

Book I – Out of the Body

Physicality

Physicality, that is, as in having an issue with my body, has framed my life. It began with a very small, specific incident: something my dad said that was so seemingly trivial that he almost certainly does not even recall it: something that lasted a matter of seconds; something I've never even told my dad about.

One early afternoon – I must have been about six – I was horsing around with my dad in our living room, in front of some bored family relatives. They were all smoking, as everybody did in those days in the early seventies (the tedium of those family visits where the adults would just talk and talk amidst a haze of smoke on the long afternoon). Suddenly my dad grabbed me, pushed his spectacles down his nose, and scrutinized my wrists, each of which he gripped with one of his hands.

“I've never noticed you had such skinny wrists,” he said.

The impact of his words was neither full nor immediate. But I discretely compared his wrists with my own, and then went up to my bedroom and stared at my wrists in the mirror. I could see that, obviously, yes, they were skinny compared to my beefy dad's adult wrists. But I could see also that the whole architecture of forearm-to-hand was completely different to his, more like a woman's, rather delicate: not manly at all.

We were raised in the masculine culture of early 1970s North East England in South Shields, an industrial town on the grim banks of the Tyne, a river lined with grey shipping cranes for as far as the eye could see. Apart from the colorful fishing boats on the opposite side of the river, the only beautiful feature of the town was the coast-line,

which, anywhere else, would have been a tourism magnet: miles of white sand, then striking, craggy cliffs topped with acres of lush, green grass. But this was a place where sixty degrees in July was considered a bit of a scorcher. I remember one day taking a walk with my dad on a foggy, cold summer day, and encountering families in bathing costumes emerging out of the shivering gloom.

At night, although we lived about a mile from the sea, we could hear the roar of the waves, the booming crash as they hit the cliffs, and the deep-night romantic call of the lighthouse. Until the age of five I still believed my dad's story that once every hundred years a sleeping behemoth rose from the sea bed in response to the light-house echo horn, in the mistaken belief that one of its kind still existed.

South Shields had only three claims to fame. And of these, only one of them, really, had any merit; that it had been a Roman fortress town. But all that was left of the remains was a set of stone outlines barely an inch out of the ground, except where they were (in recent years) reconstructed, with a fair amount of liberal imagination, using fresh new stone, no doubt looking "like a public toilet" as my mother would have said.

On the main road through the center of town, where it hit the coast road, stood a full-size replica of one of South Shields' other claims to a place in history; the world's first self-righting lifeboat. The town also termed itself the center of Catharine Cookson country; and I need say no more about that unless you're very well acquainted with British female romantic literature.

The town emblem always brought a smile to my face when I saw it. It bore, of course, an image of the world's first self-righting lifeboat: how could it not? Above the famous boat were the words "Courage" and "Commerce"; and the motto: "Always

ready”. It made me think of salty heroes fighting a gale in a self-righting lifeboat to help dying victims from a shipwreck on the dangerous coast while keeping half an eye open for salvage.

South Shields had been a prosperous town in the past, with its mines, shipbuilders and fishermen. But all three industries were in decline, and by the time of the Thatcher years, the town had a forty percent unemployment rate.

I was raised not to be “soft”: that is, to shun anything not entirely masculine. This code was enforced not only by my father – a smart, loving, hard-working, honorable, ever-cheerful and humorous man whom I worshipped – but also by my rough-and-ready working-class friends, the culture and mores of the North East, and even television culture. My dad, for instance, to this day has never used an umbrella. Even now if you go to Newcastle, the nearest major city to South Shields, on a cold, rainy night, you’ll see young men and women running round from bar to bar, giggling, without a jacket, no umbrella in site.

My dad, gentle, noble soul though he was, was a product of his culture. He was, in other words, racist, homophobic, anti-semitic, anti-catholic, anti-Paki (a term to denigrate anybody from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh) even anti-Scottish, not to mention, of course, anti-Irish. I’m not sure what his position on the Welsh was. Although his prejudices were real, he’d more often express them with an element of wit. When ITV, which at that time was the only competitor to the BBC’s two channels, first started featuring regularly a black news-reader my dad would say, “Eeeh, look, they’ve got a monkey reading the news.” In fact, there’s a popular legend in the North East that

after the remnants of the Spanish Armada fled up the North Sea, some ships dragged ashore in Tyneside and the local inhabitants thought the Spanish were monkeys.

I remember one day telling my dad that I wanted to go up to Newcastle to see “On Golden Pond”, and he asked me why I wanted to see a woman’s movie like that. I burned with shame, and had insufficient sense of self to override that shame and go see it anyway.

I don’t mean to make my father sound like a horrible man; that would be very far from the truth. He’s a wonderful man whom I love and admire very much as an adult. (He has, as with most men, mellowed with age and understanding and you’d be hard-pressed to find a trace of bigotry left in him.) But I was an inordinately sensitive, bookish youth, and, coming from him, criticism was deeply wounding. I’d always been called a “bonny lad”, which, in the local vernacular, meant a good-looking kid. But now my dad’s words about my skinny wrists began to eat away at any notion that my body held any attraction.

From that age forward, until the age of forty, I’d have to say that, to a greater or lesser extent, I was defined by my body image. I can recount most of the formative experiences in my life through that lens.

Shaun

Although we lived in a middle-class neighborhood, we had working-class blood in our veins on both sides through generations. However respectable our immediate neighborhood – or, more likely, however respectable the people thought they were – just down the street strode a staring line of low-income houses smelling of recently cooked pork chop, and all my childhood friends came from there.

My dad was the operations manager of a large printing factory, but carried his authority lightly at work: very self-confident, without the need to show steel. When my brother, Neil, and I visited the factory to meet my dad before going to the “Meat and Eat” for lunch, we’d sense the fond stares of the workers, and my back would arch with pride that my dad was obviously so liked and respected.

This was South Shields in North-East England, in the 60s; although my dad had a good white-collar job, there were four kids. We rarely took vacations, and my dad’s overcoat had been repeatedly patched (badly) by my mom, for years. We could never afford clothes that kept pace with my rapid growth. My sleeves were always too short, and, for my socks not to show, I’d have to shamefacedly unfasten the button of my pants, slip them lower than my waist, and pray that my belt held them up.

I was heading towards being six-foot-six fully grown, and was consequently extraordinarily skinny and awkward. Although I was in all things proportional, kids laughed at me, and made fun of the size of my shoes, notwithstanding that if they’d been smaller I’d have had overly small feet for my size. Even worse, they called me “Lurch”, and whistled the tune from *The Adams Family*. And I was a thin-skinned, sensitive boy.

To this day, although I've seen neither the show nor its big-screen follow-ups, I can't hear the theme tune without cringing.

Tall people always stand out; you can't disappear, although some tall people try by stooping their shoulders. You inevitably become unusually self-conscious. You think you're being observed all the time, so you dive inwards, trying to hide everything about yourself. At an early age, I realized I was homosexual too: one more thing to hide. And, as at most schools, if you were academically smart, as I was, you were actively disliked and distrusted. I grew up to feel apart from everybody else. I was stuck inside my head, and nobody knew me well. I didn't even know myself.

All this talk of "apartness" is the psycho-babble, if you like, I've learnt in my thirties. But even in my young adulthood, I could see that I wasn't in my body, which I deeply hated. Only once did anybody see inside my soul during my childhood. It was a hot day, and I returned sweating from the public library, where I'd rented a Robert Heinlein novel. My mother asked me why I didn't take my sweater off, and, to her bafflement and consternation, I burst into tears as I told her that I thought I was too skinny.

In the second year of senior school (from the age of eleven to sixteen or eighteen depending on whether you took your A-levels or not), I finally reached a class where I could develop friendships with people who, like I did, dwelled mostly in their minds, not their bodies. I was starting to fill in with the lightest of pencil strokes the fully fledged person I hoped someday to become.

In college, after an initial period of loneliness, I started to make friends easily, and recaptured some of the geniality and sense-of-humor that had perhaps been the

foundation of the golden childhood I remembered. I even found a small measure of healing for my physical psyche towards the end of my first year. Wearing my sweaters, I was sweltering in the summer heat of the class-rooms, so I entered enemy territory: Oxford Street, enduring its packed crowd of average-sized people who flitted from store to store where everything fitted them. For a long while, I found nothing: shirts that were broad enough in the shoulder floated around my midriff like a ball gown. I became bitter and resentful, and thrust my shoulders through the crowd, returning accidental contact with payment. I entered one last store, on the corner of Regent Street, and tried on a blue-and-white striped short-sleeved shirt. I looked searchingly at myself in the mirror of the changing room and hesitantly decided that it perhaps flattered my height and good proportions, and echoed the blue of my eyes. In all my photographs from the long summer breaks, which I spent in London, I'm wearing that blue shirt, smiling, with my mouth closed to hide the gap-toothed appearance caused by my childhood accident, and with my awful, self-administered hair-cut with a parting.

After getting a degree in physics with a minor in astronomy, and spending one final summer in England, having been accepted to grad school at the University of Pennsylvania, I arrived, mid August, at Philadelphia International Airport, for a new life abroad.

As soon as I left the plane, and walked across the terminal to enter the rundown international terminal, I was hit by air that had a physical presence: intolerably hot, and humid; smelling of chlorine. Once I was through customs, African-American taxicab-drivers marauded me, vying for my business. After getting into West Philadelphia, with all my belongings in two ugly canvas suitcases, I registered at my dorm (it took a while

for me to stop using the British term “hall of residence”), a concrete block on Chestnut Street called International House, then walked to the campus to pick up my registration papers. I registered the new sounds and smells: the constant hum of air-conditioners, the whirring of cicadas on the streets and the offensive smell of pretzels with mustard.

Philadelphia wasn't at all what I'd expected. Somehow the promotional brochures I'd received had led me to imagine an ultra-modern campus set in grass sloping down to green river-banks. Instead I found a mostly quaint campus, surrounded by squalor, abutting a decaying, rusted belt that blocked all access to the Schuylkill river (which, until it neared the Art Museum further upstream, was nothing to look at.)

On campus, I was immediately agog at the beauty of young American men. I saw a young undergraduate wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, the sides torn half way open to reveal rounded biceps and the edges of a muscular chest. Everywhere, blithely, care-free, cocky twenty-year-olds seemed entirely at home in their bodies, completely unaware of any self-consciousness. I went back to my room and stared at myself in the mirror, hating the bony death-head's skull atop a stick-like body, and the skeletal bones poking out of the short sleeves of that shirt I'd bought on Oxford Street; the shirt I'd foolishly believed to be flattering.

In my second year of grad school, I began to ache for physical affection. I needed to let myself be known physically, not just intellectually. Surprisingly, despite my revulsion for my body, I was well acquainted with it sexually. I'd inherited a strongly sensual nature (though it's hard to imagine from which of my parents I got this), and had become long practiced to stimulating my body. I masked my distaste for it by never

masturbating naked, a practice which strongly fetishized clothing for me. I yearned to be touched, and to touch, not even thinking about experiencing sexual climax.

It was the heat of Summer, and my roommate was out-of-town. I'd just read *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, and, in one long painful night (in my memory a crashing thunderstorm echoes outside my bedroom window), *Maurice* by E.M. Forster. I became electrified by a desire for physical affection which soon became unbearable.

A few days later, I responded to a newspaper personals ad, and, with much nervousness, went to the apartment of the short Filipino guy who'd placed it.

I remember only three things about that evening: the first was that he sang karaoke to me, introducing his song, by the Carpenters, with the words: "This one's for you, Keith." I almost choked on cloying sentiment.

The second was that he fucked me without a condom. Thank God he was a short Filipino.

The third was that I didn't sleep a wink all night as I lay next to him.

It's odd, extremely odd, that I don't recall anything more; I'd physically yearned, for so long, with desire to have a man run his hands along my body; yet I remember nothing of that first touch from another man.

In the next few weeks, after much hesitation, I came out, separately, to my two best friends, Jim, and Ricardo. It was something of a let down. My years of nerves about the idea of revealing my sexuality seemed to have been completely unnecessary. With great trepidation, I went to a meeting of the graduate gay-and-lesbian association at Penn. I walked in the room with my head shaking, feeling extremely tall and self-conscious; but

nobody seemed to think I was anybody other than a gay guy looking to make friends, which I soon did.

I developed an instant crush on a baby-faced man named Randy, which never went anywhere. Phillip, an Australian art-history Ph.D. student who was, somewhat bizarrely, doing his degree at Bryn Mawr, an all-woman university, kept catching my eye in the meetings, or at dinner afterwards. Before long we were dating. He was thirty, which seemed ancient to me. I was never attracted to him, although I was intimidated by his rapid-fire gay wit. More than anything else, I delighted in the attention he gave to my body, attention which I scarcely pretended to return.

At some point I must have made a transition into an acceptance that my body wasn't completely ugly. Or else, how could I have let Philip see me naked? But I was still two decades away from a more complete acceptance.

It sounds like a line from a bad advertisement, but it's the truth: I got my hair cut and it changed my life. For years I'd been cutting my own hair, very badly: just your basic basin cut, with a parting. Phillip persuaded me to go for a proper hair cut in a salon (they didn't have salons in South Shields), and a few days later he took me on my first outing to a gay club, a gleaming, chromed-and-mirrored subterranean space called Kurtz, on Chestnut Street. I had no idea what to expect; my only imagery of a gay club came from the gay novels I'd torn through, most of which seemed to take place in that utopia: Fire Island in the seventies. I was surprised at the innocence of what I found: nobody took their shirt off, to my disappointment.

I noticed a cute, button-nosed Italian-American, wearing a black spandex t-shirt which clung to his muscular chest. He broke a smile at me, much to my confusion. As the

evening continued, he caught my eye several times until it started to become inescapably obvious even to myself that he found me attractive. I looked at myself in the mirrors lining every conceivable wall space, and saw for the first time a handsome, strikingly tall man with broad shoulders, strong cheekbones, wide blue eyes, and a perfect hair-cut. Phillip caught both my stare at myself in the mirror, and the cute guy grinning at me, and squealed to our friends, "Look at Keith, this boy has arrived!"

Repeated visits to night clubs, where increasingly, men seemed to notice me, and the nightly servicing I received from Philip, made it sink in that I wasn't hideous. In fact, quite the reverse: apparently I was desirable.

Phillip was unsentimental: ours was a relationship built mainly on sex. When I told him we have to talk, he said yes. I said I think we should break up, and he agreed. Next second we were talking about the most recent episode of Dynasty.

I met Shaun when I least expected it, on the tail end of a rotten Saturday night in a dive bar I didn't frequent, called Key West. I hadn't even intended to go out that night, but my friend Philip (with one 'l') had dragged me out in the same nice clothes I'd worn that evening for a dinner party.

Philip left soon after we arrived, but I stayed, because my eye had been caught by a beautiful, well-built black man, dancing with his shirt off. Although he had a flat-top (this was, after all, the 80s, when Grace Jones was still popular), which could, on another man, have given him a severe cast, there was a kindliness, and a lack of pretension to his features. I was mesmerized. It was near closing time, and he'd stopped dancing, and was standing near me. I sensed breathlessly that he might be aware of me. And I thought it

was adorably sexy the way he nodded his head in time to the music. Greatly daring, I went up to him and whispered in his ear, “You’re beautiful,” then walked away.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see that he kept glancing over at me now and then. Eventually he approached, and said, “Hi, how’s it going,” in a soft, gentle tone. He’d detected my strange accent, I found out later. That night became the most blissful night of my twenties. I fell in love with him even before he departed for Harrisburg, the state capitol, two hours drive away, early the next morning.

The most appealing characteristic of Shaun’s personality was an appealing innocence about the world. This was totally at odds with his considerable sexual experience, the exact opposite of my own sexual adolescence. Shaun’s innocence came from a wide-eyed wonder at anything he’d never encountered during his upbringing, such as people from foreign countries, or ideas he’d never read about. Shaun apparently found me attractive because of my English accent (still broadly accented with the “Geordie” of my native North East), my years living in London, and my literate, intellectual background (although he occasionally deigned to compliment me on my pretty cheek bones.) During my years in London, and at grad school, I’d naturally developed a patina of sophistication far removed from my working-class upbringing, because of my wealth of cultivated, cultured friends from around the world.

He was in a relationship with a man named Rick Click, who lived in the flat above him: Shaun owned the building. They were already “on the way out” when Shaun and I met, but Rick was soon completely gone after he accidentally heard one of my lovey-dovey messages on Shaun's answering machine.

I was also seeing another guy at the same time, Shoji, a young, supposedly straight Japanese boy who never ejaculated, but would service me at length. I'm ashamed to say that one Sunday evening Shoji came over to my apartment while the bed-sheets were still wet from sex with Shaun. I was fond of Shoji, and will never forget the night in the darkness of my bedroom where I told him I loved Shaun. His English was never very good, so he said nothing, but I felt his silent tears on his face in the darkness, as I kissed him.

Shaun had a beautiful physique, and when he wrapped his strong arms around my skinny body, I felt as if nothing could ever harm me. I've never felt that with anybody else, since, of all the guys I've dated, only Shaun was big enough to envelop me in that way. Since then, I've invariably played the protective role in any physical relationship because of my height. I've tried to let guys spoon me, but it just feels physically awkward, and makes me feel self-conscious. Sometimes I remember back to what it felt like being held by Shaun and miss the warmth of being protected.

One Saturday morning he spoke to me with a contemplative air. "You know, you'd look really good if you worked out." I'd always been so far removed from my physicality that I'd never imagined a time that I'd step foot inside a gym. Yet two days later, I started working out at the university gym with my Indian friend Sankar. It forced me to get out of my head long enough to push weights, and was the beginning of a life-long habit.

When we went dancing, I envied Shaun when he took off his shirt: he knew he was sexy and relished the attention. As I developed muscle tone, I dressed a little more

sexily, wearing t-shirts with cut-off sleeves; but I wasn't ready to let anybody except Shaun see my shirtless body.

For reasons of alchemy we've never understood (he remains now, twenty years later, one of my closest friends), Shaun never fell in love with me. With time, I came to recognize that I had to break my own heart and ask him to leave me. We deliberately spent one last poignant weekend together in Philadelphia. He gave me his dog-tags as a keepsake, on Saturday night, while we sat on the steps of an abandoned building in Independence Mall. After brunch the next morning, it was the moment we'd both dreaded: time for Shaun to leave. He packed his bags while I cried silently at the top of the stairs leading down to the front door. When Shaun came out of the bedroom, I broke down and cried like I'd never done since the age of seven. He held me. "Go," I begged him, finally, and he left. I learned later that he cried too all the way home to Harrisburg.

It took me a long time to get over Shaun, a period complicated by resuming seeing each other until one of us met somebody else. Inevitably it was Shaun who met somebody: Steve, with whom he was to spend six years.

Through the remainder of my time in Philadelphia I had a couple of other boyfriends: Glenn, a tender, complicated, cute black guy; and Jorge, a preppy, Cuban-American medical student. But it would end up being a very long, almost endless time until my feelings were engaged again to the extent they were with Shaun.

Xavier

I spent my 23rd birthday in San Francisco with my French friends Erika and Francois, and, greatly daring, I asked them to drop me, the night before my birthday, outside the Stud, the long-running South-of-Market gay club. My clothes notwithstanding (I was wearing a paisley shirt and a red cardigan), I was picked up by a slightly older, slim, boyish Brooklynite with a husky masculine voice. That night, in his flat in the Haight, I had the most adventurous sex I'd ever had, climaxing three times before going to sleep. It was a turning point from sexual immaturity.

In my last few years in Philadelphia, my grad-school friends gradually moved out of town, and, as my circle dwindled, I grew to depend more and more on a new friend from Minneapolis, Greg, who reminded me of John Malkovich: only sexier and younger. We became quite close, but I always felt unequal to his élan and dissective wit; I wondered, in fact, why he was my friend. Perhaps he saw something in me that attracted him: a combination of innocence and intellect. I remember steamy summer nights biking with him, checking out every gay bar in Philadelphia, even the African-American bars in the blighted West Philadelphia.

I began to feel constricted by Philadelphia's insularity. Ever since my eye-opening trip to San Francisco, I'd harbored the idea of living there. In January of 1992, after I got my green-card, with nothing to hold me to Philadelphia, I got a job at a software company in Berkeley, and moved to an apartment above the Castro, atop a hill with a shining, distant view of the top of the Golden Gate Bridge from my bedroom window. I immediately fell in love with the city.

I'd developed nice muscle tone by now, but it was more of a delicate overlay than the robustly bulging muscle I admired in other men. I'd become resigned to the fact that I'd never "fill out" like my mom had promised. Only in the right environment – riding my bike or playing tennis – did I feel sexy going shirtless.

In San Francisco, I made friends, at first, surprisingly easily, and by April, I found myself in a serious relationship with Xavier, an enchanting, capricious devil - an artist from Mexico City. I met him, like with Shaun, on the dance floor. He was a short, shirtless, fun-loving, angelic figure with a gold chain around his neck, jumping up and down to the music, flashing his smiling, dark eyes at me. This time it was not me who made the first move.

After dancing together, I drove him home and pulled up outside his door, unsure whether or not I should look for a parking spot. He said simply (and to my mind rather unromantically), "Do you want to play?"

Without quite deciding anything, we found ourselves in a relationship. We were completely unsuited for each other in every way except for our sexual appetites. The first few months were fun, however: I remember us playing pool at the Stud and giggling like best friends. His adventurous, outgoing nature, and my more cautious balance, gave us seemingly the best of both worlds for a while. But very early on, during a day at the beach, I discovered him making out with somebody in "Lovers Cove". If I'd had any sense I'd have left him then.

He came from an upper-middle class family and was worldly, charming, witty and animated: a bit of a snob in some ways (hence his name Xavier rather than Javier). Yet he could be cruel and viciously sarcastic to other people, and I'd have to later privately

apologize to friends I'd introduced, as if apologizing for our relationship, saying, "He's not like that when we're alone together."

I would use the words "I love you," to him, and, at the time, believed them. Yet, looking back, it's clear to me now that it was more of a lethal admixture of sexual obsession and narcissistic manipulation (on his part). As we grew used to each other, he started to use his cruel wit against me occasionally, and became very controlling of every tiniest bit of my behavior.

Xavier liked to go clubbing a lot more than I did, so I'd let him go by himself even though I knew it would consign me to hours of sleeplessness where I'd be literally tearing at my hair in agonies of jealousy with thoughts of him dancing shirtless with other men. When he'd come home, I'd pretend to be asleep; it was part of my code never to say anything about it. It was only after we broke up that I found out that he'd really been cheating on me regularly. My friend John-Paul had seen him in bath-houses but had not thought it his place to say anything.

He always strongly claimed to love me; and perhaps he did: but he also promised absolute honesty, and in that respect events would show him utterly lacking in integrity. I was naïve. I got crabs from him twice, yet he persuaded me that I must have gotten them at the gym.

I became consumed with either envy or jealousy; I couldn't tell which since they both had the same flavor. (Looking back I can see that I was envious that Xavier could be so free with showing his body.) I'd secretly check his gym bag to see what he was wearing at the gym, knowing that even if I verified he was wearing nothing but skimpy

shorts (you could work out shirtless at his gym), there was no way I'd own up to checking his bag. I was torturing myself.

I was feeling strangely tired all the time, and this, combined with the raging jealousy, spiraled me helplessly into a serious clinical depression, something I'd never experienced before. It seemed as if everything was whirling around me as if I were inside a tornado: bits and pieces of my life caught up in the cruel currents; I couldn't grab onto anything substantial to ground me.

I hired a feline French therapist. But she annoyed me by asking what color my feelings were. More effective was Prozac, which fired up my neurons eventually, as if I were on a full-time caffeine high, and powered me out of depression, giving me the mental energy to break out of this toxic relationship.

My sense of trust in romantic love seemed permanently shattered. Because I'd believed, for a while, in our love, and he'd claimed honesty, I'd allowed myself to trust in him. When that trust proved misplaced, it left me doubting whether I'd ever be able to trust anybody in that way again.

Hermit

Depression and fatigue were to haunt me in my new apartment in the Castro, then follow me for the next fifteen years. Friends assumed my life in the heart of gay San Francisco must surely be swinging, and you'd expect a tall, handsome, single thirty-year-old to start enjoying the peak years of his adulthood. Yet, apart from a very few friends, I retreated from the world. I went at least a year without sex. Some days I was so tired, it was all I could do at the end of the work day to crawl onto my sofa. Every now and then I'd see a new doctor about the immense fatigue. They'd be sympathetic, but find nothing wrong with me. I allowed myself to get out of shape for the first time in years, putting on a layer of blubber.

Xavier had started to stalk me, showing up at my apartment wanting to talk. One day I was sitting with my friend John-Paul, in Dolores Park, and Xavier passed by. When he saw me, he walked down to us, and tried to embarrass me by talking very loudly about my use of Prozac, wrongly assuming I'd not revealed to John-Paul that I was taking anti-depressants.

Another day, taking pity on him, I let him into my apartment to talk. Once inside, I went into the bathroom. When I came out, he was naked in my bed, grinning at me. I found myself laughing, but not with him; it was ironic laughter at finding myself in a sitcom situation. I told him to get dressed, and he begged me to let him spend the night on the couch. When I said no, he threatened suicide. Desperately worried, I called a friend for advice, who had the sense to tell me that it wasn't my responsibility. It goes without saying that Xavier never followed through on his threat.

When he threatened to send nude photographs of me to my parents, I called his mother in Mexico City, and told her what her son was doing. Naturally, she took his side. So I called the INS; I knew Xavier was working illegally in a restaurant. An “Agent Johnson” assured me it would be taken care of. Yet a few weeks later, I ran into Xavier in the street, and he started shouting again.

After a horrible day in court, with our mutual friends forced to take sides as character witnesses, I won a restraining order against him for six months. Apart from a party a year later where, to my amazement, he showed up and started yelling again, I’ve never spoken to him or made eye-contact with him again, despite spotting him every year or so somewhere in San Francisco.

But I was through with the gay community. Although I lived in the middle of it, I felt excluded by it, and finally, I started to turn against the jewel of my heart, San Francisco itself. I’d arrived here with such a sense of wonder, and now felt lonely and alone.

Webcam

In the winter of 1999, I spent a week in Brussels with Michel, a hook-nosed, skinny gentle creature I'd met playing badminton at UC Berkeley. He and his boyfriend took me on a day trip to Bruges cheerfully expecting I'd appreciate this beautiful, ancient city as much as they did. But it was a chilly day, and, eaten up by diarrhea, I had shamefacedly to dash for the rest-room each time we entered a tourist destination; and I baled out on Michel's dinner plans that night, claiming fatigue.

The day before I was to leave Brussels, after a few somewhat frosty days in which Michel had been nonetheless a courteous host, he took me in a snow storm to a warm, welcoming restaurant, where he unleashed upon me, in his quiet way – but from a position of unassailable moral advantage – telling me frankly that I'd behaved selfishly. I sickened inside; tried and judged in the courtroom of my mind: I knew the noble thing – what my dad would have done – despite the real fatigue and illness, would have been to go to the dinner.

When I got home, I was ill with fatigue that was, as always, more than just tiredness; a thickness to my breath, a slight hint of congestion or influenza in my chest, a subtle ache to my limbs, and sufficient tiredness in my eyes to make them water. Doctors, when confronted with this vague set of symptoms, consistently found nothing wrong with me (I always felt sure they thought I was a hypochondriac).

I undressed and looked at myself in the mirrored closet door. I was the heaviest I'd ever been – 215 lbs: there was still some definition in my body, but my whole frame seemed to be clothed with a layer of baby-fat. I didn't at all like what I saw, nor, reviewing the contours of my mind, did I find any comfort inside after my moral failure

in Brussels. A wave of revulsion washed over me, closely followed by a gripping determination to create a new me that I could live with.

If I didn't have the energy to force myself to work out, then surely I could pay somebody to push me through it. In addition to hiring a physical-trainer the next day, I forced myself to take up running, not setting myself huge goals initially: starting with merely ten minutes, then gradually increasing it each day. It was a struggle to ignore the dragging fatigue, and, at times, impossible; but inside of a couple of months, I was running thirty minutes three times per week, and the layer of body fat was starting to drain away.

But a subtler and more profound change began shortly after having sex with an owner of a personal webcam site. It was the early days of webcams: I installed one on my web page, and discovered that if I strictly controlled the camera angles, I looked extremely good. The night after I registered my new webcam with a couple of gay directories, I woke up unexpectedly to emails from fifty admirers.

Over the next few weeks, the attention I received swamped me with a powerful sensual energy I'd never truly felt before. I was in control of a space where my body could be appreciated by flattering camera angles and lighting. My long-damaged physicality became a tool for expressing myself and healing my psyche. Every time I was on camera, even just working or answering email, my senses were electrified to every square inch of my body: every pose was artful and considered; every time I ran my hand down my torso, or seemingly carelessly unbuttoned a shirt, there was not a millisecond of unawareness. The first thing I'd think, feeling my loins stirring already, when waking up in the morning was what I would wear on camera.

Initially, I refrained from having paying members; it didn't seem to be what I wanted, despite many requests from the little community that attended my regular morning chat sessions. For me, the thrill was sensual: exhibiting myself shirtless or sexily dressed in a strategically ripped, partly unbuttoned shirt. And people responded, pushing me into the top ten gay webcams on one directory, but also crashing my ISP's web-server. I scrambled to get myself a domain name and moved to an industrial-strength server via a new ISP. The only way I could afford it was to start a paying-members-only site offering, of course, special privileges to payees.

I didn't notice that I was making \$3000 per month from it until after I stopped my webcam five years later. I was able to afford to travel much more frequently: in the summer of 1999, I traveled for a month around the East Coast, web-casting from each hotel, and began the daily photo-journal which eventually became the heart and soul of my website. The next summer I took two months off work – one of them unpaid – to go to Italy and England. Sharing my trip with viewers via my photo-journal diminished the loneliness of traveling alone since, in a sense, I had somebody with whom to share my thoughts, observations and experiences.

The webcam laid the basis for a greater self-acceptance of my body, as well as a need to feel connected (I met quite a few of my fans offline during my travels). But the online friendships were not based on equality; it was a trade between youthful sensuality and the private needs of mostly closeted older men outside of major cities. Through the length of time I ran the webcam, I remained lonely; my fatigue never waned, and the depression returned in strength.

Recovery

I was greatly intimate with both fatigue and loneliness I'd go whole weekends without talking to a soul. Depression was always with me, some days feeling as though it were a metal bar through the top of my head.

It was the dot-com boom, and I lived now in somewhat magnificent isolation on the top floor of the Golden Gateway apartments, just off the Embarcadero, in an expensive studio with a balcony, and a breathlessly huge, unobstructed view of the bay, ranging from the hulking gray magnificence of the Bay Bridge to misty Alcatraz.

It was a beautiful view you could get lost in, which I frequently did, spending hours making detailed photo panoramas of the bay in every conceivable condition of light and fog; but the more important amenities that a human soul needs from a community were missing. There was virtually no street life on weekends – apart from shoppers in the Embarcadero Center – and I could walk along sky-ways from my building to the take-out restaurant, Fuzio, several blocks away without once hitting the sidewalk. Indeed, the host of Fuzio, a kind, skinny Mexican who always did me the honor of flirting with me, seemed to think that I must lead a glamorous life because I was good-looking and lived in such an expensive neighborhood. I wondered what he would think of me if he knew that he sometimes provided the only cheerful interaction of my weekend.

My fellow neighbors were mostly older couples or temporary corporate-apartment dwellers. Some days I'd spend an hour or more on my balcony looking through my telescope at slim, shirtless youths playing in an improvised skate-board park across the Embarcadero. I remember one chilly, beautiful morning spying a blonde kid skateboarding alone, just wearing sneakers and a pair of cargo pants.

It was no earlier than eight in the morning, and he was seeking some sort of perfection, repeating the same move over and over again. He'd pause before beginning each time, his chest panting, looking into the distance as if awaiting the right moment; he had a perfect, lithe body: a modern-day David with the same mixture of strength and vulnerability, I thought.

Since it was so early, and he was alone in the park, he couldn't have been trying to show off his body; I had him to myself through the lens of my telescope, and was late to work after spending almost an hour following him. I longed for him, and moments like that left me feeling even more cut off from life: I both wanted to be with him, and to be him, yet here I was, feeling old, tired and sick, staring at him for hours. He was so near through the telescope that I could touch him, yet he couldn't have been simultaneously more distant if I'd been watching him on television across the other side of the world.

To combat my fatigue, I tried to improve my diet; but since I didn't have the heart to cook, this left me eating string-cheese, canned pineapple, roast-beef and Ryvita for dinner, while watching two or three video-taped hours of my favorite television programs per night, lying on my most prized possession, a \$5,000 Italian sofa bought with the proceeds from my webcam.

My other consolation, apart from the webcam and my books, was my small collection of individual friends all of whom either lived across the Bay or had busy jobs, meaning that spontaneously meet-ups were all but impossible.

I woke up one morning, and stayed in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of traffic on the Embarcadero. For some reason, the booming of motorbike engines always particularly reverberated through my apartment, riling up my nerves. I

knew I had to go to work; but I felt sick to the gut with fatigue, and my head was so heavy with depression that I almost felt like I couldn't lift it off the pillow.

I sat up thinking of all the other times I'd made a determination to change my life and had failed. But I also remembered the changes I'd made after returning from Brussels. Later that day I called my doctor and got a referral to a specialist in chronic fatigue syndrome, Dr. Jon Kaiser, who practiced across the Golden Gate Bridge in Mill Valley.

When I eventually saw him, he took a careful account of my symptoms, ran some tests, measured my body-fat index along with other statistics, and signed me up to do specialized blood-work and stool samples. A few weeks later, I returned for the results, feeling extremely nervous, because I knew that if he couldn't help me I'd possibly have no alternatives. Dr. Kaiser, a kind-faced, gentle, methodical man, briefly ran through the results, and ended, as if in passing, by saying I had a moderate case of chronic fatigue syndrome.

I realized I'd been holding my breath the whole time, and my head shook as I let it out. For the first time I could put a label on this illness which was so easy to dismiss as being "in my head."

I learned that nobody really understands what causes CFS, either physiologically or psychologically. Dr. Kaiser's approach was empirical, treating the illness as a degradation of the various systems of the body, probably caused by accumulated stress or trauma. His holistic treatment methodology was to carefully target each below-par system with a carefully reactive treatment. In his experience, he told me, if all the systems were carefully monitored and treated individually, they would each gradually rise to the proper

level, supporting each other, and the chronic fatigue should dissipate. The treatment for each patient was unique, determined by the performance of their various bodily mechanisms. Gradually, and experimentally, Dr. Kaiser introduced a course of treatment into my life: diet change, hormone treatment, anti-depressants and bacteriological rebalancing.

I found myself wondering what could have been the stress or trauma that could have triggered my chronic fatigue. My life had been relatively uneventful. Perhaps it had been the long-running play-out of my relationship with Xavier.

At the same time I began treatment with Dr. Kaiser, I started to see a therapist for the second time in my life to see if I could attack the other debilitating problem holding me back from enjoying life; the black dog of depression. I met Erika through my trainer Cecilia; she was a wise, cat-loving, licensed hypnotherapist with smile-wrinkled-eyes whom I always now picture wearing a cardigan against the chilled air of the hills above the Castro. I was a little wary of the thought of seeing a hypnotherapist, initially. It seemed such a wacky San Francisco idea. But it turned out to be old fashioned talk-therapy for the most part; hypnotism was soon demystified for me.

At this time in my life, I was looking back on my life as being one of depression and loneliness, revisionistically forgetting the rich friendships of my college and graduate-school years. A particular theme we returned to, again and again, was the change in my personality around the age of seven, when I'd started my new school much changed from the outgoing child I remembered myself as being just a few weeks earlier.

I don't remember an explicit change in my personality. There was no one moment when I remember changing from a shining, outgoing kid to an almost pathologically,

lonely child. I do, however, have a very sharp memory of the first day of my four-year junior's school at the age of seven: I was almost completely friendless throughout my time at that school, a time that left a deep, isolated crevice in my heart and soul.

We discussed the possibility that that early change in my personality could have been somehow related to my dad's observations about my skinny wrists. But that didn't really gibe with my own memories: it seemed instantaneous that I arrived at my new school as a terribly shy, lonely boy, and remained that way for many years.

There had been another significant event in my childhood, and it had affected my appearance. It was the very last day of infant's school (or "kindergarten" in America.), the beginning of the summer before I arrived at my new school with a totally different personality. I was feeling the nostalgia and excitement of leaving a school where I'd been well-liked, and had been head of my class. That night, with the long North Eastern summer twilight stealing horizontally through our windows, I dashed into our bathroom, slipped and fell backwards; the back of my head banged against the bathroom wall propelling me violently forwards into the rim of the bathtub. The impact was directly on my front teeth, which were knocked into a horizontal position, pointing at the back of my throat. I shrieked with pain. My mother later said that for years afterwards, whenever she heard a loud bang in the house, she'd feel a tremor of fear.

My dad straightened my teeth with his own hands while I stood over the sink, my mouth pouring blood. I was driven in a neighbor's car to the local clinic, where all they could do was to pack my mouth with gauze. I lay in bed all night, unable to sleep. The next day I had the first of a series of visits to a dentist's office full of grimy old fashioned equipment, where a huge metal brace was screwed into my upper jaw for two months.

(Both teeth were saved, but over the years, one of the teeth would gradually discolor and withdraw into my gums until I had a gap-toothed appearance, making me very self-conscious about my smile.)

But once again, I couldn't easily subscribe to the idea that this incident could have overnight undone my personality. I never did come to a conclusion on this matter during my sessions with Erika. We were never able to pin-point an underlying cause, but it seemed increasingly likely that whatever it was had not only affected my personality at the time, but had also caused a build up of hidden layers of self-hatred; a hatred that was now governing my internal dialog today, and stifling my relationships with others. For all I knew, my chronic fatigue and the depression could be two sides of the same coin minted in the years at my new school where I was so timid and lonely: maybe the relationship with Xavier had just pushed it all over the edge.

By now, I was beginning to notice that I didn't feel so sickly in the mornings. I had more energy, could push more weight at the gym, and the hormone supplements were fueling a stronger physique. Meanwhile, Erika was targeting the hidden system not amenable to medicine. There were no sudden breakthroughs, unlike in my favorite movie "Ordinary People." I remember talking about why I never met anybody at the gay gym. Nobody would make eye contact with me, I told her. She asked if I'd ever tried to make eye contact with anybody else. She pointed out to me that people might be intimidated by me, especially given my height. She encouraged me to move back to the Castro, where there was more of a feeling of community.

I started to assemble the pieces: I rented a huge two-bedroom apartment on Caselli Avenue, and, at the gym, started to develop a genuinely muscular body. I grew in self-confidence and even started making eye contact at the gym.

The real break-through to a new life came on New Year's Eve 2002. I went out clubbing: alone, yes, but I took off my shirt, showing off my new body for the first time outside of the safe realms of the webcam. I met a very hot army guy in line for the bathrooms. Nothing happened, but that simple step forward marked my re-entrance into gay society, from which I no longer felt excluded. It was the beginnings of the road that would lead me once again to making myself available to be loved.

Ben

By the spring of 2003 I was in complete remission from chronic fatigue; and my depression was in abeyance; I was dating with more self-confidence if not more luck, and I had a widening circle of friends, many of whom I'd known by sight – mostly from the gym – for years, but had met only by taking advantage of the conviviality of the dance-floor. More importantly, I now felt I could approach a relationship as an equal, while not feeling, at the same time, that having one was a prerequisite of a successful and happy life. I was beginning to feel whole for the first time since my early childhood. Moreover I was proud that this was not luck: I'd determinately remade my life.

In June, I was assigned a project in Manhattan. Unusually, I was required to live full-time, all-expenses-paid, in New York rather than work remotely, which suited me fine, since it would make up for the sudden appalling loss of income I'd observed when I'd stopped my webcam a few months earlier.

I moved into a small, bland corporate apartment on the Eastern edge of Hells Kitchen, just a few blocks from my company's office near Times Square. At first, as is the case whenever I start a new job or project, I thought to myself, surely it would just be a matter of time that they realized I was completely the wrong man for the job. But my drive to solve problems and demonstrate leadership was to give me eventually the most rewarding professional period of my life. I'd always known that I was very competent in my job, but in this project I would prove both to myself and the rest of the project team that there were no technical problems I couldn't resolve either by refinement of an existing solution, or by proposing a slew of alternative solutions accompanied by the pros

and cons for each. I would eventually be elevated to one of the technical-leads on this, a high-profile, mission-critical project for a world-renowned financial company.

I didn't make friends easily in New York, so I spent a lot of time alone. I worked out hard at the nearby Golds, a loud, particularly testosterone-heavy gym, and ran regularly on the equally close and relatively tourist-free bridle path in Central Park. My body became lean and very well-defined, yet lacking friends to go out clubbing with, I mostly stayed home, or went to see art-house movies by myself. It was ironic, I thought, that I had the best body I'd ever had, now that, for the first time in years, I wasn't showing it off regularly either on cam or in clubs.

As summer moved into fall, and then a bitterly cold winter, I sank back into depression: even my frequent trips back home to San Francisco were colored by it; or rather discolored. In October, while visiting for training, I went for a run along the Embarcadero, shirtless, on a stunning, perfect, Indian summer day, the blue bay giving the city a Mediterranean feel. This would normally fill me with joy; yet I felt nothing but a dull affect, and heaviness in my head. It seemed doubly unfair that I was introspective enough to be able to observe myself knowing that I both knew it was a beautiful day, and also knew it made no difference.

In December my profile was featured briefly on the front page of a gay dating website, and a sexy, clean-limbed, Los Angeles-based, Asian doctor named Benhur wrote me, more or less on a whim. I was immediately turned on by his photograph; it was rare in my experience to meet genuinely attractive men online. We exchanged a few e-mails, but in the excitement of my returning home to San Francisco from New York, I let things drop.

Once I was settled back into my familiar milieu, my depression lifted, and I began to date several guys simultaneously; my social schedule began to remind me of my first few months in San Francisco over ten years earlier. One day, I came across an old email from Benhur and, for the hell of it, emailed him saying I was back in San Francisco. By a complete coincidence, Ben, a professor at UCLA, was also in San Francisco for a conference. We talked on the phone, and (he claims) I “penciled” him in for a date in my packed week of encounters with other sexy boys.

I picked him up in my glossy, solar-yellow Nissan Xterra at his hotel, and we went for a drink in the Castro. My initial impressions were favorable: starting with his tight biceps, he was cute, sexy, smart, engaging, and well-read. Yet perhaps – I thought to myself, inevitably finding fault – he was too eager to please, echoing my frequent experience in dating Asian men.

We were both striving to make a good impression, and I could definitely see in him the potential for further dating; but since he seemed like such a nice boy, I didn't want to ruin things by coming on to him on our first date. So we parted with no sexual sparks, a rueful grin, and a peck on the cheek. I did, however, email him that night, saying that it had been a pleasure to meet him, and telling him, in a less than subtle hint, that “I’d even tidied up my apartment.”

Over the next few weeks, as we corresponded, there was a growing desire to explore a more romantic encounter; so in March I invented a reason to visit my good friend John-Paul, who, by now, had moved to West Hollywood. I arranged to have dinner with Ben Saturday night, and then go dancing. Somewhat shamelessly, I also set up a backup date on Sunday with Kasimir, a sexy Eastern European guy I’d met at White

Party in Palm Springs the year before. Ben offered to let me stay with him, but, I obviously needed my freedom for the date with Kasimir, and declined his invitation, smoothly lying that I had frequent-stay points to use at the Westin Bonaventure.

It was a beautiful early evening as Ben picked me up outside the hotel in his Volvo convertible. Ben was wearing a flattering, tight white shirt that showed off his lean muscular torso. He was playing club music on his CD player, which for me was a warning sign, tying in with my mental image of the typical gay party boy whose mind could tolerate nothing but dum-dum-dum.

Ben had chosen a very romantic restaurant in Hollywood for dinner, Yamashiro. It was a mark of how much progress I'd made in learning to accept myself, that I could feel totally free to be myself with a guy who, by any standards, was an impressive man: outgoing, smart and sexy. We conversed widely – he had a lot of intellectual interests – and laughed a lot. He had the biggest, most beautiful smile I'd ever seen, and as his eyes sparkled at me, I felt my loins stir with interest. Almost right from the beginning, I had not the shadow of doubt that the evening would end up in bed, and that it would be great fun.

After dinner, we went for drinks at the Abbey, a huge, popular, outdoors, upscale gay bar in West Hollywood, and began to evince more obvious signs of sexual attraction. I'd grip his biceps to emphasize a point, our eyes would meet, and we'd both grin with a sure understanding of what was going on. Finally it was time for what we'd both been looking forward to all evening, going dancing at the Factory, since we knew that would involve taking our shirts off, and undoubtedly getting more physical with each other.

After the Abbey, we went back to Ben's house to get ready to go clubbing. I received a mixed impression. He had two beautiful, huge dogs, Indira and Brewster, and a lot of books (even though a lot of them seemed to be about the Third Reich). But his interior décor was graduate student meets Pottery Barn, and there were surely way too many photographs of his recent ex-boyfriend on display.

The night at the Factory lived up to my expectations. Ben soon stripped off his shirt, and I grabbed him and told him he had a flawless body. He told me I was the hunkiest guy in the club, and we danced in each other's arms and shared our first kiss. I was uninhibited, and had fun making inane comments to other guys on the dance floor. It was one of those, at that point in my life, relatively rare nights when I received a lot of admiring glances from attractive men on the dance-floor. It seemed that this night I couldn't put a foot wrong; as if some angel had come to inhabit my being, bringing out all of the sureness, wisdom and warmth reflective of who I was and the path I'd taken.

That night, after we got to Ben's house, we had almost certainly the best sex I'd ever experienced. Ben loved to do to me the things I liked having done to me, and I made love with a sure, self-confident, unashamed passion, fully inhabiting, perhaps for the first time ever, the strong, forceful sexuality I'd portrayed by myself on my webcam for so many years.

Just like in the first time I'd ever had sex, I lay awake all night, this time contentedly. At seven in the morning, Indira, Ben's adorable st. bernard, insisted on climbing into bed, and fell asleep between us to my silent laughter: you can't argue with 140 lbs of dog. Half an hour later, Brewster, his beautiful bernese mountain dog, scratched at the door to be let out. I went out with him and felt the warmth of the Los

Angeles morning against my naked body, and briefly, only briefly, imagined what it would be like to live here instead of in my beloved, but cold San Francisco.

I was very tired in the morning, but there was a blissful after-glow in my heart. We went out to brunch at Hamburger Mary's, and then parted. Ben had suggested dinner, but I, ever cautious about moving too fast, declined. The night before had been perfect. I'd felt self-confident, sexy, masculine, likeable. I didn't want to push my luck. Moreover, I was tired; I even cancelled my Sunday date with Kasimir.

Despite how good the weekend had been, over the next few weeks, my feelings for Ben refused to develop. I was seeing another guy at the same time, Tony. I knew Tony and I didn't have enough in common to have a long-term future, yet my therapist would always ask why I spoke about Tony with a smile, and about Ben as if it was a forced intellectual exercise. I feared my interaction with Ben would end up like so many others: a failure of chemistry despite a good match on paper. I barely called or emailed him in the next few weeks; all the forward impetus came from him. We agreed to hang out together at the White Party in Palm Springs, a series of gay dance parties spread over a long weekend in April, but I decided to stay with a friend rather than with him, in his hotel.

A few weeks before the party, I hurt my back very badly, and could barely walk for a week. I got back to the gym as soon as I could, but inevitably, this set back my intentions to be as hunky as possible for the party. The timing could not have been worse for me to make another decision: quitting cold-turkey my testosterone supplements (part of my chronic fatigue syndrome regimen) in order to give the disfiguring acne on my

back and shoulders time to heal. By the time I arrived in Palm Springs, I was feeling weak from a testosterone crash, and didn't feel at all sexy.

As I drove to the Wyndham Hotel that first night in Palm Springs, I was having qualms about meeting Ben's best friends, Bill and Stephane. The self-confidence and sense-of-self of my recent trip to Los Angeles had deserted me. As Ben's friends gathered in the room prior to going down to the party on Friday night, I forced an awkward appearance of cheerfulness and cockiness. Walking down the corridor, I caught sight of myself in the mirrored door of the elevator, and suddenly the old, skinny Keith was back with me.

Although I did, in the end, enjoy the parties, and spent the nights with Ben – albeit without having sex, I left his room early in the morning each day, before he woke up. On Monday morning, driving home, I felt intolerably lonely and depressed, thinking I'd allowed my bridges to be torched. The possibilities that I'd allowed to flutter through my peaceful mind that Sunday morning a month or so earlier, when I'd let Ben's dog out into the beautiful morning warmth of Los Angeles, were now demolished.

Yet when I got home, there was a beautiful email from Ben. My eyes welled suddenly with tears as I read his words. "You're a beautiful person inside and out." I was so sure I'd blown it, and yet here was Ben with the courage to put his heart on the line. Moreover, he was saying something to me that seemed impossible, but that I desperately needed to believe again.

By the time I saw Ben again in May, I'd long-since resumed the testosterone, my depression had vanished, and my self-confidence was restored. Yet I still found myself wondering if Ben would be another lost cause: another guy I should have theoretically

fallen for but hadn't. It was still Ben who was doing all the legwork in the relationship. Absent his persistence, things would have gone nowhere; not because I was scared of putting my feelings on the line, but because I simply – despite my desire for them – didn't have strong feelings for him.

I decided that maybe the reason I wasn't falling for Ben was that I simply didn't know enough about him. I had to find something in his core that excited my affections, beyond his sweet nature, exuberance, blinding smile, intellect, sensual sense of sex, and buff body. Weren't those qualities enough? He had so many features I could check off as being top of my shopping list in a guy. He even read real books, for God's sake, since he'd studied philosophy in college, as a minor.

Long since, I'd developed an idea about the syndrome of falling emotionally for somebody you know a lot about, but don't know very well, if at all, in the flesh. This was something that had come to me because of my experiences with the online photo-journal I was still keeping online, and had been maintaining since the early days of my webcam. People would develop feelings for me which I, of course, couldn't return. My theory was that their knowledge of me was informed by the massive brain-dump in my journal, so that, to them, I was a multi-dimensional person.

So I spent the entire weekend drilling him about his background, his interests, his family, hoping that somewhere, somehow, I'd find something that would stimulate stronger feelings, something that Ben reacted to with puzzled good nature. The idea was naïve; hopelessly naïve, I thought afterwards.

As soon as I was back in San Francisco, even bearing in mind that we'd been talking on the phone and by email almost daily for several months now, I still found that

unless we talked, I'd go through the day without thinking about him. I'd told him over the weekend that maybe he was infatuated with me; had told him so deliberately to release the implicit pressure I felt from him to respond with feelings I didn't have. This strategy worked well; Ben began to protect himself; the frequency of his emails and phone calls declined. I'd been down this road before, and could see the end coming.

But I still hadn't quite understood Ben. He surprised me by again taking the risk of opening up his heart, sending me, out of the blue, a beautiful card, telling me how much he liked me, and ending with the quote:

"I've laid my dreams beneath your feet. Tread gently."

I was deeply touched by this, and found a lot of respect for his courage in risking rejection. This kept things rolling long enough to the point where I could naturally invite him to visit me in San Francisco for the first time, the weekend of gay pride, after flying back from visiting his family in Singapore. I think part of me just wanted him to see my apartment so that he'd be impressed with all my books (and hence my erudition) and my (recently improved) décor.

I remained in high spirits, so I was confident that we'd have a fun, sex-filled weekend, and would enjoy going out dancing again. Yet sometimes I still wondered how fragile my new-found self-confidence was. Chatting and flirting with gym acquaintances was new to me, and sometimes still awkward. I was never sure of the degree of familiarity I could assume; as I'd many times discussed with Erika, my therapist, I felt as if I were missing a gene. There was a couple who went to my gym with whom I'd danced flirtatiously several times. One time, I saw them at the gym, and paused for conversation and they seemed to be, if not repulsing me, then at least making no big effort to engage

me. I felt rebuffed, and worried myself, for a while, with the sort of bitter, hurt feelings I remember harboring in the many hurts of childhood. I knew intellectually that it was likely nothing to do with me - maybe they were having difficulties in the relationship or something – but I was still easily hurt by such things.

But for this weekend, I was excited and relaxed, looking forward to great sex, and the fun of hanging out with him and his (now also my) friends Bill and Stephane. My apartment had a built-in L-shaped sofa wrapped around a wall of windows flooded with sunlight. And on the afternoon he arrived, I took him home, and we stripped each other naked on that sofa. I was suddenly aware of being inundated with hunger and passion quite new to me. Ben must have noticed it, although I didn't immediately say anything about it. We did however stop and stare at each other in the sunlight, and I grinned. "It doesn't get better than this."

Ben was jet-lagged, so, since we wanted to go out that night, I left him alone in my bed, while I wrote in my online photo-journal.

There are times - like these - where I feel I'm falling in love with Ben.

Then there are times I really don't know.

That night, Bill, Stephane, Ben and I attended Mahler's magnificent second symphony at Davies Hall. I'd had a love affair with Mahler my entire adult life, and I was nervously hoping Ben would be as moved as I by the finale, one of my favorites, where a hugely augmented late-romantic orchestra, a choir, soloists, and pipe organ raise one of the most transcendent, powerful climaxes in all symphonic music. As we leapt to our feet

to join in the standing ovation, I saw Ben wipe tears from his eyes, and felt a rush of affection.

Bill and Stephane returned to the W, and Ben and I to my apartment, to get ready for the big party at the jewelry-mart. Yet when we arrived at the party, neither Ben nor I cared for the atmosphere, so we decided to abandon Bill and Stephane for Mezzanine, the alternate party, in a much more intimate space. As we walked to the club hand-in-hand, we decided to call each other boyfriends. At this point, the full implications of the day hadn't really sunk in.

We stayed until four-thirty, spending the last half hour of that time dancing slowly, wrapped around each other, in our own separate world, having an intimate conversation. If I attempt to recall those moments, I could swear there was nobody else on the dance-floor but us. Ben had mentioned, half jokingly, that maybe I wouldn't like him so much if I knew him warts and all. I mentioned that I was covered in warts too. So he asked me to name one. I decided it was time to tell him that I'd suffered from depression for many years. With sudden clarity I saw that telling him this was not at all a sign of weakness, but more a sign of strength: that I'd been able to deal with my depression, and live with it, not letting it control my life. I'm quite sure that that revelation was the final piece of cement needed to seal our relationship so firmly in the course of just twenty-four hours.

That night I penetrated Ben for the first time, and without thinking about it, I blurted out, "I love you." I didn't even think, at the time, that I necessarily meant it. Given our history, it must have been a surprise to him that I'd been the first with the riskiest of all avowals.

Our lovemaking in the morning was more passionate than ever. I cried during sex, which was hard at first for me to understand. My therapist suggested something which I think is a truth; such tears of happiness are a misnomer: they're actually tears of deep sadness at the knowledge that some day you will lose what you love.

By the time we finally got out of the apartment on Sunday to go over to the gay pride festival in the Civic Center, it was already mid-afternoon. It was another gorgeous, warm day. I left my apartment without even taking my shirt with me. That Ben was obviously completely and strongly attracted to me, and had no hesitation about telling me, was having a remarkable effect on me. For the first time in a relationship with an equal, I didn't feel challenged by my own insecurities, and I was finding that I was totally uninhibited sexually. (I'd discussed, much earlier, with Erika my shame that I never enjoyed giving oral sex; that I always found it a chore. She'd suggested, with – it now turns out – amazing prescience that maybe I'd enjoy it with the right person.)

At the pride festival, we lay in the sun for a while, and I reveled in the new found, wholly unexpected reality: I was in love again. It had been at least ten years since I'd felt this way. And it was the first time that I was in love with somebody I knew also loved me. It was even now just sinking in: somebody wonderful loved me. I felt walls collapsing all about me: the vista of lonely holiday weekends that I'd thought my lot in life as an adult was obliterated. I somehow knew from that moment something I'd have previously thought an impossible (and corny) experience for me: I wasn't alone anymore, and didn't think I ever would be again.

I'll never forget the broad smile I carried into my therapist's office that Wednesday, nor the tearful reaction of my good friend and physical trainer, Cecilia, when I told her about the weekend.

The following weekend was July 4th, so I made spontaneous plans to fly down there to spend it with Ben. Oh the luxury of being unafraid to presume being completely welcome for a weekend. The sun shone perfectly all weekend; I took homoerotic photographs of Ben in his back yard, his shirt open, his torso sprayed with water. I was so turned on that I had to stop taking photographs while we went back to bed. The weekend inevitably ended (the pain of any long-distance relationship) with a sad drive to the airport.

This whole concept of being in love after so many years of being alone was taking some getting used to. I was occasionally even wracked with doubt in the ensuing weeks. But far more frequently, I was filled with joy and a love with humanity.

I was called to New York for work in July, and Ben flew up to stay with me in the Hilton on Avenue of the Americas. We went out for dinner at World-Wide Plaza, holding each other's hands under the table, and straight couples smiled at us; at the obvious intensity of our passion.

As with every weekend we spent together, the weather was free of blemish. Three days in July in New York could have been stifling. Instead it was warm, with fluffy white clouds and low humidity. We explored the streets around the Meat Packing District, and I introduced him to the beautifully redesigned park along the Hudson near the Village. We met my friends Chris and Phoenix, who were the only two friends I'd made during my

stay in New York, and Ben and I went clubbing at the Roxy. We ordered room-service, and completely stuffed ourselves, then had passionate sex anyway.

We felt blessed. Early on, long before we'd fallen in love, I'd told Ben that I'd wanted to go on a gay cruise in the Mediterranean, but that it was sold out. To my amazement, he'd already booked a room on the cruise, and needed a roommate. With some trepidation we agreed not only to room together, but also to spend time together in Venice, before the cruise, and Paris, after the cruise. By the time we sailed out of Venice at sunset in late August, in the company of Bill and Stephane, we'd already been in love for two months, and the trip, particularly the final five perfect days in Paris, was both the most romantic honeymoon imaginable, and also a time to get to know each other at a much greater depth, most definitely warts-and-all.

It was a relationship of equals. Ben was relatively recently out of a very long damaging nine-years he should never have entered in the first place. I was newly self-confident as a result of years of recovery from my own demons. We'd both made our own arcs through life that seemed to lead directly (I say this even though I don't believe in fate) to the point where we were burned but available for each other. Almost from the time we fell in love we knew instinctively that this was forever. What I had no reason to expect was just how severely our ties would be tested two years later, and how near to the breaking point we would come.