in the hallway. I noticed someone had put a floppy sombrero on her head and that she looked very happy about it.

“Hi, I’m Travis,” said the guy as Gary introduced me.

“He lives here too,” Gary added.

“Wow, great place to live,” I said, looking into his handsome face.

“My lover Jack and I are pretty lucky. We came out from Dallas on a whim. Jack knew Duncan through another hairdresser, and they had a room for us.” We followed his waving bottle and looked up at the second storey from the balcony, presumably towards their room. “And fortunately, we both got jobs quickly.”

The view from the back of the house stretched across the top of the Castro District to the high-rise buildings downtown.

“It’s a gorgeous city,” I said, smiling at them both. Drunk from the margaritas, I felt confident and a little dangerous. Gary smoked a joint with Travis and offered me a hit. “I think I’ll stay with the booze for now,” I laughed.

Two days before, Gary, Sarah and I had gone to a theatre in the Tenderloin, a seedy district downtown, to see the Andy Warhol film *Heat*. Walking up Van Ness Avenue, another beautiful, wide boulevard that split the city east from west, we’d smoked a joint together. By the time we sat down in the theatre, I couldn’t feel my mouth and found it hard to breathe. I excused myself, telling the others not to worry—that once I had it all together I’d sit up the

back for the rest of the film. I left the cinema and walked slowly around the block for the next hour. Twice men tried to pick me up, and I was convinced everyone knew my secret, that I stood out like a gay lollypop. What could I do about it? It took forty-five minutes before my brain began to settle.

“Are you all right?” Sarah asked as they came out of the movie.

She and Gary looked bemused.

“Sorry to be a pain. I’m fine... I had a bad experience two months ago on Buddha dope. I was with a cook from the Bratskellar in Denver, listening to Zappa, and had to go look in the bathroom mirror to see if I existed. Somehow I thought I was going back there again.”

Some of the men looked at me as I made my way back into the house, and I was careful about looking at *them*. There were moments when I wanted to. This scene was hitting me in all sorts of ways, and getting drunk wasn’t helping. These were gay people! Secretly excited to be there, I was also sick to the bottom of my stomach. I felt so exposed. Eventually, I found Sarah upstairs in one of the bedrooms, leaning against a wall, talking intensely to a guy with a blond beard full of glitter—the Mad Hatter from Alice. Sarah introduced me, and he asked if we’d snorted amyl nitrate before. We shook our heads. Reaching a gloved hand into his large white duffle bag, he pulled out a small vial that he snapped and held under our noses.

I began to take off in my head. My body pulsated with pleasure and panic. We found ourselves rushing downstairs and out onto the sidewalk for air.

“What just happened?” Sarah asked, leaning against a car.

I was standing with my hands on my hips, wondering if I was about to have an asthma attack.

“Wow!” I replied. “That was fantastic. I feel great, such a rush!”

We were both in a world of theatrical delight, danger, and joy.

Joe came out to see what had happened to us.

“Come on back you two and eat some chili! It’s fabulous!”

## 6

---

Like most teenagers, I was ill equipped to discuss my feelings. No one was in the fifties and sixties. All my friends had this problem, but I was also grappling with my sexual identity. I rode to school on my bike each day loaded down with this intense shame and confusion. The rows of magnificent cypress trees lining the way were like gloomy sentinels watching me, judging me as I passed. Each tree represented a fallen soldier from wars that had ended by 1918 and had been gifted by the town to commemorate the men's sacrifice. I felt these noble, dead men frown at me as I passed, puzzled that I wasn't turning into a real man they could be proud of. I saw myself more and more outside acceptable society, and at the same time I longed to be accepted and loved. I imagined a very tense teenage life for myself. I felt like a doomed train going into a tunnel, not sure what I might find coming the other way.

Mum and Dad could not help, not really, and I wasn't prepared to take the risk. School was a Neanderthal minefield. I felt the church offered some sort of hope, so I persisted as an altar boy at our local Anglican church, snivelling in winter into my cassock sleeve, begging God to make me like girls. I was convinced I could change and that this nightmare would finish as I got older and grew out of it. How I hung on to this possibility! It dogged me up to the day I came out.

At sixteen, I began to think that if I went into a seminary and became a priest, I'd be able to hide and eventually be saved from sin. Later in life, I remember smiling tightly to myself as I watched the first cases of endemic child abuse being outed through churches around the globe. I knew some of the men who'd violated children would have been like me in their teens, frightened, lost, looking for safety in a system that might save them from themselves.

My own developing relationship with the physical world outside Port Lonsdale allowed me to imagine some form of eventual escape. Very early on, I began to see that my salvation lay either in Melbourne or, as Joey had suggested, even beyond, overseas—perhaps in London and Europe. Maybe the answers lay there. I revelled in stories of other places. From a young age, I read all the books Mum and Dad had in their small library, including a horrific ten-part series on World War II, through graphic pictures and text. By the age of ten, I was delving into Dad's growing collection of history books. Dad liked his nighttime for himself and Mum, when she could finally stop and put her feet up. I think he would have been happier if he hadn't had kids. He'd sit in his big chair, one leg crossed over the other, reading and listening to music, a cigarette burning in his ashtray, occasionally letting me ask questions about the Romans or Egyptians, and sometimes about the war itself. Dad rarely spoke about his own experiences, only letting us in on the wonders he saw or the animals and insects around him in the jungles of New Guinea. His stories about the size and killing power of tarantulas have scarred me to this day. If there's a spider on a bedroom wall, I'm out until someone else comes in and takes care of it.

## 7

---

Sarah and I left San Francisco as November began. It was hard to say goodbye, but I was keen to get down the coast to Los Angeles. As well as the self-help books I'd read at university, like Thomas Harris' *I'm OK—You're OK*, I'd also come across Fritz Perls' gestalt psychology. Now I wanted to go down to Big Sur and see what the famous Esalen Institute, where Perls taught, was all about. Perls had died in 1970, but I thought maybe there were courses or programs that might help get rid of the sexual identity angst I carried.

Both of us were excited to be away from home, in this incredible culture—away from parental eyes, free to make up our lives any way we wanted. We were also glad to have each other to share the experience with. But it was not always easy. I was bad with money, and Sarah, who often bailed me out, grew to resent it. I knew I was irresponsible, but when I wanted something, I wanted it now and I did not have the sensible, disciplined gene to work within a budget. Later, in therapy, I learned I was a short-termer. As an extension of this, I always looked for help from outside: a teacher or guru to give me answers. I never learned to trust myself and make my own decisions. With little guidance from my parents—love always seemed to be bargained for—I found it much easier to flow with the counter-revolutionary ideas that had come out of the sixties: not

plan for anything, to be in the moment. Deep down, I wanted to get rid of the pain in my gut, but too often got overwhelmed with the hard work required to face up to it, to think it through and trust my own instincts. So I'd find an excuse to stay outside myself, jump into something new, exciting and transitory, and avoid the hard work. Someone else could do that!

The Esalen Institute was a dud and, just like the Haight, was over and passé. By the time we got past the administration desk—the cost of the classes was exorbitant and currently not on offer—and out into the pools, we were facing naked men and women in their forties and older. I knew I had to look elsewhere for guidance.

By the middle of November, we were back in Denver. There Sarah resumed her relationship with the hippy jeweller she had hooked up with in July while I went out to the bars with a friend I worked with from the Bratskeller. I guess he must have been ambivalent himself as we ended up in a decidedly gay-friendly bar, where, emboldened by my experience in San Francisco and fuelled by my first experience of cocaine, I talked with a good-looking preppy guy with short dark hair. He was from Los Angeles, in Denver on business. I told him the truth. He was the first man to hear me say, *I'm struggling and I don't know what to do about it.*

He asked me back to his hotel. He was slow and thoughtful. What I loved most was kissing him and getting to know his body. Weirdly, I was still somewhat removed from the actuality of being physical with him. I was still straight in my head. As we masturbated each other, I believed I was simply exploring some therapeutic process. Although I did see him again, he wanted more sexually, and I was not ready for that. I told Sarah nothing of this, convinced I had gotten it out of my system.

Soon after, we caught a bus to Crested Butte in the Rocky Mountains, where we'd been told work was easy to find. There was

a new ski resort in the town, and new apartments were being built. Aspen, my old dream, seemed too hard.

Crested Butte, looking like something out of the late 1800s, covered five big blocks stretching down one main street. On the side streets were older residential houses and what looked like some new apartments. The valley and mountain slopes were off to the right. The view was everything we had dreamed of. I could see a large development in the distance on the edge of town. It looked like the builders were racing against time to get finished before the season started, and I wondered if we had come too late. Snow had recently fallen.

We got off the bus at the Grubstake, a cowboy eatery in the middle of town. Inside, a curly-headed waiter wearing a black bowler hat gave us menus. When he spoke, we started up in surprise.

“You’re Australian!”

“From Melbourne... Name’s Alex.”

“I’m Alex too,” I said. “We’re from Canberra, from the ANU.”

“Wow, who would have figured? Two other Australians in this remote part of the world...” Alex grabbed a seat and sat down with us. “What are you doing here?”

We told him our story and that we needed a place to crash and get settled for the season.

“This is totally weird.” Alex smiled. “I’m here with my girlfriend and her dog from New York. You can share with us, if you like. We’ve got a big spare room in our loft.”

Sarah and I could not believe our luck.

We moved in with Alex and Judy and her citified, ancient poodle, who was terrified of snow and wouldn’t go out for more than a poo or wee, and two days later, I got a job on the apartment construction

site at the bottom of the main ski run. The foreman found me intriguing and liked to show everyone he went to college like me. He kept asking questions about Australia as if it was some faraway, exotic part of the planet. In the early seventies, very few Americans knew where Australia sat on the globe.

He ended up giving me a false Social Security card number and got me pouring concrete, starting in the freezing mornings. One of my enduring memories of those times is of the sun hitting the mountains in pink, orange and finally gold, and all the young guys—the ones like me with long hair—singing George Harrison’s “Here Comes The Sun.”

Sarah soon got a waitressing job at a pizza parlour in town, and at night, we would go to the Grubstake and listen to music and drink beer. People accepted us quickly, I suppose because of Alex, who had been there a few months, and because we were from another country and easy to get along with. The town was on a tour circuit, so the music scene was exceptional. Members of The Band and The Mothers of Invention stayed a week, and other great performers came through too. Arlo Guthrie, who had been performing down in Denver, came up with a friend, and we were lucky to catch him.

A few weeks later, after the unions visited the construction site, my foreman friend told me I had to finish up. It was fine with me, as it was getting colder and harder to welcome the sun so early each morning.

I saw an ad in a window of a new, small Italian place on the main street. Carol and David, the owners, were a young Jewish couple from New York. She looked like Carole King, with masses of blond-brown hair framing her face. He was very handsome, with black curly hair and a moustache. They heard my history of waiting tables at the guesthouse and offered me the job on the spot. The only other wait-staff was Judy Whitfield, a tall, lovely woman with long brown

hair and grey eyes. Kind, generous and full of fun, we became instant friends, then started dating. Eventually, I was sleeping at her house most nights. One night, we came home from work to discover a package in the post from Jim, a gay friend of Judy's in Los Angeles. It was the new *Love Unlimited* album. She put it on immediately, and for the next twenty minutes we danced in our boots, snow pants, and jackets to the gorgeous orchestral sounds and rich sexy voice of Barry White.

Crested Butte was the final resting place of my heterosexuality. Judy got me to enjoy sex with a woman, and I am glad I had that experience before I finally came out. In a weird way, it probably helped me take the final plunge and return to the Bay Area. I knew that if I was ever able to be with a woman, it would be with her. Yet I was still unfulfilled. My inner conflict became so stark on the mountainside I wondered how long I could keep my desires repressed.

A couple of nights a week, I hung out with some Vietnam vet friends from the building site. I was falling hard for one of them. He was wild, educated, and intelligent, with post-traumatic stress syndrome. He and his buddies would have me over to their apartment and play the Who's *Quadrophenia* through four large speakers. These guys took me into their lives and secrets, the terrible things they did and had done to them in Vietnam.

We were so stoned as the stories unfolded. Kilos of coke had come into town via the resort owner's pilot, who had flown down to Peru and back, and conversations went on into the night. They always snaked back to Vietnam, how terror and boredom lead to drug-taking. I heard how demoralised they had become, the profound psychic distress that had developed after they returned.

There were never any women around, but these guys seemed straight. My guy, Jake, tall, lithe with long blond hair, sometimes put his head in my lap as they talked about those years. Fortunately,

I could never get a hard-on after snorting coke. It was an amazing intimacy—and it drove me crazy.

Back home, I lay in bed with Judy, think of Jake and how, if he would kiss me and ask me to live with him, I would. The guilt ate me up. I still had that projection; that major man living in my psyche; that guy who would complete me and solve all my problems. But it was a line I knew I could not cross with Jake.

These guys, four former Marines, were so fond of me. Jake's best friend Ray gave me a beautiful drawing of himself when I left Crested Butte, saying he hoped I would never forget them. I never have.

There were a number of New Yorkers in town, and the guy who ran the small cinema got a copy of the controversial porn film *Deep Throat*, which he was legally allowed to show for one night. Posters advertised it in all the eating and drinking establishments. It could only be shown at midnight, and everyone wanted to see it, so after work we all went from the restaurant, crowding into the tiny theatre to watch the mind-blowing film in which Linda Lovelace goes all the way down on Harry Reims' beautiful big cock. Man, did that send me into a tailspin!

I had to rave about her with all the other guys later, but secretly my brain had been permanently frazzled with the images of Harry's hairy chest and gorgeous dick—the last nail driven hard into my heterosexual coffin.

As January '74 turned into February, I slipped out of bed for long walks into the night, up into the snow high above town. Under a canopy of brilliant stars, I came close to freezing—desperate to stop my mind whirling, fix myself, be happy with Judy. At one point, four years after my failed attempt in Sydney, I thought of killing myself again. Then in March, struggling back from such a walk, I realised I had to return to San Francisco. The answers lay somewhere there.

## 8

---

Johnny Ashton was my best friend growing up. He and I rode the three miles to Queenscliff High School for the first time after the 1961 school holidays ended. I was twelve and would be thirteen in July that year. I had a rotten old orange bike—the summer holidays had not produced the guesthouse income my parents hoped for—and Johnny, of course, had a wonderful new Malvern Star.

We rode through the cypress Avenue of Honour and up the school hill. On the left was Swan Bay, a large body of salt water stretching to the hills up north. Melbourne was thirty miles beyond. We dreaded coming across older boys from primary school, who had gone to Queenscliff High before us, and of meeting, for the first time, the tough fishermen's kids from the town itself. But somehow we navigated that first year and established ourselves at the school.

I did well that first year, as did Johnny, and I was in the top five of my class. Then in second year, a teacher at the school got her husband in to take maths and arithmetic, for which he was untrained, and my early academic life fell apart. He was hard to follow, and I made that obvious in my behaviour toward him. I still feel somewhat bitter about it. Instead of knuckling under and improving, I became resentful and scornful. Fighting against my fear of failure, I started down the path to being the mediocre student this teacher suggested

I would become. At one point, when I challenged him, he threw me out of the school. I hated him and felt betrayed by my parents for believing him and not me. I didn't forgive any of them for a very long time. Along with a growing self-doubt, the consequence of this experience was that I never developed a good homework habit and took this attitude all the way to university. I let the idea of getting the best results break in me. A nasty brown snake settled in my gut, only to rise up when summoned by my subconscious and hiss 'failure,' reminding me I would never get to the top in life.

Many of the teachers who came to the school over those years were either very young or near retirement. Some were vicious and old school. The young ones had to come to us because they had compulsory expulsion to the country for two years after their teachers' training schools in Melbourne. Many of them hated this necessity, and it showed. Some just told us to our faces.

I did not like a lot of the kids at high school, and my parents were complicit in this. My father was a snob and Mum an aspirational one. From overhearing them talk about the people of the district, I believed we were better than most of them. Those from our local Anglican church, one or two shopkeepers who had come to the town from the city, a lawyer, a doctor and his wife, and some of the members of the golf club were tolerable. Those who really mattered to my parents were well-to-do people from Melbourne or other parts of Australia and these people were, for the most part, always connected to the land. You would have sworn it was County England. So my values were split in two. My nature has always been to favour the underdog, and the truth of it was I liked some of the local kids, as well as the supposedly better-off ones from Melbourne I was encouraged to like.

I often felt vaguely dissatisfied, restless, unhappy, and stuck, without knowing precisely what the problem was, or what to do to resolve it. Like a lot of frightened and unhappy kids, I could be cruel

and vicious at times, and as I gained power in the school ground, I tongue-lashed the weaker kids. I became good at verbal abuse. But I always suffered for it and agonised over the fact I had hurt someone. I went out of my way to fix it. This probably had more to do with my fear of rejection than anything else. I catastrophized each situation and somehow never fully recovered from the embarrassment.

At the end of the summer school holidays, the Melbourne kids would all leave their holiday houses and guesthouses along the front beach, and I was left behind in my small Point Lonsdale backwater. I desperately wanted to go with them to the glamour of city life. I was acutely aware that city people looked down on us. I wanted to be like them, wear their clothes, have their ease and grace, and go to a posh school. Mum and Dad encouraged me to aspire to this lifestyle, while I was anchored in a world they mocked. It was very confusing.

But I did have the long-term goal of getting to university. A teacher I admired at school took me aside one day and told me the only way to get out was through education. I made some strong friendships with kids who stayed at our guesthouse and their families invited me to their Western District properties, or to Melbourne for a few days in the mid-year school holidays. I never wanted to come back home. Over time, I grew to resent my family and was convinced I was crib-switched at the hospital just after birth.

I hated myself for all this unwieldy emotion and confusion. Contradictory characteristics raged within me. On the one hand, I strove to be a good Christian boy and adhere to the lessons I was receiving from Mum and from Sunday school. On the other, I learned how to manipulate those close to me—my family, teachers, and any older person I thought might get me what I wanted. This trait started when I was the cute little blue-eyed boy with the older people in the guesthouse. I took them for a walk down to the lolly shop and sighed about wanting an ice-cream and having no money. I found by the time I started school, I was good at getting my friends

to give me half a sandwich or a biscuit, and because it worked, it became a habit. I still did this shit when I became an adult with my friends in San Francisco. If I wanted something, I wanted it immediately, and I borrowed from others to get it: buy that top, eat that great meal. I felt guilty all the way through—I knew I was being a dick—and all I can say now is, I had very kind and giving friends.

But somehow through this, I hated cruelty to the oppressed above all else. I knew I wanted to be loved and comforted, and there was no one I could turn to for that. And I could see this need in others too. I knew the answers were not within my community, not for any of us. We all just had to shoulder through and dream of a better life elsewhere, as we looked out of the classroom windows at the low-hanging, grey clouds sliding in from the ocean. There was no one locally I could trust and talk with about my angst, no one who could help me change, to like girls in the normal way.

When I think back to those years, we were a lot of different things every day. In our homes—this was the psychological petri-dish we lived in, and rode away from to school each day—we were teens with big, dark secrets. We took all the baggage with us and played it out on each other in the rows of desks we sat at all day; post-war poverty and its ramifications sitting right there alongside us.

By the time I was fifteen, I would look out at Swan Bay, at the black swans and the rolling hills, the ever-changing body of water, and think about ending my life. I looked beyond the water and hills and wondered if there was a place where everything was okay, where I could learn to be normal. As I moved into my seventeenth and eighteenth years, I knew the only way I could survive was if I found people like me, the people Joey had alluded to all those years ago in our talk on the beach. She had disappeared too. By then I think she was still in Europe somewhere, completely out of reach.

I drive to Queenscliff now, past the place where the high school used to be—it is now a park, thanks to my mother’s civic efforts—and realise how beautiful it was to have had that view. But it never registered in those days. It formed a backdrop to the gulag that was Queenscliff High School for me.

There were a few guys I found myself attracted to through those formative years, and if there had been a mutual attraction, something might have happened. There were blinding moments when I got a look at them taking off their uniforms in the changing sheds, at their hairy legs and sometimes stomach hair that made me dopamine sick with desire: those characteristics of manliness.

One of my vivid memories is of a guy called Ross, of the two of us sitting behind room four facing the bay, our backs against the wall and our shirts either off or open. Me discovering the beautiful trail of hair running down from his navel into his grey slacks, joking about him getting hair. He laughed it off and changed the subject. Of course I never said anything about it again. This was always what happened when I got too close. I became good at lying about my desires. I was terrified of exposure and the shame that would entail. I overcompensated most of the time—and thank goodness I was good at sport. I ended up being the captain of sport, and this gave me some cachet in the last two years at the school.

But I always denied my desire to show my difference, to show the side of me I really wanted to show. I loved sport—tennis, basketball, hockey—but football and cricket were the only real masculine prerogatives. These two were the rites of passage to manhood and male acceptance in our state of Victoria. I preferred to dance, to move. If it were a bigger school, or if I lived in the city, I would have been in the school plays or musical productions. But boys in a small country town behaved a certain way. Any show of weakness was picked up by older boys or fathers and pointed out, sometimes kindly, sometimes not.

My godfather took me aside at fifteen and told me I shook hands like a girl. Then he taught me the way to reach out and grab a man's hand and crush it. This is the man who also took me to a prostitute in a hotel on Fitzroy Street, in Melbourne's seedy St Kilda, when I had just turned eighteen—another male rite of passage in his twisted, gin-soaked world. With sadly knowing eyes she looked at me from her seat at the bar, and I looked at her. We knew who we were to each other in that moment. The proposition was dropped with a small hint of a smile at the corner of her lips.

## 9

---

I went back to San Francisco via Berkeley. I had bought one of Ken Keyes Jr.'s self-help books and read it in the mountains over winter. Maybe I could learn from Keyes and stop the ache in my gut? The prospect of leaving the straight world was frightening. I knew so little about the alternative. I'd glimpsed it, of course, the previous Halloween and in a hotel in Denver, but could not imagine embracing it fully. Although I felt the tug towards the friends I made back in San Francisco, I still couldn't see myself as a gay man. But if I could get to Berkeley, to Keyes' Living Love Centre, I might find a way out of my psychological trauma.

To that point, my reading had not got me far. I had read Freud and some of Jung as a university student, albeit superficially, and none of it helped me understand my sexual attraction to men. Their writings were too clinical, shadowy, and seemed out of touch with my age group.

My ANU counsellor had suggested Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, which did exert some sort of influence as I stumbled through life trying to find meaning and understand who I was. In fact, I kept a beaten paperback copy throughout all my moves until I lost it during the AIDS years. By then, I was in therapy and in a period of complete self-absorption: impending death has that power. Initially,

I thought the book might provide answers about what had happened to me as a child, and in that way get me past having feelings about men. Erikson spoke about the different stages we go through in life and how opposing forces in us can be balanced when we single them out honestly. I kept trying to understand what he meant by this, but I could never get enough distance from my self-hatred to allow myself to integrate. Even after I came out, I remained desperate to understand who I was becoming. There seemed to be no way I could make the various elements of myself come together.

At the Berkeley Living Love Centre, I was given a room for a small fee and attended a couple of classes each day. There was emphasis on a vegetarian diet, sharing and trusting others in group processes, and consciousness-raising. I found it curious, watching a winsome hippy girl—Keyes's girlfriend—wrap herself around him whenever he spoke. Ken Keyes Jr. was in a wheelchair, and he spoke of the need for self-reflection, of facing up to the secrets that held you back, and of attaining and shedding the identity you knew. This became increasingly more confronting for me as the week wore on.

Ken's girlfriend came to me on the fifth morning and gently but firmly said Ken advised me to go over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, where he felt my true destiny lay. I was stunned, but curiously relieved. I could never have been happy with this group, which seemed to me to be still stuck in the sixties. Intuitively, I knew I needed different people.

## 10

---

When I was about to turn sixteen, the sports master at school told us the Queenscliff Football Club was looking for our age group to try out for the seconds, or even the firsts—if we were good enough. I was compelled to put my hand up when a few of my friends did. I always tried to win my father's approval, probably my brother's as well, or any other adult male I looked up to who might judge me for being a girlie-boy.

The oval was near the beach, next to a caravan park and the Queenscliff Bowling Club. There was a small, crude concrete clubhouse built onto an older, wooden structure that was supposed to mimic a Victorian grandstand. As we made our way down from the school at the end of the cricket season, I was terrified. I was sure I would fail at this level. I knew most of the younger guys in both teams from school or scouts. Queenscliff was a tough town in those days. They only had to hear me speak to resent me for being posh. The fact I was from Point Lonsdale only added further injury. I was also thin and scrawny and that, too, did not help my case.

A couple of boys I knew at school went cool on me at training, isolating me further. I hated changing in the rooms because the older guys were so comfortable with their masculinity, pushing and shoving each other. I always changed into my itchy woollen sweater

and shorts in a corner, pulled on my boots, and got out onto the oval to start my laps before training began.

I played football with the Barracoutas for two years, and the two best games I played were when Dad came and watched me. One of the two games was in Birregurra, down near Colac, on a wet rainy day. Back then it was a potato growing area and got a lot more rain than it does now. We played in mud up to our calves. I had the ball a lot that day and might even have kicked a couple of goals, but what I remember most was driving back with Dad, talking about the game, until I fell asleep from exhaustion—no pain in my chest, just a smooth, peaceful feeling.

As in all areas of my life, I always guarded against appearing weak or girlie until, at training one night, it all fell apart. There was a nasty guy at the club with a ferret face and shock of blond hair. I was wary of him, as he had lashed out at others. He left school at fourteen and became a full-time fisherman. For whatever reason, he was deeply unhappy and would have made a perfect prison guard, if he had not ended up on the other side of the bars.

One night after training, he turned on me. The coach yelled at me about the previous week's match—for not elbowing the opposition's centre-half back in the face—and he turned on me in front of everyone in the shed and told me to fuck off back to Pt. Lonsdale, "because that's where the poofers came from." It was a terrible moment, so loud and public. He smelled blood and humiliation, while all I could smell was the sharp whiff of liniment oil and gauze bandages. I do not remember much beyond that moment, except I had a pounding noise in my head and knew everyone watched me, to see what I would do. It would be a thrill to tell you I went over and flattened him, but I did not have it in me. I did not know what to do.

Then the coach yelled out something about meeting up to go to next Saturday's game out of town, and everyone started talking and

packing again. Eventually I slowly packed my own bag, sweat and menthol pulling in and out of my lungs, before hustling out of the clubhouse. This was the place where I learned to be frightened of straight men in groups.

I had to repeat Form Five—or Leaving, as it was called—because I chose science and not the humanities courses. Science meant harder study and, of course, I had no discipline for that. At the end of the year, I stood in the kitchen at home and loudly told myself I would not go back to Queenscliff High School. I wanted to go to Geelong College, a private boys' school, to matriculate.

Early one morning, before the guesthouse insanity began, I went into my parents' bedroom. Shutting the door and leaning back on it so no one could escape, I told them in a long rush I wanted to go to university, that I promised to knuckle down and get good grades in the arts, and get in. There was silence, and Mum looked at Dad. Through his cigarette smoke, Dad said they would give it some thought.

Fortunately, the family who owned the Geelong private school my sister had gone to were close family friends. Their reference, and the fact that one of my godfathers had been the school's chaplain before he died in the fifties, got me into Geelong College. Mum and Dad found the money, and I spent a glorious summer knowing I had finally taken my first step away from my roots in Point Lonsdale.

So the year I turned eighteen I was in the private school system, as I had always wanted. By then, my best friends were at schools in Geelong or Melbourne, and now my own feet were firmly planted there as well. It is sick shit, I know, but I wanted in on their world of wealth, exclusivity, and comfort. It had always looked so secure and happy. Over the years, the teenage boys and young men I had met from this world had never seemed threatening. Through education they had a broader view and knowledge of the world, which fitted

with the conversations we had at home. Even though I could see the cracks in this exclusive world, it gave me peace of mind at a time I really needed it. In Geelong, many of the teachers treated me with respect. By then I was too old and exotic to be bullied, and I became known for looking after kids who were.

My new, uncertain confidence almost brought me undone. On Easter Saturday night, at my prompting, three local friends and I left a pub in Queenscliff to get hamburgers in Geelong. As we sped over the Wallington hill, a Mini-Minor crossed in front of us to take the road to Ocean Grove. We slammed into it head-on. The two in the front seat of the Mini, a boy and girl, were killed instantly, while those in the back suffered terrible leg injuries. A further horror for me, beyond my own injuries—I went through the windscreen—was that I knew the dead girl from Queenscliff High. She was truly sweet, and it hit me hard. I saw her distraught and angry mother at the inquest and felt shame.

We were rushed to Geelong Hospital, where I received seventy-five stitches in my face and neck. The others in our car had minor injuries. I was lucky: the glass had just missed my jugular. My front tooth had lost a big chip, and the tooth next to it was also damaged. Both teeth plagued me for years. It was not until I was sixty, with a new, full set of caps that I could look in the mirror and smile the smile I had always wanted.

The week before I returned to College, the headmaster told the school assembly what happened, and when I got back, I was stared at and questioned. Two days later I became Scarface and Frankenstein; thankfully, it soon all got lost in the everyday cruelty of teenage boys.

Years later, talking to my mother about the accident, she told me how traumatic it had been for her and Dad. They had gotten a call at one-thirty in the morning on Easter Sunday, the busiest day at the guesthouse. She needed all the sleep she could get after working all

Saturday in the kitchen. They got up and drove to Geelong and saw me on a gurney being wheeled in for surgery. My face looked like mince-meat. Mum said she asked if I had been driving, and I shook my head. After the surgeon told them I was out of danger, they went home to rest, before the preparation of food for ninety-odd people at Easter lunch.

My face slowly settled down. After four weeks, the stitches were removed, and by the end of the year, with the exception of the chipped front tooth, no one could tell anything drastic had happened. Some girls even said it made me look sexier, a little rougher, not so pretty. With my antenna always up, looking for ways to be a more acceptable male, I went with it. But I still had plastic surgery a couple of years later in Canberra to fix the scarring under my chin. Then the surgeon went over everything again, and my face was back to normal.



Finding his telephone number in a letter he had written me that winter, I called Gary. I had not told him I was coming back to the West Coast, and I did not know if he wanted to see me again, so I was relieved when he told me I could stay at his place in the Castro District for a few days on a sofa-bed. I got a bus from Berkeley to The City, where he met me from his new job at Speedway Copy, a printing firm downtown. He grabbed my arm and helped me with my now crumbling backpack.

“You look so different, you’ve cut your hair,” I said.

Now with short, wavy dark gold-blond hair and a fair, thick moustache, he looked very handsome.

“I got my hair caught in one of the printing machines... Thank God I was with someone! We got the printer shut off quick and that saved my scalp from any real damage.”

“Well, it looks great,” I said, smiling.

It was cold outside the bus depot, with the fog beginning to slip in from the Bay.

“It hasn’t hurt me any in the boy department either,” he laughed as we jumped onto the number eight bus heading up to the Castro.

It was great to be back in The City. I watched the scuzzy areas around Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Streets fly by as we moved up the hill into a better Market Street district. It was still in need of a good clean-up, but to a young man from an Australian seaside town, it was all sophistication and glamour—a magical city.

“I didn’t tell you on the phone, but I’ve moved into a house with a carpenter called Garrett. He’s older than us, but pretty hot. He’s still a hippy. I figured he’d be happier if we were back in the sixties... But he’s cool.”

“Are you with him?”

“I tricked with him once out of a bar on Castro, but he’s too old for me. He’s probably thirty. Anyway, he had a spare room, and I needed to move.”

So there I was, staying with gay men in a house right off the Castro District, the new Mecca for gay men in America. Exciting as it was, my head was in turmoil. I had been vague with Judy about my reasons for moving back to California—and probably hurtful. I had done the same thing to Jenna when I left Canberra. I could still hear Jenna storm out of the Faunce Crescent flat, vividly recall her striding into the park across the street, where I was sullenly perched on a picnic table.

“You need to get your bloody head together!” she shouted. “These great stretches of silence are fucking with *my* head... Just go away and work out who you are.”

She was pissed off, knowing intuitively my destiny was away from hers.

All I knew now was that I had to do something about my self-denial, with no real idea how. I still did not know how to walk across that bridge, from the straight world into the gay world—across the Bay Bridge into The City.

After the Living Love Centre, I had no real plans at all. I knew Mum and Dad would be wondering about me. I had not written to them for two months, and they would certainly want to know why I had returned to San Francisco instead of going east as planned. I was meant to find out about schools in Boston or make plans to meet up with my Australian friends who by now were on their way to the UK for post-graduate studies.

At night and on weekends, Gary and I went out into his decidedly gay world. I stood in the new bars with him and occasionally responded to a guy I knew who was interested, but I kept it light, and I turned back to Gary whenever I felt uncomfortable. Often we danced at the Stud, in the Folsom area, with its mixed, post-hippy crowd. One Sunday afternoon, we walked in and heard Etta James sing with her small band; another time we heard Sylvester and his group. I loved it all, increasingly more comfortable, as I was stretched and moulded into a new way of being. I was a perfect chameleon.

We went up the hill for dinner on Liberty Street, where the Halloween party had been held the previous October. We hooked up with Joe Vigil and went to the bars or had dinner at his place. I started to meet a new tribe of people, who would all become real friends as the months rolled on.

Walking down to Eighteenth one afternoon, perhaps a week after I moved in with Gary, we ran into a new friend of his. Nick had moved to San Francisco from Chicago and had a spare room to rent. I paid him for a month and moved in. I had nothing but the backpack, but there was a mattress on the floor of the room. I unzipped my sleeping bag and tossed it over the mattress until I could get some sheets. I had my own place!

In late March, early April, Judy arrived by bus from Los Angeles. I brought her up to the Castro. Still in love with me, she wanted to see if she could restart our relationship. And no doubt, had I

preferred women, I would still have been with her. Lying on the scuzzy mattress in my bedroom, I haltingly told her about my interest in men, how I had to explore this interest now and see where it took me. Then we smoked a joint and had the most enjoyable sex of our relationship. At least that was how it was for me.

Being with Judy was comfortable and fun, but I still had to come out. In the morning, in the kitchen, Nick was incredulous: he assumed I was gay, and now found himself living with a straight guy. Later Judy met Gary and the boys up at Café Ole—they adored her—and we had a couple of awkward days before we finally parted. I did not want to sleep with her again after that first night, which bewildered her. I felt I was closer to something truly ground-breaking, but still unable to fully articulate what it was. So I began to close off, which is what I had always done to the women who got close to me. Judy left and went down to Los Angeles to meet up with Jimmy Pendergrast again, the gay friend who'd sent her the Barry White album we danced to in our snow gear. It was sad. She was angry, and I felt like I always did: a complete shithead.

Gary and I were spending a lot of time with the boys from Café Ole. I often went up on my own to hang out with them. At one dinner, all members of the household agreed I could move into the tiny room at the top of the stairs next to Kreemah's room for a few months till I worked out where I was going to go next.

I still talked about contacting Boston University to see about a placement, but until then, I wanted to move away from Nick's. Who would not want to swap a mattress on the floor for the glamour of Café Ole? Travis had seen my room, had not liked it, and brought the subject up at Café Ole. Stunned and overjoyed by their offer, I moved up the hill—to the chagrin of Nick, whom I did not see again for many years, despite living three blocks apart for more than a decade.

## 12

---

**M**y final school year finished with the summer of 1967. We finally closed the guesthouse down and converted the crumbling old Victorian structure into flats to rent over the holidays. The great thing for my brother and sister and me was that Mum did not have to cook for anyone but her family. Now, with us gone, she and Dad settled into their retirement. Nana, Mum's mother, had moved into a purpose-built flat some years before, next to our own cottage. When the guesthouse was converted, they turned three rooms that ran down the right hand side of the old building into a bedroom, bathroom, and small lounge. Nana had a wonderful view of the south channel, allowing her to see ships coming and going from Port Phillip, and she had a bell to summon my mother whenever she wanted anything. Mum grew to hate that bell.

Approaching her nineties, my grandmother was still a force to be reckoned with, and her strong opinions could piss people off pretty quickly. But she and I got on well. We always had. She was a major repository of local peninsula stories and remembered the last local Indigenous peoples before they conveniently disappeared out west. Visitors had to tell her something important, usually their best salacious material concerning shame and adultery, or they were not allowed an audience. I heard everything when I brought her dinner. I was her sounding board.

I could have worked harder and gotten better results that year, but as I have said, I had no discipline for homework; like my brother, I was also addicted to television. The results of my final year came out in the *Herald Sun* newspaper the first week of January 1968. I was down at the newsagents when they opened at 6 a.m. The news was not good. I passed, but my marks were not good enough to get into Melbourne or the city's new university, Monash, out in Clayton. Shattered, I lay on the back beach, wondering what kind of work I was good for now that I could not realise my sand dune dreams of university. I felt my magical city friends and my future slipping away, as they did every last week of the summer holidays.

Then an old friend of ours from Melbourne called to say the University of New England in northern New South Wales had opened a new arts department. It was under the direction of the new vice-chancellor, Dr. Zelman Cowen, and there were more than four hundred places to fill. I applied by post, waited two anxious weeks, and was accepted. I had to be there for orientation in the first week of February. We were able to pay for the first year out of the settlement I received from the injuries done to my face. So the tide turned.

With other newcomers to the university, I flew direct from Melbourne to Armidale in a prop-engine plane. Then, eucalyptus in our nostrils, we made our way by bus up the hill to the main campus. The University of New England was out in the country, on the edge of town. The administration building, partially painted yellow, was a wonderful old Victorian brick mansion. The union, offices, libraries, and lecture halls were behind it, sloping away down the back of a hill. There was a massive building project underway and, further down the hill, a scattering of what looked like student residential colleges. We were told places would soon be found for us in the established colleges, but as there were so many newcomers freshly arrived to fill the new arts programs, we were to be housed where we could. A number of us went into old army huts. It seemed like

a precursor to being shipped off to the Vietnam War, I heard some disgruntled kid say. In July I turned twenty, the age of conscription through the lottery.

As I went into the student union the next day, nervous and excited, I heard my name called. I spun around, and there was Joey running up to me! It had been three years since I had last heard from her, and I had no idea she'd returned from Europe. A handsome guy, my height, with piercing blue eyes and long, wild brown hair and full Scottish beard, strolled up behind her. After a big hug, she introduced us.

She and Rob had met in Melbourne when Joey came back from Europe. Rob wanted to study agricultural economics, so they decided to move up to Armidale, where there was a three-year course. They rented a farm ten miles out of town, and I had to go to stay with them as soon as I could. I left them to go to an orientation meeting, thinking how bizarre it was that this wonderful woman was again in my life.

Fleetingly, I wondered if I could open up to her and to Rob—if I could trust them—about my sexual confusion. By then I was working with the idea of curing myself, and I wondered if they could help. I was still mightily confused and freaked out, but I sensed something new in the air, that first rush of freedom away from parental eyes.

Another Alex from Geelong College had arrived the same day as me. He had morphed into a hippy over the summer holidays. One afternoon the previous year, we had gone across to his house in suburban Newtown, and I'd met his Mum. She was a stern, Scottish woman, no fuss. Looking me directly in the eye, she drilled me about what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Now, standing on the grass outside the vice-chancellor's residence, my old smirking classmate looked like a refugee from the flower power movement, and I knew change was possible for me too.

Two weeks later, rooms became available in the established colleges. I was rostered into Wright College, a two-storey wooden structure. My room was on the second floor, at the northern corner. There was long desk under the window, a big comfortable chair, a built-in wardrobe with drawers, and a single bed against the opposite wall. I looked out on the Wright College Junior common room and dining hall.

On my first night, I was seated for dinner three rows out from the raised high table, with eleven other new students and an old boy, our leader, at the head. The returning students and staff all wore black gowns. The third-year boy had a large tureen of soup in front of him, with a stack of bowls beside it. He began to ladle it out. We could have been boarders at Geelong College.

Besides the black gown, our leader was dressed in moleskin jeans, tartan tie, and a pressed, buttoned-down blue-collar shirt. Sternly, he told us we all had to wear gowns at dinner each night. We were silent until John Perry from Melbourne, whom I had just met, spoke up. He was a small guy, with crazy black hair and bright blue eyes.

“No way!” he said. “*I’m* not doing it... I’ve just come out of six years of a formal boy-centric education. There’s no way I’m putting up with this archaic shit!”

“You have to, it’s our rules and tradition,” our leader insisted.

They stared at each other belligerently.

“I’m with him,” said another very handsome boy, also from Melbourne. Then I too, tentatively nodded my head, though I was apprehensive about looking rebellious and being outed by another group of bigger boys than me. Our leader looked at us, bewildered, before turning to his mates on a nearby table. Suddenly we had a number of big, second, and third-year country boys surrounding us, pushing quietly up at the backs of our chairs.

“Back off, man!” John cried out. Then he stood up. “This is ridiculous!”

“You’re ridiculous, you pompous, city prick!” yelled our leader. “I’ll go to the student council or the vice-chancellor before you guys get your way.”

“It’s the tradition of the college—fresher...” This was the menacing, ginger-haired dude with very white skin and freckles now behind me. Images of my old football clubhouse began to intrude on my nervousness. I wondered what might interrupt the stand-off.

A lecturer watching the fracas came down from the high table and told everyone to calm down and eat dinner. This would be handled by the Junior College Committee, we were told. We got a note under our doors to appear at a meeting the following night at 5 p.m. to be censured. None of us went. After we held our own meeting, about twelve interstate guys went to dinner that night wearing short-sleeved shirts and thongs on our feet. The fact there were so many of us gave me courage. Very few of the second-year students spoke to us for the rest of that term, but we were never asked to wear a gown again.

After the incident, John and I became good friends. On term breaks, after I arrived home, I got away to Melbourne and stayed with him and his mother on Walsh Street in South Yarra. My parents approved of me mixing with Melbourne society and made no move to have me find a summer job. He took me into his privileged world of money—the new hippy-infected clothes from the chic House of Merivale and Mr John, great new food haunts, and to concerts. But for the odd dance in Melbourne during my year at Geelong College, and the occasional trip to Melbourne growing up, I was new to it all, and I loved it.

We were intense and young, excited about all the new trends coming to Australia, especially from London and America. Our

parents were definitely aliens now and impossible to talk to. The new world opening up to us was, above all else, about freedom of the individual. It was okay to be anything you wanted to be. The Beatles sang ‘Let It Be’ and ‘All You Need is Love’. We were like thirsty camels finding an oasis after enduring a long, boring, teenage journey across a vast wasteland.

Now I realise how selfish and privileged we were back then. Ironically, many of the people I knew ended up joining ashrams in India or other cultish groups to fill the void of parents ‘who didn’t understand’. Freedom has responsibilities, but not when you’re nineteen, wanting sex every seven minutes, still vastly ignorant, and arrogant about how the world actually worked.

John bought all the records he wanted. At his place, and in the homes of his Melbourne friends, we smoked dope and grooved out to The Beatles, The Stones, Led Zeppelin, Otis Redding, The Who, Dylan, and Cream. We convinced each other there were messages in the music meant for our generation only—coded words to bypass the government, and to allow youth all over the world to connect. We talked of leaving Australia and stalking the world’s delights as quickly as we could.

Back at university, I fell into a pattern of smoking, drinking, and never making it for breakfast. With a thankful sigh, I stopped all sport. I planned my tutorials and lectures for afternoons only, and this became the pattern of my two years in Armidale. I hung out with the different groups I’d befriended and stayed up till the wee small hours every night.

There were three distinct ideological groups on campus, reflecting wider society in Australia at the end of the sixties, and I got involved with them all.

The politically and socially privileged upper-middle classes were represented by the country boys who were there to do agricultural

science. Their university faculty had strong connections to country people all over the state, and they mixed with the town's elite. Then there was the new injection of students, from city and country, who came up to do arts in 1968. Many brought a desire to change society. Others were more traditional, including some on faculty staff. Those who first came in 1968 to teach were more liberal, Labour leaning, and brought new ideas that would change the university forever.

A new radical theatre group started that year, pushing in alongside the established university group. A low-church Anglican group opposing the war in Vietnam had set itself up against the established Cathedral dioceses in Armidale proper. Hundreds of new students with city educations found Armidale and the campus boring and pushed for better facilities and an immediate say in how the university ought to be run. Anti-Vietnam groups formed, and left-leaning speakers came up from Sydney to stir the campus into action against the Liberal Party, who'd been in power for over thirty years. These were important years on Australian campuses nationwide. Young people discovered an opposition voice and pushed their teachers and administrators to change age-old traditions. I believed in an earnest, socially conscious way of life that fought for the underdog, while at the same time aspiring to wealth and the upper-middle-class privilege I had always craved. I did not throw that baby out, and in many ways I have never done. What was bred in the bone has informed me to this day. I march for the things I believe in and believe there must be some sort of revolt to achieve any real change for the health of the planet. I'm certainly more cynical about my generation now. I try to live a good and fair life while I still sit in solid middle-class comfort.

On the one hand, especially in the first year, I remained a low-church Anglican and joined the local group. The minister, who was a history lecturer, held church services in a meeting room on campus. He espoused social causes: Jesus as radical, 'on-the-road' preaching

about injustice and acceptance. I thought I might find some sort of salvation from such kind, earnest people—that somehow I could miraculously be healed and become straight.

On the other hand, I hung out with kids from private schools from Melbourne and New South Wales. Because I had family connections with the land, I went to Bachelors and Spinsters' balls and to parties in the wealthy district of Tamworth. And because I had learnt to hide so much of who I was from the age of twelve, I was accomplished at stretching or cotton-balling the truth.

Trying to be accepted by everyone, my way of communicating with people became compromised and diluted. I was a fading chameleon, trying to fit into groups opposed to one another on fundamental social and spiritual issues. It was psychologically exhausting. I got swept up by our sociology lecturer, Frank Campbell and became staunchly anti-Liberal—much to the chagrin of my father—and in favour of Australia leaving Vietnam. I started to grow my hair longer and to attend rallies in the student union. I joined the left-wing theatre group, which put on plays by Orton and Brecht, and went to wild parties at an English lecturer's house in town. I met exciting adults who mixed freely with students, who could see no barrier between themselves and us. We were just out of school, allowed to drink—at eighteen—smoke, and eat spaghetti with tomato sauce that had garlic in it. It was all very exciting.

And I always looked for men like me, even as I acted straight, with my arm around a girl, constantly freaked out inside if someone said or suggested anything that might expose my growing predilection. There were handsome men on campus. Unfortunately, most of them were straight, conservative, agricultural economics students.

I met Susan in a Psychology 1 tutorial. She was from the North Shore in Sydney, and her late acceptance to the University of New England represented a second chance, just like me. She had shoulder-

length black hair parted down the middle and wore small, Lennon-styled black-framed glasses. Susan always had a cigarette between her fingers. She was painfully thin, with small breasts and a slight stoop. She ate as little as she could and I never saw her going into the Arts Building till afternoon classes began.

Guarded at first and with a wry and cynical sense of humour, it was a long time before we really started to talk, a gradual process all that first year over many glasses of red wine and cartons of cigarettes. She was deeply sarcastic about authority.

In the first term of my second year, we shot down to Sydney with some friends to see Jethro Tull. I stayed overnight in her parents' house, where her father was completely cold toward me—angry even—and jealous and mean with Susan when we escaped to meet our friends. I noticed she was always very still around him, on her guard.

At the back of my mind, I thought I might, at some point, be able to tell her about my problems with sex. Like everyone else in the late sixties, she was unequipped to talk the differences through, or at least I thought so. It would have been such a gamble to make that move with anyone. It was a question of trust. And we all had secrets. Mine seemed to be the most important of all.

Joey and Rob's farm became a haven for a mix of people. Rob invited his more liberal agricultural economics mates, who were still big and butch farm boys and a little intimidating. But because I knew Joey, who leaned to the more radical side of campus, I found some relief out on the farm. Out there, as long as you kept an open mind and debated, you could be yourself and be comfortable with individuals from both worlds.

My passion for the underdog was growing. Some of the lecturers lent me books, which I devoured. David Horowitz's book about American imperialism in South America confirmed the US's current actions in Southeast Asia. By year's end, I found myself marching

with Joey and Rob in the main street of Armidale, the first country town march against the war in Vietnam. The locals distrusted most of the students anyway, but now we were communist sympathisers, and we got a lot of abuse. I felt righteous and excited. The other big moment came for me when, toward the end of that last term, I decided to stop praying and give up the Christian God. It was liberating but frightening too. Now I had no spiritual crutch to save me; that hopeful link to a safe priesthood life was gone forever. I felt exposed, with little to conceal the internal scar tissue that had been building up through my teenage years.

John and Duncan put Café Ole together and had been there a year when I met them. John Reynolds, a few years older than me, was the daddy of the household. He had finished college back in the Midwest—in some form of early computing—and held a managerial position in the East Bay. He had sandy brown hair and moustache, a muscled body, stood about 5'11, and had a big smile. John liked to act and had been involved in theatre in school and college. He was involved in the all-male theatre scene in The City and played many key roles in their lavish productions. He could be cutting and defensive when riled and had an almost photographic mind. He liked to have the final word.

His partner, Duncan, a hairdresser, was 6' and lithe, with dark red hair, white skin, and those big eyes. Like John, he was generous, curious, and with a great flair for design; he was the main decorator of Café Ole. He worked in a salon downtown before opening his own place later in the seventies. Both he and John had taken the Erhard Seminar Training (EST) and were strong proponents of the Human Potential Movement of the sixties. The training was over two weekends and aimed to help individuals clear up issues in their life through experiential exercises.

Kreemah thought it was all a load of horseshit. He did not make the cut for the second Café Ole, when John and Duncan bought a house in the Mission. Kreemah Ritz was a large man who had been with a revolutionary drag group called, for the latter part of their performing lives, The Cockettes. Bitchy and friendly all at once, he worked in a dead-end job—and immediately wanted to get into my pants. A local San Francisco boy who drank Cherry Coke all day, he was theatrical, with an artistic flair, and always rose to the occasion on Halloween. Had he not been so unambitious, he could have been one of The City’s more interesting artistes.

Rape, another John, was known by his surname. He was from Georgia, where Rape was the name of a seed crop. He had a mass of dark brown curls, a small frame, beautiful Caravaggio eyes, and a heart-shaped face. He was a wonderfully quick, bright soul who decorated his room with Catholic imagery of Christ’s dying and death. It was both tasteful and macabre to those who visited and didn’t know him well. His flair for dress-up was legendary in The City.

Jack, another hairdresser and Travis’s boyfriend, had brown, wavy hair and moustache and a naturally muscled frame. I thought him infinitely do-able! Travis himself was the handsome, all-American boy next door. Almost 6’, with a good frame as well, he always kept his dark brown hair cut short. He had come out from Georgia with Rape, met Jack, and moved into Café Ole with him.

Suddenly it all seemed settled. I had a new best friend, Gary, and I was living in San Francisco with a wonderful houseful of men. And I was quietly beginning to tap into those parts of myself yearning to be free. I was a young, firm banana, slowly being peeled back, strip by strip.

Now early May, the weather was heating up, except for those weird days and nights when the fog cascaded over the hills behind us, sometimes looking like a slow-moving series of semi-frozen tidal waves. I went out in a T-shirt for dinner or a walk with the boys and

froze by eight o'clock, begging for a jacket. Summer was coming, but it still took me forever to sort out my clothing whenever I left the house.

I was even less sure about how I was going to stay in The City, or indeed in the States. I was still on a visitor's visa, but somehow knew I was going to make this my permanent home. I fell in love with San Francisco and its people. I briefly contemplated approaching local universities about post-graduate studies, but with six months remaining on an extended visa, I put all such concerns out of my mind. At twenty-four years of age, six months seemed like such a long time.

I loved Americans from the start. From my friends in Denver to Duncan and John in their San Franciscan kitchen, they showed an immediate interest in who I was and in my dreams. They made me feel at home. Most Americans cared less about social background. Theirs was the land of entrepreneurship and of moving ahead, and the seventies was shaping as the decade of the humanist movement's great practical push, with its emphasis on the individual and self-discovery. America had its divisions, of course—race being primary—but in my experience, people looked to your potential, rather than where you fitted into the social hierarchy.

There was no agenda to keep you in your place, especially if you were straight and white. I loved Americans' immediacy: they looked you in the face, smiled, and wanted to know all about you. They were proud of the work they did: it was a major definition of character. *What do you do?* was often the first question they asked and, at first, it shocked Sarah and me. In Australia, personal privacy was paramount. The employment question was for family only, and in any other context considered exceedingly rude. I loved the American immediacy because I loved talking about myself. I wanted to explain myself, to work through my anxieties. West Coast Americans were into the same process. Their current time and place was a petri-dish for this kind of self-discovery.

Many of the young gay men and women coming into The City wanted to get jobs and become part of the wider community. They were socially aware and politically astute and wanted more than the hippy lifestyle their older brothers and sisters sought in the sixties. That was the change I witnessed when I returned to San Francisco in March 1974. The tribal living of the Haight days was being refreshed and updated. People got together and bought up old Victorians, turning them into new, shared living arrangements. Some of the new arrivals knew each other from college or high school and were from towns in the Midwest or from the South. Many wanted to get away from their families and had not told their parents they were gay—only that they had received a job offer in the Bay Area and were going west to start a new life. Others had been rejected for their difference.

Liberty Street, aka Café Ole, was a good example. Here were six men happily living together, sharing costs. The social consciousness was shifting. San Francisco witnessed a breakdown through the collapse of the flower power movement: drugs and mental illness came close to destroying a neighbourhood. Now groups of young guys were sinking their futures into The City. The sixties ethos of self-discovery still remained, but very few of the young people who now arrived would crash on just any floor, or eat brown rice, or spend their days strumming a cheap guitar in Golden Gate Park. They wanted to slip successfully into straight society and be accepted that way, or they wanted to hang from a lamp-post in sequins and feather boas and scream for their right to be free.

There were now seven of us in Café Ole—across four bedrooms and my small room: John and Duncan on the second floor, along with Rape, Kreemah in the large front room, and Travis and Jack in the attic room overlooking downtown. This was the new tribal structure being formed all over The City, in households both straight and gay. The house was a well-kept Victorian, painted yellow and

white. The boys made it into a real home. With beautiful birds of paradise growing profusely in boxes under the living room window, Café Ole deserved its exotic name.

I spent a lot of time in the kitchen, talking to John, the main household cook. He asked me about my life in Australia and how I got on with my family but never pushed me about why I came back to San Francisco from Colorado. He answered all my questions with honesty and directness and suggested that as a tourist, I get out and explore the sights.

And that was how, a month after I moved to Café Ole, I found myself walking down the hill to the Castro village, stopped, on the corner of Nineteenth Street, telling myself and the world:

“I’m gay!”

It was an incredible moment for me, and I hope, the universe! There on the corner—one block from the centre of the gay world—I had an immediate, intense vision of standing in sunlight bursting through white clouds that illuminated the side of a large, grassy hill. I looked back at the darkened wood from which I had emerged. I was safe. I was out of the world of Grimm. I felt a mantle lift from my shoulders and melt into the air. When the vision passed, I quickly looked around and wondered if anyone had seen me acting weird.

Then, feeling foolish and giddy, I thought, *What the hell will I do about it now?* I wanted to rush home and tell the boys, but instead went down to Toad Hall for a beer and to openly look at men, to see how I might fit in. Back at the house later, everyone was great about my news and pretended they did not know I had struggled with coming out. Then a few nights later, laughing round the dinner table, they told me how they had bets going since I moved in, as to how many days it would take me to realise the truth and share it with them.

One of the first things they suggested we all do together was to go to the Rich Street Bathhouse in the Folsom District. These baths were a vanilla version of the heavier scene at The Barracks, a place for men who didn't identify with the more effete stereotypes of the time. I was worried about both scenes. The boys believed I had to 'pop my cherry,' as Jack gaily put it, and they all agreed it was a great way to ease into gay sex. If I wanted to hook up with someone, great; if I did not, I could watch and see what I liked and what turned me on. So that Friday night, around nine, we all set out for the new gay scene in the Folsom Street area.

I was nervous. Everything was new for me: *everything*. Going through that bathhouse door felt like some weird initiation into a secret society, something I had been warned against all my life. Once I had paid my money and shown how to use the lockers, I found out—to my horror—I had to take off my clothes and put on the tiny towel I'd been given with my locker key!

Except for the football and cricket changing rooms at school, I had never been exposed before to so many men. Then my housemates abandoned me. What else did I expect, to be led around by the hand? After I fidgeted around near a small table of leaflets in the hallway, I started my first circuit of the bathhouse. I nervously pushed through blackened rooms and steaming spaces until I came face to face with myself, alone, standing in front of a full-length mirror at the end of a corridor.

It was a shock. I had never looked at myself as clinically as I did that night. I had never thought about myself as a sexual object. When I was straight, I was not defined by how I looked, at least consciously, but as a gay man I intuitively knew I was; and now it mattered. I was paranoid. Since women had always wanted me, I had never been concerned about how my body looked, how big my cock was.

From an early age, it had been drummed into my brother and me that all we had to do was find roles in life that would be able to provide for a wife and family. Looks helped, but in the long run were not important. Being gay was different. I suddenly knew what sort of pressure women felt, having to create an image to appeal to men. *No wonder gay men and straight women have so much to talk about*, I thought as I faced myself in the mirror.

I knew I liked hot, hunky, hairy, masculine, and self-assured men. And I realised this was probably what most men would look for in me. I could see I did not fit that image at all. The boys had told me I was tall, with Aussie blond good looks, a firm, round butt, and wide shoulders. But I could see I had no chest and that I *did* have a paunch and skinny legs. Something had to be done. I went back to my locker, got dressed, and waited in the foyer for my housemates to reappear.

My vanity was not going to let me have sex with anyone until I knew I was in peak condition. I did not realise, of course, that this was the perfect ground zero for the proliferation of narcissism and self-hatred. It took me years in therapy later to combat it.

The next day, back at Café Ole, I began my quest for the body I wanted. I was technically on holidays and had the house to myself. I put on Elton John, Bette Midler, and Barry White and for two hours did jumping jacks, push-ups, and sit-ups. Jack gave me his barbells to work on my arms and shoulders and, miraculously, within three weeks I went from a 33" to a 30" jeans size. I started to get definition to my chest and arms and to develop a small six-pack. Having played sport most of my life, my tall, rangy body responded beautifully to the new routine. Within a month, I could go out in a tank top and jeans feeling good about my new physique, and now, looking into the full-length hallway mirror, I knew I was ready to go back to the bathhouse.

The first time I had sex as an out gay man was with this hot little friend of Travis's who often came over to the house. He had dirty blond hair and a perfect, slim body in tight jeans and T-shirt. Nick was also a waiter at Travis's restaurant on Upper Fillmore.

One afternoon, sitting in the Café Ole living room, he said suddenly: "Why don't you come over to my house and listen to some music?"

I looked like a bunny in the headlights, and he put his head back and laughed.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to bite! Unless, of course, you want me to... It's no big deal either way. I think you're cute, Alex. I've seen some of your Aussie life-savers in *Life* magazine and... Well, let's just see where it goes."

He left, and I went into the kitchen and nervously told John I had been propositioned. John put a hand on his hip, while the other continued to stir something in a pot on the stove.

Looking at me with a sly smile, he said: "Well, it has to happen sometime, and Nick's real cute, don't you think? Just go and see what happens. If you don't want to do anything, say so."

At eight o'clock that evening, I walked down Castro Street and across Market to Nick's apartment and knocked on the door.

"Hey, great, you came!" he exclaimed. "Come on in."

As I walked through the door, he grabbed my arm and pulled me into his bedroom. He took my shirt off, then his own, as we struggled to get out of our jeans.

"Can you keep your underpants on?" he asked.

I nodded. My dick was dying to get out, but I shoved it to one side and pushed up against his pillows. Nick smiled as he went

across to his chest of drawers, where he pulled out a multi-coloured assortment of Speedos and dumped them on the end of the bed.

“I love your country’s Speedos! They’re becoming a real craze here among a few of us. I wear a new pair most days.”

And with that, he slipped out of his white jocks and stood facing me with a nice hard-on. Then he slowly pulled on red Speedos. All my summer memories flooded back: hot boys in their swimwear on the back beach at home. Sliding up to the end of the bed, I grabbed him and sucked his cock through the red nylon. Eventually he wanted more than that, and I obliged.

I saw Nick again, but the Speedo thing got tired, and I could see there was not much more going on past his tan line. A week later, with pus coming out of my cock, I went to John on the quiet and told him something was wrong. “It could be an STD called gonorrhoea,” he told me and sent me to a doctor down the street. Numb and ashamed, I walked down Castro Street. I could not believe I’d gotten a filthy, vile disease from my first gay experience. I immediately thought it was some sort of punishment, and those dark woods beckoned again.

Fortunately, I had a great doctor, who was more like a therapist than a physician. He took me through the story of STDs, prescribed a regimen of penicillin, and said it would clear up in ten days or so. I was not to have sex until then. I swore to myself—and to him, out loud—that I would never have sex again. He just smiled, while I slunk off to Star Pharmacy on the corner of Eighteenth and Castro Streets.

All the boys were sympathetic. Rape and Travis both shared that they had had it too and laughed it off. But they did not laugh off my prudishness. They told me there were much worse things to get, like syphilis, herpes, and hepatitis. That was when, seeing the expression on my face, they burst out laughing.

Gary agreed with them when I caught up with him later. But I think what troubled me was the idea that casual sex was not a proper way to live my life. I wanted to meet just one man, fall in love, and settle down with him forever. This theme still pervaded *The Bay Area Reporter*, which I read at the dining room table each week, along with the editor's concern about the rise of STDs, one of the consequences of the sexual revolution now in full swing in The City. Monogamy, for many gay men, had come out of the sixties as a way to live alongside straight people, with marriage equality a distant objective as well. I saw this as a way I could be accepted by straight people—and now a way to be disease-free. I was going to take my time and meet that special man. I told anyone who'd listen about the rise of STDs in The City, alongside the rise of promiscuity. I was told to stop being so self-righteous.

For most, San Francisco was the new, shining Mecca. Word was a thousand gay men and women were arriving in The City each month. Herb Caen, a widely read journalist, said something like that in. I knew I was lucky to be part of it. Gary and Duncan were teaching me how to make myself look presentable—and hot—a whole new way of seeing myself, and by the end of May, I moved completely out of my hippy phase. Being gay gave you different priorities. Now you only had to provide for yourself. But you did have to market yourself to other men based on your looks. Your talents came second. Jeezuz! What a way to think!

Now when I walked down the street, I expected something to happen. I was excited to think I could flirt with all the guys who, like me, had just arrived. It was a thrill to know someone might turn his head to look as I passed. To openly flirt on a main street was quite unbelievable. It became a ritual for the entire gay population in San Francisco to walk the three blocks of Castro Street. Then over the following few years, it became a parade ground, a promenade for gay fashion, exhibitionism, and for hot, furtive looks. The Castro was still

a small village in 1974, and there was tension between the people moving in and the Irish workers and their families who'd made it their home from the beginning of the century. But I was oblivious to that.

What I quickly got was, I now had a new skin, and was marked by my sexual identity. I became conscious of the fact that not everyone liked me as a gay person. When I shopped in the supermarket off Collinwood Street or went into Cliff's, the local hardware and general store, where I knew some of the boys were straight, I felt self-conscious about the way I might be perceived. Did they hate me because I was gay? It felt weird to go from one identity to another and to suffer consequences for that choice. I was just the same inside, and I had been at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy only a month or so ago. I had been an educated, Western Caucasian straight male, which afforded me a privilege I always took for granted. Now, as I worried about the way I was being treated at Castro shop counters, all those fears of being found out as a teenager, of being called a sissy, sat rigidly on my shoulders. All that shame and guilt bred in the bone now had a different twist: I was gay, a poofteer, a faggot. Over the next few years, I set out to learn how to balance this—my real lifestyle—against how my family, old friends and future co-workers would receive me as someone out and, hopefully, proud.

Back up the street, I had a new, accepting family of men. Dozens of tribes of men (and some women) were moving into The City's large old houses, doing them up and setting up home. We created a new family structure and learned how to support one another physically and emotionally—and for some, economically.

When two houses socialized together, there might be between sixteen and twenty people. Lunch or dinner would turn into a party, with whirring blenders, tequila, vodka, limes, lots of ice. We cleared the living room and danced to Bette Midler, The Manhattan Transfer, and Elton John into the small hours. You could hear music

somewhere in The City most weekends. The big gay dance parties didn't start until '77. If you weren't out at The Stud, or at Oil Can Harry's on Polk, or at the City Disco in North Beach, the place to have fun, dress up, and party was at home. Everyone had pot, and most people smoked—catching the bus, going to work, shopping for a new sweater or for sex, and before they stepped into the shower in the morning. Every block had a dealer. Come the late eighties, every block would have a therapist.

I came back to Armidale in February 1969 with a Commonwealth Scholarship. Despite my lack of attention to lectures, I had done well in the exams. Many of my first-year group moved with me from Wright into Drummond College, which had just been completed. I moved into a modern room at the end of the second floor hallway. We still ate at Wright, but otherwise got away from the conservative agriculture guys. We were the first mixed college on campus.

I was more comfortable at university now and found it harder to hide my desire for men. As I began to understand human behaviour and to find like-minded people on campus, I felt safer. Despite the fact I'd be labelled a poof, I wanted to talk to someone about what I believed was happening to me.

There were a couple of guys in Drummond who were incredibly good-looking and masculine—one in particular. Rowan was tall, handsome, with brown-blond hair, a wide smile, and perfect teeth. He was all-boy, played rugby, and drank hard with all the other country boys. He had beautiful chest hair, and I found it difficult to be in the showers with him and not stare at his lovely thick cock. All that year, he fulfilled my troubled, masturbatory fantasies. We got on well, and he often sat with John and me at lunch and dinner.

One night as I studied, there was a loud bang on the door, and Rowan drunkenly stumbled in and fell on my bed. He was in a pair of red Speedos, on the way to the showers, but decided to come and talk to me first. He was a Greek god, lying there, straight out of Gombrich's high school art textbook. He pushed his head back into my pillow, babbled at the wall, and gave me time to burn deep into my memory cells the image of his gorgeous crotch, hairy stomach, and massive legs.

I hoped there was a subconscious angle to his visit, but instinctively knew he did not want me to pull down his Speedos and blow him. Not that either of us knew then what a blow job was! In the end, fearing what other guys would say if they came to the room, I bashed him a few times, dragged him up, and pushed him out through the door. I told him to sober up and get to bed. I was shaken, traumatised by having had him so close. I was still ignorant of what sex with men entailed, but I knew I would never get the smell of him out of my nostrils, and that I just wanted to keep inhaling. Something was definitely wrong with me. I could see a locomotive coming down the rails, and my left foot was pinned between a sleeper and the cold, hard metal.

Lack of sex dominated my life, as it did with most of the kids my age. Some were pairing off, and there was always scandalous gossip about guys and gals sleeping together in Drummond. We were the first co-ed college, after all, so we had to be having sex. It was all good cover for me.

I did have girlfriends, and one or two I came close to fucking, but somehow I always extricated myself. Over the two years at Armidale, I know I hurt a couple of girls this way. I eventually lost my virginity to a girl one weekend at Joey and Rob's farm. I could not get it up properly. She was kind and sweet, and in the morning, lying next to her, I felt impotent and incapable of honesty. I was embarrassed. Back at university, I found it hard to look at her. I was

evasive whenever we met. One of my lifelong ambitions has been to find her and apologise. The look on her face the first time I snubbed her when we passed each other going into the library, has stayed with me. From that moment I retreated deeper into my sexual paranoia.

That second year, I turned twenty-one. A tutor I became friends with, her young daughter Nicki, and two friends from Wright College took me down to the coast to have lunch and get away from campus for the day. This was all I wanted for my milestone birthday. I was feeling stifled and saw myself at the top of a roller coaster ride slipping down into a bad place.

And then for a moment, at the bottom of the windy, subtropical Dorrigo mountain road, I was swept away. The pain in my chest dissolved as I caught my first glimpse of the unforgettable Bellingen valley: a shimmering green surrounded by mountains, crystal clear streams, and the majestic river snaking through the valley.

Later, walking on its bank, separated from the others, the sky was low and grey, the scene beautiful and wild. I looked up at the clouds and saw myself staring out from the windows of Queenscliff High, connected by a single existential thread of torturous, mental barbed wire. My unhappiness stretched all the way back to those days, struggling to push my bike to school against winter winds, breathing deeply to ward off an asthma attack before I got back into the warmth, where it smelled of chalk. I realised that day, in that moment by the river, that there was no way out of such trauma. I could not see how I could be cured. I was trapped, going around and around on a gilded merry-go-round, the music blaring in my head. In that bleak and beautiful place, on my twenty-first birthday, I decided to kill myself.

All I could see around me were happy, excited young men and women finding each other, while I lived a filthy, sick lie, continually hurting women. If I continued the way I was, it would be my life

forever. I could keep faking it—I could meet a girl and get married—but I knew I would be looking over her shoulder, past an earring, to a beautiful man beyond. Looking out the car window on the way back to Armidale, I thought about the best way to end my life.

In the September holidays, I was given a small ray of hope. Joey, Rob, and I decided to go to Sydney, to spend a few days eating and going to the theatre. Joey heard about a hotel in Sydney with a new restaurant serving Mediterranean food, something she missed from her time in Italy and Greece. So we trucked down the highway in their funky old VW van to the city. We found the pub in Darlinghurst and had one of the most memorable meals of my life—prawns cooked in olive oil with big chunks of floating garlic and pasta with a fresh, cream sauce I had never had before. We kept ordering the prawns as Rob and I marvelled at these new taste sensations.

The next night we went to *Boys in the Band*, a sophisticated new play out from New York. In the crowded foyer of the old Sydney theatre, I discovered the play was about homosexuals and the way they lived in New York. For a moment, I stopped breathing. I knew there had to be men like ‘that’ in the foyer around me. I was sure everyone looked at me and knew exactly why I was there. It was a moment of sickening excitement.

The play, a tragedy, was nasty and sad, with a hopeless ending, and helped reinforce my wretchedness and resolve. But it did contain a beautiful, masculine couple who visited the main character in his apartment. One of the men was so handsome I imagined that if I found someone like him and lived the life this couple seemed to have, then I might be all right. It was something to hang on to, to work over in bed, where I was able to create a hot picture of his face.

The following night, we met up with Susan and saw *Hair*, the new musical sweeping the world. We had seats near the front, and I was swept away by the music and the message, and the fact that it

was such a clear statement of change being made by young people, especially those opposed to the Vietnam War. At the end, when they invited the audience up onto the stage to dance, I was one of the first to run up. As I gyrated and laughed, thrilled to be so close to members of the cast, one of the main actors grabbed me round the waist and whispered in my ear that I ought to try out for the show.

“You have the look,” he said, admiring me. “Are you in theatre?”

“University plays, yes,” I told him, flattered.

Then I became terrified as he spent too much stage time with me. Maybe he thought I was gay, that I wanted him? It was my classic push-me-pull-you reaction: on the one hand, a deep desire to give everything up and rush off to get into this exuberant show and all that might come of it; on the other, my deep-seated fear of being seen as a homosexual. I hurriedly left the stage with images of naked men imprinted vividly on a memory stick in my head, found the others, and went to get a drink, shaking inside, not telling them a thing.

The next day, we drove back up the road to northern New South Wales. I was a mess of emotions, thoughts, and doubts. How could I possibly make it? I felt trapped. I sat next to the woman who had told me when I was twelve I needed to get away from Australia. It was the only thing that could save me. We passed through a forest, when Joey made a sudden exclamation about the beautiful red and green flowering eucalyptus trees.

“I can’t see the difference,” I said, puzzled by the solid block of bright, deep green I was looking at.

“Can’t you see the bright red, too?”

“No, I’m red-green colour blind.”

She reached across and put a hand on my leg: “Sometimes, Al, I feel really sorry for you.”

I wondered, stung by her pronouncement and always in a state of self-examination, if she meant more than just the colours. As the bush swept by, I kept my burning face turned towards it.

## 15

---

I first saw Richard standing against the old Hibernia Bank building on the corner of Eighteenth and Castro Streets. He was 6'3", built big, wearing torn blue jeans and a plaid shirt hanging open off wide shoulders over an old white tank-top. His black, shoulder-length hair was swept back above high cheekbones, an aquiline nose, and a thick black moustache. For a second, I caught my breath. After one or two brief flings with men, and still new to the experience of being gay, I quickly passed him after I crossed Eighteenth.

He looked dangerous too, like he knew way too much about sex, as if he had a hidden grasp on the process most men would have just flirted with—especially someone like me. But at the same time, as I looked at him, leaning back against the wall, one leg propped up behind him, I could see he was the knight on a white charger I used to beat off over in college back in Australia. He was the man who could come into my life and make it all right. He was Rock Hudson or John Gavin, sweeping some glamour woman off into the future, informing my twelve-year-old fantasy life at the beach, watching summer movies screened in our small town hall, minutes away from sunburned bodies and crashing surf.

His eyes brushed over me on their way to fix on a hot, bearded guy standing on the corner across the street, outside Star Pharmacy. I realised he was looking for someone to hook up with. I sighed

as I walked up Castro to Liberty Street and put the longing for such a man behind me. I knew I had a lot to learn. I was frustrated and horny and still wide-eyed and excited about embracing this new lifestyle in this amazing city. I knew this guy was not for me. After all, I wanted a doctor or a lawyer, or a construction foreman with a decent salary, someone I could tell my parents about at some point way down the road—not some guy who looked like he needed a bath and a job.

Gary and I settled into a routine going out together. Gary had the new Castro look down: blue jeans, flannel shirt, leather or Levi's jacket and full, clipped moustache. I was clean-shaven and unable grow a moustache. My look was very British, whether I liked it or not. Duncan had cut and styled my hair shorter, and I now had a thirty-inch waist; I knew I was okay-looking, but still too boyish for my own taste. I wanted to look like a butch American, like I came in from the *Bonanza* ranch to the big, bad city; to me there was nothing sexier than the Marlborough Man.

We often started out at Toad Hall, then moved on to the Midnight Sun and looked in at one or two of the other bars, now proliferating in The Castro. Or we caught a lift down to Folsom with one of our friends with a car and hit the new bars down there. We took Folsom Street more seriously than The Castro. Many of the guys in that scene were into leather, S&M and sex that was heavier than we wanted to get into at that time. But it was still all about sex—and the possibility of having it put anticipatory lumps in our throats and jeans.

One day in early June, I rocked up to Gary's full of anticipation. We were going to have dinner, go cruising at Toad Hall, and then on to a new leather bar, The Ramrod, recently opened on Folsom Street. It was part of my education, Gary said, but I knew he was becoming more interested in leather and wanted to find out what kind of men would be there, and to see how they dressed.

I knocked on the door, and someone with a deep voice called out, "Come in." Then as I passed the bathroom on my way to the kitchen, I heard that voice say, "Hello." Someone was lying back in the old freestanding tub, facing me. He seemed to dwarf it: two massive, tanned hairy legs splayed out on either side of a broad hairy torso and massive crotch. He looked at me from under hooded lids, slowly moving water across his stomach as he told me his name was Richard. It was the guy from Hibernia Bank.

I tried to keep my eyes on his face as I told him my name. He asked me where I was from. I told him. If he had his way, we would have continued like this for the next half hour. But I was freaked out. I had stopped breathing. I wanted to get back to Gary and find out what the fuck this hot guy was doing in his house.

His full name was Richard Locke, and he was a friend of Garrett's. Gary told me that he often crashed at the house, that he and Garret had similar hippy outlooks and lifestyles, with their longish hair and scruffy clothes. They ate something called muesli. I came back to San Francisco from the mountains of Colorado, where everyone still dressed like the Grateful Dead. Unlike Gary, I found these men very sexy. Who didn't want to go to bed with James Taylor?

Garrett came into the kitchen from the back garden, and we sat down at the big wooden table to wait for Gary. He wore overalls over a dirty white T-shirt, thongs on his feet. He always looked so self-assured. I could not just stare at him, but I wanted to: he was so good-looking. Long, thick black hair, parted down the middle, fell down his back. He had an even face with a beautifully trimmed black moustache over full lips, and his eyes were a deep blue. Garrett had been in San Francisco throughout the sixties and after making herbal tea, spent the next half hour answering my questions about the times and the music. I could have stayed and talked with him all night.

He leaned back at one point and handed me a photo stuck to the wall near the fridge. It was he and Richard, walking arm-in-arm at the first Gay Freedom Day Parade in 1971, coming down from Polk Street to the Civic Centre. They looked proud to be demonstrating their preference and chosen identities. Gary, who had finished getting dressed, impatiently watched us from the hallway. I got up to go.

“Can I hook up with you guys when you go down to Folsom Street?”

This was Richard, who walked past Gary in no shirt or shoes and then grabbed a chair. I noticed he did not wear underwear as I could see the outline of his cock on the inner thigh of his jeans. But neither Gary nor I were keen on his proposal. We wanted to go out together, eat, and get into the bar scene and cruise. We both looked good and knew it. We didn't want an older guy along.

“What the hell would we talk about with him?” Gary said as we set off.

But he yelled from the front door that he would be at Toad Hall around 9:30.

After dinner, we walked into a packed bar. As I said before, this was the first major gay bar I had gone to after coming out. On my first visit, a few weeks earlier, I left with a hippy blond guy, who came up to me with a beer as I nervously pretended to prop up a corner of the bar. I had a terrible time with him back at his apartment. He did not get my newness to sex with men and was clumsy and impatient. When I saw him three years later at a summer Castro Fair, I had to laugh to myself at how far I had come along from that embarrassing afternoon.

We were in the bar about half an hour when Richard was suddenly at my left arm. Gary and I missed seeing him arrive. He smiled his killer smile and asked what we were doing next. After we agreed

to go down to Folsom, we left, and as we pushed out onto the busy pavement, I watched the men there watching *him*.

Sam, another friend of Gary's, met us at The Ramrod, and after one or two beers we went on to The Ambush, a friendlier bar to Castro men in denim and plaid shirts. As we discussed living in The City, what we did and what we hoped to do, I found myself talking more to Richard than to the others. We were on stools at a corner of the bar. He wanted to know about Australia and my life there, and when I asked him about his own past, he took his time, and I could tell he wanted the conversation to be real.

He oozed a strong, quiet sensuality. The way he looked at you—the way he openly looked at any man—invited you in. His black hair was slightly receding, beginning to grey at the temples. He rolled up the sleeves of his plaid shirt, worn open over a white T-shirt and big hairy forearms. His hands were big, too, and he wildly threw them around whenever he got excited. Then there was that smile, those perfect white teeth and those beautiful lips! I wondered if I babbled at him too much and stared too hard as I answered his questions. I was nervous about being with him so long, certain he wanted to crack onto someone else, soon. Other guys had positioned themselves around us, hoping he might turn away from me and see what else was on offer in the dim light of the bar.

“You want to come home with me?” he asked suddenly, leaning in to be heard over the pulsing music.

I must have looked perplexed or shocked. I asked him to repeat what he said. He smiled and asked again if I wanted to go back to Nineteenth Street and spend the night with him. I could feel the heat of his breath in my ear. I took a deep breath and, remembering the outcome of my first couple of experiences, played for time. I told him I was unsure what Gary and I were doing after we left The Ambush and that I needed to check in with him first.

He backed off immediately. With a crooked smile, he said he understood and if later, we were all heading the same way, we could hook up and go back to the house together. Then he took off for the toilet.

I found Gary and Sam talking to three other guys. I stood with my hands in my back pockets, looking into the distance, and Gary asked me if there was something wrong. When I leaned in and told him Richard had asked me to go to bed with him later, he burst out laughing.

“Really, and what did you say?”

“Something lame about having to check in with you...”

“Check in with *me*? I’m not your mother,” he laughed. But he could see I was freaked out and put his hand on my shoulder. “What are you worried about? Is he too old for you—too big, too sexy? At least you know he’s had a bath...”

Sam had been listening in on our conversation.

“You mean that hot dude over there?” he asked.

We all looked around just as Richard decided to join us. I wanted to disappear through the floor but shot off to the toilet instead. *What am I going to do?* I thought, looking into the filthy mirror. I had drunk a few beers by then and at least felt no pain. As I stood at the urinal pissing, I asked myself, *What have I got to lose? It’ll only be the one time anyway, as he’ll obviously move on. If I’m not very good at it, that’ll be that!* I buttoned up my new, tighter jeans and went back out to the bar.

“Hey, you ready to go?” Gary shouted as I pushed back through the crowd. He was waiting with Richard and Sam. We got back to Market Street and caught a late Number 8 bus to Castro. Richard sat next to me in the bus and put his arm along the back of the

seat. The invitation was still there. Gary grinned and shook his head whenever he looked at me.

There was more than just the fear of a bad performance. Richard was a physical god, but he also did not match my image of the man I would be attracted to and go home with. He was from a very different background. Of course I know that is all bullshit now, but back then, it still mattered to a well-bred, Empire-raised Australian, even one claiming to be part of the revolution, open to all the freedom America offered. Richard seemed almost too free, his views a bit up in the air. I wondered what we had to talk about afterwards.

We got off the bus outside Twin Peaks. Gary told me it was the first bar to have large open windows and proudly proclaim itself as a gay bar. "And it's owned by two women," he said, waving his arms in the air.

As we walked down to Eighteenth Street and got close to the house, Richard pulled me back. "Listen," he said, "what about having breakfast with me tomorrow?" *Wow, he wants to keep this going,* I thought. "Or we can go to Dolores Park and hang out and talk some more?"

And unexpectedly I found myself replying: "Why don't we go up to Liberty Street now and see about breakfast from there?"

He grinned.

I said goodbye to the others, waved to Gary without looking at him, and seemingly the next moment found myself at Liberty Street. I stopped Richard as we came up the stairs to the house, turned, and looked at him.

"Listen," I said. I took a deep breath and looked into those grey, intelligent eyes. "I'm new to this. I've only had sex with a couple of guys, and it hasn't been the best. I don't want to go on with it if you're expecting some full-on, experienced dude-on-dude sex romp." I let out a breath and waited.

As he looked away, and then slowly down, I thought, *Well, that's it, he's off!*

Instead, he said: "Seems to me like it'd be fun to play with you, Alex—whatever happens."

And with that, he leaned in and kissed me full on the mouth and pulled me tight to his body. I cannot remember ever kissing a man like I did in that moment. It almost brought me to my knees, it felt so right. The longer it went on, the more I found lost parts of myself coming up for air. He wanted to be there, I wanted him there too—it was good. I felt his cock hard against my leg, while mine was caught up in exquisite agony in my shorts. I pulled away and smiled at him, but he was already pushing me up to the door, and I had to get the key out fast.

When we reached my room at the top of the stairs, Richard had his shirt off and pulled at my T-shirt. Once I got it off, his mouth was on my left nipple and his hand was in my back, pushing my chest into his face. I groaned with pleasure. He pushed away and grabbed the front of my jeans. I reached for his fly.

"Don't," he said. "I'm doing this. You're just along for the ride."

He pushed my jeans down and grabbed my arse. We started kissing again and stood there for a long time, my crotch pressed up against his as he played with my arse and explored my mouth and face.

Eventually, he turned away and sat down on the bed. He pulled off his boots, leaned back on the bed, and smiled.

"Pull my jeans off, okay?"

I did one leg at a time as he wriggled his hips to get free until I finally saw his beautiful cock, fat and hard, lying on his hairy belly.

"Okay, you can take your jeans off now," he said.

I dropped them, and he told me to turn around.

“No.”

I sat on the bed and started to take off my boots.

“No?” he mimicked. He slid his arms round my body and pulled me back, fast, onto the sheets. “I thought I was telling you what to do...”

We both laughed. I told him I needed to get out of my Y-fronts or nothing would happen. He let me sit up and slip them off, my boots too.

And there I was, lying with my right leg splayed across his legs and crotch, looking across at his beautiful face.

“Your skin’s red-brown,” I said, running my hand down his arms.

“I’m one-sixteenth Cherokee.”

I nodded in the half-light, seeing him astride a large grey horse, feathers in his long, black hair, looking out across some absurd summer prairie. “You do look kind of Native American,” I murmured. I moved down and kissed his mouth.

He told me to take my time, to slowly go down and start sucking his cock.

“I’m going to tell you what I like and what feels good, so just take your time and work out for yourself what sucking cock is all about.”

And that is what I did.

I licked his big cock-head, played with it in my mouth, and slowly explored going up and down on the thick shaft. Sometimes he stopped me and brought me back to kiss him before pushing me down again. Occasionally, he pushed himself deep into my throat. When I gagged, he stopped me. He got me to kneel between his legs

and slowly go up and down on him. Then, suddenly, he moved his thighs and, pushing my head down hard, groaned and shot a stream of cum deep into my throat.

“Swallow it,” he said.

And I did. It was sweet and slightly salty. I wondered if I could do this all the time, but at least I had done it once—and it felt good. He pushed me onto my back and kissed me hard. He took some of the cum from his stomach, slid it over my cock, and started to beat me off. I pulled my face away.

“I want to watch you,” I said.

He smiled and looked at me as he pushed his fingers past my balls and under my cock.

“Feel good?”

I couldn’t believe how good it felt. I pushed my hips forward. He grabbed my cock again, and I shot fast and hard all over his arm and onto my chest.

“Wow,” he laughed, “you know how to blow.”

And he gently stroked me back to earth.

We had sex again as we woke up. When I came, it was more intense than the night before. Richard liked to kiss a lot, and kissing him was the most intimate thing I had ever done in my life. Finally, we had quick showers, pulled on our clothes, and went downstairs. It was Sunday, and most of the boys were in the kitchen, eating breakfast and reading *The Chronicle*. When I walked in with Richard, several pairs of eyes looked up in astonishment, assessing first me, then the Adonis. I knew some of them had seen him around the Castro, and I knew what they were thinking.

“This is Richard,” I said, trying to sound as casual as I could.

John came across the room.

“I’m sure it is!” he said and shook Richard’s hand.

He raised his eyebrows at me, and so did the others: I was in a room full of gay vampires.

“We’re off to have breakfast... Then Richard’s got to get going,” I said and hurried us toward the front door. “I’ll see you all later. If Gary calls, tell him I’ll catch up with him soon.”

“Nice to meet you all.” Richard smiled.

I heard a collective swoon from the kitchen as we headed out the door, down the stairs, and into the sunny morning light.

We talked about our lives over breakfast. I told him why I’d left Australia, my struggle to come out and indecisiveness about going to Europe, or to school on the East Coast. And he told me about his upbringing in Northern California, being in the army, then in Germany and college, and his plans to be an environmentalist and film-maker.

Later, as we left the Castro Café after stacks of pancakes and eggs, I said: “Thanks for a great night, mate, it was good to meet you.” I was still getting used to the endless cups of American coffee and needed a toilet, fast.

“Yeah, it was great to meet you too,” he said.

He stood on the crowded sidewalk in the blazing sun with his hands on his hips and looked at me quizzically. After this awkwardness, we walked back to Gary’s together. I wanted the moment to go on but had no idea how to make it happen. Tongue-tied, I was caught between my new feelings and the warning bells going off in my Protestant mind.

“I’ll see you later,” he said and went to find Garrett, probably to tell him what a boring fuck he’d had last night.

*Stop it, you idiot*, I told myself.

After a quick dash to the toilet, I pushed into Gary's room a little too forcefully.

"Well, well ... here he is," he said. Lying back on his crumpled bed, he feigned disinterest. "Are you still a virgin?"

He sat up dramatically and looked at me hard.

*"If you mean, did he fuck me, then no, he didn't—and yes, I am, and it's going to stay that way."*

"I hear he isn't really a top anyway," yawned Gary. "He likes getting fucked."

I was disappointed: I did not want my masculine image of Richard ruined. In my head, I carried the old-fashioned stereotype of real men using their cocks, and weaker, feminine men taking it in submission. I did not know much about anal intercourse and what it might mean. I still thought it was sort of disgusting and way too primal. Gary and I spent the next hour or so laughing about our adventures the previous night, and I learned something new every time we did this. Gary always listened well, asked a lot of questions, and never judged.

He had to work the next day, and that night was going to a movie at the Castro Theatre with Garrett. I was invited, too, but did not want to go. I thought Garrett might ask Richard, and I would have to sit there and pretend I did not want to kiss him. Anyway, I knew *The Inquisition* waited back at my house. I wanted to have dinner, hang out with whoever was in for the night, and brag about the night before.

John, Duncan, Kreemah, and Rape all stopped mid-sentence when I entered the kitchen and, in unison, told me to sit down.

“Well,” Kreemah said as he sat down beside me. “You are a dark, slutty horse! How did you get that hunk in the saddle so fast? Are you sure you’ve just come out, or have you been telling us fibs?” His last words were accompanied by a forefinger tapping on my sternum.

“Leave him alone! You’re jealous you didn’t get there first, Miss Thing, and that’s a fact.” Duncan sat down opposite. “But,” he said, “you do have to tell us how you met him and how you seduced that massive piece of man-meat.”

We all burst out laughing.

So I began at Hibernia Bank, and ended when Richard and I hit the bed: No one pushed for more.

“You’re not falling in love, are you?” Duncan asked, raising his hands to his face in mock horror. “Oh my God, you are, aren’t you? First date too!... No. No. No. This is not good. We’ll have to have a house intervention!”

He looked around for confirmation.

John remained quiet. He could see I suffered under the spotlight. He was the quieter side of the partnership with Duncan and the most stable adult in the house. If I wanted to talk about anything serious, or needed good advice, he was the one I always went to.

“Shut up, you two...” Looking at me, he said: “Look, it sounds like you had a great time with this guy. But is he someone you want to see again? I’ve heard he’s pretty aimless, not very settled... Not that any of this really matters, but you are talking about going back to school. Is he the kind of guy you want to pursue?”

“Isn’t this all a bit premature?” I signalled him to put his waving spatula back in the pan. “I only just met him last night... And we made no plans to meet up again.”

“Well, okay then!” John smiled and turned back to the stove. “You’ve had a great time. You hooked up with one of the hottest guys in town for the night. Kudos to you!” Half-bowing, he added: “And quite frankly, my dear, he was lucky to have had you—with your tight, hot jeans and great arse!”

“Whoa, excuse me, mister!” exclaimed Duncan, turning on his partner. “Are you coming onto our new housemate? What do you think *I’ve* got?”

Pretending hurt feelings, he grabbed his butt and sashayed out of the room. We all laughed, and I felt something in me relax. John came over and put his hand on my arm.

“Sweetheart,” he said, “there are so many men flooding into this town right now, with the way you look, we’ll have to beat them off of you at the front door. You’ll forget that guy within days. He’s meant for the world!”

And then the doorbell rang.

Duncan ran down the hallway to open the door. His friends from the salon, Judy and Sue, were coming to say hi before going out to dinner. Rape and I were talking about what we were going to do that night, how many we were going to have to cook for, when Richard walked in.

“Hi guys,” he said.

Duncan, coming in behind him, bemused, mouthed something we could not understand.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted out.

“Hi, Richard.” John, frowning at me, crossed the kitchen and shook his hand. “We didn’t meet properly this morning... Would you like to stay for dinner? There’ll be a bunch of us, there always is, and you’re more than welcome to join us.”

“That’d be great.”

Richard looked at me. Did I want him to stay? Clearly I still looked like a stunned mullet.

“Yes, yeah,” I said. “Far out.”

Then I went over and hugged him.

This sounds corny, but when Richard came into a room—any room—someone always stopped breathing. With his height, and his beautiful, sensual mouth, he was ridiculously handsome. He took over a room without trying. He never imposed himself, even though there were times, I learned later, he felt awkward. That was when I also learned how to read those signs in him.

He sat down at the table as I got us all beers.

“I thought you were going out with Garrett?” I said.

Now I was chopping vegetables.

“Naaah, I think his friends are pretentious. They want to go to a Dead concert, and I’m tired from last night.”

He looked up at me expressionlessly. I must have gone red again. I heard John start talking about what we were making for dinner. I was getting a hard-on.

Jack and Travis had joined the new local gay baseball association and got home from a game in the park on Nineteenth Street and so we all ended up at the dining room table sharing stories. In those early days of gay liberation, someone was always telling his coming-out story. It was something every guy needed to share, over and over, coming to terms with how he was treated as a kid. Some of us needed to talk about it more than others. That night was also an opportunity for the guys to ask Richard about his upbringing. I quietly watched him talk and listened to his deep, beautiful voice

as I found out more about his life as a teenager and as a soldier in Germany. I was fascinated watching all these good-looking men hanging on to his every word.

*Why was he so interested in me?*

Later, he helped clear the table and wash the dishes, while Jack and I sat at the dining room table listening to him talk with the other guys out in the kitchen.

“Travis is laughing too hard,” Jack observed. “But he hasn’t got a hope in hell with that one.” He jerked a thumb towards Richard. “God, he’s hot, though! I can see him in his Marines’ pants and T-shirt, coming into the barracks from a hot and sweaty run.” He didn’t take his eyes off Richard’s back. “You’re one lucky faggot, Alex. Ride that wave until you fall off, girlfriend.”

“What do you mean, until I fall off?”

“Nothing at all, I assure you,” he said, leaning into me. “Just have a good time. There are so many experiences you need to have out on the city streets... Anyway, you’re coming to the Rich Street Baths with us next weekend, now you’ve got your hot new body, and you’re coming along!”

Richard stayed the night. This time I was more comfortable with him when I got out of my clothes. He grabbed my Y-fronts off the floor and put them on. Jumping up on the bed, he modelled them for me. He had squeezed himself into my size 30 jocks and looked unbelievably sexy.

“What do you think?”

He tried to twirl but looked ridiculous.

“Get off the bed, you’ll break it!” I laughed.

“Do you like what you see, little boy?” he mocked.

He slowly slid his hands across his hard-on, lying tight in my cotton pants. Richard was thirty-two years old, and in this situation, I *did* feel like a kid.

“Come here,” he said.

He pushed down the waistband as I dropped to my knees and took his cock in my mouth. I didn’t gag like I had the night before. It was beginning to feel good, having a smooth shaft going in and out of my mouth. When I knelt in front of him, he was at the perfect height for a full-throttle blow job. Soon he started to grunt and told me he was coming. He held my head and pushed his hot load down the back of my throat. Again, I swallowed.

“You have a beautifully shaped cock,” he said, pushing it out from my stomach.

We were lying on the bed and I was hard as a rock.

“It isn’t as big as yours.”

“Maybe not as big, but still very nice.” He rolled over on top of me, squeezing the pre-cum out of my rigid dick. His body seemed to dwarf me. He was so heavy and felt so good. “I’m staying right here from now on,” he rumbled quietly in my ear. There was no way I could shift him. I started laughing, trying to push him off. “What?” he said, acting surprised. Then he supported himself on his elbows and looked me straight in the face.

“You didn’t think I’d come see you again, did you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you rushed off when we got back to Garrett’s and didn’t look back.”

“I didn’t know I had to say goodbye to you again.”

“Well, you did—and now I’m a little hurt.”

He was rocking from side to side on me. My cock, pressed into his stomach hair, was desperate to let go, and he knew it.

“I think you’re pretty hot, and I reckon it’d be nice to get to know you better. What do you think?” He slid up and down on me as he pushed his tongue into my mouth, instantly making me cum hard in what little space there was between our bellies. “Hmmm, I’ll take that as a yes,” he sighed. He put his head to one side and said he was never moving again.

Richard’s great love was film. He loved everything about it and knew several people, both gay and straight, in the film industry in Northern California. He’d studied film-making in college. “No one truly major yet,” he said of his acquaintances, “but who knows where they could be heading?” Richard wanted to write scripts and was working on something already.

These were heady times, and anything seemed possible. Gay people were beginning to stretch themselves, testing the waters of acceptance—beginning to own who they really becoming. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Society declared homosexuality not a mental illness and, by the following year, we were well on the way to proving it. I was meeting gay doctors, lawyers, carpenters, computer experts, dentists, haircutters, guys and gals working in restaurants and bars—men and women getting on with their lives, not being held back by their sexuality.

Richard would go on and on about it when we started to hang out more. I was falling in love with this fascinating man but sometimes wondered what was taking him so long to fix himself on to something worthwhile. I was on vacation with plans to go back to school. He was in his thirties. When I was that age, I knew I’d be established in some sort of role—as a teacher, or working in a company after completing a masters. Richard was at least going

down to Los Angeles to explore the possibility of scriptwriting. He was often away a week at a time.

After one of these trips, we had a meal on the corner of Dolores and Eighteenth Streets. As we walked back to his house, we talked about sex, and I stated: "Well, I haven't been fucked yet myself..." Richard stopped and squeezed my shoulders before we moved on.

"Get naked," he said when we got to his bedroom.

And I did. I was always horny. When we were together, there was rarely a day we did not have sex. When I look back, I think I can remember the first night we just fell into bed and slept. Lying on the bed that night, I watched him throw his clothes and books off the furniture until he finally found the jar he was after. Whenever I knew we were going to have sex, I could not take my eyes off him.

He knelt on the bed and told me to get on all fours in front of him.

"I agree... It's time you got fucked, and I'm going to be the one who does it," he said. I went very still. "Look, it can hurt for a second or two, but once I'm inside you, I want you to relax and go with it, feel my cock inside you, and let yourself open up deeper for me, okay? The more you resist, the more uncomfortable it can be... But hey, you're going to be okay." Then he fell down on me, kissed me for a long time and slowly pushed my arms above my head, into a mock-permissive pose. "Now c'mon, do as you're told and get up on all fours."

Slowly untangling myself, I did. He knelt behind me. I heard him open the jar and take out some lubricant. I felt one hand on my butt cheeks as he slowly began to play with my asshole. He liked to slip his hands down my jeans when we were walking or watching TV, and I always swatted him away. But now there was nowhere to go.

He ran his thumb up and down my crack. Using the lube, he gently pushed into my asshole. It felt pretty good, and I found myself, almost involuntarily, rise up, with my head going down deep

into the pillow. I felt him move in close, and with his cock he pushed gently at my arse. Then supporting himself with an outstretched arm, he pushed his cock past the anus and deep into me in a single movement. There was a second of searing pain.

Psychologically, I felt as if I was coming home as he began to move in and out of my arse. I felt an explosion of sensations from deep in my gut. It was beautiful. My face was in the pillow and I groaned hard. Richard now had me by the hips and was fucking me as deeply as he could.

“You, okay?” he said. “I’m going to cum soon, and I want you to as well.”

I had forgotten about my cock. The second I thought of it, it erupted and shot out load after load. Richard let out a deep growl and rammed himself in spasms into my arse. I could have been a car being filled at a gas pump. Instinctively, I knew I had always wanted this. I had dreamed about having a man inside me, but had imagined, as a thirteen-year-old boy in a beachside town, that I had to become a woman to get it. Now here I was, a man with another man—and it changed everything.

Looking at hot men through my teenage years, it seemed I was missing part of myself. Like so many young guys growing up this way, I could not explain my disturbed and counterintuitive yearning to be like a woman, and to have a man lie on me. I had no idea what would happen after that, because I did not have a vagina, but somehow I knew I wanted to be entered. Now here I was, completely fulfilled.

As soon as Richard withdrew from me, I felt deeply alone—spent. I knew I would never feel like that again. He told me not to move. He went to the bathroom and came back with a hot, wet towel, which he used to wipe my arsehole. Then he gently held my cock in the towel.

“Oh, my God, that feels so good!” I said.

He wiped his own cock and hands as I turned over to face him. He smirked, satisfied with himself. Lying down beside me, he looked into my eyes enquiringly.

“Will I ever shit normally again?”

We kissed, from somewhere very new in our friendship.

“I mean it!” I said next morning. “My insides feel really weird, like something’s still up there doing weird stuff!” He laughed and tried to stick his finger up my arse. I grabbed his wrist and rolled on top of him. “Stop it, mate, this is serious! Will my butt ever feel normal again, or am I permanently damaged? My arse muscles feel really sore!”

He lay splayed out on the bed in the everyman pose of Leonardo da Vinci. I lay on top of him, trying to be as heavy as I could. He loved it and pretended he did not care. He reached up and over me and grabbed a smoke.

“Go and see Dr. Ainsworth on Eighteenth Street, past the pharmacy on the corner,” he said, lighting his cigarette. “Ask him how to take care of yourself. You’re right, it’s important, and he’ll put you straight.”

The next day, I made an appointment with Tom Ainsworth, where I learned about gay health and lubrication. I also formed a friendship with a wonderful man that was to last until his death from AIDS some fifteen years later.

I told Richard how much I loved getting out into nature. Since he liked to teach as much as I liked being outdoors, he decided to teach me about California. He pulled up at Liberty Street in the yellow Pinto his dad had given him, and we took off into Northern California. Some weekends, Gary and other guys would come along

too. We would fly across the Golden Gate Bridge, passing joints—with Elton John or Dr. Buzzard and the Savannah Band blaring from the tinny car radio—and make our way up to Muir Woods or on to The Russian River and camp overnight. When we were alone, Richard and I always had sex somewhere outdoors.

As August ended, we camped near the Sierras and got it on in a sun-lit stream, slipping down smooth rock faces into waist-high pools, with the pine trees and California ash around us whispering in a light breeze. It was a scene from a gay Mills and Boon novel. I remember this day clearly even now, as I knew by then I was completely in love with Richard and that nothing else mattered. It was a liberating moment. At the same time, I felt I was falling down a huge rabbit hole. There were important choices I had to make, and I was pushing them away as fast as they came up to be dealt with. When we got home from that mid-week trip, I found a letter from Immigration. My visa was about to expire.

Richard used to laugh at my Australian mannerisms. And he mocked me hearing I had someone clean my room when I was a kid. At Liberty Street, my room was always a mess. Richard would pretend to be shocked when he came in, pretend to pick up clothes from the floor and put them away. But I knew he was just as big a slob as me. Nevertheless, when I ate, I always used a napkin and my knife and fork in conjunction, rather than cutting my food and using the fork as a shovel. Rape said I looked like Julie Christie at the dinner table, but I let that slide. Julie Christie was beautiful. As much as I wanted to be American, there were some things I did not emulate, and the way Americans ate was among them.

Richard came and went from the Liberty Street house. He always brought gifts—beer, milk, or donuts, whatever he thought of on the way up—and he made friends with the guys in the house. He was respectful of their space, never overstayed his welcome, and always mucked in. Despite his army background, his size and menacing

appearance, he was really an old pacifist. Once, we came back from the Mission through Dolores Park, and a Latino boy pushed me in the chest. Richard lifted the kid off the ground and bounced him into his mates. They lit out of the park as fast as they could. It was a weird moment and shook us both, but it was over in seconds, and by the time we hit Eighteenth Street, we were laughing about it. It was the only time I ever saw Richard come out of the quiet, gentle space he lived in.

## 16

---

At the end of 1969, I transferred to the Australian National University in Canberra, where I planned to complete an arts/law degree. I was glad to move on, but even in my conflicted state of mind, I knew I was really going for my parents, and for what society expected of me. All I wanted was to slip into a mountain cave somewhere and sleep. I wanted some sort of final peace. Christmas at home was stultifying; my mother tried desperately to have my father and me acknowledge each other at the dining room table. My parents and I barely talked now. I was, in their eyes, a communist youth radical, and I played it up to annoy them, especially Dad. I wanted to get back at him for the years of emotional neglect, and as I listened to him pontificate, I called him out.

“Did you honestly just say the Chinese will be here in five years? How?”

“Well, smarty-pants, take a look at the container boats coming through The Heads right now. Go on! Turn your head around! They’ll be converted into troop ships in five minutes, and we’ll be invaded in two days!”

“That’s bullshit... Your friends the Americans wouldn’t let it happen, and in any case, it’s still no reason to ape them and send young guys to Vietnam. It’s a useless and immoral war.”

“Don’t swear when your mother’s in the room! And what do you know about Indo-China? You haven’t been in any war, and you’re cocky because you missed the call up to fight. It would’ve done you some good. How long are you growing that hair anyway? It looks disgusting.”

“It’s shinier than mine,” piped in my bemused sister Janet.

“Will you two stop fighting at the table, please!” my mother exclaimed. “It’s ruining our time together.”

“It was fucking ruined years ago,” I snarled, looking with hatred at Dad as I got up and left the house. I escaped as often as I could. I saw my friends in Melbourne and worked waiting tables in a Geelong pub to make extra money.

I went up to Sydney at the end of the holidays to stay with Susan before starting at the ANU in Canberra. During serious drunken conversations in her bedroom over several days, we slid into the realisation that for us living was futile. We each seemed to have our private reasons.

Over time, Susan had stolen a couple of bottles of barbiturates from her parents’ bathroom. We took off around 10 p.m., made our way by train to Circular Quay, and decided the best place to die was on a Manly ferry. We grabbed some cokes and swallowed the pills over the next few minutes. Both of us fell silent, gazing out at the water surrounded by harbour lights as the ferry ploughed on.

As we chugged across the water, I watched as the famous bridge became smaller, stunned I had finally, at last, arrived at this moment. Time and place echoed in my head, and I imagined I was up above the boat looking down at us as we moved silently out over the water.

It felt as if someone else wanted this, that I was acting it out for him. There was a strong voice that quietly questioned my decision, along with resignation, and a sense of the inevitable too. The image

of the fabulous city and of its promise I had seen on the beach when I was twelve came to mind, and I momentarily regretted I would never see it now. Maybe I would when I died.

I knew my action would hurt a lot of people, but I was convinced my parents and siblings did not want a homosexual in the family. It was for the best. Most of all, I was simply tired of me, of the thoughts in my head. There was nothing positive ahead, and I wanted to escape. The past twelve years propping up who I knew I was had become intolerable.

As I stole a look at Susan, at her beautiful, sad face, I thought I knew why she was doing this with me. While it was weird that we could not share our pain or tell our stories to one another, it didn't seem to matter. We sat close, not touching, bound by this very human, final act.

We walked around Manly for about half an hour, beginning to feel the effects of the drugs. We did not know what to do next or where to go. There was no real plan beyond swallowing the pills, falling asleep, and dying. Eventually, we got on a returning ferry and sat outside again and watched the city approach us.

I was less sure of what I had done and began to feel dizzy and strange. The weather was changing, and the ferry started to kick up as the waves increased. Suddenly, I rushed to the side and violently threw up. Susan remained dopey but did not pass out, and we got off the boat very stoned, with me sheepish after being sick. We walked aimlessly and ended up at Cappriccio's, a new wine bar in Darlinghurst. Ironically, neither of us knew it was a gay bar until about half an hour later.

All we could do was smoke, drink cheap wine, and shyly grab at some thought or other to try to explain what we had just tried to do. In my heart, with the drugs quietly pumping through my body, I was happy it had now not happened—that my body was not on a gurney at Circular Quay covered with a sheet.

It was a warm summer's night in Sydney, but a change was gathering, and I heard thunder off in the distance. As I sat there and calmed down, beginning to feel more at peace, Susan asked quietly: "What're you going to do now?"

"Well, tomorrow I'll go down to Canberra, I guess—now I'm not dead! I'll see what I can work out when I get there. Who the fuck knows, but I'll see if I can find someone to talk to..." I instinctively knew I needed psychiatric help and that I was going to find it, whatever the consequences. This monumental effort had shown me I had the guts to try ways to work out who the fuck I was!

I wasn't so sure about Susan's next step. "You?" I asked with some hope in my voice. She always seemed more decisive and braver than me.

She read my face. "I'll go to Sydney Uni, as scheduled. You don't have to worry," she replied, smiling her little wry smile and lighting her next cigarette. We looked at each other for the longest time, as if we had known each other all our lives. Over two hours, we had taken a unique journey together. She reached across and took my hands in hers.

"You up-chucked," she said, deadpan.

"I know... And you've got the gut strength of a bull."

We both burst out laughing.

The next day, I dashed through the Darlinghurst rain with a handful of coins. I found a phone box and the Australian University campus number. Nervously, I asked for the doctor's offices. As I made the call, I was convinced anyone walking by knew what I was up to.

Somehow the telephonist understood my babble and put me through to Student Services, where an abrupt but not-unkind guy told me he was one of the two campus counsellors. I could see him first thing next week, after I was settled in my college.

And so, after lunch, I set out for Canberra by bus, with a slightly lighter heart and a hopeful omen—a bright sun in the west breaking through passing storm clouds. After that Sydney trip, I never saw Susan again. I have no idea what happened to her. This has shocked me occasionally over the years, lying awake at night, wondering where she might be—if she made it through. I hope she did. I liked her immensely. I did do a search through a Sydney Directory once, in 1988, when I came home for the Australian Bicentennial celebrations, but there was no one with her surname at the old address. The way I see it now, we both had tough decisions ahead of us, and while we were still close, we were also embarrassed by what we had done and wanted to put it behind us and move on.

After I slipped into 30-inch jeans, and before I met Richard, I started to run out of money. The construction job over the last winter in Crested Butte had been good. The pay had been great and I'd obtained a false Social Security number. So I knew I could get a job for a few months before I went east or worked out how to stay in the country for good.

Billy was a new friend of Rape's. I think they were both originally from Georgia. Billy was to become Miss Billie after Halloween, when he put on cowgirl drag, full makeup and hair, dropped a hit of windowpane acid, and mimed Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" on a makeshift stage in The Truck Stop diner. Miss Billie had discovered her persona and calling. We never again saw her in jeans that were not covered in sequins.

Billy worked at The Truck Stop, a 24-hour café-diner down Market from the Castro, on the corner of Church Street. It had a small bar called The Hideaway attached to the side off the car park. I asked if he could put a word in for me to wait tables. Having grown up in the hospitality business, I knew once I got in there, it would be a piece of cake.

He called the house a few days later and told me to get my ass down to the restaurant. He heard there was a busboy position

available and thought it might at least get me in the door. He said the waiters were supposed to give the busboys some of their tips, so even though the pay was shit, I could get something near-decent.

So I put on my tightest new T-shirt and jeans, cleaned up my boots, and went to meet the manager. Joe was a ferret, small and sleazy, with a fake-nice smile. He'd moved to The City from the Bronx in the late sixties and thought everyone was trying to rip him off. He interviewed me in his tiny office overlooking the car park out the back, told me to turn around, looked at my ass, and gave me the job.

It was at The Truck Stop where I learned about the wider gay world of San Francisco, its mores and rules, and how to really flirt. I met hundreds of men, but very few gay women. They came later. What we had were a couple of world-weary, straight female waitresses—Beth with a honey-coloured beehive, and Sue, who wore nurse's shoes for her swollen ankles—but the waiters were mostly good-looking thirty-year-old men.

As an Australian, I was a hit, and after a couple of weeks, I was given a try-out waiting tables. Because I was new and kept pushing Joe every day to let me be a waiter, he put me on the graveyard shift for the first three weeks. But as it turned out, this was time you made the best tips. The Truck Stop was packed from 11 p.m. onwards, which was when I came on.

Although it was a basic diner, The Truck Stop was the only glamorous place to go after hours. When it became legal for bars to close at 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, we had a rush through to 5 a.m.

The Castro was replacing Polk Street as the new gay haven, and everyone from The City's late-night gay haunts stopped by. Drags came in from shows out of North Beach, waiters, and bar-backs from The City's bars, lots of young straight women with gay boyfriends,

and I also noticed—from time to time—men just like me when I first arrived in The City: haunted but excited, tentative and poised on the edge, almost ready to come out. I smiled to myself as I took their orders.

As the bathhouse culture and late-night back rooms blossomed weekly, the crowds grew even bigger, and so did my tips. But it still felt weird to me to be in my mid-twenties working in a menial job. I was not groomed for that. I was a college graduate with great potential and a career path. Often I wanted to respond to some snarky bitch queen, in or out of leather or feathers, who thought because I took her order I was somehow less than her. Yet overall, I was content. Sometimes I worked the day and early night shifts too. So I had money again. I could keep paying the rent, go to bars and shows, and eat out.

When I moved into the house on Liberty Street, I was supposed to be thinking about going to college on the East Coast. In reality—and I laugh about this now—had I been so set on doing postgraduate work, I would have explored campuses on the West Coast too. Despite having a yen for the East Coast, it would have been far easier to apply locally. I could have turned my visa into a student visa and stayed in San Francisco. But the truth was I didn't want to go back to school. I just thought I did. It maintained a disappearing link to my past. Part of me still wanted the good life, the one prescribed by my background, possibly a place in the academic world. I did not want to lose touch with current intellectual thought, and I wanted money and security, but that part of me clashed with a desire to explore the new youthful freedom I was discovering in America, along with the kind of lifestyle Richard was interested in—alternatives to a capitalistic structure now seen as anachronistic and failed. I was caught up in it, like so many other young people, and it made me ambivalent.

When I first moved into Café Ole, I watched Nixon impeached. Alone in the house during the day, I watched the TV with baited breath. I was fascinated being part of such tumultuous times. Perhaps the USA was on the edge of something new and wonderful. Was it able to put the better aspects of sixties culture into practice, and a failed Presidency behind it? Could it ever resolve its racial problems?

I truly bought into the evolving new cult of personality in the Age of Aquarius—the live now whilst dropping the staid past of your parents' culture. I was a sponge. There was so much going on. I thought I had all the time in the world, and part of me was simply overwhelmed with the new reality of being a gay man! So I swung in the wind and got caught up with all the latest exciting events. And as San Francisco became a giant sexual candy store, I fast became addicted to exploring what was in front of me, and I forgot all else.

**D**uring my first morning in Canberra, I nervously tramped around the university, finding the student union, the library, and importantly, the law school. I found my way to John 23rd College first, and my room. It was orientation, and classes did not start for a week, so I pretended an interest in all things new, knowing that at 2 p.m. I was to make my way to the student health services building. There, on the city side of campus, I would, probably for the first time in my life, tell someone I thought I was a homosexual.

It was a terrifying thought. Could I trust the counsellor? I knew I had to be careful. I felt like a young rabbit coming out of a hole to sniff at the passing air. I was convinced everyone knew why I was skirting around outlying buildings, making my trek to that very first meeting. Was this a 'far, far better thing' I was doing, or was it just plain foolhardy? Did some sort of psychological guillotine await me after my first session?

I climbed up two concrete sets of stairs and made my way into the counselling offices. There, standing in the doorway, was a nice-looking older man with a well-trimmed black beard.

"Are you Alex?" I nodded to him, putting out my hand. He took it and said with a smile, "Good-o, you're my first victim for the year."

We went into his institutional sixties concrete and brick office, and he invited me to sit in one of two comfortable blond wood chairs in the centre of the room.

“So why are you here?”

I looked at him for a moment or two. “I’m not sure who I am, what I am, if I’m heterosexual, homosexual or what...” I trailed off with my face burning and a feeling that could only be described as apprehensively trapped.

“Ha!” he replied as he lit a cigarette. “There’s a lot of confusion at your age about what and who you are. I’m pretty sure you’re not homosexual, just confused about how you feel moving into manhood...” Then he asked: “Was your father much involved in your upbringing? Are you still a virgin? If not, what happened and what was it like?”

My heart soared. I leant forward eagerly: “Really, you think I can get this, these feelings behind me?” I could not believe what I was hearing from this confident, masculine man. “My father was emotionally withdrawn from all of us kids,” I began. And then it all started to spill out and suddenly, after what seemed like ten minutes, our first session was over. He scheduled me to see him twice a week for that first term, and we would assess it then. In fact, I ended up seeing Des twice a week for that entire year.

I think it is interesting now, and I wonder if he knew there was something core in me that could not just go away, even with all the insights and realisations that arose over our time together. Was he occasionally uncomfortable with my progress, and did he just want to win me over to a fully heterosexual life? At the second meeting, he became quite animated halfway through the session, and said: “You hate your mother, don’t you?”

I was shocked by this question and experienced an obvious range of emotions. But I went with him, as I *had* resented the way she used me as a sounding board for her problems with Dad: ironically, the classic gay boy in sympathy and siding with the mother about the remote, stern father. How many times did I hear that story from my friends in San Francisco later on? It thrilled me too, as it made me feel adult, having that lingering birth cord snipped working with this wonderful man.

Des liked Freud, so I started reading his books on the Oedipus complex. He gave examples from Shakespeare, using Hamlet to help show me how being tied up in my parents' lives would make me confused about sexual identity. This was why I just needed to find a girlfriend and a healthy sex life. It seemed so simple!

It was obviously more complex, and of course, I began a relationship of subterfuge with Des as the months went on. I did start something with a lovely girl—another sad and troubled one with a relationship with her father I now believe was possibly abusive. Because of Des, I kept it alive until the end of the year, when it dissolved naturally on the beach in New Zealand's Bay of Islands.

No doubt people like Des were classically trained with some Freud and Jung in their studies, but I really don't know. The thing was, in the Western world at this time, homosexuality as an illness was explored by very few therapists. I imagine it was a subject many in Australia were unwilling to go into fully. Without any honest conversation with gay people, without any real insight into gay lives, wishes and beliefs, it was much easier for them not to—to tackle it with real understanding and compassion. Homosexuality was still classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association. That would not change until 1973. It was still a subject to stay well away from and much better to try to push a client down a socially acceptable pathway. I went along with it consciously, because I thought I could still cure myself if I tried hard enough over the

long haul. It was as simple as that, and until I came out, every move I made in human relations was with this in mind.

I finished up with Des the following year, after the summer holidays. I never told him I had tried to commit suicide. That was a survival decision and, looking back, a wise one. He might have decided to refer me to a psychiatrist, which could have led to shock therapy or some weird sort of aversion therapy and a possible misuse of drugs.

My therapy did not solve my continuing, secret obsession with men on campus, but I was learning about analysis, about conscious and subconscious thoughts. I was reading more books on the therapeutic process and began to understand myself and my motivations, but bottomline, I still lived a constricted life.

Deep down, I was trapped, desperately trying to conform, to be the child my parents expected. Sexual desire is such a powerful force, but I was still conforming to my parents' view of me. I wanted them to love me, while at the same time I wanted to hurt them for not having understood me when I was young.

The broader problem with sixties Australia, beyond its insularity, was its enduring class structure. Wherever I went in Australia, I had introductions to people—often family. My whereabouts were tagged, and letters flew around the country, 'reporting on my doings,' as my grandmother in Yass used to say. The population of Australia was only eleven million in the sixties. Class was entrenched. Society was about to get a complete overhaul as I entered university, partly because education became more widespread, and children like me, who would never had good access to higher education before, were beginning to get it. With the introduction of Commonwealth scholarships from the mid-fifties, and the free tertiary education reforms of the Whitlam Labor government—in power from 1973— young men and women entered university from all walks of life. This broke the back of the old order.

Doing Law was a serious undertaking: the ANU campus felt more grown-up, John 23rd College more formal. I was deep into therapy, and now I was closer to Victoria, my home state, and to my father's family in Yass, thirty miles north of Canberra. I was close to my past life.

My parents came and saw me in college on their way through to stay with my grandmother in Yass. I could show them a very acceptable side of university life—the bragging rights to “our son, the budding lawyer!” It was a house of cards, as I knew by this time I did not like studying the law and was still living across two separating worlds. There was the established world I'd been bred to aspire to, to inhabit: the affluent, stultifying middle-class world, connected to Queen and country. And then there was the world I was discovering: theatrical, intellectually precocious, flamboyant, radical, opposed to the Vietnam War, Labor-leaning, pot-smoking—demanding the Liberal government, representing the established world, be overthrown.

Living this lie was exhausting. At the ANU, I slept with a couple of girlfriends, while the lusty boy-beast bubbled beneath in its own subterranean waterways—sometimes pushing through a seam in the sewer and stopping my breath whenever a handsome, masculine male dropped by my room at John 23rd and threw himself on my bed for a talk and a beer.

I hated law within a few months. The study was too demanding. I wanted everything now, with as little effort as possible. I knew I would not work as hard as the course demanded. In my therapy sessions, I finally accepted I had done law for my parents and used this as a reason to give it up. When I went home in the September holidays, I told my parents I was quitting and would finish my arts degree by distance education, through the University of New England. Dad said, “Well, you've ruined your life,” and walked out of the sitting room. It was another nail in our relationship coffin. I promised them I would sit the exams, which I did, taking in the first

book of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and demolishing a good portion of it as I waited for the appropriate time to leave the session.

In the middle of my first year, I discovered skiing and the university lodge in Thredbo. Alone with me on my first weekend was a student from California, who was studying post-graduate science. He was a big part of why I chose to make a move to the States rather than going to Europe when I finished my studies. He was the handsomest guy I had ever met—six foot with a great natural build, dark brown shoulder-length hair, a moustache over perfect white teeth, and a willingness to talk and share his life in a way I never experienced with Australian men.

I think he understood me and somehow, without embarrassing me, let me know he liked women and that he knew I did not. He spent hours at night telling me about the USA and its schools, and what I ought to do when I finished up in Canberra. We talked about applying for scholarships and moving to the East or West Coast of America, and about what the music scene was like on both coasts. Revolution was on the lips of the young in America. We talked about how free and exciting it was there, with the Vietnam War now calling more and more people out onto the streets in most major capitals. Young people had a voice for the first time in modern history. It was the place to be.

I fell in love with him by Sunday afternoon. I was mightily confused by my feelings. I wanted to see him again, but he was post-grad and three years older, with a girlfriend back on campus. We had separate rides back. I had never had such an intimate time with a man in my life. It was how I imagined being with the butch character I had been attracted to in that Sydney play. Thredbo Ski Resort was also my first real mountain experience, and I fell in love with the notion of slipping away forever into the bliss of this rugged, winter wonderland. I had tears in my eyes as I was driven out of the village to go back to school.

Nevertheless I was determined to stay, get a job, and live in Canberra while I finished my arts degree and until I could save enough money to go overseas. My university friends were there, all having at least another year to go on their courses.

Fortunately, with Des at the helm of my ship of personal discovery, I organized that while I suffered from anxiety, I had a fairly strong constitution and optimistic personality. I now had a better glimpse into my life's possibilities. I still wavered between the world I knew and what freedom might really look like for me—but I could now sense something better was in the potential future. My character armour was still firmly in place: I could keep up an external appearance of calm—and even fun—while deep within me, sexual repression coiled like a sleeping snake at the bottom of my gut. My fantasies still held a strong grip. Sometimes alone, sometimes with friends, I walked along the creek that ran through the campus and spilled out into the lake, the centerpiece of the city. Whenever I looked out, away, over the hills, the emptiness would return. Looking toward mountains brought out a longing for something better, something that could save me from my life at that moment. If only I could escape. In nature, the armour melted. I was naked. Unless I quickly turned back, I began to think of suicide again.

No one talked seriously about homosexuality, because no one knew anyone who was gay. When it was known, friends generally agreed to protect the public life of their gay friend. I knew no out people on the ANU campus. I did not want to know them anyway. My antenna was always up for the tiniest indication of difference from other males, quick to vibrate if I thought I was being perceived as a poof.

I consider the period of my life from twelve to twenty-three as one of associated mental illness, a result in the belief that I was different and sick. No one should have had to live life as I did, suffering constant, existential anxiety. Vulnerable to discovery, I felt

like an outsider, a pariah. A warped system of neurotic pathways running through my brain twisted my view of everything. I saw my life through the lens of fight or flight. If anyone found out, I believed I would either be thrown in jail or onto a hospital gurney, having shock therapy. I read of cases in England and Germany of men being given electro-shock treatment, in some instances having their testes removed to cure them of their predilection. I knew it was imperative for me to find a cure but to stay quiet until then.

One incident almost made me move to Boston University and leave Richard, San Francisco, and the West Coast behind for good. I was meeting a lot of hot men at work. Whatever shift I was on, there would be at least one guy I could quite easily have taken out back for a quick blow job. By the end of a busy shift, I often had five or six names and phone numbers scrawled on a bill slip stuffed into my back pocket. Most of them went into the bin, as Richard came in from time to time, and that tended to keep me settled. Once, in the middle of a quiet shift, we met in the toilets, and Richard blew me while I stood on the john. Eventually he got a job in the bar attached to the restaurant, and for about four weeks, we worked and played together.

Randy was an older guy—over thirty—who had waited tables at The Truck Stop for several years. He was tall, lean, and took no shit from customers. If he had a heavy time out the night before, I knew to stay out of his way. He and Billy got on well, and he liked me, too. The three of us often took breaks together out the back, smoking and drinking Coke.

One afternoon, Randy and I were out there alone.

“I’m going down to Rich Street baths tonight.” Randy crushed out a cigarette under his boot. “You wanna come?”

“I’m seeing someone,” I said, looking sheepish. “Even though there’s lots of space, I don’t want to get confused meeting other guys.”

“You mean you and Richard?” Randy looked over his sunglasses. I nodded. “I’m not asking you to fall in love, Alex, I’m talking about getting out there and having some fun and having sex with other guys. Richard wouldn’t care, and he’s in LA at the moment, right? Probably going to the baths down there tonight!” He lit up another smoke.

I ignored the comment, although I was stung.

“You can’t find love at the baths, anyway...”

Randy looked at me slowly over his sunglasses again, then up at the sky, before he pushed off the wall and came over to me.

“Sweetheart, you can fall in love for an hour sometimes. Or you can be with a man over a weekend and fall hopelessly in love for two days... Love lasts for as long as it wants to,” he said, looking at me directly. “Never put love on a pedestal reserved for the coupling of pretty middle-class white boys like you, and don’t you ever forget it... *And* stop being a princess and come out with Billy and me.”

He smiled laconically, smacked me on the back, tossed his cigarette on the ground, and went back to work. I was stunned by his philosophical insights because he was only a waiter. Obviously I knew very little about the true states of love, or anything else.

When we all knocked off later, we went down to Randy’s house on Fourteenth Street. He fed us beers, and we smoked joints Rape had brought. We caught a cab to Rich Street around 10:30 p.m. and found it jumping. It was four months since the boys had first brought me here. Looking at myself with a towel wrapped around a flat stomach, I noted with satisfaction that I now had a temporary job in The City and looked pretty good to boot.

I strolled past rooms for about fifteen minutes, just looking, still nervous about entering with someone looking at me from their bed. And so I went into one of the sauna rooms. It was empty except for this guy about my age who immediately made me slide onto the hot bench and suck in some scalding air.

“Do you mind if I add some water?” he asked, smiling. “I like it really hot.”

“Sure.” I nodded. “That’d be great.”

He ladled some water onto the coals then leaned back. He was about 6’1, with short black hair, smooth skin, and an athletic, sculpted body. He had big arms, and his legs were covered in dark hair. His thick cock hung between his thighs, and he sat with his legs splayed wide, his arms out on the bench either side. I momentarily forgot to breathe. Before I could say something, *anything*, another guy came in and sat down between us.

He looked at us both and started to stretch his hand out to me.

“Too hot,” I mumbled, pulling the soggy towel round my waist. “Gotta go.”

I slammed myself for being so inept in this scene, but there was no way I was going to get into something with three guys and miss out on the one guy I really wanted.

In the lit corridor, after a few deep breaths, I cooled down against a wall. Then the hunk from the sauna came out too. Drying himself off, he walked up to me.

“Hi, I’m Brad.”

“Alex... Great to meet you.”

In the light, he was incredibly handsome - GQ handsome, footballer from my past handsome. I *could* see falling in love with

this guy for a night! We ended up finding a space where we could talk and get closer but kept being interrupted. It was obvious we wanted something more from the encounter. We were excited about meeting each other but tentative. What the hell was he feeling? I could see that Brad, like me, was uncomfortable in the bathhouse.

He looked like he came from a different world and didn't do this sort of thing often. We dressed near each other, and on the way out from the lockers we ran into Rape. He had his arm round some short, funky guy with a goatee beard and a shock of black hair. I told him I was leaving and would see him at home the next day.

Brad was a sophomore at Harvard, about to head back. He was meeting his parents, who were coming in from LA. They were staying with friends another night, then going back to Boston together. I told him I was on hold for Boston University. We exchanged looks. Brad fulfilled my dreams about the kind of guy I had always seen myself with. He wasn't like my crazy socialist friends from college days. He was like the intelligent stud who sat with his mates or his girlfriend, who you watched play football, who you fantasised catching one night drunk outside your dorm, inviting him inside and blowing with his body lying flat on your bed.

I felt sick, deep down through my entrails. I wanted to move into Brad's arms and ask him to take me with him, there and then, back into the world I knew from home and had tried to leave behind. A world where I imagined I fitted right in, where I would not have to keep working myself out, like I did with Richard—where I knew I would be safe in a simpler, defined world. Dad's voice came into my head: *When you get to the US border from Mexico, get up to Canada as soon as you can. There's good law and order up there. If not straight away, go via Boston.* I smiled to myself.

“What's so funny?”

Brad was getting cold in the foggy night.

“Nothing really... Just memories. I’m caught between two worlds at the moment, and I’m still working it out.” We stared at each other. “Do you want to come back to my place?”

“Better not now,” he said, looking down, “but I’ll come see you tomorrow and have a meal.” He smiled. “I wish I was meeting you at home.”

My heart lurched as I looked at this handsome and serious man.

“You never know—I might get my act together and come to Boston...”

We hugged and parted. Before turning to the bus stop, I watched him cross Market Street at the lights. Somehow, somewhere in my heart, I felt a fork in the road had been reached.

*What the fuck am I doing with my life?*

I watched him hail a cab off Franklin Street. When was I going to get serious about the things I knew deep down I wanted? My mind raced to Boston, and I fantasised about being with Brad, meeting his family. I fantasised about us getting a place together, and eventually becoming academics at one of the prestigious campuses on the East Coast.

The conservative streak in me wanted acceptance from the Establishment and success. *Always remember our strong family name!* my mother would tell me across the kitchen table. *It’s not just what you know, it’s who can help you take the next step.* She was so determined to get me into society. And I always tried to please her and made a point of telling her about the parties and dances I went to with my private school friends. Even when I went to university in NSW and then Canberra, I found stories to tell her, like the Brazilian ambassador’s daughter I saw for three months in 1970, who put \$3,000 diamond earrings casually down at a college ball, and then lost them. I knew these stories impressed my mother. They gave her hope.

*What a joke...*

I sighed as I walked up Market Street, looking back downtown for the number eight bus. Deep down, I knew I did not have the fortitude to go back to the academic life. It was not for me. Boston really was a fantasy, of another Alex, a more responsible and disciplined Alex. Had he ever been real? I suddenly felt alone and foreign in a very big world.

**B**y my second year in Canberra, I'd established a solid group of friends who were creative and involved in all aspects of campus life. Most were into theatre and literature. Occasionally, I heard that someone had paired off with a same-sex partner. It was always shared as experimental, and while I laughed about it and joined in the gossip, I was careful not to show too much interest. They were a clever bunch, and I often felt out of my depth. My academic life was always a mess, and I found myself lying about my level of commitment. Looking back on this period, and indeed at all of my schooling, I believed I was innately suited to study.

For the first term of 1971, I crashed on floors. While I was determined to stay at the ANU, I was technically going to my old university via post! We kept it under wraps as I was using the university facilities for study, and I was taking jobs where I could to stay alive. I ended up living in Burton College with Sarah Lachlan, who let me sleep on her floor. I used the men's showers and became so well known around the corridors that many believed I was a full-time Burton resident. I even ate in the dining room. My cover was permanently damaged when I was asked to direct the college variety show. It was a big success. Afterwards, I shook hands with the college president, who said, perplexed, that he had never met me before and could not remember interviewing me for residency.

As a free agent, I became more organized on the ANU campus. There was so much going on. We marched against the Vietnam War, had our minds expanded, then blown up by the first ever Australian Union of Students Arts Festival on the ANU campus. Penny Chapman, another new friend from the previous year, was one of the Union's ANU managers who worked tirelessly to put on the Festival.

With others, I discovered peyote and LSD and smoked Thai hash. It was a time of exploration of literature and new music, and of heated discussions around the rights of man. One Saturday, in the dead of a cold Canberra night, we took window-pane acid and played John Lennon's "Imagine" and Elton John's "Madman Across the Water" at least six times each, analysing the track's lyrics, convinced we had found a new philosophy for our times.

On another winter night, after very strong acid, we wandered through Canberra, following its architectural layout, marvelling at the thought that had gone into the planning of the city. As we approached the campus, the streetlights turned the young European trees into shapes resembling what we decided were universal shapes in nature. Acid pushed our heads out of Canberra, into the geometric designs used by artists, and the wider world beyond. It made me itch for travel.

In 1972, I began formulating a concrete plan to go to the States, rather than to England and Europe, as so many other Australians did. I wanted something fresh, and secretly, I wanted to find an American man like I had met in the snow.

As my major arts degree studies were on the War of Independence and the political creation of the United States of America, I decided to see if I could do postgraduate work on the East Coast. Through my supervisor at New England, I found out the best campuses to apply to and wrote to twelve of them. Most sent applications six weeks later, and I replied to them all, with a letter from the head of

history. Around Christmas 1972, I received acceptances to eight of the schools. I planned to leave Australia in the first quarter of the following year, to have time to travel before enrolling in a master's degree in time for the September start of the 1973 academic year.

This thrilled my parents, who had quietly despaired about my basic arts degree. My father asked me to go to my graduation in Armidale with my mother, as a favour to him, which I reluctantly did. There's a photo of me in cap and gown, Joey standing on one side in the blue Chanel suit she'd brought back from Paris—Rob had another year to go before they moved south again—and my mother standing on the other, the degree scroll in her hand.

## 21

---

The final letter arrived in late August. I went down to Immigration to see about a possible extension but was told I had to leave the country by 15 October 1974. Had I been paying attention and not let it slide, it could have been a different story. My dreams of staying on, of settling into a permanent life in America were dashed. I did not realise until that moment, looking up at those clear blue skies of California, how much I wanted to stay.

I had a month to go. I set out to make the most of the time I had left with Richard, Gary, and the boys, and we started formulating a plan for me to get back. First, I would go on to England rather than back to Australia. Something in me never wanted to go home anyway. Richard said he would come over when he could. It depended on how long I was there—but I wondered if he would. He had begun talks with an old film-maker friend about starring in a movie, and I reckoned that would be the end of me in his life.

An old friend of Duncan's was in California on a summer break from the East Coast. Hearing I was travelling to England via New York City, Cookie invited me to stay with him and his partner in Soho.

"It's horribly run down," he said, "an old warehouse space." We were sitting on the Café Ole couch with the afternoon sun streaming in. "But we do have plenty of corners you can sleep in and be private."

“It’ll really help me with costs, and I want to see New York before I was turfed out. Who knows if I’ll get back in? Thanks.”

I worked double shifts at The Truck Stop to get as much money as possible, hoping to buy myself breathing space in England while I worked out what the fuck I was going to do for more permanent work. I planned to be there a year before I tried to get back to San Francisco.

John and Duncan had just bought a house, a cute two-storey place on the edge of the Mission District, on Oakwood. It was one street in from Dolores Street and the Park, which satisfied safety concerns. The Mission was not always the best place to be gay. We all moved over together, and by the time the house was set up to everyone’s satisfaction, I was close to leaving.

We had a late-night party in the Hideaway when I finished up at The Truck Stop. I sat propped up between Richard’s legs, sad to be leaving this generous crowd. Richard squeezed me as Randy made a speech. Then Miss Billie performed a country song—more for her own profile as a new performer than for me, but it was still a memory not to forget.

Richard and I had a couple of days away in our favourite spot at Hepburn Springs, and after a crazy last night out in The City with Gary, where many promises were made, I flew to New York.

After the airport bus dropped me off, I came down into Soho. Like most adventurous people, I was curious about this wonderful city. I bought a big bag I could sling over my shoulders, and since it was still warm in New York, I wore the Castro clone look—Levi’s, white T-shirt, brown suede jacket (for nights), and brown boots.

Cookie and his partner Tom got me settled in quickly, and then whisked me out to dinner and to the nearby bars. In the week I was there, I saw most of the major landmarks and galleries: MOMA,

The Met, and The Frick. Cookie's press pass got us into a number of places, and I was able to see extraordinary interiors, amazing art shows, and to hear some great jazz. I was overwhelmed by what I saw. Nothing on the West Coast compared.

Four days into my visit, I came in exhausted from walking the streets and was confronted by Cookie, holding an open silver fan to his face.

"Do you have something silver to wear tomorrow night?" he asked, knowing I didn't.

I looked appropriately surprised and despondent.

"Now you do!" He whipped out the piece of silver lurex material that was to serve as my scarf. "We're going to the Metropolitan Opera House, to the 'La Belle' concert. It's the first time a contemporary event has ever been done in that august space! The invitation says to wear something silver."

He leaned back against the kitchen wall, posing, looking up the ceiling, fan on rapid.

"Wow, thank you."

"Thank the paper I write for." He threw the scarf round my neck and stepped back to inspect it. "It'll have to do... I'm assuming you have no real evening clothes? We'll just have to soften that butch look."

Luckily, Tom did not want to go, and I was able to wear a dark jacket of his, to which Cookie pinned a large silver brooch. He wore a dark red velvet jacket and black pants with a lovely pair of black felt slippers on his feet.

Not since the Stones had I been so thrilled to be at a concert. The crowd coming into The Met was extraordinary. It was a special night for the beautiful people. There were silver pantsuits, silver jackets, tight-fitting velvet jackets on the men, flared trousers, and boots

with very high heels. Café Ole would be jealous as hell. We danced in the aisles for most of the show, and when *Voulez-vous rganiz avec moi, ce soir* started up, the place erupted: Soul entered the house, and I thought I'd gone to heaven.

I turned to Cookie and shouted, "You'll tell them we were here, right?"

"Oh, you betcha... I'll make those bitches suffer!"

Two days later, I was on a flight to the United Kingdom to stalk the Queen, when all I wanted to do was stay behind and put down roots in the American Republic.

## 22

---

**M**y friends on the ANU campus were the first adults I was able to be present with. Therapy had quietened me down. My internal dialogue relaxed enough for me to actually listen and hear others' stories about themselves and their upbringing, which had previously been drowned out by my worry that I would be exposed. I'd walked through my teens convinced I was an open wound. Now I had the idea that America might provide the suturing to close it all over. Fortunately, there was no male I was attracted to in our circle, so my fantasy life was mine alone. I could rganizednlize.

My last Australian girlfriend was Jenna. She was about 5'2, with a mop of dark brown curls to her shoulders; she was fiercely intelligent, had a wicked sense of humour, and was a lot of fun. We met towards the end of 1972, and she almost moved in with me.

She flew down to Victoria in February 1973, and we went to the Rolling Stones concert at the Kooyong Tennis Courts. I came home briefly to get my passport ready, and I picked her up from Essendon airport in Melbourne. As she emerged from the doorway of the plane, she looked like a pop star, wearing a tight white satin shirt with a black tulle ball gown shot through with silver thread. It billowed out and around her. She looked amazing, and the airhostess looked amazed by her. We had been anticipating this concert for

weeks. We hooked up with John Perry and his friends before going out that night into the city.

On the following hot summer's day at Kooyong Tennis courts, we attended the most amazingly intimate rock concert put on in Australia. I had gone to the Stones' first concert as a fourteen-year-old, at Festival Hall. At Kooyong, I smiled to myself at how far I had come since then: standing in the intense heat of the day, stoned, hair down to my shoulders, makeup on my face, wearing huge grandpa pants held up with suspenders over a white silk shirt. We had great seats down on the court. When Jagger strutted onto the stage fully glammed up—wearing a purple jumpsuit with silver blobs sewn into it, throwing petals from a silver ewer, as if to give us relief from the heat—my friends and I burst into tears to the pulsating sounds of 'Brown Sugar'. It was the best concert of my life.

At the end of February, with some sadness, I left Jenna, the public service job I'd had over the past year in Canberra, and my tiny O'Connor room, and I came home for good, to load up my new blue backpack and finalise leaving. I had lunch in Melbourne with my brother, and we had been up country to see Janet, my sister. Mum and Dad drove me to Melbourne's port, and I boarded a Greek-owned ship, *The Australis*, on the 13 March 1973. It would take me to Sydney and then on to Panama City, where I was getting off to go down and see Allende's Chile before I headed north to the USA.

The ship came into Sydney Harbour overnight, and I awoke to the thrill of meeting up with Penny Chapman again. She now worked for the new film school in Sydney and had taken the day off to spend with me before I left Australia for who knew how long. We had a great day walking and talking, and she saw me off that night amid the streamers and throngs of well-wishers. The year before, we had both been titillated and thrilled by the sexually charged new movie musical, *Cabaret*. It was a smash-hit in Sydney and Melbourne but was not shown in Canberra, so one afternoon

on a whim, we drove the five hours to Sydney in Penny's VW to see the film and drive back the same night. We had constantly talked about seeing it. We sang all the way there and back. I was buoyed by Michael York's character, Brian—secretly excited about seeing some sort of glamorous acceptance of homosexuality.

In a final scene, Lisa Minnelli, as Sally Bowles, leaves Brian for the last time. As she walks away, without turning back, she puts her hand in the air and gives a quick little wave—just once. As I watched Penny leave the pier at Circular Quay, she wended her way through people who were still watching friends leave the wharf. Right near the exit, without turning back, she gave me that same little wave.

I crossed the Pacific by ship, with little idea of what I was doing or what I wanted. All I knew was I needed to escape my past. I wanted out of living a lie. I wondered if somewhere—in the corner of a Canadian forest, perhaps—there might be a distant light in a small cottage that would lead me into its warmth, a safe harbor, or to a witch with a changeling apple: not a poisonous one, but one that could make me whole.

I spent a lot of time out on deck, nervous and excited. I watched a thousand blue-and-gold flying fish momentarily catch themselves in the light and hundreds of enormous tuna leap and fly through the air as the ship ploughed on through the sea. A million stars came out at night as I sang into the wind off the islands of Fiji.

I watched the back of the Bay of Acapulco slip away after spending a day roaming the enormous gulf between rich and poor that made up this famous resort. As the lights turned on and twinkled like diamonds around the shoreline, I dragged on my Acapulco gold joint and had the best marijuana high I'd ever had.

I met a guy on the street and ended up getting a taxi into the hills with a young couple from the ship. In a tiny hut with a hessian flap for a door, they bought a pound of gold—it actually shimmered

brown-gold in the light—from an old lady sitting on the floor next to mounds of grass. As I watched Mexico disappear, my mind and body soared higher and higher. For an hour or so. I believed my dreams might someday soon come true.

Panama, where I got off the ship the next morning with what felt like an early stage of dysentery, was a sobering comedown. I did not end up going to Allende's Chile, a dream from my leftist readings at the ANU. At the Hilton Hotel in Panama City, a couple of Americans, drunk at the bar, told me there would soon be a coup. Panama City was on alert, and soldiers walked everywhere with machine guns. As a pampered young white boy who had never seen any real violence, I took their advice and instead went north into Central America. Later, I learned the Hilton was renowned for being the place the CIA plotted and schemed about America's plans for the region, and that I had drunk and eaten with American agents.

In Guatemala City, I was introduced to Charles Brayshaw, an American diplomat stationed on the political desk. A diplomat couple made the introduction. I met them in Santa Rosa, in a small tourist café at the site of the famous Mayan stelli, high in the Honduran mountains. They told me I looked ill and offered to take me back to Guatemala City to see a doctor attached to the embassy. When I saw him the next morning, he told me I could have died from dehydration within the week. After two weeks with dysentery, I'd lost twelve pounds, and none of my clothes fitted. I was in my hotel bed for the next two days.

Slowly, with kickass drugs, I felt better and was taken under the wing of my new friends. Charles travelled with me around Guatemala for a week, showing me Antigua and Chichicastenango. We have become life-long friends. The others took me by plane to Tikal to see the Mayan ruins in a jungle full of howling monkeys and gold-green snakes entwined around ancient pillars covered in proud soldiers marching off to war and domination.

In Mexico City, I had my head explode over two hours looking at Frida Kahlo's visceral self-portraits. Her honesty and artistry gave me a new appreciation of art. It was Gombrich's history of art book up until that point. From then on, I sought out female artists who spoke directly to me. I later found Georgia O'Keefe in Santa Fe, Emily Carr in Vancouver, and Louise Bourgeois and Cindy Sherman in New York. Each time I stood in front of their work, I found peace and a certain private connection.

When I left Guatemala, I took an express bus up to Mexico City, and I discovered at the Anthropological Museum that I had bypassed the Yucatan. Not knowing if I would ever make it back to Mexico, I decided to backtrack to Merida and the archaeological sites. It took me almost three days to get there by train. In Palenque, I got off for a day and a night to see the ancient Mayan temple and experience the migration of millions of Wanderer butterflies coming back from the north to mate. I stood still in the stifling heat while hundreds of them quietly covered me from head to toe.

Fellow travellers at the small Merida hotel told me about a remote island called Isla de Mujeres, and so, to escape the Yucatan heat, I set off for the coast. In the island's sole cantina, I shared my butterfly experiences over beer and ceviche with a couple from Denver, Charlie and Janet, who invited me to stay with them in Colorado. After getting to the States and travelling through New Mexico, I made it my home for the next few months, falling in love with the beauty of the mountains. Janet had two sisters who lived in the city—they had all come out from Pennsylvania to go to school—and Charlie's family were second-generation Jews who came from Russia at the end of the last century. I had an instant family.

In Colorado, I was taken into the Rocky Mountains to fulfil my childhood dream of seeing twelve-thousand-foot-high peaks stretched out before me. I saw valleys of green and gold in Aspen, where I stayed for a week at Charlie and Janet's holiday house—

drinking tequila late at night, dancing to a rock band in a Victorian bar on the edge of town, getting unnaturally exhausted from lack of oxygen, and eventually passing out on the street. I vowed to come back in winter to ski.

I called Sarah Lachlan, my old roomie from university, now back in Sydney after graduating, to see if she wanted to join me. I promised to get in touch once I got settled. It was my first international call to Australia, and it felt odd connecting like this. It seemed I had left Australia years ago, although it had been only three months since I'd boarded the ship. To my wonderful surprise, Sarah agreed to come as soon as she could pack. She would send a telegram to Charlie's office when she knew her flight times, then I would make my move to meet up with her in LA.

Living and working in Denver was my first real opportunity to learn about Americans, their habits, the way they saw themselves, and how they interpreted the world. I was surprised they knew so little of what went on beyond their borders. It was 1973, after all. I could only surmise no one had geography lessons in school. I guess when you are Rome, you do not need to know about the vassal states.

I recalled my first breakfast in El Paso, after coming through the immigration offices and receiving my six-month tourist visa. I sat down in a diner and was served by a large, tall woman with a huge honey-blond beehive atop a big smile and perfect white teeth. The menu was completely foreign to me, the truth being that in Australia at that time, no one went out for breakfast.

"Where you from, sugar?" she asked, hand on hip, pushing her pen deep into her hairdo.

"I'm from Australia."

"Wow, you speak real good English!" she exclaimed, and proceeded to decipher the greasy pages for me.

After a couple of weeks of crashing at Charlie's, I found a room in a hippy house off Cheeseman Park, a leafy part of old Denver called Capitol Hill. I also secured a room for Sarah. When she arrived, she got a job waiting tables in a café near the one I worked at and became good friends with Susan, one of five others living in our old three-storey Victorian. Susan was an ex-ballet dancer, working in a studio on Colfax, but who wanted to go west to try her luck in San Francisco or LA. She sent her resume to some of the well-known contemporary dance companies in both cities.

"How're you going with enrolment in Boston Uni?" Sarah asked as we were talking about resumes and enrolments.

We were seated around an old redwood table in the living room.

"I don't want to talk about all that now," I demurred and took a hit on the joint going round the room.

Summer was hot in the city that year. Massive storms periodically came over the mountains, drenching us as we walked across the park. Sarah started a relationship with a guy in the house, a college friend of Susan's. He had crinkly brown hair that fell to his butt. Like Sarah, he was quiet and measured. Susan and I, on the other hand, were loud and excitable—always talking, always planning, the ones who organized trips into the mountains to do acid and mushrooms, or to visit towns like Silverton, Leadville, and the magical country around Pikes Peak, near Colorado Springs.

One Saturday evening, returning from a picnic, we came down the back of a natural amphitheatre called Red Rocks. There were hundreds of people there, and we could hear singing. After stumbling and laughing down a hillside, we got close, and sitting high up on a rock organize we were watching Roberta Flack. As we settled into the concert, she walked back from the standing microphone to a piano and sang 'Killing Me Softly'. Sarah and I were in America!

In early September, Susan got a letter inviting her to join a dance company in San Francisco. She was crazy excited and begged us to go out there and stay with her. We wanted to see San Francisco and said we would follow her there once she knew she was settled. We did not want to give up on our dream to work and ski in Colorado and thought we could pull a trip off if we could find a quick ride across the deserts, stay for a few weeks, and then race back, get jobs, and ski our hearts out into 1974.

I was pissed off in England. The winter in 1975 was a shocker, and the Underground smelled of wet wool. Coming out of the post-war fifties and sixties, most English people still only took one bath a week. For Americans and Australians, it was a shock to the system. Adding insult—and terror—to injury, the IRA was bombing London. On a couple of occasions, I was caught up in freezing weather, pressed up against the closed grill gates of an Underground exit, looking out on an empty street as soldiers searched bins on the sidewalk. I heard the bomb that went off in Harrods and ran for safety. Much of my time in London that year was punctuated by attacks.

I decided to escape to Austria to ski before settling into a job but was thwarted by a dentist who insisted I get a bridge put into the right upper side of my mouth, a long-term consequence of the car accident when I was eighteen. It cost five hundred pounds at a dental clinic on Old Compton Road, an enormous amount in '74. It left me with very little money, and I had to confront living in freezing London.

Sarah and I had written on and off since Colorado. She was now in London, living with a New Zealander, Scott, in a small flat in Hammersmith. She invited me to stay. The flat, part of a row of Edwardian working-class houses, was partially underground and was

squalid and damp. The girl they shared with was moving out, taking her white rats with her. After a total fumigation, I had her room.

Scott was a handsome boy, tall with black spiky hair and a great laugh. It took just two weeks before I had him on the living room floor one night when Sarah was away. He came out to her in the morning, over tea and toast with marmalade. We became vampires together, seeking out the best places to meet interesting gay men at night. Usually we ended up at Sombrero's on Kensington High Street, where we could dance and flirt with rich and bizarre Europeans. It took me a while to get him to the more regular denim-and-leather scene in Earl's Court, but it was never really Scott's milieu.

The world of the waning British Empire was not what I wanted anymore. It reminded me of the stultification of growing up in class-ridden Australia. But I was thrilled to see the National Portrait Gallery and The Tate—for the Turners and Blakes—and I will never forget going into the British Museum for the first time. These were institutions we were brought up to revere—part of our education of Empire—and seeing the Assyrian reliefs and the Elgin Marbles were highlights of my life. When I returned to London on business through these past decades, I always ended up at the British Museum. It is the same in New York, where I always find myself outside the Met.

All I wanted was to return to America. I missed the ease of its citizens, its openness, and even its brashness. It had an air of eternal hope that I did not find in the UK, with its cynicism and firmly shut closet doors. I missed the now open fight for gay rights in San Francisco, and I missed my friends and my love affair with The City itself. And, of course, I desperately missed Gary, Richard, and my other gay friends.

I followed up on one of my narcissistic-tainted American dreams and took a stab at modelling. Maybe I could make a lot of money and become famous? Late one afternoon I went to Bobtons, a leading

agency, and met with one of the owners, a gay man called Garry. He gently let me know I did not have the look they wanted, and that whoever had taken my photos in San Francisco was not a fashion photographer. I'd done it on the cheap, and that was the mistake. We left his office and went to a bar for a drink and then on to dinner.

Garry and I became good friends. Through him I met a wonderful group of men who modelled and so moved into a circle of glamorous Londoners. They all hated the American western look. Since I only had my American clothes and the identity that went with them, they stuffed me into the tightest flared jeans they could find. At one point I found myself in 29" pants, lying on the floor of a jeans shop on the Kings Road, with a salesgirl pulling up the zipper with a coat-hanger. Completing the local look was a flared shirt, styled hair, Dunhill cigarettes with Dunhill lighter only, and brunch at The Ivy on Sundays.

Through Mum, I discovered that my old friend Joey was now living in London! After their time in Armidale, she left Rob and came to England to learn to weave. Eventually she wanted to move to Lesbos; she missed Greece, she told me when we caught up.

Joey came to dinner and met Sarah and Scott. We got into lengthy war stories from home, and I told them about coming out in San Francisco. So finally with these old Australian friends, I was now an out gay man. They were intrigued by my stories of California and happy I was at peace with my sexuality.

"Did you ever wonder about me?" I asked Sarah one morning in the kitchen.

I was watching her put bread slices in the toaster, hoping it might heat up the freezing dump we rented.

"When I left you in Crested Butte, I still thought you'd end up with Judy." She sat down and watched the toaster intently. "But

obviously in hindsight there were signs. You were so excited about the guys in San Francisco and would not stop talking about our time there.” She looked up at me and smiled. “And earlier at uni you didn’t go on about girls the way a lot of guys did, even at parties or at the student union. I always felt you were removed from sex somehow... And you’d been seeing that counsellor the year before I met you.”

“How did you interpret that?”

“Well, I felt you’d worked out more of your life than the rest of us.” She shrugged and started buttering her toast. “So I didn’t really question your orientation.”

We got together with some other Australians who had moved to London to either work or study and went to shows and museums. We took train trips to Sissinghurst Castle to see Vita Sackville-West’s gardens—with one of us quoting lines from Virginia Woolf’s diary about the beauty of the place—and to Brighton, which we found run-down and dirty. We went to the London Museum and followed in the footsteps of the Bloomsbury Group round their London haunts. All this was satisfying, but somehow tainted by my Australian past, so I often felt outside the shared experiences we were having; it seemed to me part of an old world.

And I hadn’t yet come out to my family.

“You won’t find peace till you do, Al,” Joey said one dreary, wet, and cold afternoon.

We were in her weaving room, at the top of the stairs of a red brick and white-trimmed Victorian house in Archway.

“I don’t know if I can yet... What on earth would I say?”

“You don’t have to go into a great saga about it, just be factual and tell them you’re much happier now than when you were at home growing up.”

The shuttle moved rhythmically across her upright loom. As I watched her, I thought about the implications of my parents finding out, of the two of them thrusting my handwritten pages at one another across the kitchen table. Would they tell my brother and sister? Joey and I talked about it on and off all that afternoon, and later discussed it as we walked, rugged up, in a small park nearby.

That night I sat down at the little Formica table in the kitchen at home and wrote a sixteen-page tome referencing Leonardo, Michelangelo, Jesus' disciples, Tchaikovsky, and Oscar Wilde as examples of creative homosexual men. I addressed it to both parents and rushed it to the post office the following day before I could chicken out. It felt good to finally tell them, although I worried about how they would respond. In the meantime, I started talking about going back to school. I did not want to commit to a long-term project but was concerned I had not found some sort of career path. And I was set on leaving the UK within a year to eighteen months.

Scott eventually found a pathway for the three of us, bounding into the flat one day with a fistful of papers. We were all going to go back to school to do English as a Second Language (ESL) diplomas. With an education minor in my bachelor degree, it seemed like a smart move. Scott and Sarah got jobs around London after completing the course while I found a place for a couple of months at a language school in Folkstone. It was a drag, but nothing else showed up.

My only compensation at this time was catching up with a man I met at a chic, vegetarian restaurant called September, where I worked for a while as a waiter as I did the ESL course. Richard—another one—was from the minor aristocracy and had been seated at a table full of rude snots from County England. He asked me out as he left the restaurant and I had said yes.

Now every Friday after school, I took a train up from the coast to be with him in London, where we went out to small members' clubs for the rich and closeted. Most of the people I met inside these red velvet rooms still lived in this deeply homophobic world. Occasionally, we would head off to the country to his freezing manor house and have sex in an enormous, free-standing clawed bath, or on any number of beds throughout the house. Later, he dropped me at the station to take the last train late back to the coast.

Six months in London was enough. The flat was breaking up, with Sarah and Scott both talking about trying a language school in Alexandria, Egypt. The romanticism of Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandrian Quartet*, a series of books we swooned over at the ANU, played into this move. So I kissed them both goodbye, had one last fling in my aristocrat's bath, and with very little money, left for Paris by train and ferry.

Charles Brayshaw, my American diplomat friend from Guatemala, had invited me to holiday in Tunisia where he was now stationed. I was to come in late May, when he could take time off work. He sent instructions about how to book a boat from Genoa in Italy and to travel across the Mediterranean overnight to North Africa.

I have not forgotten the first baguette with ham and Gruyere and the large bowl of coffee I had in a sidewalk café near Montmartre! This humble meal was superb. I immediately found a cheap hotel in Place Pigalle. There, I became friends with three prostitutes who worked out of two of the rooms on the small first floor above the lobby. Naturally, they knew I was gay.

My first trip to the Louvre was with one of them, Nanette, who told me later it was the first time in her life she'd been in a museum or gallery. We were in the little hotel bar, describing the vast salons to the other girls over cheap Portuguese port. Nanette had tears in her eyes, her hand on mine.

Gary sent me an introduction to two men who lived in a beautiful turn-of-the-century apartment with a view of the Arc de Triomphe. But they weren't much company. Mourning the death of Josephine Baker a week before, they were mired in tragedy. So with a few weeks remaining in Paris before going to Tunisia, I set out to find my own way into the local gay scene.

The gay bars were in Rue St. Anne. One night I went into one called Le Club and stood against a wall and watched the others dance. From across the room came an insanely handsome man with short black hair and trimmed black moustache, a much more masculine Alain Delon. He was wearing a fitted black coat over a dark blue shirt, jeans, and beautiful brown brogues. He whispered in my ear that his name was Pierre. Then he held my eyes for what seemed like a minute. Like all the gay men I met in Paris and London, he was impressed by the fact I came from America. He took both my arms and slowly put them behind my back, as if they were to be tied together. He raised an eyebrow.

“Oui?” he asked.

“Peut etre.” I smiled.

A model I knew from London told me Pierre was Le Club's manager. A guy this gorgeous and obviously well known in the bar scene would be fun to play with! I waited for him to finish up. We went to his small, exquisite apartment, where, for the next three weeks, I only saw Paris by night.

The sex was intense and structured. S&M was new to me. I knew about it but never thought of myself as someone who could embrace it. In the beginning, Pierre was thoughtful and kind, and I immediately fell for him hard, a sucker for any man I found physically beautiful. I started to think of seeing out the year with Pierre in Paris and not going on to Tunisia.

We were together for about two weeks when things changed. He was getting bored and wanted more. It was his night off. He told me, in his stilted English, not to get ready for the clubs we'd planned to go to, but to lie on the bed. He came back with a bottle of Scotch and a folded piece of leather, like a book cover, which he put on the side of the bed. He sat in a chair near my chest and said he wanted me to drink as much of the Scotch as I could.

When I asked what he was going to do, he gave me his usual enigmatic little shake of the head. He reached for the folded leather. Inside were two short, curved silver needles, gauze, and a small bottle of clear liquid. When I looked at him inquiringly, he reached over and took one of my nipples and told me he wanted to pierce them and leave the needles in them, curved over and partially concealed. The alcohol would dull the pain. Then he wanted to go out with me. At first I was stunned. Would it hurt? Would it leave me permanently scarred? We kept drinking until his kissing and cajoling finally got me to agree.

I lay on my back naked. He straddled me in leather pants, with a vest over his white T-shirt. Slowly, he started to push the needles through my erect flesh. It was excruciating. At one point, he slapped me hard to quieten me down. Thirty minutes on, it was done, and the pain ebbed away. He wiped off the droplets of blood and covered each nipple with gauze and a white Band-Aid. Satisfied and excited, he jumped up and tore off his clothes. Then he made me sit on him, as, with his hands covering his handiwork, we had some of the most intense sex ever.

Later, we went out to another club on Rue St. Anne. By now I knew a few guys—some from London, some local—and I joined them under the strobe lights. Pierre never danced with me, but from time to time, he came up and squeezed my nipples, smiling sardonically. I winced with the pain, and one of the models could see I was bleeding through my T-shirt. He leaned in.

“We told you about him,” he said. “Now you look like you’re in too deep.”

I felt exposed. Pierre’s domination of me was so public. I had slipped into something destructive, something that was not me. I tried to turn it into something romantic. Part of me loved being taken care of by this beautiful man, giving myself up to him and being told what to do. Now I was beginning to see another side of him. It pulled me out of my stupor.

I went down to the bathroom. Fortunately, no one was there. I stood looking into a well-lit mirror over a basin. My eyes looked haunted, and I had begun to lose weight. I’d worked out in London, but after a month in Paris I was losing condition fast. I lifted my bloodied T-shirt, ashamed of the state I was in, and tore off the Band-Aids. Locking my eyes on my image, I twisted the surgical hooks and pulled them out of my nipples. Bleeding again, I stopped the flow with toilet paper before gingerly replacing the Band-Aids and T-shirt. Sitting the needles on my tongue, I made my way back upstairs. I felt reckless and wanted to hurt Pierre.

I moved onto the floor and started dancing again with the two guys I had left earlier. It wasn’t long before I felt an arm around my waist and a hand slide up to my chest. Pierre pulled me around and, with a quizzical look, started to tut-tut with his beautiful, pouting lips. Defiant, I slowly poked out my tongue. He grabbed my arm, and we left the bar, excitement fizzing between us.

I was angry with myself for getting caught up like this. I had not seen the beautiful sights I wanted to, nor followed up on my friends in the city. I only had a few days left in Paris, so the following evening I moved out of Pierre’s apartment after he left for Le Club. I did not want a confrontation, and I knew his attitude towards me was changing anyway and that we were coming to an end. I moved in with a girl I knew from Australia. She said I looked ill and unhappy and let me sleep late every day that remained.

I was worse by the time I got onto the ferry from Genoa, and in Tunisia, I was told I didn't have a visa to get into the country. The heat was unbearable, the wait four hours long, and for a while it looked like I was going back to Italy. Fortunately, one of the kinder officials had put a call in for me to the American Embassy, and so around midday I was extracted from customs by Charles, flanked by two Marines.

Everything was taken out of my hands, and within fifteen minutes I was whisked away in a large black car, with another behind as escort, and taken down to Carthage. Charles had rented a small manor house in this coastal resort. It was set in formal gardens full of Punic statues, behind high white walls covered in a riot of red, purple, and white bougainvillea. Slumped over with fatigue, I made my way into the beautiful foyer and dropped my bags. I collapsed after we caught up over lunch. A doctor was brought to the house, and he put me to bed in a room overlooking the sea. I slept for the next two days, waking on the third to have breakfast and lunch served by the maid on the balcony. And then I began two beautiful months in paradise.

Charles had to work a few days a week, and we would grab a couple of days here and there and see parts of the country in his diplomatic car. We went to wonderful parties with the ex-pat crowd, and I met people from all over the world.

Every second day, I went to the local beach at La Marsa and soon became strong again. The men in Tunisia were all beautiful. The motorcycle cops wore powder blue jumpsuits. With their short black hair and moustaches, they would have been huge hits in any San Francisco bar.

One day on the beach, I noticed a local guy sitting on the sand twenty or so yards away. He was stocky, 5'9, with short dark hair and trimmed black moustache. When I looked at him directly, he smiled

and became very handsome. He came over and sat in front of me. He had no English, nor I Tunisian, so French became the language of our understanding and love. I called him Fatih. His other name was Bachir, meaning oldest son. He wore brief black shorts and was dark with the sun. The longer I was with him, the more excited I became. At one point that day he smiled, changed position, and showed me his hard-on. We set up a place and time to meet later before I went back to the house singing, and then on to the film school, where I had found a short-term job teaching ESL evening classes.

Fatih and I spent the rest of my time in Tunisia together. He showed me a more authentic side of the country. One day, we took a train to another city, where we met two of his favourite aunts and their families. As the honoured guest, I was expected to eat a full meal at each house under the watchful eyes of each aunt. The tables groaned with wonderful tagines, vegetable dishes, rice, and cous-cous.

We met at night as the jasmine came out, making the air pungent and sweet. Sometimes our sex was hard and fast up against a back wall in a quiet alley. Otherwise, we went to the beach where, with an eye out for cops and walkers, we could take our time and get serious.

Fatih sang in a mufti choir. Late at night, as walked along the beach, he sang old Persian love songs to me. His body swayed and turned, arms and head caught in the moonlight. Toward the end of July, when he came to the house to give me a parting gift, a small vase, he openly wept. I did not know what to do. I was unable to reciprocate his love for me. I got into the car awkwardly, my head filled with the possibility of new adventures. I was about to fly to Florence with Charles, then on to London via Paris. Turning back, I watched him, shoulders down, bereft, slowly walking away to the beach.

As I travelled back to England, I resolved to go to California as soon as I could. From Paris, I asked my parents to cash in a life insurance policy for me so I would not have to find work when I got

back to London. Standing in the American Express office on a long-distance line, I could hear the fury and upset in their voices. Mum was bewildered and hurt, Dad accusative.

“Why didn’t you send it to me?” He was referring to my coming out letter. “Why did you address it so your mother could open it?”

“I don’t know! I wanted you both to know the truth... Why should I hide it from Mum?”

“Well, you’ve hurt her. She doesn’t know what to think... You always did have too many girlfriends. I always had my suspicions...” I thought this was quite perceptive. If I had not been so desperate for the money and upset by my parents’ reaction, I might have explored the idea further. Now Dad cut back into my thoughts: “Are you coming home or staying in London?”

“I’m not sure, but whatever happens, I’m going to get some sort of teaching job. Just send me the money, and I’ll let you know when I’m back in England.”

I knew he did not want me home anyway, so I felt confident about him wiring me the money. *Stay there and get a job* would be what he was thinking. I was hurt by their reaction, but what else had I really expected?

When the money came, I went straight to Yves St Laurent’s major boutique and bought a pair of brown and white brogues with raised heels for some ridiculous amount of money. I could never hold on to money—always compelled to spend it. It took me years to work this pattern out. The truth was that whenever I felt empty and rudderless, I had to fill a hole in my chest. Somehow buying something I couldn’t afford helped reinforce my lack of self-worth. It always gave me a short-term boost and satisfied the need to appear together and successful.

Back in England, I was surprised by an aerogramme from Richard from California. It was the only letter I got from him. I'd stopped sending postcards myself after the third month in cold, wet London. I thought he had moved on. He said he was making a film with some friends, and that he was building a house in Palm Springs. Then he said he still loved me and that he knew I was the man he wanted to spend his life with. Would I come back to him? I was overjoyed. I had spent the year away from San Francisco pining for him and America. Yes, I had some great sex in Europe, but no one had truly touched my heart. I also wanted to get out of tight, flared pants and sweater-vests and back into T-shirts and jeans.

I left for New York almost a year to the day after arriving in England. Wanting the longest possible visa, I put together a fake travel plan for a trip across the country, visiting everyone I knew before supposedly returning to Australia. It was an elaborate ruse, as I only bought a one-way ticket. At JFK Immigration, a very butch female customs officer hauled me into a room and grilled me for an hour. She went through everything, asked me to tell her stories about my friends, and took my bag and wallet apart. It was the weirdest experience I have ever had with an immigration officer. She finally gave me six months, although I knew she did not believe me. It made me wonder how difficult the process of becoming a legitimate American resident was going to be.

Gary picked me up from baggage claim at San Francisco airport. I was so excited to see him again but disappointed not to see Richard, who said he would be working in Los Angeles. I did not know if he would have received my letter telling him when I'd be back. We drove to Gary's new place in The City with his new Castro Street boyfriend, Phillip.

They looked like clones, with their nicely trimmed moustaches and blue and red plaid shirts with white T-shirts underneath. They were both in blue jeans and brown boots. The only difference was

that Gary had short blond hair, and Phillip's black hair was receding. Phillip was a closeted gay doctor in the Army working out at The Presidio. He and a couple of friends had recently bought a house on Twentieth Street, off the Castro, one street down from old Café Ole on Liberty. He lived there with his tribe from Florida and Chicago.

"I'm so glad to be back!" I said with a rush. "You've got no idea what I've been through... The past year was one of the worse winters on record. All I did was look at posters of Spain and pine for the beach whenever I came up to Trafalgar Square from the Underground."

"Did you meet the Queen?"

Phillip started the engine of his enormous golden-brown '71 Cadillac Seville. The three of us fitted easily across the front seat.

"No," I laughed, "but I did date a man who once carried Princess Alexandra's wedding rings down the aisle in Westminster Cathedral... What did I miss over here?"

"The Parade was better than last year, more organized. And a new bathhouse has opened at Eighth and Howard called the Club Baths. It's got two hundred rooms, dimmer switches, and clean showers... Folsom Street has really taken off, there's a great new bar on Market near The Truck Stop—called Alfie's—and I think you were here when The Badlands opened on Eighteenth? .... There are so many more guys here now."

"Wow!"

"What were the bars like in London?" Gary asked.

I noticed he had an arm on Phillip's leg as he drove.

"There aren't many, it's still pretty closeted and pathetic... We mainly went to the Colhern for leather and the bad boy stuff, and the Sombrero for the creative types. I had fun."

I asked Gary if he knew anything about Richard's movements or his films. Neither he nor Phillip had seen anything yet, apart from his posters and the ads in the B.A.R. newspaper.

"He wrote me he was doing a film with Artie Bresson, an old film-maker friend from his college days, so I thought it was going to be all art-house experimental and not get much of an audience."

"Garrett told me recently a couple of his new porn films are being shown in the Tenderloin, so let's go see them when we get you settled."

"Yes, please!" I squealed in a mock teenage voice.

As we rounded the bend from South San Francisco, The City came into view. The skyline was white and pristine against a blue sky with the black Bank of America building stark in the middle. The lush Berkeley Hills and Oakland were off to the right. I was home. Now the job was to make it permanent.

Gary shared an apartment with Bill, a real political animal. He was a six-footer, lean but muscled, with nice brown eyes and a great hairy chest. He was balding, which made him look older than Gary and me. He was certainly an older brother type and would make a great teacher, coach, or advisor. He'd grown up as a Mormon, been married briefly, and had a son who lived in LA with his mother. He worked in some sort of telecommunications role downtown. He was also a rganizs flirt, the only non-boyfriend I never minded slipping his hands down my pants as I stood in the kitchen making dinner.

The apartment building was one up and one down, typical of many built in San Francisco between the two wars. Bill and Gary were on the top floor, in a dark wood and lathe plaster apartment, with walls painted white. It was warm and comfortable—a real home: Bill had acquired a lot of beautiful things. The two bedrooms were at the back. Another small room, like a sunroom, was Bill's office. It had a row of small, high windows wrapped around the three walls

jutting out from the building. This was the apartment I took over in the early eighties and lived in for the last eleven years of my life in The City. For now, I slept on Bill and Gary's sofa, which pulled out into a bed. So I put my stuff in the hall closet and my dirty clothes in the washing machine and hugged Gary again.

The next day, I set off down Dolores Street to the new Café Ole in the Mission District. My old housemates had asked me to dinner. Judy and Jimmy had moved up from Los Angeles and now lived with the boys. Jimmy opened the front door for me. Judy and Travis met me in the hallway and took me through to John and Duncan in the kitchen. Rape and his new boyfriend, Jerry Terranova, came down from the first floor. Curtis, who had moved into the house while I was away, came up from the basement. Suddenly it was a massive big hug fest with everyone talking at once.

After dinner, I sat down with John and Duncan in their gorgeous art deco living room.

“Do you remember on your last night before you left for England, you left a guy here with us?”

“Yeah, I'm sorry about the messiness of that...”

“Well,” Duncan said, “he stole \$200 of mine and a bag of very good dope.”

I was stunned.

“I'm so sorry, I'll repay you tomorrow...”

“We were really upset with you... But”—he smiled—“if you tell me more fabulous stories about Swinging London, Biba's department store, and your boyfriends, I'm sure I'll get over it.”

Later, as I finally got up to go, they surprised me by suggesting I come back and stay for a time in the small room behind their bedroom. It had a double bed, chest of drawers, and a closet I never

used; I was still a room-pig, my clothes always on the floor. With no idea how long I be able to stay in the country, there was no point making long-term plans. So after a couple more days at Gary's, I packed up and moved to the Mission District.

Although I knew it was San Francisco I had come back for, more than for Richard or his plans, I could not wait to see him. He came to Café Ole a few days after I moved back in and insisted on kissing me solidly outside the closed front door. After a couple of minutes, something in me melted. He looked darker from the desert sun and a little greyer, but now his hair was shorter and his moustache nicely trimmed. Again, I fell head over heels in love with him.

Back in the house, I could not believe I was once again with the main players I'd first met in The City. Now Judy was there too. At times she must have found it hard having me there. Café Ole had been a good move for her. She'd found work as a waitress the year before at the Boarding House, a club that brought in great acts like Lily Tomlin, Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, Martin Mull, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Tom Waites, Barry Manilow, Willy Nelson, and Waylon Jennings. The club tried out new people too. Many stars were born on its stage.

"Déjà vu," said John, echoing my thoughts.

Richard told us about his new porno films. He called one or two of them *plornos*: these were the ones with a plot. He answered all our questions while Judy sat next to me and held my hand. She was the only one in the house who would not be seeing any of the films, she said, and we laughed.

As he took the boys through the making of *Pool Party and Passing Strangers*, two of the five films he had made that year, Richard often had his eyes on me. It was the same look he gave me later when we were with his parents. He loved to shock, but he also wanted me to like what he was doing. So far, he could see I had not made up my mind.

When the evening finished, we went up to bed.

“Well, I can tell you are not excited by my news,” he said, lying on top of me.

“Shut up and kiss me...”

His smell was driving me crazy.

Next morning, he told me more about his place in the desert—that it was outside Palm Springs, and not in the city’s precinct. We were walking up to Castro Street, along Eighteenth, and I could see guys looking at him—talking about him. He was not a big star yet, but it was obvious his films were being seen.

I had to get legal. That was my contribution to our first conversation. I was back in The City, I wanted to stay, and I also wanted to see what Richard had done in the desert. That night we went to a party on Cole Street, with some of his friends from his old Haight days. It was a mock wedding between two straight women, exploring the cultural relevance of marriage. If a man and a woman could get married, why couldn’t *anyone* get married—gay, straight, or other? The ceremony, performed by a minister from some new church in town, was a hangover from the late sixties, when there were Haight-Ashbury communes and individuals wedded to the goals of liberation and the socialist dream. England was only five weeks ago. For me, the contrast was palpable.

I was introduced to one of the brides, another Judy, who heard Richard tell a guy about me needing a green card.

“I’ll marry you,” she offered.

“You just got married!” I laughed.

“That’s all shit... Let’s *really* fuck with the system and do it properly!”

Stoned and drunk, we worked it out over for the next fifteen minutes. We picked a date, and I said I would go down to City Hall and get back to her. I buzzed with excitement as Richard and I left. Could this be real? Could it really work?

It did.

Two weeks later, after we had blood tests and lodged forms through an immigration lawyer, Judy and I became man and wife at City Hall. We had another wedding party at the same house as the mock wedding, with all the same people. Gary and Joe were the only friends I invited, other than Richard. I only told Judy Whitfield at Café Ole when the deal was sealed. She was pissed I had married another Judy!

I could now work legally. I filed my papers at the immigration offices on Clay Street and received a temporary Social Security number. It would become permanent in a year's time, after an interview, and after Immigration was convinced I was *an alien of good standing and could support my wife*. I also had to show—at that time—I was still happily married. Before then, an officer could call in on us at any time to check the marriage was real and not one of convenience.

A month later, Judy called to say she was moving to Tennessee with her current boyfriend and did not know when she would be back. This sent me into a complete panic. I had to get a job, my own place, and live the lie for a year. Fortunately, one of the straight guys at the wedding party had a room to rent on Fourteenth Street, just down from Bill and Gary's on Dolores.

“Better to be living with straight guys for this time than gays,” Richard said.

Halloween was approaching, and Café Ole was abuzz. The masterpieces of invention that were the household's Halloween

events were now even more intricate than the party at which I'd first met the boys and their friends. A tradition had developed where groups created themed performances and took them round in small buses, tumbling into the clubs and bars and parading. The Tavern Guild awarded prizes, and competition was fierce. This Halloween, the Bette Davis Bus was *Going to the Circus*—with kazoos!

Everyone would be a circus stalwart, à la Bette movie characters: Baby Jane dressed as ringmaster, Eve in clown makeup, martini glasses on her shoulders, and so on. There might have been twenty of them, including Judy. It took three weeks to pull it together, rehearsing entrances and exits. Timing was essential, as everyone would be on acid, drinking champagne, or stoned—or combinations thereof. On the night, Gary, Richard, and I went down to Folsom. We watched from the back of the Ramrod and roared when they all came through. Café Ole won the contest for Best Themed Comedy Bus.

The gay population of the Castro District and along Upper Market had noticeably grown. There were more gay-owned shops and bars, heralding the start of a real community. On any weekend, walking up Market to meet Phillip and his housemates for brunch, Gary and I always ran into a crowd. The Castro Theatre had double bills starting early, with small crowds milling outside. The neighbourhood's young men had become confident. Dozens of guys walked up and down Castro Street or lolled by their cars outside Toad Hall and the Midnight Sun. In well-worn jeans, tight around the crotch, tank tops and T-shirts, brown and black boots, men openly cruised and kissed in public. It was a new world with its own sensibility—two blocks long.

As we stopped for the lights at Eighteenth Street, I saw guys standing around the Hibernia Bank building, where I first spotted Richard. It was now a playground for drinking, smoking, cruising, and talking. Gary laughed when he saw the surprised look on my face.

“It’s called Hibernia Beach,” he said.

My eyes flitted from one guy to the next. Gary’s did the same. This was now a full-time cruising scene, as people shopped and went to eat and on to the bars.

By the time I moved into Twentieth Street, the Castro Street Clone was a potent masculine symbol many of us aspired to be—or to sleep with. By ‘76, the new Winston cigarettes ad on the back of *City* magazine featured a well-groomed dark-haired, hairy-chested man with a beautiful set of teeth covered by a full dark moustache. This was the man to emulate or lust after: successful, college-educated, clean, and acceptable. The man you could eventually take home to meet your parents. He reminded me of the actor I’d seen on stage in Sydney, one of the Boys in The Band. My personal ideal man had become the dominant ideal type; bare feet and patchouli oil were out, showers were in.

As the years rolled on, the Castro crowds only got bigger. On a sunny day, the cut-offs with cloth belts, tank tops, and T-shirts only got tighter and smaller. The body was being structurally changed to be more appealing.

I do not think there has been another time in history gay men so openly displayed themselves as they did on Castro Street from ‘75 through the early ‘80s. A few young guys wore the skimpiest outfits to advertise themselves, to display their hunky bodies. They were out and proud—and defiant too. Men revelled in their sexuality, played with gender, and shocked to please and tease, to upend old patterns of thinking.

At the Castro Street Fairs of the late seventies, standing opposite Cliff’s Hardware, the Twentieth Street household was challenged by the open sex acts taking place on the roofs of the buildings. Some people roared approval, but a number of us thought we ought to be more careful, more respectful of the community at large. There was the

possibility of a backlash and judgement from the wider community. I saw an article reprinted from a 1970 B.A.R., asking why young men were coming to San Francisco. What was their motivation? A few guys had said emphatically that they came to party, fuck, and do drugs, that they didn't give a shit about convention. There is no doubt we looked down on the guys who lived the full bar and bathhouse lifestyle—the hypocrisy being that if you ran into one of these hot guys in the baths, or in an alley off of Folsom or Bryant, you wanted to have sex with him. You just did not bring him home to meet the folks! Nothing had really changed since Oscar Wilde's days.

With a small but growing number of men, Gary and I were caught up in the new bodybuilding culture taking hold in The City. At first, there were no gay gyms, just the usual musty, heterosexual establishments downtown. Gary and I joined an upstairs gym on Polk Street, near Macy's off Union Square. It became the first place I did any real exercise since leaving school.

Everyone read Herb Caen in the morning paper, *The Chronicle*. He was a respected journalist with a pithy column and a wry eye who had his finger on the political and cultural pulse. He wrote more and more about gay people and events, especially with the rise of Harvey Milk and the power of the pink dollar. Harvey was now a powerful voice in the Castro District and wanted gay men and women respected. And more than that, he wanted to establish cooperation between all the communities that made up the districts of San Francisco.

There was old gay money in town, and now, with the steady influx of educated men and women in positions of influence downtown and throughout the Bay Area, economic power was shifting. All politicians, whether they liked it or not, began to seek us out. In January, Harvey and a group of his ardent supporters walked all the way down from the Castro to City Hall as he was sworn in as a supervisor. It was a time to be proud, to share the growing sense

of purpose gay people felt through voting and supporting Harvey as their spokesperson. The press was not his kind, especially *The Examiner*, the more conservative afternoon paper. It pandered to the Irish Catholics who were threatened by the hordes sweeping into the Castro and other areas of The City—and to the establishment, which was threatened by a potential loss of power.

The young gay writer Armistead Maupin provided balance to the suspicion and mistrust between The City's straight and gay people. From 1976, his *Tales of the City* was serialized on *The Chronicle's* back page. Along with a large portion of the San Francisco population, I drank my coffee—at breakfast or in the office—and followed the exploits of Michael Tolliver in our City by the Bay. Maupin's gentle, honest, and pithy description of San Francisco's intertwined gay and straight lives did more for our acceptance than most other efforts. Everyone in The City could relate to some event or person in the four issues a week, Monday through Thursday.

I always wondered about Michael Tolliver winning a buns contest at The End Up. Gary and I laughed about it at the time. A few weeks earlier, I'd won the contest myself. Gary and I were down at The End Up with friends late one Sunday afternoon, and I guess we had too much beer or quaaludes. The contest involved any guy who thought he had the butt to win stripping down, lining up, and after a few questions—usually meant to embarrass the guy—turning around to display his wares.

My old waiting buddy from The Truck Stop, Randy Johnson, was compere, and I heard him tell me over a very loud microphone to get my jeans off and get in the line-up. To my friend's horror and delight, I did—and then, to my own embarrassment, I won. Randy screamed out who I was and where I came from over the microphone before giving me the hundred dollar prize money. Beer in those days was fifty cents a bottle, so this money meant a meal out for the household before drinks all round at a favourite bar.

Reading Armistead Maupin's tale later, we wondered if he was there, sitting up the back taking mental notes. It just read so true to my afternoon. We were in the dining room at Twentieth Street, and Sam, who was listening to us from the kitchen, yelled out.

"Yeah, but Michael Tolliver's way nicer than you, Alex!"

"Bitch!" I yelled back.

Richard went back to his desert home early in November. He had animals to look after, his dome to start building, and a film to finish in Los Angeles. But he said he would be back for a couple of weeks before Christmas. Before he left, he took me up to Corona Heights, the little bit of nature above Castro Street, towards Buena Vista. At the time, it was a private wooded area where guys went to have sex. From there, you could look down and across to the Bay.

As he rolled a joint, he said: "I can't live in a city anymore, Alex. I know you have to get legal, and that'll take some time... But then can you come and start a life with me in the desert?"

We smoked the joint in silence and looked out at The City. I knew the main reason I had come back to America was to live in San Francisco, to be with my friends, and to create a life *here*. Richard's letter to me in London had not said anything about living anywhere other than The City. I simply had not faced up to the fact of him buying land out beyond Palm Springs. As I turned and saw his expectant face, the realization struck me hard.

"I've got to admit I'm not completely sure about moving again," I said. "I don't even know whether I'm going to be able to stay in the country... But yeah, okay, if I get legal I'll move down and live with you."

He reached over and kissed me hard. When he started to unbutton my fly, my horniness took over, and my doubts and fears were pushed to the back of my mind. I always wanted to have sex with Richard. It was a serious addiction. Looking back on this time and on the many

times I did fuck him, I know this was why I stayed, and why I lived with him. Also, right then, the desert was still a good year away.

He came back for Thanksgiving. Always desperate to win the approval of his parents for his gayness and angry with them for not having done so already, he pushed to have us invited to their farm for the four-day holiday. I was thrilled with the thought of meeting his family. If we were going to be together long term, it was important to me to have his family accept me as I was. I knew Richard had argued with his parents, not only about his sexuality, but his choices.

These were people who had fought their way up from nothing while raising four kids, and Richard had laughed in their faces about their conservative outlook and their need for certainty. I was the same with my parents and could sympathise with him. But something in both of us still wanted familial acceptance, and so these few days were important. Richard told me stories of how his parents met in California after their families came out from Oklahoma, through the dust storms of the Depression. It was harrowing, and I was eager to find out more from his mother Bess. I'd read about those times in Steinbeck and other writers and knew it must have been an enormous struggle. The Lockes had come a long way since then. Now their big country garden provided all the vegetables—pumpkins, tomatoes, corn, and greens—for Thanksgiving dinner. Most of the family was there.

Richard's Dad, Clay, could not understand why I wanted to come back to America.

“He couldn't keep away from me!” Richard said.

After a moment of silence, we all laughed at him. He pretended to look hurt, and then beamed and laughed too. I could see that the family, especially his sister Janet and older brother Clay Jr., accepted me. For a brief moment, I wondered if, in choosing someone like me—clean cut and college educated—Richard was making a strategic move. I imagine Bess thought I might be a good influence on him,

now I was permanently living in California. Since he'd left the Army and college, Richard had been drifting. With his unconventional, hippy lifestyle, he looked unsettled, and this worried his mother.

We told them about my marriage of convenience and that I was looking for a job in San Francisco. They obviously were not thrilled about the flaunting of the wedding vows, but they could see Richard and I were serious about working it out. For my own part, I could see the Lockes as my new American family—one very different from my own folks back home. Partnering up with an American guy was something I had wanted since coming out—and to have a family who accepted me was a big deal. It made me feel part of the bigger picture, part of the American Dream.

I wondered how my own parents might have reacted at that time had I arrived home alone, or with someone like Richard in tow. I know there would certainly have been a scene, given that Dad harboured resentment over my not sending the coming out letter to him first. Walking through the door with Richard in T-shirt and jeans would not have gone down well with either of them. My folks were snobs, Richard's parents were not, and that was a big difference, especially in those first few days.

Years later, when I took Michael home in 1991 to meet my folks, they loved him. By then, Mum and the rest of my extended family had worked through a lot about gayness, both with me and other gay people they had met. He walked into their house in chinos, sneakers, and a nice cotton shirt, and his handsome face and big smile won everyone's heart. Seventeen years would make a big difference in social attitudes.

Richard and I went to Desert Hot Springs after Christmas, to assess my potential new home. I knew he was anxious for me to like it. But this part of Palm Springs Valley was far from glamorous, even in the early morning. It was a moonscape, harsh and sparse, a long,

flat stretch of country that ran away from the spectacular mountains backing luscious Palm Springs to the uninspiring foothills on the other side of the valley—our side of the valley, the impoverished side. This was Richard's world.

I could see mesquite bushes, an odd cactus. Run-down dwellings, set well back to discourage intruders, suggested PTSD, an occupant who might be a little bit whackadoo. Dotted along the highway was an occasional rusted car, together with the more familiar sight of metal trash piled up on some sad little block. Then, as Richard pointed to the left, I saw his tiny soldier settlement dwelling, its partially formed geodesic dome sticking up 150 yards away, to the east of the house. A friend of his had been coming to check on the place and feed the animals. Thankfully he had gone by the time we arrived.

I was dumbstruck as we drove up the dirt driveway. In my mind I was married to this man and here, now, I was going to make the most of what lay before me. I probably would be able to make changes as time went on.

Sally, Richard's lovely big mutt, wagged her tail madly as he jumped out of the truck. Perched on the roof was Grumpy, a tough, wiry tiger-striped cat that brooked no bullshit—as I was to find out, one locked-down desert storm later.

“The fact he's survived this long in the desert, with coyotes all round, tells you how tough he is,” Richard said.

He leaned up and scratched Grumpy under the chin. I simply got a very cool feline stare.

Inside the house, everything was old and used, covered in a fine dust from the desert. A couple of old rugs had been thrown over the concrete floor. A sofa and two old op-shop chairs made up the living area. Near the kitchen, four chairs were placed round a wooden table

stacked high with papers, maps, odds and ends, and some weird-looking implements I assumed had something to do with the dome. A tiny television was screwed to the wall in a corner, like in a cheap motel.

“The TV works from the wind generator on the roof,” Richard said proudly. “The energy gets stored in a couple of car batteri’s. I’ll show you later.”

He was so desperate for me to like everything he had done. I stood there, hands on my hips. After an awkward moment of silence, he hurried on.

“We sleep in the camper,” he said, pointing through the tiny kitchen window.

“Okay.”

I went out to look at it, with Sally close on my heels. The air was still and cold. I had just come from the warmly decorated, lavish Café Ole—the glittering world of city queens.

“Where’s the shower?” I asked.

“Here.”

He walked over to an outside contraption with a showerhead attached, partially hidden behind a large rock and a couple of mesquite bushes. A long, green plastic pipe wended its way from some source near the house. I must have looked incredulous. He rushed on about how the sun heated the water in the pipe and provided ten minutes’ worth of hot water—plenty of time for a shower.

“Can you be seen from the road?”

“Not really, but does it matter? Maybe you’ll see the flash of a car going by.” He had that gorgeous grin on his face as he watched me squirm. “But someone would have to know you were showering if they were going to stop and really take you in.”

“Comforting,” I replied. “And what about the toilet?”

He pointed to a porcelain arrangement, sitting next to another big rock.’

“I’m in the middle of designing the first fully organic toilet waste disposal for desert-livers, but right now it all goes into one big hole. There’s no smell. I’ve got stuff I put into the waste.”

“That’s great!”

The sun went behind a cloud for a moment. The buzz of insects sounded louder in my brain.

He took off his shirt and was standing in cut-offs and boots, watching me through the now muted light. I wondered where I had left my sunglasses. I was Donna Reed, kidnapped by Clint Walker, standing in front of him with a broken heel. I’d had my blindfold removed after swinging down from a sweating horse. I knew it was going to be downmarket, but I had pictured a desert house with more than one room, nearer Palm Springs, near people I could have gotten to know—played tennis with, had cool drinks with in their poolside cabanas.

I had to have sex immediately, or the spell would be broken. As we made our way to the caravan, I saw it against the sudden sunlight and I began to cry inside. There were no wheels, just bricks, with an old stained quilt that had slipped to the floor. I could smell the age and mould as my ass hit the crumpled sheets. It was the smell of the guesthouse rooms from my childhood—post-war odours, the whiff of real poverty.

## 25

---

**B**ack in The City, I pushed the desert into the back of my mind and began 1976 at Oil Can Harry's on Polk Street, spilling out onto the street at two in the morning, with cars still honking and people partying. I untied the jacket from my waist. Life was pretty good. I was about to move into a new house. I had a new wife—my first and last—and I was on my way to living legally in the best city in the world. I had lived in London for nine months, Paris briefly, and stayed twice in New York, but San Francisco had my heart, and I knew I was meant to be here.

I moved in with the straight guys—Bobby, Glenn, and Brian—and prepared to fool any officer who might come to check on my marriage. We hung some women's clothes in my closet and put girly stuff in the bathroom, old makeup one of the boy's girlfriends did not want. Everyone was prepped to say Judy was away for two weeks visiting family, and we would get in touch when she returned.

It was a very unimaginative, boy-centric apartment, which was mighty strange after the glamour of Café Ole. The boys all had jobs as messengers at a law firm downtown so they could pursue their band interests at night. As it was always looking for new messengers to run documents around the city, the law firm was a good place to start looking for work. I had to show Immigration I had a respectable job,

and not have them walk into my place of employment and receive the same screaming reception I had gotten at The Truck Stop when I when I returned from London.

The law firm was around the corner from Gary's printing shop, behind the gorgeous Wells Fargo Bank on Market. Once administration found I had a university degree, they offered me the supervisor's job, managing the messengers. The current guy had just resigned. So I bought a jacket, two pairs of pants, and a couple of shirts and ties and became an administrative manager at the law firm of Brobeck, Phleger, and Harrison. The boys were now reporting to me.

One of my main jobs that year was making sure they all got out of bed and into the office on time. Each day I walked along Dolores up to Market Street and jumped any number of trams and buses going down through the never-ending road works to the ferry building on the Bay. I knew being supervisor of a group of messengers would not satisfy me long, but for now I had to become respectable in the eyes of my adopted country's government.

The messenger crew was a mixed bag. There were two law students, making money to live on while they finished their studies, and a few guys who were unsure of anything and hard to control. They had the cars for out-of-town deliveries. There were ex-college kids who had come to San Francisco to follow their musical dreams and to start a band. And then, there was Billy.

Throughout the commercial heart of The City, Billy was famous as a foot messenger. He came from London in the early seventies after marrying an Italian-American girl he met in his cousin's Notting Hill fish and chip shop. Georgia was from an old, established Italian family in The City. With his Cockney accent and great sense of humour, Billy was on speaking terms with everyone, from the top partners to the janitors. I learned a lot about humility and fairness from him. He treated everyone the same. He also used to quietly

disappear throughout the day—not every day, but often enough. He had been a messenger at Brobeck before I arrived and was there for years after I left. Billy and Georgia are two of my most enduring friends, and whenever I am back in San Francisco, we always spend a raucous afternoon together atop their fabulous penthouse looking out across the Bay. Sadly, Georgia passed away in 2020.

Gary and I had lunch together at least three times a week. At other times I shopped or explored through the lunch hour. I made friends at the law firm and was invited to dinners and movies by the secretaries and lawyers I got to know. At night I was often at Bill and Gary's, where there was always an extra place at the table. *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* reigned supreme on TV most nights at dinnertime, as it did in homes throughout America. We had so much fun at Dolores Street. Bill's friends were a bit older than us—three years made a difference back then—and it was here I learned a lot about local and national politics, the way Americans thought about race and how the draft had just ended. Bill's friends had good jobs and had either been called up or had stayed in college to avoid the draft. No one had been to Vietnam.

From 1976 going into 1977 marked my big gay political awakening. Now I knew I was able to live here, I could get involved in a more meaningful way. Only my anxiety about not being an American citizen held me back. It niggled at me until I left the country, and it limited my involvement in the gay and lesbian liberation movement.

Harvey Milk was at the centre of The City's gay politics. He owned the camera shop on the left-hand side of Castro Street, between Eighteenth and Nineteenth. He'd been engaged in gay rights for a year or so, from the time he organized gay men to boycott the liquor store across from the camera shop, because of the owner's opposition to gays. It had worked, and he tapped into the growing power of a group of people ready to show its muscle.

When I first lived in The City, I frequented the shop as a tourist, dropping off and picking up film. Sometimes, sitting up at the counter, I would get into conversations with Harvey or his partner Scott about being a foreigner in America, what I thought of the Nixon investigations, and other topical events. Harvey, always vibrant and so often the showman, was also a terrible flirt. He was very open about his interest in getting it on with me. It made me uncomfortable at times. Travis said he didn't like to go into the shop if he could get Jack to do it. Harvey was much older than most of us, and the truth was that if he had looked like the Marlborough Man, we all would have flirted back. After I got back from the UK, whenever I went into the shop with Richard, now the star, the two of them always got stuck into local politics.

When Harvey was standing for his first city role, I remember him stopping me near the Bank of America as I was walking down Castro Street.

“Are you going to vote for me, Alex?” he asked.

“You know I can't vote, Harvey,” I said. “But get the dog shit out of The Castro, and I'll hand out leaflets for your next project.”

He laughed. A number of people had already approached him about the dog poo. It was horrible. You had to check your shoes and boots every time you came into the house. Promising to clean up dog poo was one of the main reasons he first got into office.

The year 1976 was when my friendship with the Twentieth Street house blossomed. It would eventually transplant my relationship with Café Ole. Phillip had bought the house with his friends from New Orleans, Manuel Fernandez and Sam Nuccio. They moved in on the July Fourth weekend in 1974, when I was still living on Liberty Street. Manny had a real flair for interiors, and the house had been fixed up from top to bottom by the end of that year. It was a Victorian with a basement and three floors above. Eight people living in six bedrooms.

Like me, the guys in the house went out to the bars, both in the Castro and on Folsom. I remember Joe Vigil from Café Ole coming over with Gary and me. He told us Twentieth Street was not really his world. Though he liked Manuel's flair, he saw a difference in temperament between the two houses. Café Ole was somehow more settled than Twentieth Street. Café Ole had been in The City longer and was more focused on the older gay world of theatre and drag.

For me, the theatrical gay world is best illustrated by the 1974 Isadora Duncan Memorial Day Celebration, held on the nearest Sunday to her death each September. Everyone was on acid and dope, and we'd lugged picnic stuff up the mountainside of Mount Tamalpais across Golden Gate Bridge. We lined up along the cliff's edge as the sun went down on the sea's horizon. We were dressed in long, flowing garments and coloured scarves, some dancing with cymbals on their hands and feet. One cute guy had a snake around his neck. Then there were older hippies, redolent still of patchouli oil, and a guy who looked like Jesus with a wire pyramid on his head. We all stood in reverence and watched the sun slip away. It was a gentle time, with memories of Greece and dance and the promise of the Haight in the early days - all about love and inclusion.

Two years on, the gay scene changed fast, and Twentieth Street typified the change. Gary and I went out together alone. Phillip knew this was important to us and had Gary on a long leash. Gary had always loved going to the Folsom Street bars, and we resumed our nighttime lives together down there. The Boot Camp, The Ambush, The Stud were favourite haunts. If we were going out as a household, we all jumped into Phillip's big Cadillac and went down for dinner at Hamburger Mary's - those fries! - where we met up with Twentieth Street's friends. Slowly I became friends with these people too.

I was also changing internally. I used to have a strong desire to project my feminine side but was afraid of being seen as a sissy. I

could see others involved in that kind of lifestyle but thought that if I joined them or acted like them publicly, I would be judged and made fun of. I was conflicted, not knowing which way to go or how much I wanted to be involved. On the day of the '76 Castro Street Fair, Gary and I were slated to join Joe Vigil, all the guys from Café Ole, the Radical Faeries, and other performance groups and go up to Mount Tamalpais for the annual Isadora Duncan Memorial.

We decided to fake it somehow, to get out of the celebration, because we wanted to be with all the hot, new masculine-leaning guys at the Fair. We knew the Castro Street Fair was now the major event for the men we liked and the direction we were taking. For Café Ole and Twentieth Street, it was the parting of the ways, the separation of two city lifestyles. Many guys saw being gay as a masculine thing, almost a political statement to be encouraged. A lot of them openly hated 'queeniness'. They wanted to look straight, strong, and wanted to be accepted by straight people. And, they didn't necessarily want monogamy; they just wanted to fuck in the local candy store as much as they could.

They wanted to be seen like straight men, to celebrate being guys in T-shirts, jeans, jockstraps, leather vests, boots—another type of fetishized uniform. Those of us who wanted to have both tried to balance two life choices in a city turning to hedonism. Part of me felt terrible and remorseful for lying to Joe and missing the '76 Isadora Duncan Memorial. I saw the drag queen in me saying bye-bye. But Gary and I got over our guilt and had a great time at the Castro Street Fair with ten thousand other hot guys.

Richard came and went. He was making a film—*Kansas City Trucking Co.*—with two brothers out of LA. He also became serious about the building of his geodesic dome. He was at his Desert Hot Springs home for a few weeks, then came up and stayed with me in The City. We used the word 'lovers,' but not 'monogamy'. Monogamy is intrinsic to my make-up, but it wasn't intrinsic to

Richard's. He encouraged me to have sex with other men while he was away. I thought I wanted just him, but the truth is when he was not around, I wanted sex with other men too. I could see how it fitted psychologically with my homecoming wish of living in San Francisco. I still was unsure if I would leave The City and go south to Richard's desert. Secretly, and not too far beneath the surface, I looked for a reason to stay in The City.

Richard's long-term movie-making friend Artie Bresson, a lovely, messy, kind of nerdy guy, finished making a film with Richard in San Francisco called *Forbidden Letters*. Through 1976 I went on some of the shoots and naturally was unable to see how Richard could be attracted to the young man Artie had chosen to play opposite him. Nevertheless, I feigned interest in the project. The film at least had a plot, and I enjoyed Artie's company. For a fantasy prison cell sex scene, Artie took the film group across to Alcatraz on a tourist ferry. He shot the scene quickly in a cell, pretending to be a student filmmaker. As tourists walked by, everyone changed position, ready to resume filming when the tourists had gone.

I always had the wee green devil on my shoulder when I was out with Richard; it was better when I was alone with him—at his folks', or out in the country—or when he was not in town. When we went into gay San Francisco, he was a man who liked to look around and appreciate what he saw. I lacked the self-confidence to realise some of the men were looking at me. I was convinced they all looked at and wanted Richard. Occasionally, he disappeared, and I knew it meant he was at the baths. Eventually we came up with the rule that when he was in San Francisco, he could go to the baths once or twice, but he would not go home with anyone. When he was away from The City, there were no rules for either of us.

At the Howard Street baths one weekend, a man called John followed me down the hall to my room, and I let him in. After sex, we talked for an hour, and he asked me home. John lived out in

Pacifica, in a condo overlooking the Pacific. In the very late morning, he served me eggs, coffee, and orange juice overlooking the sea.

“From sleaze to sea,” a voice said behind me.

There stood his roommate and ex-partner, Ron, smiling at me from the kitchen. He had blond, tousled hair, a wispy moustache, and piercing blue eyes. John had short, dark receding hair and a brown beard.

“Opposites *do* attract each other,” I said.

“Ah yes, but make better roommates,” John replied.

They were from Texas, and we spent a couple of wonderful hours telling our stories. John and I saw each other again, and I knew he wanted more, but given my circumstances, it went no further. So we all became friends.

Ron and I began to meet up in city bars with the Twentieth Street boys, and then we met his crew as well. In those days, I loved the phenomena of an instant crowd, when two households met up. When Ron brought his Texas friends to Twentieth Street before a party one Saturday night in late '76, there were over twenty gay men together, most meeting for the first time. It made hitting the bars later a lot of fun. There was always the excitement of meeting someone hot in the other household and ending up with him. Eventually, you could be incestuously involved with five or six households. Everyone knew your business—especially what you liked, and what you were like, in bed. Casual sex was a weird experience at the best of times. Sometimes I went home with a guy who was full of confidence, had a great career, and who I could see myself being with, but at least until the end of '77, I kept myself available for Richard.

Performance was the big issue for all of us in the first ten years of the sexual awakening in San Francisco. Everyone knew you were going home the next morning to tell your roommates about the

sex you had just had. Most people lived with more than two other roommates, and everyone, on a Sunday morning over coffee and *The Chronicle*, talked about who they had been with the night before. Most men who played out at least three nights a week knew who had the biggest cock in town and who was a top and who was a bottom. Every month, there was a new fashion or sexual practice, a new political rally or store opening to discuss and dissect. It was always exciting and always new. And by Sunday brunch, we all knew about the hottest guys who had just arrived in town.

One Sunday morning, as I was leaving his second-story flat in the Haight, the guy I'd hooked up with the night before at the Midnight Sun stopped me. He turned up a very full mouth and looked me straight in the face.

"Be kind about me at your house," he said. "I know one of your roommates."

I started crab-walking down the stairs, looking back over my shoulder.

"Who?" I asked.

"Sam."

And with a laugh from me and small wave from him and pout, he shut the door.

You also had to be wary of the roommates of any guy you still liked in the morning and wanted to see again. You had to hope you had not tricked with one of them, turned him down at a bar, or met him some previous weekend in an alley or at the baths, or at the Glory Holes. By 1980, you would probably know at least one of the roommates by sight. And there might be a nod of recognition. This happened in the twinkle of an eye as coffee or juice was poured. If the roommate(s) did not like you, you were in trouble. And if the roommate(s) liked the guy scored with, then you had an uphill battle dating him. There was nothing like a jealous roommate.

Although guys were streaming in from all over the country, it was still a small world. There were about three thousand men who saw each other regularly—in the Castro or downtown at work, in the bars spreading across The City, and in the bathhouses, especially after the City Baths opened on Harrison Street with more than two hundred rooms. The big dance parties had not started yet, and they were going to complicate things even more when the health crisis hit.

Gary and I were still friends with Joe Vigil, along with some of the boys from Café Ole and their theatre friends, and we helped put on the gay musicals as stagehands. The Tavern Guild, the oldest active bar association in The City, ran large, glamorous events throughout the year. I especially loved these shows as I still harboured a desire to be on stage from my early performances as a kid at school, and at the guesthouse in summer on a makeshift stage, entertaining the guests at night.

Joe and I had our own friendship apart from Gary, and I met up with him and his friend Woody—aka Marilyn when stoned—to attend drag performances, or the early shows of *Beach Blanket Babylon* on Grant Street, where sand was trucked in and spilled out onto the floor. With Gary and others, we saw Bette Midler every time she came to town. Sadly, when Joe got posted to Seattle later in the seventies, I travelled up to visit him there.

Occasionally Joe put on one of his famous movie weekends—acid in punch glasses at the door, doled out by his brother Mark—and fifty queens would hiss at Eve Arden, or glory in the dresses on parade in the middle of *The Women*. Many of the men in the room had come from production jobs in Hollywood. People like Pat Campano, a well-known costume designer, his partner Dick—who, as Fay, was a famous male actress in *The City*—and their helper Brandy who helped them make the stunning gowns for the lavish theatre productions. Sometimes on a Saturday afternoon, I sat spellbound, handing Dick thread or a swatch from the benches as he

sewed, listening to him talk about all the shows he had been in and whom he knew in the scene.

In December '76, a young immigration officer looked intently at Judy and asked if her husband's job at the law firm provided enough money to keep her. Judy smiled, her bloodshot eyes slowly blinking, and said she was going back to school in the New Year. I gulped: this was not scripted. The officer folded his arms and looked at me, then at Judy again before unfolding his arms and giving us both a thin, conspiratorial smile. He said everything looked good.

“Welcome to the United States of America.”

Outside, Clay Street suddenly took on colour, became vibrant and alive. I welcomed all the traffic sounds swirling around me. The deep blue of the Californian sky was a canopy of promise over my head. It had been a tense year for me, not knowing whether I would be accepted or not. I hugged Judy and thanked her from the bottom of my heart. She smiled at me, shrugged, and said she knew it was all going to be fine after a reading she'd had the night before with a psychic.

She found a joint in her string bag, lit it up, then said goodbye to me—I never saw her again—waved, and went off to meet up with her old friends in the Haight before flying back to the South. I think I floated back to work. I was legal at last.

Nevertheless, I did not want to draw too much attention to myself. It had taken two full years to become a legal resident, and I refused to fuck it up. So I was hesitant at times, holding back from fully engaging in American life. I could not vote anyway. To do that, I had to give up my Australian citizenship—and I did not want to, despite the real grudges I harboured about growing up there, especially around my father's lack of love and the way straight men had treated me. Despite being legal, I often felt like an outsider, never fully American—one foot in and one foot out. And I was never

fully understood in the US. Americans rarely get the British colonial consciousness, with its ability to laugh at itself. Certainly Americans did not understand our gentle mocking of patriotic displays. Once, at a heated dinner party at Bill's, I criticised something President Carter had done and was told to *go home if I didn't like it*. Living two lives could be frustrating, an existential merry-go-round.

John Irving has spoken about 'the foreignness that travels with you,' referring to lives lived in two countries over long periods. It is hard to assimilate completely in a second place: childhood roots go down deep early and are surprisingly strong in their hold, especially as you age. Despite that, sometimes now, back here in Australia, I feel equally alien—just as a youth, I often felt I was born to be somewhere else.

Ironically, I spent most of my twenty years in San Francisco coming to terms with my childhood trauma and family history in Australia: therapy disconnected from the place where it happened. Then, when I did come back to live in Australia in 1993, I felt completely lost and new, unsure about who Australians were. I'd missed twenty years of cultural, political, and social history, and I knew no one in the press or on television. It took another five years before I could relax and be Australian again.

“You can't leave,” said Gary.

We were sitting inside a new soup and sandwich place in the Embarcadero, the wind softly howling along the high concrete walls between the three buildings. At the end of fall, leaves whirled in the air. Morosely pushing a salad around, I said I'd made a promise to Richard and wanted to be with him.

“He'll understand! It's all changed now. You have a great job and you're sure to get more money after Christmas. He can come up and visit, just like he's been doing!”

“It's not a great job at all!” I fired back. “No way would I want to go on working for those snotty arseholes, even if I was staying. You've got a great position with great prospects, but I haven't. I want more. I want to get in with someone and start a business. I can achieve a lot more now I'm legal here. I have been thinking about teaching again as well.”

“That's a reason to stay, isn't it? Can you start a business out in nowhere? And can you handle the fact Richard's becoming a star? Didn't someone at Café Ole always say he was meant for the world?”

Gary and I had gone to see Richard's breakthrough gay porn film, *Kansas City Trucking Co.* He was fantastic in it. I felt weird as

I watched him get it on with these other hot guys. Though I did not want to admit it, I knew this was going to be part of our lives over the next few years.

We finished up in sullen silence.

“I’m going to miss you,” Gary said as we walked back through the lunch-hour rush. “And it’ll be a while before I can come down.”

“Joe said he’d come too, right? Ron and John?”

“Yeah, and Phillip of course.”

“Well, it’s not going to be so bad... And it’s only an hour’s flight away,” I said, trying to placate him.

“I’m still not happy about it. And if we’re being honest,” he said, looking at me directly, his hand on the door of his shop, “neither are you.”

The unspoken subtext of all of this was that Richard had never been a good influence on me.

I walked back to work in a foul mood. The law firm was also unhappy when I told them I was leaving. The office manager told me they were relocating to the bottom of Market Street in early '77 and they wanted me to be part of it. But I was happy to be out of there: The pay was terrible, with only one week’s vacation. In Australia at that time, all workers got at least two weeks paid. The American work culture seemed almost feudal. I had given my straight Fourteenth Street roommates a month’s notice. I was saying goodbye to everyone.

At Desert Hot Springs, Richard made a vegetable garden. He built a chicken-wire perimeter and even put in poles so we could cover the garden with a tarpaulin when windstorms came through. Long ago, soon after we had met, I told him how much I wanted to grow vegetables.

Now I planted a small crop, and though the broccoli suffered some sort of bug infestation we were able to eat lettuce, beans, and tomatoes as summer came on. I would have liked his folks to see this effort, but no way were they going to visit. It was still hard for them to fully accept our gay lifestyle.

One night, a few weeks after arriving, I got up and wandered outside. Leaning against the bedroom caravan, I lit up a Marlborough Light. I moved to the desert, knowing Richard and I should have been fuck buddies only. I should still have been in San Francisco. Richard should have just gotten on with it, hooked up with someone more appreciative of his desert life—perhaps one of the guys who were already showing up randomly. Some of them looked like they could live out here forever. But I had committed to it. I was addicted to Richard—having sex with Richard—and now I had to knuckle under.

Occasionally, we got a call from someone in LA, and Richard would say to come on down. Other times they just appeared. *Kansas City Trucking Co.* was now a hit, so actors and others connected to the film were always keen to come down for a few days.

And that fucking dome. It inched forward through the early part of the year. There was rarely any money for it, but I do remember a steady stream of men who came through to work on it. They all wanted to have sex with Richard, and I stood squarely in their way. Often a lone wolf appeared at the door, some hot guy, always about thirty, either really good-looking or with a big dick. He would look at me thinking, *Who the fuck's this? I didn't come all the way for a three-way with a clean-shaven boy...* When I was told, *Jeff's here... Didn't I mention he wanted to help work on the dome?* I showed my contempt. I knew Richard had most likely met Jeff on his hands and knees at the baths in LA three weeks earlier, and that Jeff would have been told nothing about me. The story he heard would have been all about the desert, the freedom, sleeping under the stars... And all about the fucking dome.

I felt like shit and tried to push it all aside. Richard was never directly dishonest about his motives or actions and could not understand why I was unable to get involved with him and other men. I was angry with myself and with the way I felt. I was greedy for him and did not want to share him. I tried to fit in, and there were times it was magical. But I was living inside a fantasy bubble, wherein I could change him, while the truth was he was moving further away from my dream of him. He was developing strengths from his movie-making. If he had experienced this type of fame a year earlier, I doubt he would have written to me at all. He was becoming a sexual representation of strong masculine gayness, more famous each month. And I was becoming more distant and withdrawn, harbouring a resentment that simply kept growing.

I made an appointment with the assistant principal of Palm Springs High. Throwing on a shirt and tie, I went in for an interview. He was a middle-aged gentleman with a comb-over, big black sideburns, and thick glasses. He took an instant dislike to me. The contempt was there on his face. I thought I looked okay. My London teaching credentials and my Australian university degree were reasonably strong, especially for a temporary position or part-time role. But he interrupted my oral academic history with a hand in the air.

“You don't have a Masters in Higher Education, do you?”

“Do I need one to teach English to children who can't speak it?” I asked, astonished.

I said I could go back and do a master's over the next couple of years while I taught, if that is what it would take.

“Without a master's, I can't even consider you for a position.”

My mind was racing: I'd banked on getting a professional job like this.

“It’s the same in every school district in Southern California,” he added.

I looked up at his smug face. My disdain for American education—for any education system other than the superior British system—took over. I got up in a bewildered huff. Standing in the hot sun outside the school, I felt more trapped than ever.

The truth is I went to live at Desert Hot Springs because I was lazy, because I didn’t want to throw myself into a job or do further study toward a career. I wanted to float along with another man’s vague dreams about a possible alternative life in the desert. And the truth is by then I was an addict; that I wanted to have sex with Richard all the time was too big an admission to make to myself or to my closest friends. It was base and unworthy, and I would have hurt not only myself but Richard if I had made the admission.

The closest I came to it was driving into Dave’s Villa Caprice the first time we went in and discussing how we would navigate monogamy and his desire for other men. It was in the air, the space was open for it to come out, but I could not grab the full truth and articulate it. He wanted me to be with him and love him for who he was, but knowing I could never do that, I punished him—and myself—and eventually drove us apart.

I loved his mad energy and great plans, his fun nature, and his care for the wider community, but somehow I knew it was doomed to fail because he would never let the establishment help him with his projects. He wanted to be the heroic outsider. Then as his film fame took over, he put his projects to one side, believing money would come more easily from his acting career.

I will never forget the look on my friends’ faces when they came down toward the end of February.

“You can come back with us,” Phillip whispered.

He was holding my shoulder at a Palm Springs disco. Phillip was never taken in by the Teddy Roosevelt romantic outdoors tradition. He freaked when he saw his first chicken sitting on the woodbin by the stove. Most of my visiting friends accepted my decision for a day or so before they all said the same thing.

“Look, it isn't an admission of failure,” Gary said quietly as we walked through the desert. We were at the back of the house, late in the afternoon. He and Phillip had arrived half an hour before. “I know you've put a lot into this working, I really do, but are you happy now you're here? Something's happened, I can tell... And it's not what you bargained for.” He stopped and stood with his hands on his hips, squinting into the setting sun. Gary, although someone always up for fun and even a good rally of support for gay rights, was essentially a conservative, respectable guy who went through life well-planned. Unlike yours truly.

“I don't know.” I was squirming inside. “It's only been a couple of months. And look at my vegetable garden at the side of the house.”

“Do you have a job yet?”

“I tried the Palm Springs School District to teach ESL and got knocked back for not having a master's. I'm not sure what to do next. Richard doesn't have any money.”

I looked away, toward the barren desert, ashamed of my situation.

“Doesn't he get some sort of Army pension?”

“It's a disability pension... He's been surviving on it for the past few years. He had some sort of mini breakdown in '71.”

Gary's look was tinged with disgust. He already knew something about Richard's past from Garrett and had always disapproved. I felt I had to defend Richard, even though I felt it was wrong. He said he was trying to get it together but did not have support from

local officials for his wind energy schemes. Gary and I walked on in silence until we heard someone yelling. We both swung around.

Phillip was weaving carefully through the scrub, not letting anything natural touch his clothes.

“Guys,” he said, “I’ve made a decision, and I don’t want you to freak.” He looked from me to Gary. “I’ve booked us into Dave’s for the rest of our stay ‘cause I can’t do that camper.” By now he was crazily waving his arms in the air. “Richard showed me where the shower was, and the toilet... My God, I just can’t do it! I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me, but we’re booked in and that’s that.” He turned to me. “You and Richard are going to come in later, and we’ll all have dinner on me and then we can talk about what we’ll do for the rest of our holiday.”

He turned, started back, and almost ran into a cactus.

Later, as we sat round the pool at Dave’s Villa Caprice, Joe Vigil exclaimed: “We know you really wanted to make this work, darling, but you’re a city boy, and you look miserable, and The City wants you back!”

Joe had gone straight to Dave’s when he arrived.

“I like this, though,” he added, lips pursed on his Cherry Coke straw.

He let his sunglasses slip, his eyes falling back onto the very cute, naked blond guy floating in the pool.

I did not tell Joe, or the others, about what happened soon after I first came to Palm Springs. Richard had brought me in to Dave’s to swim and lie by the pool, and we got to the end of our most honest conversation to date as we pulled into the car park. It was to colour my entire stay in the desert—and really the rest of my time as Richard’s partner.

I tried to explain what I wanted from our relationship, and how I'd felt during the months before I moved to the desert. We'd never confronted the fact we were possibly looking at a lifetime commitment. But here we were. Or more to the point, here I was, having left my city life, a steady job at a law firm, and my friends—with some angst. I believed I could make it work, but my paradigm was based on the notion of heterosexual marriage: being married to one person.

Driving into Palm Springs that morning was the first time I understood this so clearly. Before, I always thought I would lose him if I said anything about it. Now I told him how I felt, with the hot wind streaming through the open window into my face, the glorious vistas of manicured lawns looming up left and right. When we pulled up, Richard turned to me.

“Alex, I love you, and I want to have a life with you, but sexually you're not enough for me,” he said. “I want more than one man when it comes to sex. I've never lied to you about that, have I?”

I shook my head. There it was, honest and true. I had a choice. I could hold on to my attachment to monogamy, my dreams of being with one exclusive, big man, who would take care of me, have me sit comfortably in front of him on his horse as we rode off into the distance—Clint Walker in Cheyenne, on a grainy TV when I was twelve years old, lying front down, squirming on an Axminster carpet. Or I could be carefree and open to the new shared sexual freedom that was becoming the gay lifestyle of the late seventies.

I lit a cigarette with my Dunhill lighter.

“No, you haven't lied about having sex with other guys,” I said. I hated myself at that moment: I felt so impotent. “But I guess I thought it'd be different when I came down here to live. I know this is stupid, and I'll get used to it. As long as it's not always in my face, I'll be all right. But if guys come to the house just to fuck with you, I'm not sure I can do this for long.”

My mind travelled back to the choice I'd made a year ago on Corona Heights.

"What about us having three-ways?" he asked, taking my cigarette.

I noticed he didn't say he would not have sex with guys who dropped by the dome.

"It's possible. Just give me some time."

I secretly believed these men would never be there for *me*, and that knife twist hurt me again. I knew the kind of guy who liked me immediately. He wanted a smooth-skinned, European-looking guy, not the fashionable hot, hairy American cigarette ad. Richard was looking at me, and I felt like shit, but I gave him my best smile and together we got out of the car and went into Dave's. I made up my mind to hate the place right there and then as we walked from a parking lot full of beat-up pick-ups and gleaming Cadillacs.

The Villa Caprice complex was decorated New Mexico style, with a high, mustard-pink wall providing complete privacy. We were greeted by the unctuous manager Jess, who made a big insincere deal of letting Richard in for free. It was obviously a plus to have a porn star at the pool, but he wanted us to know it was not forever. I immediately disliked him and wanted to leave.

Jess buzzed us through, and there we were, walking into a typical Southern Californian resort space—the oval-shaped pool with blue tile, plenty of rich green grass stretching away to the Disney cabins with colourful gardens around them. Five or six guys on the grass and in deck chairs immediately looked our way, all of them naked except for one in yellow Speedos—an LA queen who wanted that tan line.

I assumed most of them knew who Richard was now that his first major movie was out and I was on hyper-alert to see who he looked at. It combined with my growing sense of dread having made

the move to the desert, and I became the Ice Queen, a name I was actually branded with after a month or two in Palm Springs.

So hanging out at Dave's Villa Caprice, fully aware I was wasting my life, comparing myself to all the men coming and going—no different to being on Castro Street or in the bathhouses of any city in the US—but still addicted to febrile sex with Richard, I sank into an awful place in my head.

The person who saved me in the desert was Christopher 'Blossom' Fiorentino, a sweet guy about my age, originally from San Francisco, who was a friend of everyone on the outer fringe of all those living an alternative lifestyle in the desert. He was about 5'9, slim, with a mop of curls around his head, and he sported a thin, bushy moustache. He wore self-repaired glasses with a severe prescription that made his eyes owl-like when he looked at you directly. He was a man with a heart of gold, a remnant of the Haight, who'd ended up in a place where he could live cheaply and find work in small-town cafés and bars. We became good friends, and he worked hard to keep me happy down there. There must have been times he nearly gave up on me. One day at Dave's, he plopped down in a banana chair beside me and told me Grace Kelly had arrived and taken over my body. We both cracked up.

He was right, of course. I could not get over myself. But together we made our way through February as waiters at the Palm Springs Tennis Club. On Wednesdays in March, I did a short stint in a Palm Springs hotel modelling men's clothes for groups of wealthy women, and for the next three months, we set up a small dinner-time café at Dave's.

Richard made constant plans for some project or other, ideas about getting a place and building a garden, a sustainable house. This was the side of him I loved. Somehow it matched the sexual desire I had for him. It rounded him out for me. When I looked ahead to

the possibility of staying with him and settling down, these planning conversations were important to me. My background dictated an idea of roots and worthwhile work, a home and hearth. Richard talked about having these things, but I learned as the months turned into years that he was just like my dad. Lots of great plans, but no ambition to make them happen—unsettlingly, because 'other people' were holding him back, 'making it too difficult' with bureaucratic tape.

I puzzled that we were just getting by most of the time and that we could not pull it together with a project that made money. I knew something was wrong but was unable to put my finger on it. Though Richard had his dome and environmental projects, I struggled to get behind them. I was never a hands-on guy. Beyond the vegetable gardening, I only worked once in the dome.

He sabotaged his planning permits and fought with the council over creating onsite prototypes for his projects. He did not seem to be able to stay with any one project for long. He was freewheeling and did not understand that these types of plans take focused commitment and a willingness to work with the establishment. Sometimes a sympathetic older council engineer came out and tried to help him work through regulations and design planning, so I knew there was help there, but it was dawning on me that it had to be his way all the way, or it was not going to happen. Then there would be a knockback or a fight with an official, and he would storm off to Dave's or go up to LA for a couple of days and I began to realise this was his pattern of living.

By 1977, Richard had formed a victim mentality where the straight, outside world was concerned. He was a star in a small gay world of pornography and amateur environmentalism in Desert Hot Springs. But creating an income to help get us out of *poverty*—and I mean poverty—meant he had to knuckle down and open himself up to the world.

His underlying fear of The Man, his conspiratorial rants, made me nervous. He could be incredibly practical with anything to do with equipment and building. Anything he wanted to work on, he stuck at and got it done—but if you did not fit his worldview, he dismissed you and your ideas. Contrarily, he would then come back to you and make up. He never wanted to hurt anyone. Overall, his heart was as big as that smile. He had a beautiful nature.

Yet I watched and listened to him be incredibly rude to his parents whenever we visited them. Two hours after arriving at their northern Californian farm, he was in an argument, though I could see him being kind and gentle to everyone else. His attitude seemed to derive from his complex relationship with his mother. Bess was the daughter of a Baptist preacher and consequently challenged by gayness while Richard was insistent she accept him and his gay brother, Robert.

In fact, he outed his brother before Robert had a chance to sit down with his parents and tell them they had a second gay son. Richard had blurted it out in anger, while forcing gayness down their throats. He could never understand why people did not accept what he saw as the truth and the best way to live. So he laid it all out for them—and suddenly, there it all was for them, Bess's favourite little boy also living in the depths of depravity.

But his parents were much better than that. Like so many parents across the Western world in the seventies, facing up to the horrors their children were inflicting on them—anti-war sentiment, gay liberation, women's liberation, racial equality—I think they handled him very well. They liked me and had us with them for Christmas '76. This meant a lot to Richard. The only argument at the farm on that occasion had been about the needs and fruit from regular work.

In June '77, Richard finally told me he was setting aside his building and environmental projects. The films would get him the

money he needed if he made the most of his new star status. The dome could wait. I was cooking and looking out of the small window to the desert hills, and something sank inside of me. He wanted me to agree immediately and completely with him, I could hear it coming from deep in the back of his throat.

*Kansas City Trucking Co.* was giving him countrywide notoriety and was to be followed by *El Paso Wrecking Corp* in '78. The filmmakers had realised what they had in Richard and came down to Desert Hot Springs to discuss the 'plot' of the next film. So we all sat down at the house and began the script of *El Paso Wrecking Corp*. I actually got some dialogue in, although any suggestions I made about plot-driven dialogue that conflicted with the timing of sex scenes were ignored. What excited both of us was that it now looked like he could make real money as a porn actor. He had only gotten five hundred dollars for *Kansas City Trucking Co.* He was going to ask for eight thousand dollars for the next film—and more after that.

Then Wakefield Poole and his film *Real to Reel* arrived. It was supposed to be erotic, the story of four guys talking about their real lives and sexual passions, but eventually got caught between a doco and a porn film and satisfied no one. Richard saw it as an opportunity to tell his story, to share his philosophies about sustainable desert living with his fans—and I would be part of his ideal lifestyle. He was so excited about the idea I did get caught up in the process. Wakefield was famous. *Real to Reel* would be a diversion from the day-to-day grind of living so far out in the desert. I even agreed to have sex with Richard in the film. Unfortunately, Wakefield was a heavy cocaine user, and on the day he shot my part of the story on the roof of the desert house, the coke was flowing and the hard-ons were not. When we saw the film in '78—with cast and crew at the Nob Hill Cinema on Jackson, San Francisco—I was mortified, ready to leave the country. Our sex scene looked fake and awkward. From behind me, in the dark, I heard a frustrated guy shout to Richard on

the screen: "For God's sake, just fuck him!" But it did not happen. Gary said I had nothing to worry about; no one would go and see it after word got out. I was sorry for Richard and very happy for me. Thankfully, the film was pulled over distribution rights and has never been released.

By now I felt I was walking through quicksand, stuck in a world I did not want. I felt ashamed, too. I became increasingly angry with myself for throwing my lot in with another man's dreams and not making more of my own. I could see that Richard's path was moving away from mine, now he was becoming famous. He got press in major papers as a star of a new, more 'thoughtful' gay pornographic genre. There had been *Deep Throat* in '73 from the straight porn world, and then the better-produced *The Devil in Miss Jones*.

By the time Richard's films were coming out, gay and straight porn were both becoming part of modern American culture. Men wanted it, and so did some women. A tsunami had started in the Los Angeles porn industry, which was beginning to make people rich. A new industry was out and proud, talking and arguing in print and on film, and in the law courts, about freedom of speech and sexual freedom.

I was happy for Richard. At last he was motivated and, at least with his acting, having success. I could see how he loved slipping into this new public persona. He received a letter from a young man living in the Midwest who thanked him for being who he was. The kid had just seen *Kansas City Trucking Co.* and realised he could be a masculine gay man and be proud of having sex with other men and that he had drawn back from committing suicide. This touched Richard profoundly. He now saw his film work as a crusade to help the liberation of gay men everywhere.

I watched him, letter in hand, standing in the kitchen looking out at the desert, lost in his thoughts about where all this was going,

and I wondered how I could fit in. Soon, more men arrived to help him with the building of the dome. I found myself wanting to have sex with some of these guys too, but now, on my own, just for me.

One day, we drove over to Christopher's place in the desert for a barbecue and party. We arrived about six to avoid the heat of the day. He had a small, fairly decent caravan on a small ridge near the entrance to the valley, but far enough away from others to have peace of mind. It was still hot, and we were all lounging around on old chairs and sofas. Large coolers had been pulled up against his house, out of the sun. Someone had started firing up the grill on an open fire-pit. Christopher and I ended up seated apart from the rest of the group just as the sun started to set over the mountains behind us. We faced the peaceful eastern end of the valley.

"I figured you're about to leave us, right?" he said, scratching his head.

Christopher had big, intelligent eyes, which now looked straight at me.

"I think I am," I said.

We turned to look at Richard, holding forth to a spellbound group of pristine, well-dentured hunks who had just arrived from LA.

Listening to him, I remembered our own recent trip to LA. Richard had gotten a call from some gay guy he met through Sam Gage at Paramount a month or so earlier, a well-known musician who toured with Laura Nero. He invited us to a party in the Hollywood Hills. It made sense because it meant Richard could network.

We had parked out on a nice street near the top of Mt. Olympus and gone into this large white Spanish house. There were about thirty men and women in the living room, lounging around on sofas, chairs, and bean bags. I loved the room. It had big windows

and a large glass door leading out to a pool and garden, and a view stretching downtown. The guy Richard had met was sitting at a piano telling a story, but he jumped up when we came in and ran to give Richard a hug, like a long-lost friend. He was loud and super friendly, and that is when I saw the large bowl of cocaine on the glass-topped table in the middle of the room. Everyone looked at us and especially at Richard. He could always stop a room dead, but now I felt like we had entered a den of unknown male and female vampires, all whacked out on coke. In a very loud voice, our host told them all how Richard was the new gay porn star, how he was going to be the next big thing, and I watched as all eyes then went to Richard's crotch.

We found some space and settled into the afternoon and, of course, got fucked up on what was very good coke. I talked with a few people through it all—most seemed to be on the periphery of the industry—before having a telling conversation with the main man, who told me he had lost his music mojo and was working to get it back.

I wondered as he piled more coke up his nose how this was going to help him, and it dawned on me then, as late afternoon became evening, that he was expecting more from us than just a drop-by visit. Networking and the power of influence had its price.

Some people had hit the pool naked, and others were peeling off to other parts of the house. I felt like we had entered an Altman film, or worse, a scene out of *Day of the Locusts*, and with some difficulty got us both out of there when the host's back was turned. I was surprised Richard agreed with me about the guy's intention, because he adored the attention. Thankfully, he could see the piano man was only using him to spice up the scene. We made it back to where we were staying that night and had great, coke-fuelled sex.

Christopher was still watching Richard.

“He's meant for the world, isn't he?”

I nodded slowly, smiling a tight smile: Was this everyone's mantra about Richard?

“But you must know he loves you, and you're the most important person in his life, right?”

I nodded again as we watched them all around the grill: Ulysses with his crew, no earplugs for any member. In the west, the sky was getting darker, but still cut with a blue-gold edge. The lights were starting to come on over all of Palm Springs and into the desert beyond.

“What I'm trying to get to,” I sighed as I put down my empty bottle, “is that he's caught up in this, and I want him to pursue his dreams. But it's not my direction. It's that simple. I just want to go back to San Francisco and get a career going. I'm not saying we've ended; I just don't want to live here anymore.”

Christopher nodded, and we talked about keeping in touch.

The desert fell dark, broad, and silent, as the sun completely lost itself beyond LA, somewhere out there in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

Back in San Francisco, I stayed for a couple of weeks with Bill and his new lover, Brett. Months in those days meant enormous changes in the evolving gay movement. There was a boycott in place over Anita Bryant's anti-gay rights activism. No one was drinking Florida orange juice—she was its cover girl—and there was a ban on Coors beer for the same reason. She became the spokesperson for a repeal of anti-discrimination laws in Dade County, Florida and won. This was the threat that galvanized the emerging gay rights movement nationwide.

I got all this around Bill's dining room table. Rick Stokes, a nice, earnest guy who was standing for supervisor as a gay candidate, came over with a bunch of mutual friends. At one dinner, David Goodstein—the owner of *The Advocate*—was there as well. The push from these guys was winning more economic power in The City: This was their gay way forward; more pink dollar clout meant greater access to political power. I thought they were elitist in their approach, that they missed understanding the different types of men and women who were moving here.

Harvey Milk always talked about working with other minorities, a conversation lost on the supporters of David Goodstein and the more conservative gays. They wanted economic alliances, while Milk was more concerned about social alliances. Harvey accused these

gay people of helping The City's more prosperous citizens prevent minorities from having any significant piece of the pie. Even though I liked the comfort of the prosperous, I had just spent months with people who deserved an equal voice, and my heart reached out to the streets.

I was soon caught up in my own attempts to fit back into The City. In September '77, Brett, Bill, Gary, and I went to the annual gay softball league game put together with the San Francisco Police Department to foster a better relationship with the police. There was a crowd of more than eight thousand, larger than some official baseball crowds out at Candlestick Park. The Badland Buddies won, 14 to 8.

Gary had moved in with Phillip on Twentieth Street. I went over and had dinner with everyone, comforted by the fog swirling round me as I walked up Castro Street onto Nineteenth and then up Hartford Street, past its stately Victorians. Phillip had just left on a tour to South Korea and would be away until July of '78, so Gary was alone in their top room. Paul and David were now in the first floor room with the bay window, and Sam was in the big room facing the street. Manuel had moved out some months before with Rick, his lover, and was living over the hill in Noe Valley.

These house tribes were a way of living cheaply, and it also allowed someone, or a couple or friends, to acquire a property, which was what was happening at Twentieth Street. At dinner, to my great delight and surprise, they asked if I wanted to move into the room now vacant in the basement. I gave them an emphatic yes. Richard came up from the desert, and we bought a waterbed, which he filled with a hose from the back garden. There was enough furniture in the house to provide me a chest of drawers and a closet. I also had a view into the garden. I was set, and now I had to get work.

I loved those days at Twentieth Street, and I realise now I was desperate for middle class stability. I was over the poverty I'd

encountered in the desert. I could see the foibles of the capitalist way of life, but I wanted the benefits it provided. I was approaching thirty, and I needed to get my shit together. I wanted creature comforts and a way forward, and I knew I had to show my friends in San Francisco that I was not just some flighty queen. Gary had been unhappy about me hooking up with Richard from the start. He was a conservative man with a democratic heart, and he wanted me to settle down, get a good job, and find another man in The City. I still loved Richard, and not having him near was a struggle at first, but I knew I could never live with him and love him the way he wanted me to. I was coming out of the spell I'd created around being with such a hot man and with the sexual addiction I felt when I was with him. And my new independence felt good.

I found out through an old friend at The Truck Stop that a new dance bar about to open on Haight Street was looking for staff. When I found the address and came up the big, front stairs, I could see the place had a way to go before its October opening. I met Sanford, the owner, who struck me as a savvy guy, and he and his partner Bradley interviewed me for a job.

Naturally they wanted bartenders who looked like Castro clones, but being an astute business operator, Sanford asked me if I would come aboard and help get the place ready. He could see I had the gift of the gab and was a bit of a show-off—that I could make the front-door process entertaining, become the impresario—a polite word for door bitch. He said I had a face and physique that would appeal to everyone clubbing; I think that was supposed to flatter me. When I returned to The City, I immediately had gone back to the gym and was hardening up fast. The I-Beam job got me bodybuilding in earnest.

Sanford had a doctorate in astronomy. The I-Beam had paintings of the planets around the walls and iron-coloured cardboard I-beams hanging from the ceiling. There was a buzz about the I-Beam, where the dance floor was enormous. Most bars had tight dance floors.

The only other place that could accommodate a decent crowd was the City Disco in North Beach. I took the job and thought if I gave it time, he and Bradley would see how good I was, and I would get behind the bar, where I could make good tips and earn more than a meagre salary. It was the same formula I'd applied at The Truck Stop. There were delays with permits, complaints about noise from neighbours—especially after our pre-opening party—and finally the doors opened on schedule in mid-October 1977.

The I-Beam was a smash. The lines stretched north along Haight Street, and I had the job of letting in San Francisco's hot people. The heating was always turned up to encourage the men to take off their tops. I rarely wore anything but jeans and boots, sometimes a leather vest, and occasionally the new Adidas sneakers—but, for foggy nights, I always kept a leather coat on a hook near the coat check. So I moved up and down the stairs, keeping everyone waiting, and as the weeks wore on became a night-time celebrity in The City.

People implored me to let them in quickly. I had little bags of coke and MDMA pushed into my pocket as incentives. I took no notice. I took on a persona, becoming the ultimate door-keeper. Later, in the early eighties, some guys at a party told me they thought I was a stone-cold bitch. Bradley encouraged me to only let hot men in—and a certain number of women. That's the way it was back then. But I always picked out the lesbians who wanted to come in together. To my mind, they had just as much right as the boys to be there.

As '77 turned into '78, I finally got to tend bar and began to make decent money at last. I was still on the door on Saturday nights—Sunday nights, too, when Tea Dance was introduced—but during the week, someone else took over the stairs. When I went back to work downtown, I still did occasional weekend shifts.

I hooked up again with Ron, my friend from out at Pacifica. He was bored at his job, and because I knew menial jobs were short-term

for me, we began to seriously consider what we could do long-term. After going to Michael Maletta's back-block apartment party on Upper Market—which was supposed to emulate Manhattan and the Fire Island parties—we decided we could become successful party people ourselves. We would put on the first big dance extravaganza and make a killing. We wanted to become the Bill Graham of the new developing gay disco dance world.

Over the next month, we scoured the Folsom District, looking at venues with realtors. We discussed DJs, designed a logo and a name, and Gary told us he could get printing and posters done at cost. I had always loved the school crest at my secondary school back in Australia—a white Pegasus in flight—so we named the party Night Flight. The logo was a Pegasus beast galloping front-on, wings outstretched. We settled on an old warehouse on Bryant in the Folsom District. The next step before signing the lease, was to get a liquor licence and a permit for the event. This is when we hit the real world.

Ron's roommate John was willing to invest, but the liquor licence and insurance killed our chances. After toting everything up, we found we needed an extra fifteen thousand. We were naïve, and perhaps if we had been willing to take the idea to another backer, we could have done okay, but we did not know anyone with that kind of clout in the gay world. Sadly, we dropped the idea.

In November, as I crossed the Haight/Ashbury intersection on my way to work, I noticed a familiar image on a light pole. I got the shock of my life! There was a large poster advertising Night Flight, a dance party for New Year's Eve, and its logo was a beautiful white Pegasus! Someone had stolen our idea. I was angry and wondered if Ron had talked to anyone else: enticing drugs and a few drinks might have changed that. Later that night when he came to the bar, he swore no one had found out from him. But it was obvious to both of us that someone had talked.

At Christmas, we discovered Michael Maletta and his New York friends, including Wakefield Poole, were behind Night Flight. With the buzz for the event huge in the gay scene, Ron and I surrendered. The whole house was going. Richard was up for the holidays, and after I finished work at the I-Beam, he met me. It was the most amazing scene, fabulous in the true sense of the word.

We wandered hand in hand through the floors, through the pinball machines, carnival players, and carnal excitement. A lot of thought had gone into the event. As I told Ron later, we would never have been able to do a party as good as this. It was obvious that trained, creative minds were at work, using white sheets from Crisco's wall that had been strung through country fields beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. A trapeze artist walked high above the dancers on the main floor. There were places to have sex, and drinks flowed from various locations around the Grove Street building. I knew about Studio 54 in New York and realised these guys were trying to emulate it on the West Coast. And it worked, at least for one night.

Richard would have loved to have gone into the sex rooms alone, but he knew it would hurt me and stuck close, standing with a beer on the side of the floor, talking with old friends. Without him there, I would have felt freer, too. As it was, I fell back into the jealousy trap. I stayed on the floor with Ron, Gary, and the others, occasionally checking to see where he was and who he was talking to. Around 5 a.m., he grabbed me, and we went off and got it on before leaving an hour later to go home.

Earlier in December, around Sixth Street and Harrison, a small bar opened called the Black and Blue. Richard and I got jobs there during the day, working to put it together. Its disco ball was a black and chrome Harley hoisted over the mid-sized dance floor. The club opened late and went all night, to the sexiest drug music in The City. I would arrive about 2:30 a.m. from the I-Beam and enter an avant-garde, circular space with gay men and some hard-core women—

accepted by the guys for their partying commitment—dancing and having sex to incredibly dirty music. San Francisco was now fully engaged in sexual liberation.

At the Black and Blue, we were given invitations to the Fey Way Gallery nearby—to meet the creator of the Tom of Finland drawings. Of course, Richard fitted the Tom of Finland fantasy, and many were thrilled to see him there. When I was introduced to ‘Tom,’ I just saw an old man with grey hair, and did not appreciate his presence and what it meant to the men of Folsom.

*El Paso Wrecking Corp.* opened on December 28, 1977. Most of the house went to the opening at the Nob Hill Cinema, where Richard stood up and took a bow. He was now a gay icon, and there was a crush around him when we went out onto the sidewalk. It was a great time for entertainment that Christmas. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* opened at the Coronet Theatre and *Saturday Night Fever* at the Regency—both, for different reasons, amazing. As a house, we went to both, then to dance at Alfie’s Bar, which had just opened on Market Street.

Richard continued to come and go in my life, but I knew we were not compatible long-term. The city I loved was displacing my need for him. He was now making his third famous movie—*L.A. Tool and Die*, to be released in ‘79—and going out with him was a minefield. When we went into The Cove, an eatery on Castro Street, a waiter pushed me out of the way to get to him. I fell and was only saved by the wall from going right over. Richard was stopped, sometimes groped, and men’s eyes glazed over when he spoke to them. He loved the attention and saw himself as a saviour of masculine gayness. So began his crusade to sexually liberate the young men of America. Yet he still wanted us to remain lovers.

Night Flight set the bar for all the major dance parties thereafter. It was a night in heaven. But it did not mean I was over having

my name and logo stolen. I confronted Wakefield Poole about it in his trendy shop, Hot Flash, on Upper Market. Of course he denied it, but looked defiantly guilty standing at the register. I was dumb to go at him but felt righteously better afterwards. A number of entrepreneurs were now stalking the scene and, along with the I-Beam and Night Flight, Trocadero Transfer soon arrived down on 4th Street at Bryant. It opened to a sparse crowd on 14 December '77.

Ron and I were there, stunned by the Greybar sound and lighting system brought in from New York. The dance floor was four thousand square feet. One of the things I loved was that right at the end of each night, the DJ played a beautiful piece of classical music to herald closing time. I went down to Troc after leaving the I-Beam, meet up with the house, and dance until dawn.

In 1978, the first year of the dance parties, we learned how to stay up all night. We also had to learn how to use Twentieth Street's one bathroom at the same time. On Saturday nights, there could be up to twelve of us getting ready to go out. We had to shower, shave, douche, primp, try on three or four new T-shirts, get approval from the others to wear our final choice, and come back again for a final look. Someone, often Gary, would surprise us all with a new item and innocently turn when challenged about its obvious fabulousness, and say, *This? I've had it stuffed in the closet for ages!*

Harvey Milk walked from the Castro to be sworn in as District 5 supervisor on Monday, 9 January, 1978. He succeeded on his third effort, creating hope for young gays and lesbians. Two hundred supporters walked with him. The year started with a call for everyone to come out and find their freedom. Many men and women were still in the closet, and there was a 'push-me, pull-me' kind of psychological war going on in dining rooms throughout The City. Some of us were out at our jobs and to our straight friends. Then there were house members who were not out: It was never talked about but understood to be so. Others like Phillip, and gay

people in the military and police forces more generally, did not want their colleagues to see them differently and be judged as weak or perverted, so they went on pretending. The truth is no one still fully knew what gay liberation meant.

It was great having Harvey step forward and to see those in the local and state governments support us. It was great, too, to realise our economic clout was improving, not only in our own lives, but buying us political cachet, as politicians now saw us as a strong voting bloc. In his first piece in the Bay Area Reporter, in January 1978, Harvey wrote:

*The American Dream starts with the neighborhoods . If we wish to rebuild our cities, we must first rebuild our neighborhoods. And to do that, we must understand that the quality of life is more important than the standard of living. To sit on the front steps—whether it's a verandah in a small town or a concrete stoop in a big city—and talk to our neighbors is infinitely more important than to huddle on the living room sofa and watch a make-believe world in not-quite living color.*

One afternoon, Ron and I were sitting on the balcony at Pacifica, looking out at the ocean. Ron had the new red, popular hoodie on over a white American Boy T-shirt, and he zipped it up tight as light tendrils of fog started to whisper onto the deck.

“I’ve met a guy who knows bikers out of the Vallejo area over Bay Bridge, and they’re selling a new type of speed.”

“Okay,” I said. “Go on.”

“It comes in a crystallized form and looks like small, clear chips, and when you snort it, you stay up longer than you do on coke. It’s got the same kind of buzz, some say better.”

He took another drag on his smoke. He smoked way too much, I noted as I lit up and listened to him outline his plan.

He looked down at me lounging in my chair with those very cool Texan blues.

“If we put \$200 together quickly, we can get a few kilos of this shit and sell it on to our dancing buds and make \$1,000 bucks, easy,” he said.

Constantly worried about my alien status in the country, I asked if it was legal.

“There’s no law about it—it’s new!” he exclaimed. “Things like Bennies and other drugs that have been around for years... The pharmaceutical companies and government have got their paws all over them. You need a prescription. No one knows about this shit yet, so I figured we’ve got a great window here... See how it goes.”

We looked at each other for a moment, and then he went back inside and got a couple more beers, and we organised a plan over the clink of glass on glass.

A couple of Saturday nights later, when the house was getting ready to go to Troc, Ron and John arrived with their cute friend Niles. At the next Gay Day Parade, Niles and I would dance on Grace Jones’s float for four hours straight with her refusing to acknowledge us! Ron had also brought a kilo dope bag full of this crystallised product. We sat at the kitchen table as people went in and out of the bathroom, trying on different T-shirts and parading in their new jeans. Tipping some of the crystal onto a big white plate, Ron used a razor blade to chop it into a fine line, like you did for coke.

Sam was looking over his shoulder, arms folded, in a pinkish tank top and blue jeans.

“How much do you snort?” he asked.

“I figured a little less than a healthy nose of blow. It’s pretty bitter and tastes like shit.”

Ron was still intently chopping.

“You’ve done some already?” I asked, knowing the answer.

We had not told anyone about us selling it. I felt guilty about this because I knew the concerns Gary in particular had about Ron. And up until recently, I had always told Gary about everything important I was getting into. I knew he would be angry with me being involved with Ron in this way.

“Yeah, I did some a couple of days ago when I picked it up... I didn’t sleep that night.”

“So you’re saying we can go dancing on this and stay up and not get tired?”

“I figured.” He smiled.

He offered Sam then Gary a silver snorter. All of us got an immediate nasty taste and sensation at the back of our noses and throats.

“Yuck, it’s disgusting,” said Sam.

I watched him for a moment, and then started to feel this incredible wave of pleasure come over me. Within thirty seconds, my whole body felt like it was vibrating. We all looked at one another and burst out laughing.

“This is fucking beautiful!” someone said.

Soon everyone was moving quicker, talking faster and louder. Ron and I sat down at the table and smiled hard at one another.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked.

“Let me tell you in a few hours... But it reminds me of Black Beauties, and they were from Olympus.” I started to have sex images of fucking on this stuff race through my vibrating brain.

No one could believe the high. A few of us were already dancing in the living room as the slowpokes finished primping in the bathroom.

I had the night off from the I-Beam. We arrived at Trocadero at 12:30 a.m. and within minutes had found our new spot on the floor, to the right of the DJ booth. The looks we shared told us that disco would never be the same now we had discovered crystal meth. The glitter balls looked different, the space itself felt different, and the music was way more intense. I pulsed to the base line and could feel my jeans and T-shirt moving sensually on my body. The music flowed into me, up through the floor and across my skin. The high lasted all night. Ron had been moving around, talking to people, and I could see deals being made. I saw Gary's eyes on him as well. And I knew then that I wasn't going to be seen as a pusher.

In those days, the music was changing, from the beautiful lush strings of "We're On The Move" and "Fly, Robin, Fly" to a more intense sound, which married well with crystal meth, MDMA, and poppers. The old sounds were still wonderful, but Bobby V's seamless playing at Troc allowed us to come onto the dance floor and stay there for two hours straight. At first we drank water from the bathrooms, until it was eventually sold at the bar. Very few wanted alcohol, and beer tasted weird in your mouth. The alcohol came later, mid-morning the next day, when we were still awake and had to relax. Vodka and valium became the way down.

The Troc started a new way of living for two thousand people in The City, a moving crowd from all walks of life that waxed and waned but knew what they wanted for entertainment. Beyond alcohol and heroin, none of us knew much about addiction. Slowly, very slowly, crystal meth made its way into all our lives. We started to go to the bars on it—a small snort at 11 p.m. as we left the house—then, if we were going dancing or to the Howard Street bathhouse, we would do a healthier hit in someone's car. Crystal became part of our social and sex lives. If you were going to an event you were a little nervous

about, you could do a small hit and become the life of the party. I went to a few dinners on meth and remember pushing food around on a plate for an hour, not hungry in the slightest, but very busy with stories, and laughing just a little too hard.

At the bigger parties during the next few years, at the Gift Centre or the CMC Carnival parties, we sometimes did MDMA, a wildly physical drug that pumped its ecstatic way on and through and finally out of your entire system—usually through your anus—until you were completely exhausted, left playing alone with toys or wrapped up in someone else’s body, fucking for hours into the following day.

Friends from my former law firm asked me to come back and run the messenger department again at their new location at One Market Plaza, where Market Street started at the ferry building. So there I was on the bus again, going downtown, something I disliked but was strongly advised to do by my friends. It would get me back on my feet. Gary and I often went downtown together, although he tended to start work earlier than me, and I was often caught up later in the struggle for the bathroom with Sam, Paul, and Doug, his new partner.

In ‘78 I got caught up again in my ambition to get a solo career going, to make something of myself. Some of my goals and ideas were wrapped up in fantasy and lacked concrete research. I had never planned anything in my life beyond getting out of Australia. I had made a half-hearted effort to go on with postgraduate studies at an East Coast university, but that had fallen by the wayside.

I was an undisciplined boy struggling into manhood, sideswiped by living in a sexual candy store.

I still had basic level thoughts, like *I want to be a lawyer* or *I want to be a doctor*. And I still thought the world owed me a living and resented having to try. I was a classic case of fear of failure, of not knowing what real success looked like and what you needed to do to get there. I thought things like wealth would come easily. That is

partly why I took the job: it was easy and gave me time to work out what I needed to do to move into employment I liked. Also, the law firm allowed me to get my head back into the wider world and to mix with straight people again. I had lived solely in the gay ghetto for the past two years.

And then Mum came to visit. One of her fierce Victorian aunts had left her money, and she was taking a six-month trip around the world—without my father—coming first to San Francisco, then on to Canada, the UK, and Europe, and back to Australia via Pakistan and Singapore, visiting friends along the way. The house agreed it would be wonderful to have her stay. She was shorter than I remembered, and had her black hair cut in a more workable, travelling style. She always looked Spanish or Italian to me, and the new style framed her face well. It must have been weird for her at the house.

I knew she could sense my defiance whenever she said anything about me coming out. It took us a while to get comfortable with one another, but since I had been her reluctant confidante growing up, we soon fell into an easier relationship. She said her main concern was that I would end up alone and lonely. This was her picture of the older homosexual—straight out of the fifties.

She loved The City and met a couple of my good friends at the law firm. Jackie Hushins, the administrative assistant manager, was about the same age and took Mum into her home and gave her a normality break from me and the boys. Even so, Mum loved Twentieth Street and had spirited conversations with us all at dinner around the table. She was always a curious person, hungry for knowledge. She was brought up in the era of the British Empire, when a woman was not expected to have the education reserved more *usefully* for men and was expected to act in a certain way. She resented this all her life, and now, here she was, with eight college-educated men hanging off her stories about history and geography, especially about Australia and Great Britain. She revelled in it.

And then Richard arrived. I have never forgotten that first meeting. Of course, she knew who he was, but I'd only told her about the good parts of my year in the desert, about how 'we'd' attempted to start a community involved directly with environmental change, about our progress building the dome, and about Richard working with the local council to get grants to develop systems that would improve the world.

I told her about trying to get a job teaching, about returning to San Francisco because I could not find work in Palm Springs: half-truths with rosy-coloured glasses attached. I did not realise that a mother instinctively knows about her son and his choices. And, of course, she questioned the boys relentlessly about why I had really moved, and they found it hard to stay on script. Everyone, to a man, intimated it was best I had come back to The City and was now living in the house and back at the law firm.

Richard came through the front door as Mum was coming down the stairs. From the basement, I saw him park on the street and rushed upstairs to introduce them. We all met on the landing. Mum was in a twin set and Royal Stewart tartan skirt, with pearls and black shoes. She looked down at him from the stairs.

Richard was in torn jeans, no belt, wearing an old plaid shirt with two buttons done up. No shoes. He'd arrived straight from the desert, tanned and tired, with an overnight bag he casually dumped on the floor. I realised uncomfortably that he could have probably done with a shower. As usual, he looked incredibly sexy.

They summed each other up. Mum slowly raised her eyes from the bag to his face, put her hand out to him, and said she was glad to meet him and had heard a lot about him, and so forth. I watched her face and thought, *Right now, she's probably thinking about what we do in bed.*

Richard smiled the killer smile.

“Welcome to America, Joyce,” he said.

She returned his smile and demurred, while I got them moving into the living room to chat about the coming days.

Richard and I had talked about Mum’s visit. He wanted her to meet his folks. That was important to us both. When we put it to her, she said that would be nice, so Richard went off, satisfied, to shower and to call his parents.

I told Richard that under no circumstance was he to mention pornography as part of his film-making. He could talk obliquely about Wakefield’s film—I knew no one would ever see it, so that was safe—about it being a story of his environmental studies and other desert projects. He grudgingly agreed. Although his parents knew about his films, there had been no conversation about them when I visited, so I reckoned when they met Mum, it would be the last thing they would want to discuss!

I told the house no one was to even remotely mention Richard’s LA activities. Sam had laughed and pretended not to hear. He could be very naughty when he wanted. Once at a dinner party, he and Elena had gone upstairs, stripped off their clothes, and come down and run around the rooms screaming, hands waving in the air—and then gone back upstairs, put their clothes on, and returned to talk to the others at the table. He was a total imp.

I was fortunate over the next two weeks. Paul took Mum to I. Magnin, where he worked to look at clothes. She went to lunch with Sam and with Gary. I sometimes met her from the office for lunch downtown. Otherwise, she was off at the museums, and on trolley cars, finding her own way around. The problem came when she was alone with Richard and me. He argued with her about pretty much anything, constantly vying for my attention.

“If he interrupts me one more time, I’m going to hit him,” she said one night.

We were back from a movie. I laughed and said she ought to. He was quite nervous around her.

By the time we got to Richard’s parents for lunch, Mum was only answering his questions and then talking directly to me. Bess was shy but got on well with Mum. They were both from the country and understood the Depression years. Mum knew what the family had gone through as they made their way from the Dust Belt to California. They talked about the war years and the common pressures both countries had experienced. There was an understanding between them we could only listen to. The only thing that disturbed Mum was that Richard’s dad, Clay, never took off his baseball cap in the house. She told this story on and off back home for years to those who were allowed to know of my relationship with Richard.

After getting back to The City, Richard had to return to his animals and another film. I saw him off at the front door. Mum came downstairs and held out her hand. She came no further than the landing.

“It’s good you’re on your way, Richard, and it’s been wonderful meeting you,” she said, looking him straight in the eye. “I think it’s best Al is staying in the city and getting on with his life, too.”

I held my breath: I was not expecting this.

Richard returned her smile. “Well, he’s a big boy now and can make up his own mind about whatever he thinks is the best move for himself, here or there or wherever. Goodbye, Joyce.”

“Goodbye, Richard.”

And that was that. I walked down the front stairs with him.

“She hates me and thinks I’m taking her little boy away from her,” he said. “And,” he continued, turning and looking back up at the house, “she knows I’m fucking you, and she doesn’t know how to handle that one at all.”

I babbled something, and off he went, but not before he gave me a very long and full kiss, hoping she saw it. She had not, as I discovered when I went back inside. She was in the kitchen talking to Sam, helping him get lunch ready.

“Has he gone?” she asked sharply, not looking up.

“Yes.”

“Good,” she said, loudly chopping off the heads of some carrots.

The sexual smorgasbord that was The City only got bigger and more inventive. Since my first pharmaceutical upper experience back in The Truck Stop days, I loved going out alone, stoned on speed, looking for sex. If I was dating someone, it was different. Otherwise I loved the hunt.

Going out on a Saturday night as I walked toward Folsom, I popped a pill or snorted a line and slid with anticipation into the night. How I was not killed and shoved into a trash container, I do not know. I had done this now for five years in cities all over the world—New York, London, Paris, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Memories flooded through my mind as I walked down Folsom, a hundred pictures of where I had been, of those I had met and slept with: different types of men, drugs and alcohol, the alleyways I would walk down into and have sex in.

Gary took me to the California Motorcycle Club social afternoon at the Seaman's Hall, down on Fremont. Towards twilight, the room suddenly became an orgy, with hundreds of men, who had been dancing and talking and drinking, now having sex. Gary and I separated, not wanting to see each other doing 'it'. I gave myself up to the sensuality of the bodies pressed against me, fuelled by a quaalude and a few beers. Soon I was kissing an incredibly handsome older

guy, around forty, while being blown by another guy down on his knees. Later I realised that guy was picking my pockets. The scene became filthy, my T-shirt got trashed on the floor, and the police group hired for the afternoon had to wade in and pull guys off one another and scoot them out of the hall. It was my first orgy.

I finally found Gary outside, leaning up against a wall talking to Tim, a very hot guy who later became a good friend. We all laughed at the turn of events and then, somewhat stunned, made our way to the buses on Market and back to the house for showers and exaggerated storytelling around the dinner table.

I loved the feeling of a drug taking effect, as it pushed my concerns and worries out and away. I was more confident and pain-free. I was definitely making my own way in the world, in San Francisco, in the city I loved. But why was I unhappy? Something was missing. Despite taking New Age courses about self-responsibility and self-actualisation, I still looked for solutions outside of myself. I was so affected by the years of judgement of my sexuality—and by my own inertia—I was still wary of the outside world.

EST, Werner Erhard's Seminars Training, was one of the main courses I became involved in. I took it back in '76 at the insistence of the guys at Café Ole, who had already done the training. The self-responsibility it taught began my search for inner freedom from past pain. That search took me on a long and convoluted journey! I met the wonderful Maureen Armbruster at one of the refresher courses at EST, and she and her husband Bob invited me to dinner. They introduced me to Amway as a way to supplement my income at the law firm. Pyramid selling attracts a lot of adverse criticism, but for me, Amway proved to be a valuable learning tool. The products were good, and it was a huge success across America in the late seventies. I pledged to give two years to the program, and I did. Once, when Gary and I were at a Stones concert in the Oakland Colosseum, I left midway to catch the BART back to San Francisco. I'd promised

to do a demonstration for some people I had sponsored. Gary was shocked. He and the other guys never thought I would stick to it. But what I learned from Amway was that I could achieve results when I gave it my all. I eventually left later in 1979, when Amway, in Northern California, was hijacked by Christian fundamentalists. But by then I learned how to keep books, create profit and loss statements, run my own business—and understand its language—and even employ an accountant.

But for now, I loved taking drugs and dancing and fucking—and being validated by hot men out on the streets. Their attention proved I was somehow worthy. I was not a fool, I knew it was temporary, that tomorrow the reality of finding a better job and a permanent place of my own to live in The City would loom large again. I knew my recent drug-taking was becoming a foil for inaction, even as I went into The Hungry Hole to get lost in the brain and body rush of MDMA.

It was a new bar, and at first, I was unsure about the bales of hay spread around the two front rooms or the country motif the owners were trying for—but it was new, and the bartenders were hot. I got a beer and looked around at the other men, either standing alone or talking to friends along the bar under the small red lights. New guys were always arriving. San Francisco was still the gay Mecca.

A number of guys moved to one side of the bar and went out back. I followed to see what was happening. A long, dark hallway led to the back of the building. By this time I was flying, my entire body pulsing. I knew I had a light sweat all over my torso. I could feel my arsehole throbbing. I put down my Bud Light and took off my T-shirt. My skin felt electric, and I managed a few quick breaths to calm myself down. I had to move carefully, stay balanced, as I pushed into the crowd that was jammed down the long, dimly lit space.

I felt a guy's beer-breath on my cheek as he passed, the pressed warmth of other men's clothing on my skin. I was being touched, probed, and felt up. As I moved slowly down the hallway, my arse was grabbed and assessed. At one point, there were so many guys in different positions I was stopped in my tracks. My jeans felt tight and hot on my legs. There was nothing in my pockets—no wallet, just a house key and the remains of twenty bucks shoved hard into the small coin pocket in front. I knew anything valuable would be gone by the time I got out of there: an inevitability of orgy life.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I found myself looking into the face of a tall man with what I thought was a black moustache and a set of very white teeth.

“Where you going?” asked the mouth.

“Actually nowhere, I'm being held up by bodies,” I managed to laugh. “I'm pretty high right now.”

“Are you indeed?” the moustache said. “I'm trying to get out of here, so when you find your way back, let me buy you a drink.”

“Sure.” I smiled as I slipped by him, feeling his massive chest and big thighs press against me.

I lost my T-shirt, which I had pushed down the back of my jeans, but found it quickly on the floor. Then I felt someone's hands pulling at the buttons on my fly and knew there was a guy on his knees in front of me. I felt his mouth slide onto my cock and could not believe the intense pleasure I felt. My back arched, and I pushed myself into the wall. Another guy was sucking my nipples and rubbing his hands around my arse. I was in Wonderland.

I must have been in there an hour before I pulled myself together. I had played around and been played with by a lot of guys, and I reckoned it was time to get back to the bar. That was when I realised somehow I had gotten my jeans off and was miraculously back in

my boots. *When did that happen?* I thought, amazed. *And where were my Levi's?* I fumbled my way back through the bodies still fucking and sucking and moaning in the hallway and found my T-shirt again almost immediately. It was covered in filth, but at least I had something. When I could not find my jeans, I began to panic. I pushed out into a lighted room, holding the crumpled T-shirt over my crotch.

Over a hay bale, near the edge of the bar, was a filthy pair of jeans, a white sock, and a jockstrap. Thankfully, the jeans were mine. I slid into them past some dodgy wet patches and, keeping my head down, pulled them up and buttoned the fly. I looked up and saw two guys following my moves, one with amusement, the other with a nod from beneath his cowboy hat. I was still flying. I could not remember ejaculating at any time down the hallway, and I was still horny as hell, but knowing how I looked, I had to get out into the night air. I wanted to get back to the house as quickly as I could without freezing to death. My T-shirt was in no state to wear.

Out on the street in front of the bar was a fat black Cadillac. As I moved onto the pavement, the passenger door pushed open. There was the moustache and white teeth I had seen in the hallway, now attached to one smiling, fine-looking man.

“Get in,” he commanded. “You look like you could use a shower.”

And without a second thought, I jumped into the big black leather passenger seat and was whisked away to Nob Hill.

As more gay people came out into the light from their closets of shame and fear, as they became more powerful in San Francisco, the influence of the old private gay world waned. Through the sixties and early seventies, this world had held sway through the Beaux Arts Ball, the Imperial Courts for both Emperor and Empress, the Closet Ball and Halloween costuming. This had been how the gay world entertained itself, expressed a gay lifestyle. When I worked at The Truck Stop, most of the guys in the bar and restaurant scene had

still been part of that world. The Tavern Guild was the conduit from City Hall to the gay person on the street, and it was a fact that gays lived most of their lives through these hidden gay venues.

Now new businesses opened all over the Bay Area. Good food was becoming the new black. Zuni opened on Market above Van Ness Avenue—who knew you could dip fresh bread in olive oil and balsamic?—while over in Berkeley, Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse, and nouvelle cuisine was born. The thousands of young people who came into The City through the seventies established themselves as responsible adults and finally had extra money to spend. Small gay brunch places opened up, and on those rare occasions when we stayed in on a Saturday night, thereby waking refreshed on Sundays, we went down to Castro Street as a household for brunch.

Sartorial splendour was a priority. You never went out for breakfast looking like you'd just gotten out of bed. Those days were over. Ripped jeans, patches, macrame belts, and long scraggly hair had been replaced with tight-fitting Levi's or Calvin Klein fatigues, with cloth belts and silver buckles and haircuts by Yoshi and Sassoon. Shirts were worn open, sleeves rolled up with a T-shirt beneath. Accessories were also becoming important. Glasses, fanny packs, wallets, and haircuts all said something about you. Did you shop at Macy's or at The Emporium, or were you shopping in the boutiques along Upper Market, at Wilkes Bashford downtown, or in the Castro itself?

By the end of the seventies, you had to meet exacting standards. If two fashionable groups arrived at The Patio Café on Castro Street together, all the tables went at once. The kitchen hated it—swamped with twenty orders of eggs Benedict. If you were in self-doubt or feeling hungover, The Patio Café could be rugged: a hundred sets of eyes immediately looked your way. You were either dismissed with a quick turn of the head, or you were admired and reviewed as a potential trick.

I loved it when we discovered a small, chic brunch place on Upper Fillmore. They did their scrambled eggs with tarragon, which I had never had before. As a bonus, the clientele was mainly straight. You could take a break from being on the perpetual Castro runway, less concerned about having to be seen. It could be so tiresome, especially if you wanted to talk about other things like politics and the state of the union.

The compulsion to look at and discuss other men was always there. One Saturday afternoon, Gary and I walked past the dozens of guys lying around on their cars and bikes at Hibernia Beach. A group had broken away from the herd, sitting on the sidewalk against the wall. They had numbered cards and were rating men walking across Eighteenth Street from one to ten. We were shocked—and quietly terrified about our own scores. I stood straight, tightening my arse as I passed and trying to show disinterest. We both got eight and a half. We were not thrilled, although further down the street, we burst out laughing. I knew a couple of the perpetrators from the I-Beam days—and from the baths—and wondered if there were scores to settle, or if it was simply a clever, ironic statement about gay narcissism.

Fashion was becoming crisper, body form was in. Some Castro clones pushed the leather fetish. They had leather chaps made, with a more stylised boot and tight belts across flat stomachs, large buckles attached. On top they might wear an American Boy tee with a tight-fitting vest over it. Leather thongs replaced gold chains. They liked leather but did not want to go the full Tom of Finland. The Folsom guys might have quietly thought them irreverent, but when they walked into a bar, lust always took over. These boys were hot. Many of us owned a black leather vest, to blend in on certain nights in Folsom Street bars. Paul actually had chaps, vest, boots, and a leather thong around his throat. As long as he didn't light a cigarette or open his mouth, he could carry it off.

The Castro District was called The Valley of the Dolls—by the leather fraternity. They called the Folsom area The Valley of the Kings. We often got looks of contempt when we went into bars like Febe’s or the Ramrod on Folsom. In the latter, I always made straight for two of the bartenders. I’d waited on one at The Truck Stop, and we’d become friends, and I had fucked the other, and he always had a welcoming smile. So I got away with not being in uniform. Castro prevailed in the wider world. Herb Caen of *The Chronicle* was credited with coming up with the name Castro Clone—hair cut short, with a thick, clipped moustache—and within a few years, straight men all over America adopted the look.

The American Boy clothing store opened down from the Castro Theatre. The moniker itself tells the story—arrested development—for it was here you found men, me included, rushing in to buy boys’ T-shirts in multiple shades. Then we proudly went off in them to The Russian River resorts, to Fire Island during the East Coast summer, and into the dance halls and bars of The City and claimed eternal youth. The tight-fitting T-shirts were intended to show off the new and improved bodies we were getting from the gym. As another generation of young men came to live in San Francisco, looking like we were in our mid-twenties was prized. In 1978, Gary and I hit 30.

This was when we began to look at having our eyelashes dyed, and facials became a monthly necessity. Castro Street demanded we keep fit and young. This physical obsession had not made it into the straight male world yet, despite being pushed by gay men in the state’s capitals. Beauty and perfection were high priorities in urban gay men’s lives, and the perpetual still images of Tyrone Power, of a young Rock Hudson, Marlon Brando, and Jimmy Dean adorned many gay shops, not to mention the bedroom walls of San Francisco’s admiring men. In 1978 there was such hope, such a promise of mainstream acceptance. That lingering hold on our youth was lost and savaged in the 1980s as the immediacy of survival took hold.

In 1978, my relationship with the boys in the house deepened. Together we went to every new bar and dance party that opened that year. With Sam's friends, we went to the ballet and to contemporary dance companies coming into The City, and to the Berkeley Rep over the Bay Bridge. And we went to all the new musicals in town. I have never forgotten seeing the magnificent *A Chorus Line*, whose gay character spoke to us all. As a house, we went to the big parties at the Gift Centre, as well as to Trocadero's White Party and then its Drummer Dance Party.

Gary and I went to the launch of Sylvester's new album at the Gift Centre. We were so excited by his hit "Mighty Real." I met Sylvester on and off over the years, once at someone's apartment on Upper Castro, after a major party, where we sat and talked over coffee around 11 a.m. In '74, I gave him a gold chain, after a performance at The Cabaret. His gorgeous voice was so amazing that night I spontaneously took off the chain and pushed it into his hands when he sat in the audience later. He smiled and thanked me.

Gary and I also went to the gym together—on Powell Street, a block up from Market Street, where tourists clambered onto the cable car to careen up and down the hills to the Bay. He often picked me up on the way home at five-thirty. Then we walked to the gym, commenting on the clothes in the windows of the new Neiman Marcus store. The gym was located on the side of an old emporium, on the first floor, and its huge windows let in a lot of natural light.

As a consequence of us acquiring a decent set of muscles, our friend Fay approached Gary and me about doing a show with her at the Gift Centre. She was a professional in this theatrical space. The show was a competition for best group, individual performance, and themed performance, as well as overall champion, and Gary and I were to be two of the six Egyptian muscle-slaves carrying Cleopatra on a litter. We wore little gold skirts that showed our gold jocks underneath, with gold sandals on our feet and Sphinx

headresses on top—all made by Fay and partner Pat Campano in their workshop. We had kohl eyes and bronzed, gold-flecked bodies. When we walked out on stage, the place went wild. Fay was a stunning Cleopatra. She sang the great disco anthem “If they could see me now,” and when we put her down, she strutted to the edge of the stage with thirty feet of silver material billowing out behind her. We were a sensation and won best overall performance. Fay gave us all one hundred dollars and a gold chain. So I got my chain back eventually! I also got one of the other slaves as a boyfriend. I spent the next two months with him until I discovered he was being kept by a wealthy old queen from Hillsborough.

While Gary, Paul Helsing, and I loved these events, a lot of our Twentieth Street roommates never went to them. They saw them as an expression of a world that ought to die a natural death. Most of the guys coming into San Francisco at that time simply wanted to be men among men and fit into normal society. The same went for the crowd that read *The Advocate*, those who had important jobs downtown and wanted to be accepted by the straight world. Except for Halloween, they hated guys dressing up as women and appearing weak and girlie. I remember how uncomfortable Bill Gassaway’s crowd always looked when they went out in drag on Halloween. They either couldn’t identify with their inner girl or were trying it just that once in their lives. Many of them were still uncomfortable, too, with anyone thinking or knowing they liked to get fucked.

The Jonestown massacre occurred on 18 November 1978. Over 900 people lost their lives in the tragedy, an enforced suicide pact. Jim Jones, the charismatic cult leader, had moved his base—The Temple—from San Francisco to Guyana and taken hundreds of families and individuals with him to create a heaven on earth. The tendrils of this horrifying affair touched many of the victims’ loved ones in the Bay Area and reached deep into City Hall. Jones had been in local politics and had helped George Moscone become San

Francisco mayor. The news went on day after day in the media, with local officials blaming each other and trying to score political points. Meanwhile, the unsettling knowledge remained that the bodies were buried in the hot earth of another country, thousands of miles away.

Barely ten days later, on 27 November, Moscone and Harvey Milk were both murdered at City Hall. We heard the news in the messenger room in the late morning that day. I was with Rich O'Toole, a law student working temporarily as a messenger. Both of us got up and left the building. We had no idea what to do or how to handle the enormity of another San Francisco tragedy.

By the time we hit Market Street, there were others like us—dazed, angry, numb, and confused—walking up and down the broad sidewalks, framed by the rows of massive early twentieth-century buildings, trying to process what had just happened. Suddenly a young guy bolted out of a building and ran up Market Street screaming, *They shot him! They finally got him!* His arms flayed around as he ran. Then he stopped and sobbed, clutched himself, and swayed from side to side before he took off again. He mirrored our pain. Instinctively I knew he was not stopping until he got to City Hall, and part of me wanted to go with him.

Rich went back to cover the office while I went off to find Gary, to find someone to hug. That night after dinner, we all left the house and walked down to the rallying point between Eighteenth and Market Streets and joined the great candle-lit march to City Hall. It was a night of anger, fear, and mistrust. I cannot remember who spoke. What I do remember are the thousands of remaining candles, the melting, greasy mess on the plinths outside City Hall.

Rich O'Toole was from the same Irish community as the killer, Dan White. He was worried about the backlash there, while I was horrified about what the murders meant for the gay community. We had such a hero in Harvey. Many of us knew him or had shaken

his hand at some time in the past seven years. What was going to happen to us—and *for* us—now? The City was suddenly adrift.

In late 1978, Bill and Brett talked me into doing the new gay consciousness-raising training organised by David Goodstein. As mentioned earlier, Goodstein owned *The Advocate*, one of the journalistic mouthpieces of the men's gay rights movement. The Advocate Experience, as the seminar was known, was based on EST and promised a space for focused growth around issues holding back gay men and women. Initially, I did not want to do it, but Bill was pushy and persuasive, and since I was in the process of making my way out of the gay ghetto and back into the real world, I agreed. I was still unhappy about a lot of things and wanted to get as much clarity as I could about what was motivating me—and, more importantly, about what was holding me back from contentment.

In a large room near the Marina, I met up with fifty other men. Because it was a gay event, I dressed to meet men. I did the same thing when I went on a three-day water-rafting trip with Bill and his friends on a river in Washington State. I over-packed, had my hair cut, and wore a new flannel shirt over a crisp white T-shirt, Levi's, and big black boots. Naturally I had clothes for every event in a gay man's life.

Neither David nor I liked each other. He hated being questioned, and I had done this a couple of times before at Bill's dining room table, getting into arguments about Harvey Milk, whose brand of community politics I supported over David's. Today he was sitting at the front of the room propped up in a director's chair. When he finished his spiel about the program and asked if anyone had considerations, I put my hand up and was called upon to share.

I stood up, looked at him, and said I did not think this experience was necessary at all, that it was a waste of time. I said there were enough organisations around The City catering to *everyone's* self-

realisation requirements. Gay people did not need specialised care. Most of the men glared at me as I was acknowledged, and then I sat down. No doubt I looked smug. The training continued.

Late in the afternoon, people began to feel more comfortable and began to share their truths to the group about how they saw their lives playing out. A guy who had the mic suddenly turned to me and exclaimed that I represented most of what he hated about the gay movement—what 'we' had become. He went on, sometimes pointing a finger and getting quite worked up about it all, and said I was the worst example of the modern gay man; that I was vain, narcissistic, and cared only about superficial values and did not contribute to the advancement of the movement—and on and on. I sat there calmly and listened to everything he said with a surprisingly open heart. I am good in a crisis, and this was one.

Everyone looked at me to see how I would react. I remained calm. I had done the EST training and enough group work to know not to react. In fact, I agreed with him and the way he saw me. But I knew I did not need to apologise for my journey. Watching his animation, I wondered if I had ever knocked him back from the I-Beam. That was when he called me vacuous—now that hurt. Vacuous!—In 1973, I'd sat through three days of Italian, French, and Russian post-war films at an arts festival. But of course, he knew nothing about me or my education or where I was from. All he could see was a façade, a projection of the way some of us saw ourselves at that time in The City. So he assessed me as a type. But I knew who he was. He was a journalist for *The Chronicle* and sometimes wrote for *The Advocate* and the B.A.R. I actually liked his writing style and what he had to say generally. And in that moment, I saw how far a lot of us were from each other, and that it was not necessarily a gay thing, despite the fact that we had the opportunity here to speak freely, some of us for the first time. I was sad he could only see one side of me. I looked up at David, he looked at me and smirked, and I looked down at my watch.

At the end of the second weekend, a lot had been shared and said plainly. I dropped my façade with some of the men and possibly made a new friend or two. Bill came to our graduation, and we hugged: he was such a sweet, sexy man. He believed in me. Now I had to believe in myself. That was the path my first EST course had set me on. Because my concerns were so broad—a mixture of existential fear, loss, and alienation, shame and self-doubt—healing them was a slow process, over a number of years, bit by bit. Only occasionally did I have a real win, when I was able to grab hold of a piece of myself and drop it into the jigsaw that was truly me.

Now it was time to make a real effort to get into the business world. Napoleon Hill's book *Think and Grow Rich* advised me to give myself to my job one hundred percent, even if I hated it. He cited a universal law, using the analogy of water poured continuously into a glass, which dictated that when you give something 'your all,' you flow over the edge into something new and better. I loved this metaphor. I got one of the messengers, who had an artistic bent, to draw it for me on a card, which I kept on my desk. I threw myself into making my job as messenger supervisor the best it could be. I felt like Camus' take on Sisyphus, the ideal absurd hero, whose punishment is representative of the human condition. Sisyphus must struggle perpetually and without hope of success. So long as he accepts there is nothing more to life than this absurd struggle, then he can find happiness in it.

A couple of months later, two young businessmen from LA approached me at work. They had just opened a new local delivery service called Now Messenger Service and wanted to show the law firm the benefit of using an outside service alongside our own internal system. I was intrigued and could see how it would save us money. Two weeks later they came back, took me to lunch, and asked me to become their Northern Californian manager. I experienced a new feeling: being wanted for my apparent and observable talents. It felt great. It seemed the self-help books were finally paying off!

One month later, early in 1979, my embrace of 100 percent commitment landed me on 311 California Street as a regional manager. My task was to build a messenger business. So began my commercial relationship with downtown San Francisco, something I'd wanted from the beginning. If I was not going back to university or into teaching, I wanted to become a successful businessman downtown.

Through 1979, as I became better at selling Now Messenger's service, I met and made new friends. Most of those I saw outside work were single too, and we partied; and so on weekends I began to play in both gay and straight worlds. I went to birthdays, engagements, and weddings, met parents and families around the Bay Area, and reconnected with a world I had turned my back on over the last few years. And that felt great too. It gave me something more than the 'eight street experiment' that was the Castro District.

But those eight streets still had a hold on me. I spent a couple of hours one Sunday morning sitting in Phillip's car alone, around 8 a.m., looking down Noe Street, seriously messed up on drugs and booze. I knew the partying had to end. I was still there two hours later, when I finally pulled myself up to walk home down Twentieth Street. I had a solid job, and I lived with a great group of guys, but something dogged my psyche.

So, as 1980 loomed, I took myself off for four days to an Anglican silent retreat at Bodega Bay, two hours north of The City. That weekend, walking the beach and roaming the hills in silence, I decided to move out on my own. I believed that if I got my own apartment, it would be the best move for me to realize my own dreams without the distractions of several other dreams going on and being mixed up with six other people.

I returned to The City on New Year's Eve of 1979, an hour before midnight. I planned to have a peaceful night's sleep, as I had each

night while I was away. On the fridge was a ticket to the big dance party everyone else was at, with my name inked on it. I smiled to myself as I looked out the back door window to the pulsing, expectant city. I wanted to slow down and get some balance in my life, right?

Then I saw my image in the glass. I took off my shirt and looked at the pumped torso reflected in the light. I slipped up to Sam's room, found his stash of crystal meth, and within an hour I plunged into a mass of heaving bodies and into our fucked-up group in its midst.

Sitting together later in the household's new hot tub in the back garden, Phillip pleaded with me not to leave. He argued that adulthood is when you leave your parents—and I had done that act, in spades. I argued it was time to stand on my own feet, to make a home for myself—and for someone I was yet to meet. With a mixture of sadness and fear, I left Twentieth Street and found a small, one-bedroom place and installed my first real, queen-sized bed. I had amazing views across Dolores Park to Downtown and across the Bay—my childhood vision fully realised. It was 1980, and I was 31 years old.

I met Tom at the end of 1980, a few weeks after Mum returned home from her second visit. I was at The Balcony, standing on the actual balcony, when a gorgeous, tall young man with jet-black hair and moustache smiled at me. What a smile! We started talking and ended up back at my apartment. I was nervous. When I was on meth it took ages to get a hard-on, and often guys would not wait. When I haltingly told Tom about this, he grabbed me, started kissing, and that was it for the next couple of hours.

By Christmas Day, we were inseparable, and for a few short months, Tom was the best and most attentive lover I have ever had. He was completely into me, and once he started kissing, he would only stop when I made him. I could open up to him in a way I could not with Richard. Tom wanted me and no one else. Sometimes we stayed overnight in his one-bedroom apartment on Fell Street, near Market, but usually we were at my place—because I liked to cook, and he did not at all. He was the first person I ever met who saw food simply as fuel. I set out to help him see it differently.

A tradition had begun with the guys at work of throwing wonderful dinner parties. The first party was hosted by Matt, a bike messenger, and his partner, Candy. They had an inner-city apartment in the building next to Benihana's Japanese restaurant on Post Street.

The dinner that night must have been spectacular, because for the next few years, everyone tried to outdo each other.

I won hands-down one Saturday night in 1981. When people arrived at 8 p.m., they found ten settings at the table: ten white plates with two vertical, thick lines of coke and a line of crystal meth horizontally above. In the middle of the table were two large platters of fruit and four bottles of Napa Valley Chardonnay. Dinner ended up with us all dancing at The Stud. A few of us went on and danced at Troc until 8 a.m.

Early in 1980, I left Now Messenger and started Kangaroo Delivery System with a business partner and Phillip as a silent partner. We moved into a lovely old office building at 250 Columbus, opposite City Lights Bookstore. Francis Ford Coppola's building was just down the street, and above us was the dying art of the pole dance, with Carol Dodo's flashing nipples enticing men to North Beach on weekends.

My life was still entwined with partying and drugs. We worked hard at Kangaroo, and on the weekends, I played even harder. I sabotaged myself all the way down the line. I find it hard to explain even now, just like I find it hard to explain the way I gave up Tom. All my life I longed to be one of the elite—from the time I waved off holidaying families returning to their perfect lives in Melbourne, wanting to go with them. Now I wanted to become the wealthy man in San Francisco. I inwardly drooled whenever I told people I had my own business. I could feel the admiration and adulation of other gay men as I told them, but for whatever reason, I still felt empty. We struggled with cash flow going into the second year and moved out to cheaper digs on Van Ness Avenue. Then I partied even harder—until with a massive amount of shame I ended my time with my partners, who bought me out of the company.

I slunk off to Australia in July '81, and with my mother, I watched Prince Charles marry Diana Spencer the day after my thirty-third birthday. I seriously entertained the idea of not going back to The City and to Tom. I had no idea what I was going to do. To add insult to this unfolding victim narrative, my head was turned by a very handsome Australian man I met in Sydney, who promised to come and live with me in San Francisco, if and when I went back. In a letter, I told Tom I was breaking up with him.

Then I did return, to a heart-wrenching scene with the only man who accepted me as I was and to the fact that I had to quit my apartment on Dolores Park and sort out my life.

The next few months became a blur—of moving into cheaper digs with a guy I found in the B.A.R., of looking for work, and of playing hard late at night on crystal meth with Sam and other friends who had now become addicts over the past four years.

The wake-up call came one Sunday night at 2 a.m. Sam and I were sitting in his VW Rabbit outside Stephen and Steven's apartment, debating whether we would go up and join them injecting speed, taking it a step further than our usual snorting. The boys had a friend who was a nurse, and she was going to facilitate the process for all of us.

We agreed to make the final decision up in their apartment. In the darkened living room, we watched the boys stalk around, the drug already in their veins. They were wild, ecstatic, unsmiling, and tense in ways I had never seen before. Both had deep, haunted expressions, and as they raved in our faces about how amazing the high was, I looked at Sam, he shook his head, and we went downstairs to the car.

“That was the beginning of a horror movie,” one of us said.

Sam turned on the ignition. We drove in silence to Twentieth Street, where I crashed in the small room off the upstairs landing,

outside Sam's room. Later we had a long talk about cleaning up our act. We'd come close to addiction, and we knew it.

Change was in the air. The 1981 International Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade signalled a dramatic shift in the community. There was defiance with purpose and visible direction, more than just slogans and signs. This was a day for expressing the best of the recent accomplishments of the community. The Gay Men's Chorus returned after a successful nationwide tour. The San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band, Twirling Corp, Tap Troupe, and Guard were strong. There had been a concert at Davies Hall on the Friday before the parade, made up of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Men's Community Chorus and the Bay Area Women's Brass Quartet. The concert had played on the radio, citywide. And, of course, there were the floats, which advertised that gays and lesbians were teachers, worked in offices, ran businesses, voted, and knew how to have fun.

Supervisor Harry Britt, now the voice of the gay community in City Hall, spoke of the firm footing gay pride had in American life. He called for us to give greater understanding to our parents and to let them know they had not done such a bad job raising us. We needed to look around and see how wonderfully diverse we had become, to work more with the police to reduce their fear of us, to finally heal the deep rift that existed between us and them. By the end of the parade, the Castro was jammed.

Many of us moved off to the Galleria to dance to St. Tropez; some flowed on into Trocadero Transfer to hear Viola Wills and Sylvester entertain; others to the I-Beam, Alfies, Gay Father's After-The-Party, or Party at the New Bell. Maud's was for the women, Febe's for the leather fraternity, and The Balcony for the harder drinking and drug crowd. Hope was in the air, too, in 1981. Gay Pride was strong, and its catch-cry was 'Let It Spread'. No one knew that something else, a vicious silent killer, was also spreading into the

community—a germ injected into the bloodstream, methodically taking hold, sinuous as a snake making its way down a rabbit hole, with all exits blocked.

In the first issue of the 1980 B.A.R., amongst the Letters to the Editor, there was a plea from a health worker for all gay men to get themselves screened for venereal disease. The letter-writer noted that gay men had become increasingly concerned with their outer selves—the new clothes shops, hair salons, gyms, places to have faces scrubbed—and were not sufficiently concerned with what went on inside their bodies. I had read these warning letters from health workers in the gay papers for the last six years. With chilling prescience, he wrote: *It is no secret that San Francisco is in the midst of a VD epidemic—it's reported in the paper, comes up in conversation, is stated over the radio almost daily. We could put the responsibility on the diseases themselves. After all they're not giving us the usual symptoms we've been told about. But rather, they're lying low, inside, spreading slowly but efficiently from man to man, to many of us.*

From 19–20 June 1980, a major symposium was held at San Francisco State on sexually transmitted diseases in the gay population. It was for clinicians and public health officials and was run concurrently with the third annual Lesbian/Gay Health Conference. Sexual diseases were now at almost plague proportions, and more and more health practitioners wanted to work on a solution. Every issue in the B.A.R. now carried a letter to the editor from a concerned gay man about sexual practices and the resultant spread of venereal diseases. Sometimes the letter was shrill and judgemental, at other times it might come from a health industry worker concerned about what he was seeing in the clinics.

Many of us saw it as par for the course and accepted the situation as a side effect of being horny, of taking our pleasure whenever and wherever we wanted. I never attended a talk or conference on the venereal epidemic during my time in San Francisco, but articles

about them always worried me. I had a small outbreak of genital herpes in '77 and was freaked out when my doctor, Tom Ainsworth, told me it could recur on and off for the rest of my life. I also had Hepatitis A earlier, in '76, and gonorrhoea a couple of times in the early years after coming out.

A guy I'd made it with called me in '81 and told me he'd come into contact with someone who had syphilis and wanted me to know. I thanked him and made my way to the Public Health building on Fourth Street to have a blood test during my lunch break. A good-looking young doctor approached me in a small cubicle, took some blood, and cheerily told me, as he took another syringe from his kidney dish, that I might as well get a shot of penicillin—*to get the healing going now as a precaution.*

I balked and said, “No way, are you crazy?” I would wait for the results. He told me it was the new protocol as he looked around at the mostly gay men who were there to get tested. I could see them all checking each other out, seeing if there was someone they could have sex with later. On Mondays now, men lined up to get a fix to kill anything they might have picked up that weekend at the baths. Annoyed with what I thought was an irresponsible approach to healing, I realised I had to be a lot more careful. When I called a week later, I was told my results were negative.

In June 1981, I read the first article in *The Chronicle* about the new illness that was beginning to put young men in hospital. Somehow, it put me on alert. Soon, there was anecdotal information from friends about someone they knew who was falling ill and losing weight. A year later, in June 1982, the disease was named GRID (Gay-related Immune Deficiency), as it seemed to affect mainly gay men. Speculation began to mount that only gay men were exhibiting the symptoms and dying. Similar reports were coming out of New York and Los Angeles. In September, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta renamed the disease, giving it the official title

of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome—or AIDS. It was now on the table. The nation's only AIDS clinic was created by Marcus Conant and Paul Volberding and moved from the University of California San Francisco to San Francisco General Hospital, where it was operating from the beginning of 1983.

Back in the summer of 1982, after GRID became AIDS and CBS aired a Dan Rather report, we discussed the sickness at Twentieth Street. I was over from my new place on Dolores Park and was there as a guest, although I had kindly been allowed to keep my key.

“I don't know what all the fuss is about,” Sam said as he brought a roast chicken to the table.

Sam and I cooked that night. I had already set the table and put out the mashed potatoes and green beans. Now the others were coming from their rooms down to the dining room.

As Sam sat down, he added: “We've got nothing to worry about... Dave and I have been together for a while, Paul is with Doug, Manny with Tracy, and Gary is sort of with Phillip... And Alex is a big fat slut. So there! We're not going to catch a thing!”

We all laughed, and I pretended to look hurt. I was now the only single person in our group.

“Everyone looks healthy, right? Has anyone got spots or coughing a lot? No? Then if we keep it tight and don't go sticking our dicks into anyone new, we ought to be okay until a cure's found.”

“I'm wondering how you get sick in the first place,” said Paul.

He had come in late, as he'd wanted a smoke out on the deck beyond the kitchen. After Sam's rant, Paul took a different tack. I looked up with interest.

“We've heard most illnesses are from Folsom Street,” he said, patting Doug's head.

He slipped into the chair beside Doug. The two of them had been spending more time down around Folsom—especially at The Handball Express on Harrison—with some of their new, druggy friends. They were all getting deeper into the leather scene through their use of crystal meth.

Sam jumped in again: “It's got to be infectious... and it might just be infecting certain people, like guys who are weak or prone to these weird illnesses. We've got no way of knowing. Like Paul said, it might be guys who are living in the bathhouses down on Harrison and doing it in the back alleys!”

Sam looked satisfied with himself and started eating. Shortly after, he added: “Anyway, there might be a pattern, or since the illnesses are so different, it could be something to do with a lot of things... The talk on my campus is that some health professionals think the CDC will come up with something quickly, like they did with Legionnaires' disease.”

None of us felt an imminent danger, just a disquiet feeling that was slowly taking hold. We thought we would escape the bullet and that the majority of those getting sick were the super-weirdo guys who had moved to San Francisco just to fuck. There were a lot of them living in tear-downs around Folsom, Bryant and lower Harrison, and under the freeways. We were smug, middle-class queens who had created a comfortable gay lifestyle that was not going to be taken away from us.

“What pisses me off,” said Doug, “is that we're just beginning to get our freedom and some decent rights and another thing comes along and wants to fuck it up! I hate the fact they're calling it the gay disease... Why just us? Isn't there talk about straight Haitian men and women having some of the same symptoms?”

“True,” said Sam. “I guess we just don't know enough yet.”

“Yes, but right now it’s mainly exhibited in gay guys,” I insisted. “There are no lesbians, very few straights, and it’s in New York, LA and here, so something’s not right.”

I’d recently gone to Tom Ainsworth at his practice with a vicious short flu. He told me he was starting to see more patients with fatigue, fever, unexplained weight loss, and night sweats. He patted me on the bum and told me *I’d checked out just fine* in his slow, Southern accent, and I came away breathing a sigh of relief. Gary and I had already talked about only having sex with men who looked really healthy and pumped.

“A government plot,” Doug pushed on. “I think the government’s behind it!”

“What a dumb idea!” Gary always thought Doug a lightweight. “If it was in the water or the air, everyone would have it.”

“What about the hepatitis study so many doctors wanted to get us on?” Doug asked. “That’s been going for years... It could have been put into that.”

“You think the gay doctors in this city aren’t going to know if something’s up? They’d alert us... Crazy talk, Doug.”

We went back and forth for a while before moving on to what was happening that weekend. We were still going to Trocadero together, especially Sam, Gary, Dave, and me. Weekends were still lost to crystal meth. I was using it again, but nothing like I had been in the late seventies.

Early the following year, I got a call from Richard, whom I had not spoken to for several months. He told me he was off to the East Coast to do his sex show and that he was now actively involved in the fight against AIDS. He was going to develop a system for safe sex and make it a part of his act. Being Richard, he began to lecture me on what it meant to be safe. I told him that coming from him, this was a bit rich.

“I don't want to fight with you, Alex,” he said. “I love you and want to know you when we're old.”

“You're right,” I said, embarrassed. “I'm just a bit fearful at the moment. I promise I'll be safe, and I'm going to get involved myself in whatever this is.”

So far, he felt healthy and strong, and so did I. We agreed to keep in touch. Months later, towards the end of '83, I began to check myself in the shower, look scrupulously at my face in the mirror every morning, and wonder about any shortness of breath. My narcissism took an interesting turn. Now I worked at *not* changing my looks, at keeping everything just the way it was. Even a little more weight round the tummy seemed a healthy option.

People started to go missing from the gym, like my old fuck-buddy Reed, the Southern California surfer—who was actually from Pennsylvania. When I saw him next, he was evasive, turned in on himself. Reed had always been loud and fun, but now he was sober. He was towelling off after taking a shower when I approached him. He said he had been busy, *caught up in other things*, and that he had to get dressed and go. He acted like a completely different person, and being me, I felt rejected.

I looked at men in the showers now in a different way, to see if anyone had lost weight or had purple marks. It was furtive and strange. Relationships that had been so easy and carefree between the men I knew there slowly began to change. A number of guys disappeared from the gym completely.

Reed, and others like him, had been told they might have contracted the disease. They were experiencing things like extreme fatigue and night sweats. There was a growing list of symptoms. In September 1983, there was some good news. The CDC ruled out transmission by casual contact and through sharing water, air, and food.

I wanted to get involved but did not know how. I lay and thought about it on the re-upholstered sofa I'd recently bought from an old friend. I had taken over the lease of 106 Dolores after Bill moved to LA to run a division of a large software company, and after I started a new job myself, now working as a sales rep for an air courier company based out of Los Angeles, I knew I would have to get a roommate to share the bills, but I felt lucky, as I'd always coveted Bill's place.

Finally, I had a place I could make into a real home. As I lay there that Saturday afternoon, looking up at the clouds through the intense, green fronds of the palm trees lining Dolores Street, I realized this could now all be taken away in the blink of an eye.

I was frightened. I began to wonder if it was some evil plot of the extreme right. It was irrational, but it was also so unfair. Like so many gay and lesbian people, I felt safe in San Francisco in the early eighties, even when the gay movement started to take another beating. In some states, hard-won laws were being repealed as the moral majority, epitomised by Anita Bryant, gained real power after Reagan became president.

My mother had been in America during the 1980 federal election. On election night, we went to the theatre on Geary Street. When we came out and walked arm in arm to catch the tram home, a large balding man burst out of a steak house on O'Farrell.

"He won! He won!" he yelled, hoarse with joy.

I stopped him for a moment, as he swayed in front of me.

"Who won?" I asked through his cloud of cigar smoke.

I dreaded his answer.

"Reagan, of course!"

Then he raced off to join his Republican buddies on their way to the strip clubs.

Mum and I huddled deeper into our coats, warding off the foggy chill.

“Oh dear,” I said, looking at her. “We're in for it now.”

I did not think much of Jimmy Carter as a president. He was a loving man, but he bowed to the evangelical churches springing up around the country and the political pressure their candidates had brought against gay rights legislation. The gay movement had helped create this right-wing Christian backlash, which was now flexing its muscle.

This was a fight I could openly become involved with; it was not directly political, so that if I put my head up, it would not be noticed. And I wouldn't be shipped out of the country for subversion. From my New York immigration interrogation through the year's wait to get my Green Card, I shied away from expressing public outrage, from shouting on the street, megaphone in hand. I was keenly aware I was not a citizen. One day, I dreamed there might be reciprocal rights between Australia and the USA, and I could finally become a voter.

Michael Fiorentino, brother of my old friend Christopher from Palm Springs, was back in The City from his Los Angeles home to look after their mother. She had moved deeper into dementia. Around his kitchen table in his apartment on Market Street, I told him I wanted to get involved somehow, and he said the same. We set out to find a project we could both volunteer with together, and after going to a lecture put on by one of the gay medical groups, we were led to The Shanti Project. Housed in an old convent on the corner of Oak and Webster, it had recently been funded by The City to provide counselling and on-the-ground care for AIDS patients. It had originally been a Berkeley organisation, set up to help cancer patients, but now it was expanding to respond to the new crisis. Jim Geary, a lovely man, ran it out of an old office at the back of

a grand Victorian room with tall, stained-glass windows. Once, it might have been a chapel or dining room for the nuns. The second intake of its training program would begin that November '83 for people interested in caring for people coming down with the various illnesses now collectively termed the gay disease.

Michael and I signed up for the carer program and committed to two weekend trainings. This decision changed us forever. Everything about our old lives slowly and inexorably was swept away as the plague moved into the Bay Area. There was no way we could not be consumed by it. This is what we learned on the first day of training. Something fierce awakened in me. I knew then I had been asleep for years.

I still believed, against all reason, that there was design in the universe. Neither the New Age movement nor the humanist movement had provided the answers I was searching for. I was still looking for the thing that would help open my heart. All the work I had done through the second part of the seventies was based on getting to know and accept myself. Now I found something worthwhile, beyond my own petty issues. Meeting Tom in 1980 had helped pull me off the merry-go-round of drugs, late nights, and lost weekends. I slipped up when we broke up but subconsciously continued to move away from that scene and now only occasionally ended up at 3 a.m. on my knees in an alleyway.

On the first weekend morning, a young, handsome gay doctor, Michael Mahalco, spoke for over an hour about what the disease seemed to be and how it exhibited in current patients and in those who had already died. He shared photos of the different types of opportunistic infections now showing up in men's bodies—lymphoma, thrush, Kaposi sarcoma, the wasting effects of pneumocystis, encephalitis—an abattoir of diseases. It went on and on, every illness more exotic, more puzzling, and more horrific. We sat there, stunned. As he finished his presentation, showing images of men who now looked like the Elephant Man, every gay man in

the room realised this could be them in a few weeks or months. The room was completely silent. For some time, we were unable to look at one another. I could hear people's hearts beating beside me and had to remind myself to breathe. We knew that outside the medical community, we were the first to have the current state of AIDS revealed to us so thoroughly.

Jim took over from this ghastly exhibition and somehow lightened the mood. Throughout the training, all faces turned to him when things got tough for signs of hope and inspiration. He sat up the front with Bobby Reynolds, who was a PWA—a Person with AIDS. Before he asked Bobby to tell us what it was like to live with the illness and what clients like him needed from us, Jim spoke about the current state of mind in The City.

He talked about how reviled gay people had been until the past ten years. As a new community, we were finally at a place where we loved ourselves and found joy in ourselves and in each other. And then along came this crisis, out of nowhere. Over the past two years, it had become identified as a gay disease. He went on and explained, in his quiet, beautiful voice, how the tragedy of the disease affected many people still in various stages of their coming-out process—some of them just getting off the bus in San Francisco, carrying their hopes and dreams of a new life. Others had been out and proud for ten years and believed their wonderful jobs and apartments would be theirs forever. He described the different stages and places of acceptance AIDS sufferers were at, especially within their own hearts.

Jim then looked up at the ceiling.

“To love oneself is difficult anyway,” he said. “But to have Jerry Falwell tell us that this disease is God’s will is a bit much to take.”

He talked about being petrified of meeting his first victims of the disease because of preconceived notions.

“In the press they’d been portrayed as degenerates, as people who’d come to San Francisco to do drugs and have sex all the time. Stereotypes of people with AIDS include people who have been very sexually active, who are drug-crazed, who are slightly less than human. What I met was the complete opposite of that picture. I met a man who, while so ill and so near death, wanted to speak of the beauty of life and what he had discovered about himself through the process of having AIDS. We talked about his life and who he needed to say goodbye to.”

His grey-eyed gaze moved over all of us. He told us what we faced in The City and what our roles would be if we wanted to be a part of the Shanti community. There were now over 300 people with AIDS and 600 family and friends needing support. We were to be carers to both groups. We might encounter enormous prejudice and it would be hard not to judge. Lovers were being left literally out in the cold as families swept in to take their sons away. There were stories of partners being pushed out of apartments with nowhere to go after their lover had died, of not being able to see the body again once families had arrived and taken over. Of partners being told ‘not to get emotional,’ not to get in the way when wills were being read and funerals planned, of not being mentioned at the church or memorial services as a long-term partner but as a friend of the deceased. Men were seen scrabbling through dumpsters, looking for anything they could salvage, that would leave them with a memory of the lover who was taken from them—before U-Haul trucks pulled away with their combined lives.

Everyone sat stunned. Beside me, Michael was red-faced with anger. Some were in tears again while others looked strong and defiant.

“We’ll teach you to stay open not only to your clients, but to others as well,” Jim said. Relentlessly, he went on to show us how the AIDS epidemic had affected everyone in San Francisco: gay,

straight, bi, or trans. “Grief is everywhere; we’re being faced with an epidemic that’s continuing to grow and take lives. And at this point, we don’t know how to treat it and we don’t know how to stop it. We haven’t found a way to cure it. By this time, every gay person knows someone with AIDS and is dealing with this in his or her own way.

“The horrible issue here is that cruelty and pressure from fearful straight people are compounding the horror of the epidemic. We’re hearing stories of gay waiters losing their jobs because patrons don’t want to be waited on by them. We’re hearing of visibly ill people being shunned by staff at pharmacies, even though the latest information is that the disease can’t be casually caught. We’re hearing of nurses and some doctors and dentists who won’t physically touch anyone who even looks like they’re ill.”

“It’s not been easy living in San Francisco anyway. We talk about liberation over these past ten years, but it’s still tough to walk down certain streets at night, even near the Castro. And who hasn’t wondered at the speeding car coming at you a little too fast as you started to cross a street with no lights?”

Several of us had gone pale. I felt as if I was leaving my body and listening to this from someplace else. I was compelled to take it all in, frozen in my seat, while I desperately wanted to run, to get out of The City.

This was the end of the first day. I have no memory of getting home, but I remember the look on Michael’s face as we parted, a look of love, compassion, stoicism, and resignation.

“And now I’ve got Mom to see to,” he said. “There’s always something, eh?”

I trudged down Market, past The Balcony, where two years earlier I could have easily slipped into drug addiction.

That night I had a dream. It was a bitter winter, and I was somewhere in Scandinavia. I was a Viking lord, and the dead king was to be sent off, not by boat as was traditional, but on a funeral pyre in the middle of a lake. As we walked out with torches to complete the service, I knew instinctively the ice was unsafe. Then when I looked up at the pyre, it was not the king lying there. It was me. My eyes were open, and I was being farewelled by someone I loved. As I returned to the body of the person on the ice, I knew I could never turn back. I had to keep moving forward, in terror, as the ice became increasingly treacherous. Beneath it were ghouls and fish, who waited to drag me down and devour me.

I woke, heart pounding, and had to push myself into a sitting position to break out of the nightmare. I got up and went down to the front room to connect with the outside world. Looking at The City—the uncertain, earthquake city—I wondered if the lives our generation had imagined were now slipping away forever.

The second day was another assault, but in a wholly different way. I was so geared up to be there now. I felt more needed than I could remember at any other time in my life. Michael and I were both at the old convent by 8 a.m. It felt important, right, and for me, selfishly, a possible way I could save myself from dying—or at least learn how to cope if I discovered I had the disease.

This second day was more about what the clients were going through. Jim entered with an old lady and a guy who was obviously unwell. The woman was Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, the pioneer in near-death studies and the author of the book *On Death and Dying*, in which she discusses her theory of the five stages of grief. There were audible gasps when she was introduced. A few people stood up to applaud. I knew who she was from an article I had read on her work with cancer. Jim told us she was a co-founder of Shanti in Berkeley, that the AIDS crisis was now an extension of her work with terminal cancer patients.

Ms Kübler-Ross spoke quietly about the honour it was, on both sides, to be together through the journey to death, that death existed in every aspect of the living process right up to the last moment. As one who went through this many times, she outlined with steely certainty, the objections, the frustration, the fear, the conciliation and the acceptance that can come—but not always, and not for everyone. I realised as I listened to her that I was fully committed to this journey now. Some people did not come back after the first day, and I did not blame them. But for me there was no choice: there was nowhere else I could be. I had to learn how to integrate this new care work into the rest of my life.

After a short coffee break, we met Gary Walsh. Jim introduced him as a well-known gay identity in San Francisco, a leading psychotherapist with a practice designed to help gay people find their potential. He was politically active, an outspoken advocate for gay rights. He now sat in front of us, a shell of the handsome, proud, and accomplished gay man he was. Taking the microphone, he told us what he had gone through over the past year. And we all knew it could be us up on that stage.

Gary spoke of needing a carer and of his state of mind and his firm belief in an afterlife. He had studied living and dying as a way of being in the moment throughout his adult life. He did not want to die, and he certainly did not want to die like this, but over the past few months, he'd never felt more present as a human being as he did right now.

He felt he was receiving real assistance as he left earth, and this was a gift to me in this extraordinary moment. I hung on his every word. He gave me comfort and a way forward, a way of coping—not necessarily either Christian or Buddhist. He awoke something in me. I was already looking for a more spiritual life and now actively started to seek out spiritual pathways that could answer my questions about life and death. I did what so many others did in times of extreme

crisis: turn to a higher authority for answers about the purpose of my existence.

I wonder, looking back, if I would have got involved with Shanti had I known the commitment it demanded. Then again, what we saw in the training program did not offer an alternative. This was going to be a life and death struggle until a cure was found, so what else really mattered?

A number of volunteers went back to school to become nurses. Bill Gassaway's best friend John closed his very successful travel agency to do just that. I was convinced, from that first Shanti weekend, it was only a matter of time before I succumbed to AIDS. It was inevitable. Before, like so many, I thought only degenerate gay guys who lived deep in the Folsom District would contract the virus. Yes, I'd fucked and sucked my way from '74 through '82, but I was with other healthy, white, middle-class men. They dressed fashionably and went to Castro Street for meals; they went to marches when it was necessary to show force, and to Fire Island and to The Russian River on the long weekends of summer.

My first client, Rick, was a skinny little guy with a thin brown moustache who lost his hair through his twenties. He'd come to San Francisco from the Midwest in 1976 and worked in a hardware store downtown. We had nothing in common. I wondered how comfortable I could be with him. Rick had very little in his tiny apartment on Noe Street. He was proud of the trucker caps he collected and hung in a line on hooks above his bed. As time went on, his Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) lesions grew, disfiguring his face. His mind began to wander too. Each time I arrived with his groceries, he was visibly thinner. Together, as the days got darker for him, we went over the story of each cap, where he found or purchased it—over and over.

Rick had a best friend, Patti, who'd left their hometown around the same time he had. As the months went by in '84, she and I

crossed paths. The only thing we had in common was our interest in Rick's well-being. When he was eventually hospitalised, she called me at my new job downtown to tell me he was close to the end. I was a counsellor by this time and had taken over from Rick's former counsellor. I got to his hospital room in the late afternoon and sat with Patti at his bedside.

Just before he died, he reared up, shouting in wild terror. She cradled him back down onto his saturated pillow. I could only support her loving actions. This was my first death from AIDS and the first death I ever witnessed. As Rick breathed his last, Patti and I agreed later, the room somehow seemed to expand. He fell still, his tiny body and drawn face sinking back slowly into the sheets. His funeral at a nearby Catholic church was also my first service for an AIDS victim. Over the next decade, I went to dozens of such services.

We had weekly meetings and monthly refreshers at Shanti's headquarters, where we received updates on the disease's progress in The City, as well as any new treatments that had promise. At this time, there were none. Some of the counsellors and cares hatched a plan to put on a social night for the PWAs and hired a hall for a Friday evening. We had food and drink set out and an attempt at party favors to make it seem more friendly and fun. Only a couple of guys came, with their carers or counsellors, so it was a bit of a bust. It was hard for everyone to know how to handle the process of staying well and of keeping our spirits up. As no one had any idea yet how to stop the ravages of the disease, a sad hopelessness coloured our every effort.

Toward the end of the party, a man with the most disfigured face and body I had yet seen arrived with his carer. I could see on my new friends' faces that they were as confronted by his appearance as I was. He was another Michael. He had real problems speaking, and he kept jabbing at two photos he'd brought with him. Both had been

taken on a beautiful sailing boat on San Francisco Bay. Behind the stern, you could see the bridge, and there he was, a handsome Italian American man, confident at the tiller, laughing at whomever had taken the photo. It was a figment, a modern look into the American Dream. He wanted us to see him as he was then, back when he was young, free, and gorgeous. The second photo was a group shot, with three other people who looked like family: an older man and woman and a teenage boy. Michael must have been about 25. The smile under his clipped, black moustache showed a successful, happy, handsome young man settling into a gifted life in The City.

“When were these taken, Michael?” someone asked.

He told us it had been in 1980. We were all silent. He desperately looked at each of us, shifting his eyes around the group. He wanted us to know he had been like us. Feelings surged between this ravaged man and the carers who wanted to get him back into that boat and out there, sailing again. One counsellor pulled away, distraught, and excused himself. Michael’s carer quickly got his client’s attention and asked him about his parents as we all started to pack up to go home.

Some city apartment owners refused to let flats to sick gay men. Men were thrown out for not being able to pay their rent, and lovers abandoned them over dementia and fatigue. And so Shanti and City Hall started putting together places for shared living. Some of us were asked to work on the project, in addition to our client work. One weekend, we found ourselves near the Haight, off Castro, helping some PWAs into the rooms of a newly acquired four-bedroom apartment. We helped with cooking meals, keeping the place clean and arranging the furniture and items the men had brought with them to make it feel more like home.

It was rarely easy. Four men, who probably had never met before, were now forced to get along. Different manifestations of the disease created specific problems. One guy had a tendency to wander.

Another, who I'd known in his former life as a Folsom bartender, was downright ornery and could fly off the handle when things did not go his way. We had to work closely with each person's counsellor to make them as comfortable as possible.

As I completed my counsellor training over two weekends in May 1984, the Center for Disease Control announced the discovery of the blood-borne virus causing AIDS. We were optimistic a cure would soon follow. Soon a blood test would be available to find out if you were infected. Like most men, while I wanted to know, I was terrified.

Jim called me into his office around 6 p.m. on the Sunday night of the first counsellor-training weekend. He told me that when he first met me, he had been concerned about my ability to open up emotionally to PWAs, but that now he was convinced I would be a great counsellor. I was slightly shocked, as I always thought I was empathetic. I said so.

"Alex, a lot of us are so guarded, so protective of who we are and what has been done to us as a gay person since childhood. You came in with a front like that."

He held up his hand as my mind flew back to the advocate training where I'd been called out by another gay man as arrogant and narcissistic.

"But," he went on gently, "all that seems to have dropped away. I hope this serves you for whatever comes up next in your life. There seems to be a little more hope for us all on the horizon."

He reached out his hand, and I took it.

In groups of ten, we met at each other's places every Monday night. They came to my upstairs flat for our first meeting, where we took turns to lead the reporting on our clients, their status, and our own emotional states. A lovely woman in our group, Sarah, was

looking for a place to live. We clicked, and at the end of the session, I asked her if she wanted to move into my spare room. She lived with me for nearly two years. Tall, with short, brown, wavy hair, she had a touch of Eleanor Roosevelt about her. Originally from the eastern states, she grew up privileged in Philadelphia. I missed having an educated person like her around, and we bonded over our pasts and what was expected of us as adults. She knew quite a few of the women I knew, and occasionally we all went out together. She always wore jeans, boots, and a plaid shirt over a T-shirt: Maud's and Peg's bar attire. Warm and funny, she was very serious about her commitment to the program.

After Sarah moved in, we often hosted the group. One night, we decided to go together to see the new film *The Times of Harvey Milk* at the Castro Theatre. It was a lighter Monday evening than usual. Ironically, the film ends with Harvey being killed, but for us, the movie was better than talking about our dying clients.

As the months rolled on, the number of men who came down with all the different opportunistic infections exploded. We all took on more clients, and some of us began to experience the deaths of our current clients. Attachments grew, and though it was never encouraged, some counsellor-client relationships became very close. In these early days, the counsellors would go as a group to the funerals of their respective clients.

In late 1984, I got a new job and was given a small company car, a white VW Rabbit. It was used by couriers or for appointments during the day, and on nights and weekends, it was mine. For the first time, I had my own car—and even a garage to put it in. It was something I could drop into conversation with my father on calls home. I felt like a real grown-up.

I also had a new belief system: Eckankar, which had been founded in California in the mid-sixties. The simple and direct

spiritual exercises taught me to go inside myself and through the presence of Spirit in my life, gain confidence and trust in myself. I now also had a new community and a place I could go to and be with like-minded people. And I formed a casual but monogamous relationship with a very hot, leather-wearing, six-foot-tall bartender from the Badlands. His name was Michael, as I think every fourth gay man in America was back then. By the time we met, there was no excuse for unprotected sex—yet sometimes it happened. A belief was circulating that you had to come in contact with the virus a number of times to become infected, so if it happened once, you were probably okay. Your body would be able to kill it. Theory, speculation, and rose-coloured hope were all we had by that time.

I worked during the day, and five nights a week I was either with counselling clients or other counsellors in my group. I worked at least one full day on weekends at Shanti itself. I was unable to talk about my clients or Shanti with my friends, some of whom felt guilty about not wanting to know about or get involved with the fight against AIDS. Misunderstandings also arose over what I was doing and why I wasn't around. Gary did not understand my change in focus and said he found me changed. The easy chat of 'sex and men' faded from our conversations, and we rarely spoke of our own impending declines.

Randy Shilts, *The Chronicle's* AIDS crisis correspondent, had written that Shanti was a 'woo-woo' group, suggesting it was concerned more with the afterlife of its clients than with their physical needs. I remember I had an argument with Randy at the Shanti building one Saturday afternoon regarding his position on Shanti. But I always remember a defence of Shanti by Bobby Reynolds, one of the first men in The City to come out about the KS lesions on his feet. He told us that when he found a Shanti counsellor and was able to speak openly about his condition for the first time, he finally felt heard and not judged.

One Monday morning in April '85, I read in *The Chronicle* I could now get the blood test to find out if I was HIV positive. Without a second thought, I made my way to the Public Health Clinic on my lunch hour, where my blood was drawn by a doctor. We hardly spoke. He told me they would call me to come back for the results. I was deeply freaked out about knowing, but I could *not* not know. I wanted to give myself the best fighting chance I could. I had no symptoms. Maybe I'd dodged the bullet.

The following week, I sat nervously in the clinic hallway and waited to see someone about the test results. Out walked the same doctor who'd wanted to pump me full of antibiotics years ago as a precaution against syphilis. Now in his thirties, he looked older, drawn, and sober—completely changed. We sat down right there, on an old bench, and he told me, with deep regret, that I was HIV positive.

I was among the first people to find out their status. This was the first week results had become available. Once he told me, he was embarrassed and tongue-tied: he did not know what else to say. I felt compelled to rescue him. I told him I was fine, I'd expected the result, and I was going straight to my own doctor, Tom Ainsworth. He quickly smiled, then got up and turned back down the hall.

I watched him walk away. Suddenly, I wanted to call out to him, remind him of the days he shot penicillin into everyone and contributed to all this.

“What about our weakened immune systems?” I wanted to shout.

I was angry, frustrated by my diagnosis, and wanted someone to blame. But I did none of this. I got out of there and stood, hard and fast against a wall of the building in the noonday sun.

It was like the moment I'd come out as gay on Nineteenth Street a decade earlier. Everything had changed. Nothing could be the

same again. But this time, I was one of the walking dead. Curiously, I remembered a conversation with my mother when I was a child. I had listened, spellbound as she told me, in her rather over-dramatic way, that when Dad went off to war in 1939, she had to rush back to Port Lonsdale from Melbourne Ports, where she saw him march onto the troop ship. She watched his ship sail past our house at the coast on its way to the Middle East.

“I stood there alone in the light rain, on a cliff, in a simple cotton frock, knowing nothing would ever be the same again.”

I now understood her—that sense of impending loss she must have felt, the uncertainty, desperately clutching within her body and mind at any sort of hope available.

Tom Ainsworth had my medical records in front of him.

“I’ve been updating everyone’s data onto my Macintosh, about a weird flu I was seeing in many of you from about 1980. It totally fits with when you probably sero-converted. I talked with Atlanta, and I think it’s right.”

Tom turned from my records and invited me to look at the date I’d come to him with the beginnings of a nasty flu: early April 1982. When I first came out, I perversely kept a list of the men with whom I had sex. Was it pride in my conquests, or was it that when I met the man I married, I could say I had not slept with too many men?

When the count reached 105, I gave up with a mixture of shame and bravado. Now, I wished I had kept it up until April ‘82. Then I would know how—and from whom—I had gotten the virus. This was a weird issue for a lot of us in conversation back then. It became a topic in counselling catch-ups and in support groups with others who were HIV positive. Some guys wanted to blame someone else for sero-conversion, especially those men who were not promiscuous. They wanted to *pinpoint that one time I went to that bar and went*

*home with that guy.* For some of us, it was simply morbid curiosity. I wanted to know the actual night, and who I had been with when I'd received the fluid, the infected semen. So I guess I wanted to blame someone else too. But it was also a fantasy about *what if I had not let that happen that night?*

*What if I'd said no? Why didn't I just stay with Tom?*

The fantasies were a kind of justification, letting me off the hook of the fact that it had happened, and I just needed to get on with it.

I met Michael, the bartender, in the Patio Café the following Saturday and told him I'd tested positive. By then, I was pushing him away and had been for a while. He was controlling and wanted more from me than I wanted to give. He bristled. We both lit up our cigarettes.

"Now you're going to fucking blame me, aren't you?"

He was spoiling for a fight. I could see it as soon as he'd arrived at the table. While I certainly wanted someone to blame, deep down, I knew it was my own responsibility. But I still must have looked defensive.

"It wasn't you, Michael. It was from a couple of years ago. I've been HIV positive for some time... I might have given it to you."

It was part of my angst about meeting him. I could have passed it on to him. I felt terrible.

He put his head back and laughed.

"Don't worry! I know I'm positive..."

"You've had the test already?"

I was incredulous.

"Nah, and I'm not going to... But it's definite, I just know it."

“Why don’t you want to find out?”

“What’s the point?”

Then he launched into a conspiracy theory about Reagan and the pharmaceutical companies. While none of us knew the full truth yet about how the virus got into our blood, I did not want this construct in my life. When we left, we both knew it was over.

Gary and I still had lunch regularly downtown. We made an effort to go to a movie and have dinner a couple of times a month, but even with him, there was a growing distance. Our core relationship remained, but we talked less on the phone at night. He made new friends, annoyed that I gave so much time to Shanti. We discussed him having the test, and when he did, and I knew he had the results, I walked over to the house. He told me as he folded clothes from the dryer.

“Yes, I’m positive too.”

“I honestly thought you’d be negative...”

“Don’t be stupid,” he shot back. “Of course I was not going to be negative!”

He turned and started to leave the basement.

“Hang on,” I said. “Why are you angry with me?”

We walked up the two flights of stairs to his bedroom, where he dumped the clothes basket on his bed.

“Look, I don’t want anyone to know I’m positive yet. I’ll tell them when I’m ready. Not everyone is out about it like you are,” he spat. “And I can’t believe you wouldn’t think I was just like you. We’ve done the same things in The City for years. I would’ve thought it was pretty obvious.”

He was frustrated and fearful and tried to make it all seem normal and okay. I knew this reaction from counsellors in our meetings when they found out they had sero-converted. Some of us wanted to talk about it immediately and wear it out on everyone around us, whereas others, like Gary, desperately wanted it to be private and deal with it internally and alone.

“Well, no, actually... I’ve met lots of guys you’d think would have it, but don’t. I was sure, since you’ve been with Phillip so long, and the way in ‘81 you backed off partying when Sam and I kept going, that somehow you might’ve been saved from it.”

“I was hoping too, I guess.”

He finished putting his T-shirts in a top drawer.

We both sat on the bed in silence for a while, not knowing what to say to one another. I reached out and put a hand on his knee.

“Well, we have to get on with things now,” I said. “Some doctors are saying it’s only a matter of a couple of years until they find a cure.”

“Yep, I’ve heard this too. We just have to keep doing healthy things.”

He sat at the table next to mine at the Spaghetti Factory, quietly flirting. Our next step was obvious. He jumped in first.

“I avoid him who has the plague,” he said, dropping his voice.

His sentence structure might have been out of Shakespeare, but the meaning was clear. Hurt, I scratched the tablecloth with my middle fingernail and then looked up.

“Well, I guess we’ll just be friends,” I said.

His quick look was a mixture of surprise, anger, and fear. It was the first time I had been the recipient of it. I made up my mind it would not happen again. Recovering, he smiled, grabbed his bill, and made his way to the front desk.

*Wow*, I thought. *This is probably how it's going to be, coming from the unaffected.* I wanted to yell out to him, “Hey, have you been tested yourself?” But I didn't. I was under a spotlight as it was: HIV positive, a walking dead man, someone to be shunned. I sighed as I got up. And these were the early days.

Slowly, like a poison injected into slices of apple lying around a serving plate, the virus changed how we related to each other. It

infected friendships. Our old lives were permanently gone by 1985. In the Castro District, more and more men became ill. Going out on weekends delivered a visible shock. The odd storefront closed, leaving a 'to let' sign hung in the window.

One Saturday afternoon, I saw an old, old friend, who had left The City and moved to Washington State with a new lover in the late seventies. Bobby was getting out of a truck with some friends and stood outside the Castro Theatre. He briefly turned his pale face to the sun.

I'd met Bobby at the Folsom Street bathhouse way back in 1974. It was my first night there, the night Gary pushed me up the stairs and made me swallow the small hit of acid on offer at the front door. This was the most famous bathhouse on Folsom Street then, especially among sexually hardcore men. Forever caught up in the belief I did not look butch enough, I was intimidated. It was dimly lit, and after I fumbled around with my locker—thankful that I did not have to take off my jeans in this space, as I did at the Rich Street Baths—we set off on a tour.

Gary promised not to leave me for the first ten minutes—and for that first year, when we went into group sex spaces, it was understood I could leave quickly and go home on my own, without him needing to find me later or judge me.

We slowly walked down a hallway, looking into darkened rooms as we went. We then climbed a staircase to the next floor and back down its hallway. I felt more comfortable by this time, fascinated by what I was seeing. There were slings with guys in them, legs wide, being played with and smacked by others. Hard hats, leather caps, chaps, jeans, and jockstraps started to meld together in my vision. I felt the acid coming on: my mouth became dry, and the shadows began to move on the walls as we came down to a larger room. It was an orgy space. Fantastic rushes of pleasure surged through me

as I braved moving toward a large bed covered in what looked like black leather. Gross, I thought as I slid onto it, wondering how often the room was cleaned. There were guys fucking and sucking on two bunks pushed against a wall. I was entering one of the levels of Dante's Inferno. Suddenly, a handsome face with a thick moustache attached smiled from the bed beside me.

“Hi, I'm Bobby,” he said in my ear.

We kissed and moved together onto the same bed. It was fantastic. I'd never had sex on acid before and it felt like I was melting into him, and he into me. Other hands started to get in on our action, and finally, he pulled me out of the room. There we stood, half-naked in the hall, looking at each other in the light. He laughed and looked back into the room.

“Wow,” he said. “It's crazy in there!”

The whole bathhouse was pumping by then, and there was no place to go and fuck alone. So we lay our little towels down on the floor at the end of a hallway and spent the next hour or so having incredible sex on the stickiest petri dish of a carpet on the planet. This was how I met Bobby. We slept at his place just off the Mission District all through Sunday and saw each other on and off until I left for the desert with Richard. We had loved each other.

Now, today, he was speaking intensely with one of his friends from the car. When he turned, I rushed over. His face wore the same look of distress and bewilderment as Reed's at the gym. He quickly hugged me but only because I grabbed him first. He looked at me like I was someone from another time, someone different. My heart tightened. Somehow I was not and could not be relevant to him anymore.

In another universe, we'd had such fun together: late-morning coffees, sitting up in bed talking about our dreams and hopes. And

here he was, slipping out of my arms, rushing away down Castro Street with his friends, all huddled up together, on a mission. The frightening and tightening AIDS mystery and its outcomes kept deepening.

I turned to go home and felt the dread that was taking over our lives. I walked down Market Street, wondering how long I had before I got sick, too. Bobby definitely looked thinner, his hair receding, skin slightly blotched. But I did not immediately see him as sick, just deeply trapped, with something overwhelming him. People like Reed and Bobby had a secret and would not share it unless you were in their immediate family group. That is how it went, from late 1982 through the rest of the decade.

By 1986, many who were HIV positive lived with a bunker mentality. You felt marked, and ever so slightly separate from your HIV negative friends. Everyone at Twentieth Street was positive. I only told my closest friends about my diagnosis; walking up Market Street, I was sure anyone could see, pinned to me, a pink triangle with a plus sign sewn into it. I heard that a Californian legislator from Los Gatos had introduced a bill in Sacramento to corral anyone suspected of having AIDS, or exhibiting any of the multiple symptoms, and inter them in camps out of Bakersfield, or out in the desert. It seemed like the beginning of the end for us.

There were stories of gay men not being served in restaurants, of waiters with colds being fired. We were to be interred like gays in 1930s Germany, allowed to die, away from the 'normal people'. No one knew how these illnesses were transmitted. Many feared they were airborne. The ghost of influenza after World War I, with millions dead, started to manifest. As there seemed to be no cure in sight, I thought about moving back to Australia. I believed that at some time in the near future I would start to show symptoms—and I did not want to die in America.

By this time, after four months with our support group, Sarah had taken on a Shanti counsellor role at Ward 5B at San Francisco General Hospital. But whenever it was my turn to host the group at our flat, she always jumped in. Ward 5B was the first of its kind. It emphasised a holistic approach to care for people with AIDS, as well as having nurses and doctors who wanted to be involved. It was a place where patients could get a hug and human warmth. Sarah worked there through the last months of '84 and most of '85.

I never forgot the night she had to stop. She had great empathy, which is why she was given the role. Jim had seen an enormous capacity in Sarah to hold the space for someone experiencing the horrors of their illnesses. I heard a noise late one night, a heavy thud on the stairs coming up from the front door. I flew out of bed and grabbed the two-foot piece of steel rod Richard had once given me in Desert Hot Springs, when he was leaving me alone overnight. I kept it, ceremoniously shoving it under each new bed I acquired after moving back to The City. I peered over the staircase railings and saw Sarah lying prone on the stairs.

“What's wrong with you?” I asked as I rushed down to help her up.

She was breathing hard.

“Oh, Alex! I've just been with my 76th guy who's died from this fucking disease... My body and soul can't take it anymore.”

“You poor darling,” I cooed and brought her up to the living room.

She fell on the sofa, and I turned the lights down low before I went to make us tea. She could barely move. “I know what you're feeling,” I said when I came back to the room. “At least in a small way. I mean, like having guys suck the life out of me, greedily wanting my health to sustain them. Do you remember Martin? Not from our group, but from Michael's group? I saw him in hospital one afternoon, and he had a look of anger and lust in his eyes... I remember getting back to

the house and just making it upstairs before I collapsed. Then I fell into a long, long sleep on the couch.”

Sarah had her forearm across her eyes and nodded.

“Think about that happening four or five hours each day, five days a week—and get aboard!” she said drily.

“I could never have done your job.” I leant forward and took her hand, which was dangling beside the couch. “I get it, Sar, I really do. No one has done what you and Paul have done. It's time for you to find other work.”

Paul was the other Shanti counsellor Jim Geary sent to Ward 5B. Sarah quietly nodded. And then curling up in a ball, she sobbed and sobbed into a big pink and grey silk pillow.

At the beginning of 1986, I was counselling five clients. They all died within ten days of each other. We watched an avalanche that had slowly moved down the mountain gain traction and was now out of control. Six months later, I quit Shanti, too, after two and a half years. I had known I was HIV positive for a year. While I felt well and looked okay in the mirror every morning, I waited for something to happen. I had not told anyone about my status outside my immediate friends. But I knew I would have to tell my family soon.

Generally, if you were negative and single, you sought out men who were the same. If you were HIV positive, you remained unsure of what to do at first, especially if you felt and looked well. I was offended by the fact I could not do what I had done before, with whomever, wherever. It was simply that I knew my former life was over, and I was frustrated. But most of us were horrified of passing the virus on. I had to navigate a new lifestyle now, and I left the house every day knowing I was diseased and had to keep it a secret. I felt like a vampire, some sort of sub-breed of human others wanted to eradicate from the earth.

While Twentieth Street stayed together until the early nineties, many other large households became deeply affected as occupants became ill. I saw the beginning of this breakdown while caring for PWAs, then counselling the very ill in the latter stages of the disease. There were war stories of extreme heroism, of men who took in the ill and cared for them. And there were darker tales: partners breaking up, groups pushing out members who became ill. The Shanti houses and apartments we found to safeguard sick men with nowhere to go were kept secret. Neighbours might have caused problems. There was still no cure, and though it was known you did not catch AIDS through casual contact, I think very few believed it, even by 1986.

The bathhouses had closed by city decree. Most bars were covered in pamphlets about safe-sex practices. Richard had returned to the limelight, as an advocate for using condoms—he was writing a book about it—and now his sex acts included a piece on staying safe while having fun. Gary and I went to a show he had at a porno theatre in the Tenderloin. I had to leave: It was too confronting. I knew Richard had to be positive, though I had not spoken to him about it.

The new way to meet someone was by putting an ad in the B.A.R. or Sentinel. I finally took the plunge, after not having had sex for nearly a year. *I'm HIV+, healthy, 165 lbs, 38 years old, with short brown hair, considered handsome, bit of a gym bunny looking for same and similar*, my first ad read.

My first date was with a guy who responded that he was the same age, similar weight, into gym and had black hair. I nervously met up with him at Café Flores, at a small outside table. I was greeted by a chubby 25-year-old with very little hair, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, big shorts, and Birkenstocks. He laughed when I challenged him about his misrepresentation. But his eyes betrayed him. When he told me he was HIV negative, I got up and walked out of the café, angry and disappointed. It had taken me ages to find the guts to put in that first ad. I wondered if crisis dating was more than I could handle.

But as I continued with the ads, I started meeting guys I knew from years gone by. We often laughed when we met up, knowing we were not attracted to each other. We had not been each other's type before, and that was not changing now. When we met for the possibility of dating and sex, our fear was so palpable we were confused about how to be with one another. And it was such a fake set-up. Once I met this very hot short guy with red hair and a great build. He and I had been dancing friends at Trocadero and party people together at The Balcony. We wanted those memories left intact. The pain just sat between us as we talked about people we knew and had lost.

Finally, there was only one guy I wanted to be with. We tried, but a few dates in, when it came down to it, he did not want to touch me because I was HIV positive. He told me this through tears, shame, and guilt. He felt we could make the virus flare up and cause further damage to our immune systems—sex as a lethal weapon. I was shattered by now and stopped putting in the ads. I became celibate until I met another Michael, in 1989.

My new job helped save my life. I was busy building their business on the West Coast, and after six months I travelled to Los Angeles almost every second week, as well as to other cities in the western region. It gave me time to breathe, away from the everyday confrontation of the gay ghetto. Together with the support of my new spiritual path, Eckankar, I felt I had a chance of not going insane through the anxiety of coming down with the illness. But even with this inner help, I was deeply affected by past losses and those I knew that were coming.

At the beginning of 1986, when I was having involuntary panic attacks and trouble sleeping, Sarah found me a psychotherapist through her contacts. I saw Don Propstra once a week for the next two years, and twice a month for the following three. The end of my first month with Don was the time I had five clients die in ten days.

It was overwhelming. One of them was a friend who had been in our movie, *Real to Reel*, in the seventies. He died first. I could only attend two of the memorials that followed. My new work schedule and exhausted state stopped me attending more. Don advised me to leave Shanti, or to at least take a break for a while. Surprised, I felt a great weight lift from my shoulders. Someone in authority was giving me permission to stop, and I knew I was going to be out of town for work more and unable to be as committed as I had been. I resigned from the program in May 1986.

I went to Seattle for a week's vacation to see Joe and Woody. We spent hours in Joe's wonderful apartment in the old district downtown and listened to music and watched videos as it rained, talking long into the night. On my first night there, we gossiped about some film industry friends from Los Angeles, and I mentioned I had not heard from a mutual friend for a few months. Joe was in the kitchen. He was silent for a few seconds, and I thought he did not hear me. Then he walked out with a framed glamour photo of Brad and handed it to me.

“He committed suicide last December,” he said.

Bewildered, I looked at the beautiful face, so reminiscent of Tyrone Power, caught forever in black and white.

“He found out he had the virus and matter-of-factly told Woody on the phone he would not lose his looks and had to do it now,” Joe said as I returned the photo. He stabbed it in the air, like an exclamation mark as he walked back to the kitchen. “Apparently, he is one of many down south in La La Land.”

I began to feel more isolated. And when I spoke with Gary or any of the guys from the house, I heard it was the same for them. It was hard to remember what we did for fun after 1985. Dinner parties became the norm on Saturday nights. Sometimes I went to a bar on the way home, but I never went home with anyone. We still

went to movies and plays. Sam and I went to the symphony; Gary and I saw some opera.

The bathhouses were closed, backrooms were secret, and the bars that remained open were quiet. They lacked the old throb and pleasure that came from unfettered sexual anticipation. Sex equalled death, and everyone was on guard. I know some younger men were living a much more existential way of life than we did, and that certain venues still pumped with a devil-may-care attitude, but I felt alone with it all. I often had dreams of being in a war, coming away from a terrible bombing, turning around and looking back at a ruined city—scenes of hopelessness and isolation.

I was in the first two Shanti groups that marched in the Gay Day Parades in '84 and '85. And of course we still went on the candle-lit marches commemorating Harvey Milk and George Moscone.

From the march in '85, Cleve Jones, the wonderfully dynamic local gay activist, started the Quilt Project so that people who died from AIDS were not forgotten. Meeting specific dimensions, a quilt could be made by those who wanted to celebrate a friend who had died from AIDS. Each quilt would be collected, stored, and shown collectively to help the grieving process of those left behind, as well as stand as a perpetual memorial to their passing. I walked up to their storefront on upper Market one Saturday afternoon to see about volunteering, but I found a very sombre, tense group. I walked out. I could not get back into it—not yet. Gary and I went down to the first showing of the quilts at the Civic Centre and were deeply moved and shocked as we gingerly moved around the room, discovering friends we did not know had died. The quilt display was a beautiful act of remembrance but terrible at the same time.

Later I helped Rita Rocket, a wonderful woman who cooked food and took it into Ward 5B. We prepared fried chicken and mashed potatoes in her apartment, loaded up my car with silver

turkey roasting pans, and then walked the floors, handing out meals to the men who could sit up and eat. Rita was amazing, so loving and kind. The latter part of the eighties saw so many different individuals and groups throw themselves into caring for the ill and dying. Some parents even moved to San Francisco to look after their sons.

In 1987, I was staying up with Joe again when, with rain drumming on the roof, a friend told me over the phone he heard that bartender Michael had collapsed in Seattle on the way to his sister's and been taken to Seattle Hospital. I hurried there the next morning. He was in the infectious diseases ward, quarantined, with another couple of guys in nearby rooms. They were at the end of a long corridor. Each room had medical equipment standing by outside, with tape across each doorway, warning about the possibility of infection.

A nurse walked down the corridor with me, urging me to put on gown, mask, and gloves before I went in. I stopped, stunned, and asked her when they were going to come out of the Dark Ages. I told her you did not catch AIDS from the air, or from coughing, and furiously pushed my way past the tape to the room. I found Michael, a shadow of his former self, gaunt and wasted, his handsome face sunken and blotchy. It was a little more than two years since we had broken up badly at the Patio Cafe, accusations and acrimony brittle in the air between us.

Looking at him asleep, I thought, *This will be me in a few months or a year.* I gently rubbed his foot. Shocked to see me standing there, he tried to jump up, and I had to settle him back.

“Alex, get me out of here! These northwestern bastards know nothing about AIDS, and I want to leave...”

I felt helpless. He knew I could not break him out and began to make it even more difficult—not letting me get anywhere near him. For some reason, he was terrified I would catch something from him. He pushed my hand away when I tried to help him sit up.

Eventually he asked if we could go out in a wheelchair, to get something decent to eat. He was embarrassed about his body. He had been a stud, one of the top barmen in the leather scene. I grabbed his shoulder and looked into his angry eyes.

“Look, we've got a couple of hours together,” I said. “I go back to The City tonight. Let's not waste time with bullshit from the past.”

He sighed and slowly relaxed and nodded.

As we entered the large, sterile cafeteria, people got up from their tables, disgust and fear on their faces. They moved themselves and their food trays away on both sides. Some people stood and just looked at us, unsure what to do. A man near the checkout spoke in a loud angry voice.

“I thought we were protected from them!”

Michael looked up from under his Niners baseball cap.

“Go fuck yourself, you moron,” he said.

I looked around the room.

“Please everyone, I'm his doctor,” I said. “You've got nothing to fear... HIV can't be caught from the air or from sharing food.”

The tension eased. I pushed Michael to a single table away from the crowd. My tight grip on his wheelchair started to hurt. He turned and told everyone to go fuck themselves again. No one met my gaze as I ordered our lunches. I knew how the disease was still being reported around the country. It had been an amazing moment of group near-hysteria. I now saw how a situation like this could get out of hand.

I never saw Michael again after that brief afternoon's visit. His sister was on her way over from a small Illinois town to be with him. Later she called to tell me Michael had died, two months after my visit.

I did eventually go home to Australia for Christmas 1987. With a lump in my throat, I sat on the bottom of Mum and Dad's bed on Boxing Day morning and told them I was positive. I had rehearsed this conversation repeatedly over the past few years. I had been diagnosed since the middle of '85 and now here I was, telling them face to face.

Watching their still, solemn faces, I reported how well I felt, how good my white blood cell count was, and that I had a fighting chance of surviving until some cure arrived. Dad lay there smoking, looking out to sea, remaining silent. Mum asked me about the others in the house and Richard. I was able to tell her that no one, yet, was in any way ill. This seemed to pick her up.

Then I told my brother and sister. Janet called me before I left to fly back to America. She told me that if I did become ill, I should come home, and she would nurse me through to the end. I was deeply touched by her offer. It made everything okay. I knew I could come home, that I would not be judged and I could die knowing someone cared. It was a very special gesture, a parachute offered as my burning plane was going down. It is the one gift I never forget.

After hurried clinical trials, the AIDS drug, AZT, was released as the first treatment to stop the progression from HIV positive to full-blown AIDS. Reports in the first few months of 1987 were sketchy. While some men's immune responses were initially positive, there were doubts about the high level of the drug being prescribed. I was convinced it was too high. I had no medical knowledge—it was only intuition—but I decided to wait. Counsellor friends told me that for some of their clients, the drug was counterproductive. It was too much of a shock to their systems. By 1988, most of the Twentieth Street household was on the full dose of AZT.

One Saturday afternoon, I had a panic attack. Seized by a dread I'd never felt before, I walked up to Twentieth Street to get some comfort from Gary and the boys. I usually felt safe in The City. I had never directly experienced real hatred or prejudice. Now I felt the larger part of society hated us. They wanted us dead, or at best, considered us a conundrum that needed to be solved. Internment camps among lonely pines or out in the desert seemed to loom on the horizon. I had to go back to Australia before they closed their borders to people like me. There was still no effective treatment for AIDS.

I joined a group of positive men in Hollywood in mid-1987, through Jerry Terranova, Rape's ex, who'd moved to LA in the early eighties. He and Rape had parted amicably, and I'd always felt a special bond with Jerry through our intense conversations around the spiritual quest, Joseph Campbell and the path of the hero, Jung and his dream studies, and now with my commitment to Eckankar. We became very close through these years.

At Ma Maison Sofitel, where I stayed every second week, Jerry confided that he was also HIV positive. We sat out on the terrace of my room, having an early dinner, and watched the sunset over the hills toward Santa Monica. LA sunsets have a special light, tinged with the pollution only LA can muster: golden into orange and finally, a deep magenta.

I had wondered about Jerry's status but never asked him directly. It was something you only did if you were going to sleep with someone. He told me he was shattered, that his T-cells were down in the 300s. I went into counselling mode. He talked about who he thought he'd caught it from. He asked Why me? After all the spiritual and health precautions he had taken. He was angry in a way I had never seen or heard from him before.

But then, with increased excitement, he told me there was a doctor in West Hollywood who was offering promising alternative treatments. Jerry was one of the few men I could talk to about alternative treatments. He and I had explored natural remedies over the phone for all types of illnesses over the years. Now we were both HIV positive, and we were in the same place, looking for a way out of this horror story. Like us, Jerry's new doctor fully understood the poisonous effects of AZT. Word was she was having success with her approach.

I was in LA regularly, almost every second week, and so made an appointment with her office. When I met her, I was impressed.

She took my blood, discussed possible treatments, and invited me to join her support group, held every Wednesday night in her rooms on Sunset Boulevard. Jerry and I duly arrived the next night, joining eight other guys.

I was immediately struck by how culturally different these men were from the San Francisco gays in my support groups. After my years at Shanti, I was a group-sharing veteran. Conversation that came from the heart was too threatening for these guys. They were like their city—spread out and disconnected. Most of them were in the movie-making business. Two were film producers, one was an agent, another a writer, and the rest were actors who were also waiters. In San Francisco, there was an immediate connection to the dilemma of AIDS that came from the intensity of the democratic lifestyle in Gay Mecca. These LA guys were often petulant and self-serving. Despite the underlying terror they shared, they viewed each other within the hierarchy of their respective jobs and incomes in the film industry. Some of them were yet to come out as gay, and knowing they were HIV positive added another layer, another burden to their lives.

As the weeks rolled on, our doctor came up with a treatment she believed would cure our disease. She came to one of our meetings to tell us about it, and about a chemist who had been to Africa and had developed a compound he knew would make a difference. We were to be the clinical trial. The whole group got behind it. We believed in our way—a natural way—given that so many guys were dying from the toxicity of AZT.

The following week, I took a day off work in Los Angeles. After a colon cleanse at a clinic off La Brea, I was given an injection of the compound. We repeated this over the next month and waited for blood work to come back. My T-cells had remained at 1200 since I'd started having my blood tested. When I got her results, I was shocked: they'd dropped to 600. She said it was a reaction to the

treatment and that the numbers would come back up, but after the second set of blood tests, I began to doubt it.

After two more months with no improvement, I was disappointed and angry. I stopped going to her clinic and support group and went back to my doctor in San Francisco. I then had blood taken for my twice-monthly tests. My doctor was out when I came to get my results. His nurse looked at me directly as she handed me the sheets.

“Alex,” she said, “you have to start taking the meds.”

I froze inside. My T-cells had dropped into the 400s. They were slowly going down since the Hollywood adventure in alternative treatment. I took the prescription from her and left the office in a daze. In the hallway, I suddenly welled up in tears. I began formulating plans to sue the doctor in LA.

As I entered the lift, a young couple were laughing. They were going to get coffee, carefree, and blissed out with the idea of a never-ending future. A young child held on to her mother's hand. She looked at me silently and intensely, with an accusatory stare. She knew I was doomed. All this played out in slow motion. I smiled grimly and watched the levels ping their way down. I was often in medical elevators for my work and sometimes, perversely, wondered if there was a person standing there with me who had just received bad news about cancer or some other dreaded disease. Now I was the one with Damocle's sword over my head.

I filled out the prescription for AZT—the drug I swore I would never take, the drug that would lead me on the pathway to skin and bone disfigurement and an iron bed in Ward 5B—and drove back to work.

When I got home, I decided to make a moment of it. I asked Spirit to guide me in the doses I was going to take. There was no way I was taking the amount prescribed by the results of the hurried

trials. I took the cap off. The pills had stuck together. I whacked the bottom a few times and finally three pills fell out onto the dining room table. Then and there I decided to take one in the morning, one at lunch, and one at night.

I had a bottle of champagne in the fridge, so I cracked it open and took my first pill with a glass of bubbles. At that time, I was looking after a friend's cat for a few months while she and her husband got settled into new careers in Monterey. Tanya jumped up onto the dining room table as my drama unfolded. As I swallowed the pill, the cat swiped the bottle off the table. Then she looked up at me with feline wisdom. We leaned forward and gently touched noses, a meeting of like-minded souls.

Two weeks later, my count went back up to 1200. I was over the moon! My doctor, Marcus Conant, was very happy too, with no idea I was only taking 300 milligrams of AZT per day. We had a positive five minutes together, after which I hesitantly asked him if I had a chance of making it. We looked at each other. I'd asked this poor, dedicated man the million dollar question. He crossed his arms and leaned back against his desk.

“Look,” he said with a smile, “in every epidemic, twenty percent make it through. Just make sure to be in that twenty percent!”

I breathed out and nodded. This time, I enjoyed a better ride down in the elevator. If that little girl had reappeared, I would have poked my tongue out at her and given her a wink. I made up my mind to be in that twenty percent. I was going to do whatever I could to stay out of the burning plane.

That night, I rushed over to Twentieth Street. Sam, Dave, and Gary were in the kitchen and Manny, Tracy, and Phillip were upstairs. I knew these guys thought me flighty at times, prone to following the next big thing to wealth, health, and success. So I tried to play it down. I told them about the reduced amount of the drug I

took and the great results I now received. There were nods and polite questions, especially about what Dr Conant had said, but I could tell no one was going to reduce their medication. If their doctors told them, they would. Who could blame them? Gary gave me a frosty look. I sighed, and we sat down to eat.

The giddy visual beauty of the Bay Area created a fleeting, safe space for forgetting—the dream world of the hills, frozen, like a scene from a Japanese scroll. But The City’s beauty was now co-mingled with fear and doubt, which grew like a metastasising cancer. There was very little relief from false treatments and wild speculations. I longed for the innocent pleasures of the seventies. My world had split in two: life before AIDS and life after. I found normality where I could as the decade rolled toward the nineties. Beyond AZT, and the FDA licensing an interferon injection for KS lesions, there were no new, immediate developments, only regulations being put in place to expedite new therapies to get to people with life-threatening diseases. It felt as if any real treatments were still a long way off.

I turned 40 in July 1988 and decided to throw my own party on Dolores Street. I invited Woody and Joe from the northwest. They joined John, Duncan, and Kreemah, Gary, and the guys from Twentieth Street. I wanted these men around me. I was 40 and still alive. It seemed important to gather around me the men who’d helped to create my life in The City before anything happened to us. We had a wonderful night together—some of us not seeing each other for years—even as we shared quiet memories of friends who had gone.

I hugged Joe tightly as he left and stepped back in surprise after feeling his body.

“Shhhhh,” he whispered in my ear.

Then he waved himself down the stairs behind Woody, John, and Duncan.

Life in San Francisco was a blur of grief as the eighties turned into the nineties. In some ways, I became hard. I felt unable to participate in gay life. Luckily, my work consumed me, and I travelled a lot. I had a few friends who were sick, but only Dave and Doug looked like succumbing to the disease. I missed Bill Gassaway's funeral, but spoke to him as he rasped for breath on the phone just before he died. I left the next morning for New York on business, trusting he would still be alive when I got back. I missed his memorial.

Sarah left for the East Coast to become a Jungian analyst, and Linda, my old friend from the first days of Now Commercial Messenger Service, moved in with me. The old life of drugs and partying was replaced by entertaining at home, going out to movies and plays and dance. This was our staple weekend fare at the end of the eighties. I became good friends with Jeanne and Marc.

Jeanne was the catalyst for the Twentieth Street guys moving to the Bay Area. She came out from New Orleans with her company's expansion and invited Sam and Manuel out for a summer holiday—and the rest was history. Together, we started elaborate dinner parties between three or four houses. We went on monthly weekend trips in the Northern California countryside. It gave us a break from The City and allowed Gary and me to be together as old friends again, away from the increasing losses in our lives.

Part of my drive to get out into the Californian countryside was subconscious, a desire to connect with nature again. I had never really appreciated growing up by the sea at Point Lonsdale, but now I could see I was one of the lucky ones, growing up with full lungs of salty air. We'd lived dangerous, carefree lives as young teenagers, climbing craggy rocks and plunging into surf, always aware of deep undertows. I began to miss this recklessness. I am sure it helped make the case for my eventual decision to move back to Australia.

In December 1988, I was at a Tuck and Patti concert at the Great American Music Hall. Coming back from interval, Patti told us through sobs that Sylvester had just passed away. The next song was dedicated to him. Cries went up around the room, and the concert finished early.

There were more women in my life since the crisis had begun and established itself. I recognised and was grateful for the contribution lesbians had made to the welfare of dying gay men. Linda met Terri—a tall, blond athletic woman—and moved her into the apartment. Their mutual friends were often at our place. We threw a thirtieth birthday party for one of them, Rosemary. There were about forty women and me, and it inspired the annual women's dinner I have now hosted over these past thirty years. It ranges from a simple night with a few women in town to much larger parties, like Rosemary's birthday party. That night I had to ask two female cops who had just met to stop comparing work notes and to put their guns away.

Rosemary and Terri kept pushing me to date again. A few months before, Linda had asked me if we could have Tom over for dinner. I was nervous to see him and felt such a rush of lust and renewed love as I watched him come up the stairs that I blew the evening. I said weird things at the dinner table and pushed him further away. I wanted him back but could not tell him the truth.

By the time Rosemary said she had a gay friend to introduce to me, I had retreated deep inside my shell. The friend wanted to know more about Eckankar, she said. (When women try to set you up with a man, they always think you'll want a man like yourself. In fact, you usually want the opposite to you in looks, work, and background.)

*Oh, you'll love Les, he likes the opera, theater, and the ballet just like you!* I'd rather have heard, *He fixes bikes, owns his own shop, and likes to bootscoot out of the city every other weekend.* But I did agree to meet

Michael, and my heart completely skipped a beat as I came out of my room, finally settling on a blue T-shirt, one of the eight I'd tried on over the last thirty minutes. I could not believe these women had actually hit the right note. Six foot three, athletic build, handsome, with a great smile and dark red-brown hair cut short. I found out later that he was eleven years my junior.

I cannot remember the next few days. I was obsessed, and set out to pursue him. After many dates, long talks, and taking him to Eckankar events, I finally got him to go away with me on a weekend trip to Northern California. But Michael wanted a friendship, not a relationship, and pushed away my sexual advances. I finally came to my senses when I got back to the apartment and I turned on the landing and suggested he go home and I would see him sometime down the road.

“No,” he said after a moment. “I'll stay tonight and get into a relationship with you. If we end this now, you won't remain friends with me, and I don't want that.”

Deep down, I knew this was too much of a compromise, but I so desperately wanted him.

“Okay,” I said.

And that was how we started what would become a nine-year relationship.

Michael moved in with me at the end of the following month. We lived together at Dolores Street, which was where Mum came to visit us on her third visit to the States. Michael and I talked to her about moving out of San Francisco and re-establishing ourselves elsewhere before I took Mum off to visit New York and Washington.

While we were away, Michael came home from work one day to find a dispossessed woman taking a shit on our front stoop. As we walked in through the door from the airport, he told us he wanted

to leave The City as soon as we could. First we talked about moving to Portland, after which Michael and Mum became serious about moving us to Australia. We had talked about it together, wrapped up under the covers, Michael's head on my chest as I watched fog tendrils sneak over the apartment houses at the back. But having Mum there seemed to make it real. By the end of the conversation, we had ninety percent made up our minds. No one knew that my real reason for agreeing to the proposal was Janet's promise to take care of me—if it came to that.

Through the second half of the eighties, Eckankar fulfilled my search for spiritual meaning. The contemplative exercises I did through ECK slowly helped me get in touch with myself, in a way I had never known. The shrieking voices of imminent death quietened in my mind as the months passed. I recognised that I was, essentially, an optimistic person, but I had this trait along with a healthy dose of anxiety. When I heard someone tell their story about how living with a terminal illness made them appreciate living in the moment, I railed against them in my head, vowing I lived for my future and would beat the virus. My therapy sessions, business success, and meeting Michael enabled me to hold a steady psychological course—even though there was a good chance I could be dead sometime in the very near future.

I got a heart-stopping call from Gary. Joe Vigil had died, and his brother Mark was holding a memorial service for him on Mount Tamalpais. I had known it was probably coming—since my fortieth birthday party—but I was surprised no one had told me. Travelling so much for work, I often found myself out of the loop about where friends were at in their decline. It was often a selfish blessing.

We all trudged up the side of the massive mountain in Marin County to a private, grassy area. After a eulogy from an upset Mark, each of us took a scoop of Joe's ashes. So many people we knew from years gone by were there. Naturally, Woody had come down

from Seattle. As I hugged him, I felt skin and bone—again. Like Joe, he gently spoke to my searching look—*Not now, not now*—and we pulled apart and moved on to greet others.

Gary and I went off together and sat for a while in the sun, on a rock overlooking copses of small redwoods in the valley. We held on to Joe's ashes and talked about the early days in the Haight and of Joe's fabulous parties and the nights at the Beaux Arts Balls in the glory years. Joe had been a mainstay of a large group of funsters from the seventies. He was an impresario, a maker of dreams, an entertainment creator. He was sorely missed when he moved to Seattle. Now he was permanently missed as his remains flew up and out into the crystal clear air high above the Pacific Ocean. We huddled, crying together, as if in a leaking boat, watching in silent terror as strands of the mooring rope to our former lives were slowly cut again.

Mannie had become sicker faster than anyone else in the Twentieth Street house. He and his partner Tracy had moved out the year before and renovated an old Victorian in Oakland. He died in hospital in 1991, in Davies Medical Centre. It was on a weekend. I returned from shopping at the Rainbow Grocery in the Mission with Michael when Sam called to say he was going down fast. I had visited him the day before. For the first time in a long while, he sat up in bed, smiling, talking about how well he felt. If this went on any longer, he'd said to me, "I'd like to go home!" But I had seen this phenomenon enough times to know there was often a rallying moment a few days before death. I was not ready for it to be the next day.

I rushed over, parked, flew up the stairs, and sprinted down the corridor. Tracy was standing in the doorway, looking blankly at the wall opposite. Seeing me, he rushed into my arms. Then we heard an animal wail come from the room—from Sam, his oldest friend, his kindergarten playmate. Tracy broke from me and rushed back into the room. I stood, tears streaming down my face. I heard someone

behind me, and turning, I walked into the arms of one of my old support group friends from Shanti, now a registered nurse. I had not seen him for a couple of years. He looked strong and somehow more at peace than when I'd first worked with him. I knew he had been on the frontline now for over eight years. He was a veteran.

“When does this end, Steve?” I finally asked.

“I wish I knew, Alex, I wish I knew.”

We looked at each other with wan smiles. In those few, brief seconds, we knew this was how we all met each other now—amidst the immediacy of death and dying, in hospitals and hospices across The City. Sometimes it was a quick smile at rallies, glimpsing each other momentarily, across the heads of other angry protesters, pressing Reagan's administration for faster clinical trials for any newly discovered drug compounds. Walking up Castro Street, running into each other and quickly nodding—“Yes, we are still alive”—but not wanting to stop and remember what had brought us together in the early eighties. But there in that corridor, it felt good being held close in Steve's big arms.

Sometime in the early nineties, I met Gary at Leticia's. I was still away a lot on business but tried to be at home more for Michael. After brunch, Gary and I crossed Castro Street. There were few people around.

“*The Chronicle* said ten thousand men have died from AIDS this week,” he said.

Gary was sombre. We stopped for a few moments in the middle of the street. Through the Muni bus wires, we looked down past Eighteenth Street, across Nineteenth, and then, over our Twentieth Street and on, up beyond Liberty, to the top of the hill.

“Remember how many men were at those first Castro Street Fairs?”

And it hit us hard. The same number: ten thousand men had partied together in those very early days. So happy to be together, proud they'd made the trip from every corner of the world to be there—to be free to test their sexuality, to assert their right to be alive and loved. It was all gone now. It would never be the same again.

I lost Michael number one, then my first major love, Richard, then my second and true love, Tom. I chronologically shared my life with these three men from 1974 through 1984. News of each death came at different times over the years. I was back in Australia when I found out about Richard, in a phone call from Gary.

The last time I saw Richard was in 1987. He was in San Francisco, and we met downtown for lunch. I wanted to impress him with my success as a businessman, to show him that my decision to leave him and come back to The City had come to mean something real for me. I made sure to wear my best suit. He met me at our office on Kearney Street. After a brief hug, we stepped out into the midday sun. He had aged. His skin was loose and unhealthy. He was wearing an open plaid shirt over a dirty white tank top, dirty jeans, and dirtier boots. I remembered this was much the same outfit he'd worn when I first saw him, leaning against the bank wall on Eighteenth Street, fourteen years ago. He was high on meth, and he stank. I was wearing my Perry Ellis camel hair coat over my suit. We both looked ridiculous and regarded each other with a mixture of concern and contempt.

I took Richard to a small Thai restaurant nearby, and he raved about the dangerous relationship with a current boyfriend he was

extricating himself from, about his continuing protests and sex work with AIDS. All the while, he pushed the food around his plate. We each had moved into the worlds we wanted, and despite some things in common, particularly the AIDS experiences, we were two different men. I got us out of there as fast as I could. We crossed the road and awkwardly said our goodbyes. He leaned in, his face still ruggedly handsome, despite everything.

“I love you still, you know,” he said.

And off he went, towards Market Street. I turned and went up our office stairs, angry with myself for not acting real, for saying nothing at the end beyond flashing him a quick smile.

Manuel was the first from the Twentieth Street house to go. Doug Brown, who lived with Paul for a year in the early eighties, went six months before him. Dave went next—Sam's sweet, sweet partner who made my drag dress for the Closet Ball in '88. Then, in the mid-nineties, it was Sam, shortly after Richard. And then it was Gary.

Michael and I decided on a date to leave for Australia. I set out to arrange visas for him, to find movers, to tell people of our decision. We both left our jobs. Michael wanted to start afresh. I wanted to make my job work for me in Australia. The owner and CEO of my company told me I could have a sales position, but that a management group was already in place. I would have to see if I liked the setup, and see how I could fit in. I was going to live in Melbourne, and the head office was in Sydney.

Gary and Phillip were now alone in the Twentieth Street house.

Jeanne returned from New Orleans for Manuel's memorial. Tracy was shockingly upset at the service, and his pain was unbearable to watch and hear. I had almost stopped going to services by the nineties. It took a very close relationship to pull me into that space. Jeanne

and I slipped out during the latter part of the service and went for a contemplative walk around the lake. It was a beautiful afternoon, birds wheeling over the water, with views of the Berkeley and Oakland Hills. Weirdly, from within my internalised homophobia, I started musing that if I had been straight and had a family, I would have liked to have lived at the back of the Berkeley campus, done post-graduate work, and eventually taught there. If I was straight and normal, I would not now be gay and sick and dying.

“I can't believe he's gone,” she said, bringing me back to the moment. “I loved him so much.”

“I know,” I murmured.

I kicked some loose stones ahead of me from the pathway.

“These times are so surreal, aren't they?” she went on, hands clasped behind her back. Her face was turned down. “We've found others now dying closer to us in the South and also in New York. It's everywhere! I'm finding it really hard to cope, and both Sam and Dave aren't well now either.”

There were a few seconds of silence. It felt like a Scandinavian movie but way too bright.

“Michael and I are leaving for Australia next year,” I said. “I don't want to die here if I do get sick, and I'll be looked after at home.”

We stopped and sat on a bench.

“I heard you were planning to leave... How's Gary taking it?”

“Not well... Do you remember how we use to talk about finding land up near Mendocino, building a number of houses, and sharing common spaces in our old age? Well, he brought that up as part of his argument for why I shouldn't go. He's going to visit as soon as we're settled.”

I stopped, so I did not cry. Leaving Gary would be one of the hardest things I would do. Jeanne knew it.

“It seems to me our era is over, and everyone who can is leaving,” she said. “I couldn't bear to live in The City now anyway, so I understand your motives. I'm just sad you won't be around. I know Marc feels the same way. Oh fuck, this is horrible, it just is! I simply can't bear the fact I might lose all my friends.”

I wanted to tell her how I sometimes woke at night and saw a tidal wave about to hit the beach near the old windmills out in the Sunset at the end of Golden Gate Park. They were furiously turning, curiously rebuilt. The sense of foreboding was overwhelming. I could feel the hearts of every person in The City, knowing all life was about to end.

She reached across and took my hand.

We looked up at one another.

Finally I said: “Let's get back. The others will think we've gone back to The City on our own. Quite frankly, I wish we had. I don't think I want to go back in there for more grief.”

I felt strong in our joint decision to return to Australia. We were the first same-sex couple from the Bay Area admitted to Australia. A lot of paperwork was required. We had to find witnesses to prove our time together. The process took about six months. I left on 13 March 1993, exactly twenty years from the day I sailed out of Sydney Harbour. Michael delayed the blood work he needed to have done so was unable travel for another three months. I had to get back immediately, as Dad had just passed away, and Mum needed help. And my job was scheduled to start on 1 May.

Gary, Phillip, and Michael drove me away from The City. This was also surreal. This was my home. And I was leaving to go back to a country I had very little real relationship with, maybe to an eventual

deathbed. I knew nothing of Australian politics, its healthcare structure for HIV, or its contemporary culture. In that car on the way to the airport, I almost changed my mind about leaving.

I hugged Gary and Phillip hard. Promises were made about visiting. Michael stood, looking goofy and unsure what to do. I grabbed him.

“See you in three months,” I said.

He laughed, kissed me, and nodded.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and I felt Spirit had chosen to give me the best day possible to fly away from the past twenty years, from this wonderful part of the world. The pilot swung left instead of right as the plane left San Francisco. I was gifted a complete view of downtown, both bridges and all the surrounding landmarks, the masses of sailing craft on the Bay captured for a few moments on a sparkling blue and white canvas.

I remembered the party we'd thrown in the early days of Shanti, the shockingly disfigured man, Michael, showing us the photo of himself out on his boat—sailing fast, close to the Golden Gate Bridge. He was strong and happy, laughing into the wind, his arm on the till, the world's challenges ahead. He was now a representation in my psyche, an archetype of sorts, for all the wonderful men who'd come to this part of the world to find acceptance and safety. For a brief time, it looked as if the future was golden and rich with promise, then, like a serpent in a fairy tale, the virus had insidiously entered The City and poisoned so many dreams. The sailboat lost its rudder and foundered on nearby rocks.

As we roared past and over the Golden Gate Bridge, I could see Marin County and remembered that first exciting visit to Mt Tamalpais in 1973, when Sarah Lachlan and I celebrated Isadora Duncan's birthday with Gary, the boys from Café Ole, Joe, and all

the gay radicals. Lines of us standing on the cliff's edge, singing, arm in arm, watching the sunset.

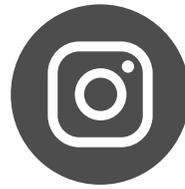
Then the plane banked left again, and I was left to stare at the dark blue sea ahead, as those memories and that life slipped away.

# THE END

I would love to hear your feedback and connect with you.  
Please message me on facebook or instagram;



[https://www.facebook.com/  
authoralexstewart](https://www.facebook.com/authoralexstewart)



[@authoralexstewart](#)

If you would like to read other works please visit;



[www.authoralexstewart.com](http://www.authoralexstewart.com)