

# broken whole

**by Keith Adams**



Note to reviewers. If you are mentioned by name in the book, please let me know if you do not wish me to use your real name.

To Ben, my partner and best friend;  
To Dean who was there for us;  
And to my father, the sanest man around.

## **Author's Note**

All of the events in this book are true. However, in these scandal-mongering days, I do want to protect myself from claims of "making things up." If you compare timelines and details between this book and my blog, *brokenwholeblog.blogspot.com*, you'll see a few minor discrepancies, made for the sake of better pacing.

Additionally, in the chapter which takes place in Dallas, I used fictitious Christian names, and masked a few arcane technical details.

I also changed the names of a couple of people who requested it. And, finally, I invented a surname (but not the actions or situation) of an officer in the chapter where I'm arrested and jailed by the LAPD. The officer in question, in the unlikely event he should ever read the book, will undoubtedly know that I'm talking about him.

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## **Prelude - 2006**

Hollywood Boulevard, Hollywood, CA, August 11

I have always been strongly compelled to organize, categorize and understand every piece of information in my life. Now the flood of ideas through my brain was becoming almost impossible to handle. I was, for the moment, still able to control it, but I was close to being overmastered. The hardest thing was to figure out simple priorities against the raging background of my thoughts. And now the pressure was vastly increased by the screamingly high priority of not worrying my boyfriend Ben. He'd called me, out-of-the-blue, almost in tears because I was late for our meeting with our couple's counselor, and I'd immediately set off to try to get across to West Hollywood.

At all costs, I thought, I had to protect him from worry. For weeks, I'd known that my increasingly confident and ambitious demeanor had made Ben anxious. I knew he thought that I was becoming slightly manic, so I'd gotten into the habit of concealing things from him: I didn't want his worry to restrain me from achieving my goals. Ben's last boyfriend had had episodes of intense mania as well, so this only increased my desire to hide from him all signs of any behavior that he might wrongly interpret as manic.

For the moment, I could still wrestle my thoughts to a stand-still long enough to remind myself, every other minute, that it wasn't life-or-death. If I missed the meeting with our counselor, Ben would be upset; very upset: but we'd get through it.

At the Renaissance Hotel on Highland, I tried to get a taxi, but the hotel staff ignored me. I became briefly and savagely furious with them until, once again, I managed to recall that my sense of urgency was self-imposed. But that thread of rational

thought kept disappearing in the vastness; I couldn't hold onto it for more than a few seconds at a time. Each time it slipped my grasp, my focus would return to the urgency of protecting Ben at all costs.

I wasn't scared about myself, however, until I rounded the corner onto Hollywood Boulevard. And then I felt, just for a second, that it might be possible to drown in the deluge of my own thoughts.

I tried again to hail a cab. It was rush-hour; traffic barely moved, and all the cabs were full. I was, by now, almost panicking with the urgency of saving Ben. It had finally become impossible for me to have a rational perspective; I really was drowning.

I redoubled my pace, crossing through traffic to catch a cab in the other direction, anything. Once more I momentarily recalled the lack of real urgency, but only briefly, before crashing back, with increased violence, into a skewed sense that making the meeting with Ben and our couple's counselor was life-or-death.

I steeled myself. "Calm down, there's no rush." A second later, I looked at the time, and started to run. The clash of priorities began to feel like a clash of hammering irons in my head; then a constant thunder. I ripped my expensive watch – a sexy, masculine watch with a wide leather strap that Ben had given me – off my wrist, and threw it, along with my cell-phone, into a parking lot, hoping that if I could no longer tell the time, the raging confusion would cease. But it only got worse.

Dimly through the clattering chaos, I momentarily heard a shining clear note: instead of worrying about Ben, I should take care of myself. This was my own crisis now, not Ben's: I was falling headlong into the void, and had to save myself. Moreover in saving myself, I'd save Ben too. If I lost my mind, Ben would shed far more than the

few tears he'd cry at my missing our counseling appointment. It seems so obvious now; but that's a symptom of mania: that you can get so consumed by something that it makes you blind to all other priorities. In this case I was so driven to protect Ben that I was quite literally driving myself insane.

That gleaming note I'd felt moments earlier disappeared again in the gathering murk; I felt my sanity slipping away; I knew I needed to medicate myself immediately, either with drugs or alcohol. I pitched into a Mexican restaurant.

"I need a drink," I grated out to the petite hostess, who looked at me worriedly, taking in the contrast between my wannabe-superstar appearance – six-foot-six, hair spiked with blond highlights, dressed in a tight-fitting, black open-necked Miu-Miu shirt, my sleeves rolled up to my biceps – and, presumably, the desperation that was written on my features.

"You'll have to wait for a table."

"You don't understand, this is an emergency," I shouted.

She looked at me as if I were an alien, then shrugged, while I strode into the bar, grabbed a bottle of tequila, and walked out, ignoring the bartender's flailing arms and angry shouts.

I was on Sunset Boulevard by now, just east of La Brea. I drank about a fifth of the bottle: it tasted foul. Vodka is my drink, I thought randomly. My mind was still falling into chaos; the alcohol wasn't working.

I went into a 7-Eleven, where the cashier looked up at me, startled, seeing the open bottle of tequila in my hands, not exactly looking like a typical wino.

"Call 911!" I said, urgently.

The cashier barely even made eye-contact with me before switching back to his customer. I couldn't understand why nobody could see my pain. I was running into intense alienation wherever I turned.

I shouted at him, "Call an ambulance, now!"

"Fuck off!" he told me.

I was amazed that he didn't seem the least bit scared of me. I slammed my fist onto the counter, and poured the bottle of tequila all over it.

"Now will you call the fucking police?" I needed help, any kind of help. I knew I needed to be restrained and medicated.

A young gay customer yelled at the cashier, "Call 911!" The kid led me outside.

"Here, I'll call them," he said, soothingly.

I tried to sit down, but I couldn't keep still. He couldn't get through to 911; he was on hold for ten agonizing minutes; I couldn't wait. I crossed the street through moving traffic, and entered the strip-mall on the corner, which contained a Starbucks, nail salons, and some jewelry stores. I thought the police would come eventually, and I was concerned now that they'd think me dangerous, that bullets might fly.

The tequila was finally slowing down my thoughts. Somehow, I suddenly instinctively knew the worst of the crisis was passed; I'd saved myself. But there were still the consequences of my actions to deal with, and I was still far from being myself. I heard sirens, so I went into one of the salons to sit peaceably, my hands clearly visible so the police could see I wasn't armed. I was completely exhausted and intolerably thirsty. The tall Asian transsexual who was doing somebody's nails, kept looking over at me, a

half-smile alternating on her pretty face with curiosity. I prayed she wouldn't say anything to me.

The police never came, so eventually I went outside. I still wanted to go to the emergency room, but maybe now I could do it without police involvement, I thought. I convinced a kindly Filipino security guard that I was having a medical crisis, and he lent me his cell-phone so that I could call 911.

He had, ironically, a blue-tooth headset, my first exposure to one despite my immersion in technology, and it took me a while to get it to work for me. But I couldn't get through to 911 - I was kept on hold for even longer than the kid across the street had been. I knew Ben would be worried. It seemed impossible, but it had only been thirty minutes since I had left the Renaissance after failing to get a taxi there.

I finally gave up on getting through to 911, but I didn't know who else to call. I didn't want Ben to know what had happened - at least not yet. But Ben's cell-phone number was the only number I knew by heart, and neither of my therapists had listed phone numbers, so finally I had no alternative but to call Ben. He was frantic. He'd been calling and calling, getting my voicemail. I told him my cell-phone was dead, and asked him not to ask me any questions; just come and pick me up.

At last I could let the tension breathe out of me. I thanked the security guard for the use of his phone and asked him if he could please find me some water. He looked at me dubiously, so I started to pull off my \$300 belt to offer in exchange for a bottle of water. He relented and got me a bottle of water, declining the belt (for which I was later thankful – it's still my favorite belt).

When Ben picked me up, I had to figure out how to explain to him everything that had happened that day (because, you see, this headlong rush through Hollywood was only the climax of an astonishing day.) I knew it wasn't the right time to tell him anything what preceded his tearful call from our counselor's office less than an hour earlier. Nonetheless, my mind was still racing, and there was the manic temptation to explain myself fully. I kept holding onto the fact that I couldn't possibly tell him everything without scaring him; I had to simplify things. I kept saying to myself "breathe", as a mantra to remind myself, through the haze of explanations yearning to be spoken, not to be driven to make Ben understand everything. I wrote "breathe" on a scrap of paper as we drove home, because I didn't trust myself. And once I got home, I wrote it out again, on more scraps of paper, so I'd see it everywhere.

Later that night, as I got ready to take a shower, I looked at the scrap of paper on the sink with the word "breathe" written on it. I suddenly had the image of Ben finding it, picking it up, and thinking it was another indication that I was not entirely in my right mind. We had a decorative bowl in the living-room full of pebbles of green glass bought from Pottery Barn. So after my shower, I grabbed a few green pebbles, and left them in inconspicuous places replacing the pieces of paper. Now I knew that every time I'd see one of those pebbles, it would remind me of "breathe", and I'd stop trying to put into words what was going on in my racing mind.

But would I still remember "breathe" in the morning? I surreptitiously stuffed a pebble underneath the sheet on my side of the bed, knowing that whenever I woke up, the physical discomfort would reconnect me to "breathe".

(It was only after this crisis that I realized that I'd grabbed on, for dear life, to two spiritual concepts without realizing it: meditation – repeating the word “breathe”; and the use of pain as a spiritual reminder.)

The next morning, things returned to a surprising degree of normality between us. We were both anxious about what had happened; but also eager to please each other. I felt sure that I'd never again let worry for Ben drive me to the edge of insanity. I also knew that it was going to take a lot of dialogue before he could fully understand what had happened the previous day. I had no idea there were even worse days to come; that the first, as yet undiagnosed, manic episode of my life hadn't wrought, by any means, all the damage it held in store.

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## **Book I – Out of Body**

### Somebody like Me

Physicality has framed my life. It began with the tiniest of incidents, 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 Sunday 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, gabbing in a haze of gray smoke (how did adults talk at such tedious length?) as everybody did in those days in the early seventies. 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.

His words took months if not years to fully take over my self-image, but right then I discretely compared his wrists with my own, and 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 architecture of forearm-to-hand was completely different to his; delicate in fact.

We were raised in the macho culture of early 60's and 70's North East England in South Shields, an industrial town on the River Tyne, whose banks were lined with grim, grey shipping cranes, dark against a washed out sky, along which a salt-misted wuthering gale always seemed to blow, rattling the ropes on the usually idled fishing boats, the only specks of color in a landscape which would have been truly dismal had it not been for the

coastline. South Shields might have had a sizeable tourist industry had it not been placed in such a miserable climate: miles of white sand, striking, craggy cliffs topped with acres of fog-fed green grass. But this was a place where sixty degrees in July drew newspaper head-lines “Pheww, what a scorcher!” One day I was walking with my dad on a foggy, cold summer day, and encountered families in bathing costumes emerging out of the shivering gloom. It’s difficult to understand how people from South Shields ever came to be called “Sand Dancers”; it seems inapt given the faces you see on the street, all screwed up from a combination of penury and the endless fight against the blasts of air coming in from the North Sea. I’m thankful daily that I got out of the north-east early enough to preserve a decent complexion, especially given that I now live in Los Angeles where pretty skin is at a premium.

At night, although we lived about a mile from the sea, we could hear the huge waves crash thunderously against 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’s booming horn, in the mistaken belief that one of its kind still existed.

South Shields had only three claims to fame, all of them dubious apart from the fact that it had once been a Roman fortress town, the only remains of which were a set of stone outlines barely an inch out of the ground, except where they’d been (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. (My mother was a fount of colorful sayings, many of which I like to bring out when needed. My favorite is

reserved for bad weather: “Eeh, I wouldn’t be a sailor today.”... long pause ... “Not today.”)

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 “Catherine Cookson country”; an appellation that will only resonate with those very few readers who are fond of British female romantic literature.

The town emblem always made me laugh. 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 a crafty eye open for making a penny or two out of the opportunity.

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 would have a forty percent unemployment rate, with the only profitable businesses being pubs and slot-machines. It was a town of one-hundred thousand, yet lacked a cinema and a single decent restaurant. Norman Tebbit (now I hear he’s Baron Tebbit of Chingford), the quite horrible Thatcher minister of employment, had encouraged the complaining working-class to get on a bike and seek work, which I’m sure might have been an attractive proposition to the working age residents had they been able to afford them.

I was raised not to be “soft”; 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 and the culture and mores of the North East. My dad, for instance, to this day has never used an umbrella, and on a cold, rainy night in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the nearest city to Shields, you’ll see young men and women running jacketless from bar to bar, giggling, no umbrellas in site.

My dad, gentle, noble soul though he was, was a product of his culture: racist, homophobic, anti-semitic, anti-catholic, anti-Paki (a term to denigrate anybody from South-East Asia), even anti-Scottish, not to mention, of course, anti-Irish. I’m not sure what his position was on the Welsh. Although his prejudices were real, he’d couch them in a way that just about prevented you from making a serious argument. When ITV, which at that time was the only competitor to the BBC’s two channels, started featuring Trevor Macdonald, the first British black news-reader, my dad would say, “They’ve got a monkey reading the news.” (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 – I’m sure the motto “Always Ready” came in useful then, although not as useful as the self-righting life-boat – and the local inhabitants thought the Spanish were monkeys.)

Maybe I’ve made my dad sound fairly horrible, so it’s time to correct that impression: I love him and admire him very much as an adult. (Following the path of most men except right-wing Republicans, he’s mellowed with age and understanding, and you’d be hard-pressed to find a trace of bigotry left in him.) But his words and

affection had enormous power over me: I was an inordinately sensitive, bookish youth, and, coming from him, any criticism was deeply wounding.

I'd always been called a "bonny lad", which, in the local vernacular dialect called "Geordie", meant a good-looking kid. But now my dad's words about my skinny wrists began to eat away at any idea that I was attractive. From that age forward, to a greater or lesser extent, until the supernova – in my early forties – that occupies the second half of this book, I was defined by my body image.

## Somebody Likes Me

We lived in a middle-class neighborhood: next door to the snooty-nosed Moss family indeed, with their new car every year, and perfectly landscaped garden. Mrs. Moss seemed to spend a lot of time fussing with her hair in her bedroom, which faced the street, poking her nose into our business as we played outside.

We were allowed to play with Gillian Moss when we were younger; in fact, now I think about it, the only female butt I've ever seen was hers, around the age of five, as we mooned each other in curiosity. My family had working-class blood in our veins on both sides through generations. The Moss family, on the other hand, were solid, "respectable" middle-class. However even they couldn't help but feel somehow implicated by the image encountered just down the street, where strode a staring line of low-income "council" houses smelling of recently cooked pork chop. All of my childhood friends came from the working-class, so Gillian – not to mention her five-year-old butt – was soon off limits.

My dad was the operations manager of a large printing factory, but carried his authority lightly at work: sort of like Captain Kirk: self-confident, without the need to demonstrate he was in charge. When my brother Neil and I visited the factory to meet him once a week for lunch, the workers would grin at us, and we'd feel proud that my dad was obviously liked and respected. We'd go to the "Meat and Eat", a sort of cafeteria down-town, where we'd be served by the "Love and Darling Lady" ("What do you want, luv? What about you, pet?")

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. My sleeves were always too short, and, for my socks not to show, I'd have to unfasten the button of my pants, slip them lower than my waist, and pray that my belt would retain its precarious hold on them. In short, I was gawky, heading towards being six-foot-six fully grown, extraordinarily skinny, awkward, and thin-skinned. I'd cringe when my mom would take me shopping to Binns, the oddly-named department store, and she'd gaily say to the clerks "Eeeh, he's only fourteen you know!"

Although I was fully proportional – in all things, kids laughed at me, and made fun of the size of my feet, notwithstanding that if they'd been smaller I'd have blown over in the wind had it been able to gather sufficient pull against my slender form. Even worse, I was cursed with the last name "Adams", so they inevitably called me "Lurch", and whistled the tune from *The Adams Family*. Even now, if I hear somebody humming that tune, I tense up and briefly contemplate punching him. I've never told all this to anybody before, because it shamed me so much, so quite why I'm baring it here for the world – or at least the small subsection of it that's reading this book.

Tall people always stand out; you can't disappear, no matter how hard you stoop your shoulders, so 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. Even at this very moment, as I write this book on my laptop at Starbucks, I'm a little wary of my neighbors reading my words, when, in reality, they're most likely in their own little worlds. After all I'm not curious enough to snoop into what they're writing. (Given this is West Hollywood, most of them are writing screen-plays that will never see the light of day.)

At an early age, I realized I was homosexual too: one more thing to hide. I have a clear recollection of when it struck home: I was digging in the front garden; Grannpy (Mrs. Moss' father) said a cheery hello over the garden fence, I pushed the spade into the dirt, and suddenly froze: the word "poof" which had always been thrown at me became fused with my hitherto natural-seeming physical admiration of cute boys at school (I was thirteen), and a vast panorama of a life of loneliness opened before me as I realized I could never tell anybody. It was instantaneous: a big bang fading into the background radiation of sadness for the rest of my teens and early twenties.

In school, Phys.-Ed. was a nightmare for me. Every Tuesday and Thursday morning I'd wake up physically sick with nervousness, at the thought of it. I particularly hated cross-country, since we would only ever do it if there was too much snow on the fields to play football or rugby. We'd be forced to pound our way over the freezing hills around Cleadon, making a mad dash past the windmill to avoid the free-ranging bulls.

But I feared nothing so much as swimming, because it would mean that there was nothing I could do to avoid being seen in all my glory, a skinny body with long, thin arms, bony knobs on my collar bone, and ribs you could count openly. And since I'd almost drowned, once, in earlier years, when visiting Whitley Bay Swimming Pool with my cousins, I had a violent distaste even for the smell of chlorine.

To add to the mix, I was smart, which made me a natural target for nasty school-kids (most of my peers). I was actively disliked and distrusted. Through all these ways, I grew up to feel apart from everybody else – in the words of my current therapist here in Los Angeles: "other than". I was stuck inside my head, and nobody knew me well. I didn't even know myself.

My body was like this useless appendage flopping around by my side. I hid all this pain, throughout my childhood, except for one occasion. 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 – a rare event for me now that I'd learned to hide my emotions – as I told her that I was too skinny to show my pallid limbs in public.

It wasn't until college that I staged a rally against my body-image. Wearing my sweaters, I was sweltering in the summer heat of the un-air-conditioned class-rooms, so I entered enemy territory: Oxford Street, with its packed crowd of average-sized people flitting 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 grew to hate clothing manufacturers. (To this date, I'm not fond of shoe-stores: there's huge warehouse on Sunset Boulevard which contains surely way too many choices for every body else, but not a single pair in my size 16, nor any socks for sizes above 13.)

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. (I obviously hadn't yet learned that tall people shouldn't wear stripes.) In all my photographs from the long summer breaks, which I spent in London, I'm wearing that blue shirt, and my awful, self-administered

hair-cut, half-smiling like Mona Lisa with a mullet, my mouth closed to hide the gap-toothed appearance caused by my childhood accident.

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 in America. I'd never been abroad, or even in an airplane. Flying into the Philadelphia area, all I could see were trees, giving me the impression that Pennsylvania must be a very rustic state full of elks and grizzly bears. I made this observation to what I'd thought the archetypal representative of a lovely old American lady sitting beside me, and she warned me, in response, to be careful, because "there are a lot of black people in Philadelphia". Welcome to America, I thought. Maybe it's more like Starsky and Hutch than the "Back to the Future," which, over the summer in the fabulous Empire, Leicester Square, I'd watched seventeen times (crush on Michael J. Fox, and a fascination with American suburban life that I can't now for the life of me understand.).

As soon as I left the plane, and walked across the terminal to enter the squalid international terminal, I was hit by air that had a physical presence: intolerably hot, and humid; smelling of chlorine. Once I was through customs, black taxicab-drivers marauded me, vying for my business. (I'm sure the old lady on the plane was thinking "told you so!")

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. (Pretzels, pop-corn and peanut-butter are the three things whose appeal I understand least in this country.)

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 poor neighborhoods, abutting a decaying, rust 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 (that was the exact term I wrote down in the journal I kept at the time) 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.

I had, at this time, a sort of girl-friend, Paula Porter, a stout black girl a couple of years older than me. I'd met her at my church during my waning months as a Christian in London, and I'd taken her to see Carmina Burana at the Royal Festival Hall. With her sensible, belted grey mackintosh, and big spectacles, she looked like an American intellectual. Once she returned to the States, we stayed in touch by mail, and even after Jesus no longer resided in my heart and I nervously told her so, we maintained our correspondence.

When I went to visit her for the first time after I arrived in the States, I don't actually recall very clearly my first impressions of New York – 80's New York with all its dangers, nor how I felt as the train pulled into Penn Station. I do remember – and this is a sudden remembrance that's lain untouched for a long, long time – that I was wondering how we would greet each other. Still a virgin, certain I was a homosexual, starved for affection and emotionally dry, I nonetheless wondered if there'd be some sort of cathartic hug waiting for me. But as soon as I saw her, the anticipation of being physically affectionate felt not only laughable, but almost scary. We were prim with one another; after all, we weren't officially anything more than friends, since there'd been no flirtation, and of course nothing physical, not even a kiss. It helped that she was so devout that she probably didn't believe in getting frisky too early in a relationship.

I think it was on my second trip there, when I stayed, once more, in her room in a theological seminary on the edges of Harlem, that we were sitting on the bed looking at photos and she suddenly put her hand on my leg. I felt a little surge in my groin, just at being touched in that way. I was twenty-two, and that was the first time anybody had ever been physical with me, apart from, obviously, my parents, when I was a child. Despite the apparent stirring of my loins, I felt awkward; I knew that I didn't want to touch her in return. In fact, I was terrified she might go further making a liar of me and my lack of intentions towards her. Her next move was quite unexpected: she tried to teach me how to dance - the waltz, of all things. I'm glad, in retrospect, that her wooing techniques weren't more ardent since it gave me the opportunity of behaving as if nothing was going on below the surface of what was, after all, just an every day scene: a devout, black New

York girl and a skinny white boy from North-East England dancing the waltz in a tiny dorm-room in Harlem.

When, in my second year of school, I belatedly started peeking my eyes through the cracks in the closet door, Paula, was the only person I came out to by mail (with the later exception of Neil, my brother, who preceded me with the astonishing revelation of his own homosexuality.) Although my friendship with Paula had survived my first coming-out – as a born-again atheist, it didn't survive the second, strangely enough. (I'd have thought, surely, that rejecting our Lord and Savior would have been more damning in her eyes. But apparently not, homosexuality was the greater sin.). She wrote me a series of caustic letters which could, perhaps, have been understandable in their tone had we been going steady for months if not years, but which seemed a little over the top, considering there'd been nothing more than her hand on my high, and experimental ballroom-dancing. We did affect a rapprochement a year or so later, but didn't stay in touch. I still occasionally think about her when I'm in New York, especially when I see a sturdy black woman in a sensible belted London Fog rain-coat, and glasses with huge round frames. I wonder how we'd react to each other if we met again. I'm light-years different now than the shy, skinny twenty-two year old she knew.

I'd ventured out of the closet, in my second year of grad school, to satisfy an insistent, increasingly painful ache for real physical affection from a man. 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 a chronic masturbator. Even before I hit my teens, I went at it for a few years without climaxing. I masked my distaste for my body by never masturbating naked.

But now I wanted to be touched by somebody else. I wasn't even thinking about actually having sex.

It was a sticky Philadelphia summer, and my straight Mexican roommate Ricardo, on whom I had a crush, was out-of-town. To the constant whine of my window air-conditioner, I read *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, and, in one long painful night (in my memory a crashing thunderstorm seems to echo outside my bedroom window), *Maurice* by E.M. Forster. The electric desire for physical affection soon became unbearable, so I started responding to personal-ads. I'm going to completely gloss over the first "date" where a horrible, bewhiskered man with foul breath appeared at my door and go straight on to my second, where I went to the apartment of a short Filipino guy.

I remember only four 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. The second was that he fucked me without a condom. Thank God he was a short Filipino. The third was that I had poppers forced on me for the only and only time, and the fourth was that I didn't sleep a wink all night as I lay next to him.

It's extremely odd, that I don't recall anything more; I'd yearned for so long to have a man run his hands along my body; yet I don't remember how it felt that first time.

But I'd yet to tell any friends face-to-face. It was something that had seemed an impossible barrier for most of my life, but now felt like the last attack on a bunker that would win the war; I was scared like shit, but if I never did it I'd hate myself. With nervousness and dissemblance that Woody Allen would have been proud of, I finally came out with it to Jim, my lanky, urbane best friend from California. And what a let down; it seemed it had no significance at all to him. Something that had burned deep in

my heart since the age of thirteen seemed to escape in a moment's revelation, and I wondered why I'd imprisoned myself for so long. All the hiding, the burying of feeling – all of it had been unnecessary. And it had come at great cost, imprinting on me a general secrecy in all things, and a reserve about being truly known.

I'd read so many books about the gay scene that I knew what to expect when I went to my first meeting of the graduate gay-and-lesbian association at Penn: baptism by fire in a 20<sup>th</sup> century version of a Napoleonic salon, with socialites vying to out-do each other with rapid-fire puns, scathing ridicule, and withering put-downs, and a level of sophistication that would likely cause my old class-consciousness to reemerge. I'm sure that my head was shaking as I walked in, my bony six-foot-six body flopping as usual; I felt ridiculously tall and self-conscious; I was sure everybody was looking at me, judging me, even laughing about me and criticizing my clothes. But when I finally lifted my eyes to glance furtively about, there were small groups of guys in cheerful conversations, none of them about me (probably). The reality to them was that I was just another new guy walking into their club. People even started talking to me, and if they possessed rapier wit they kept it to themselves – at least on this occasion.

I developed an instant crush on one of the first men who talked to me, a baby-faced man named Randy. That never went anywhere, despite my moon eyes. Phillip, an Australian art-history Ph.D. student who was, bizarrely, doing his degree at Bryn Mawr, an all-woman university, kept catching my eye in the meetings, or at dinner afterwards. He was vastly older than me – thirty, but he laughed at my jokes, and always ended up sitting next to me at parties: it was clear what he wanted. So I gave it to him, and now I had a boy-friend, of all things, just weeks after first revealing to anybody in the world

that I was gay (with the exception of a freaky Freudian psychiatrist in London, whom I'd visited in desperation, when I was at college, who'd attempted to persuade me that if I used him as a surrogate father figure, my homosexual feelings would dissipate.)

I was never attracted to Phillip, and I was intimidated by his needle sharp reflexive gay wit. (He was the soul of a party, sending people into fits of laughter while he imitated Krystle of *Dynasty*, in his Australian accent, puffing up his shoulders to imply 80's padded shoulders.) But there was something on my side of the bargain: youth and high cheek-bones. I knew I had power over him, despite his verbal control, and I delighted in the attention he gave to my body, attention which I scarcely pretended to return. We had an easy relationship on the whole; the only time we ran into problems was on a trip to Boston where I felt so battered down by his non-stop barrage of pointed comments that I found myself punching him hard in the arm. It was just a big a surprise to Phillip, as it was to me; but not for long; he slashed me across the face with the New York Times, and berated me into intense shame about having reverted back to the little boy method of winning a fight.

I got my hair cut and it changed my life. (No, this is not lifted from a commercial for Vidal Sassoon.) For years I'd been cutting my own hair, very badly: just your basic basin cut, with a parting. You can imagine how badly this went down with Phillip, so he paid for me to get a proper hair cut in a salon (needless to say they hadn't had salons in South Shields so the entire concept was new to me). I'd also, by now, had my teeth fixed American style: my lower teeth shone in a regimented row, while a bridge restored the gap in my smile due to the childhood accident. A few days after my hair-cut, I went, with eager curiosity, with Phillip and the guys from the gay & lesbian association, to my

first gay club, a gleaming, chromed-and-mirrored subterranean space called Kurtz, on Chestnut Street. I had no real idea what to expect, since my only imagery came from the gay novels I'd torn through, most of which had seemed to take place in the utopia of 70's Fire Island. In reality it was disappointing at first; no raunch, not even anybody with their shirt off.

I greedily eyed a cute, little button-nosed Italian-American, wearing a black spandex t-shirt which clung to his muscular chest and biceps. He turned round suddenly and smiled, and I looked away in vast confusion. But as the evening continued, even I had to admit that he was interested in me. I looked at myself in the mirrors lining every conceivable wall space, trying to see what he saw in me, and, to my surprise, I saw for the first time a handsome, strikingly tall man with broad shoulders, strong cheekbones, wide blue eyes, and, of course, 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!"

The boy's name was Vincent, and he was the original Italian ... well I'd say "stallion" but in reality he was more of a toy horse given his height. After having been fucked by a short Pilipino, serviced repeatedly by a lanky Phillip, I was finally going to get the chance to see what it was like to be with a sexy guy. (I do hope Phillip never comes across this book.) I ran into Vincent at the regular gay & lesbian dance at Penn, and invited him to come down town (to "see my Christmas tree", I think, was my line of invitation.) This happened not long after I broke up with Phillip (Our break-up was completely amicable: Keith: "There's something we should talk about." Phillip: "Yes?"

Keith: “I think we should break up.” Phillip: “I agree ... (brief pause) ... did you see last night’s Dynasty, wasn’t Krystal fabulous!”)

My first night with Vincent was one of almost unbearable eroticism; for the first time, I enjoyed another man’s body. On our first real date, a few days later, we went to see “Moonstruck,” and I remember not the slightest plot point since all my senses were alive only to the touch of his fingers gliding over my left arm and hand. But it rapidly became apparent to me that Vincent and I weren’t a good match, especially after I declined his invitation to join his family while he competed in an erotic dance competition at the gay club, Kurtz, where we’d first met. (His dad was going to video-tape it.)

(Since then, Vinny has continually cropped up in my life. Years later, when I was jaded and more sexually self-confident, I came across him dancing on a pole at a dive bar in Philly, on a return trip there after I’d moved to San Francisco. We walked back, on a sweaty summer night, to his house in South Philadelphia to have weird sex – he got turned on by standing on my feet. A couple of years before I moved to Los Angeles, we came across each other on a dating web-site, and had one more try at understanding each other, over a period of a few weeks. I realized what a profoundly decent and caring person he was, but stronger feelings didn’t develop, so I pulled away once more, hurting him. Nowadays, with our past happily behinds us, we see each other occasionally at clubs – he lives in Laguna Beach – and get on like a house on fire.)

I met Shaun when I least expected it, on the tail end of a rotten Saturday night in a Key West, an always empty club I didn’t frequent. I hadn’t even intended to go out that night, but my squinty-eyed, mischievous friend Philip had dragged me out in the same

nice clothes (rust-brown corduroy pants, and a black turtle-neck – it would be a few years until I'd learn to dress like a gay man) I'd worn that evening for a dinner party.

Philip left the club 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 (to apologize for him, Grace Jones was still popular), which might have made him look severe had it not been the gentleness lack of pretension written on his features. I was mesmerized like I'd never been before. 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. I thought it was adorably sexy the way he nodded his head in time to the music. From somewhere I plucked up the courage to do something I'd never have thought possible: I went up to him and whispered in his ear, "You're beautiful." Then I walked away, almost as if I'd just been commenting on a painting at a museum. (This is one of my advanced wooing techniques – feigning a complete lack of sexual interest. It usually fails abjectly.)

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see that he kept glancing over at me. My eyes widened as I felt him approach and whisper, "Hi, how's it going," in a soft, sexy voice. (Later I found out, disappointingly, that it wasn't my pretty-boy features that had attracted his interest: he'd picked up on something that always intrigued him – a European accent.) We went for pizza, where I stared at his muscular chest, visible underneath the scoop-necked t-shirt he wore under his motorcycle jacket. That night was the only night of my life I can truly say felt like bliss. I'd never known love before, and that was what it was: literally love at first sight. After he departed home for Harrisburg, the state capital, two hours drive away, early the next morning, my mind could dwell on nothing else.

The most appealing characteristic of Shaun's personality was his innocent wonder and curiosity about things he'd never encountered during his upbringing (which explains his interest in my accent, still broadly accented with the "Geordie" of my native North East.) This charming quality was totally at odds with his considerable sexual experience, the exact opposite of my own sexual adolescence. But during my years in London and at grad school, living amongst well-traveled, culturally literate cosmopolites in my international dorm, I'd naturally developed, by now, a patina of sophistication far removed from my working-class upbringing; and this Shaun found compelling, along with my height and my funny accent. (He even occasionally complimented me on my cheek bones.)

He was in a relationship with a man with the unfortunate name of Rick Click, who rented the upstairs flat from Shaun (who owned the building). They were already "on the way out" when Shaun and I met, but Rick was soon completely out the door after he accidentally heard me cooing on Shaun's answering machine.

I was seeing another guy at the same time, Shoji, a young, supposedly straight Japanese boy who never ejaculated, but who'd 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 tears on his face in the darkness, as I kissed him.

Shaun had a beautiful physique, and when he wrapped his long, strong arms around my skinny body, I felt almost melded with him, as though I couldn't tell where our boundary was. 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, especially now that I'm considerably more muscular (at least forty pounds heavier). I invariably have to play the protective role in any physical relationship because of my height. (I just end up feeling silly when a guy tries to spoon me.) Sometimes I remember back to what it felt like being held by Shaun and miss the warmth of being physically protected, something I'll never experience again.

One Saturday morning he spoke to me with a contemplative air, trying to make it seem like it was something that had just come to his head, "You know, you'd look really good if you worked out."

I'd always been so far removed from my physicality that the idea of going to a gym seemed as alien as walking on the moon. It seemed like an almost impossible task to make anything of my sinewy body; yet I've barely missed a week in the gym in the twenty plus years since Shaun first mentioned it.

Shaun usually took his shirt off when we went dancing. That ease of knowing you're sexy was something I wanted, and seeing it in Shaun made me jealous. As I developed muscle tone, I did venture to cut the sleeves of some t-shirts, but that was as far as I was able to go, unable to foresee the strongly-muscled gym-body I'd develop in my late thirties, which, as any of my friends will testify, I'm now overly eager to show off to make up for my years of hiding.

For reasons of alchemy we've never understood (twenty years later, he's still one of my closest friends), Shaun never fell in love with me. 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, while he held me. Then there was the moment which truly sounds like it's written for a bad soap-opera, yet it's the truth: "Go," I sobbed. He told me much later that he cried too, all the way home to Harrisburg. It made me feel better, showing that he did have some feelings for me after all, if not the whole shebang.

I spent a tortured few months afterwards, wallowing in my broken-heartedness, misting up at the sight of anyone in a motorcycle jacket, or over-hearing "Nothing Compares to You" by Sinead O'Connor. I soon made things even worse by agreeing to his suggestion that we start seeing each other "as friends." Yeah, right. One week later in Harrisburg, we inevitably had sex, and then I set myself up for another fall when we agreed that if one of us met somebody else (that is, when he met somebody else), we were free to go; which happened when Shaun met Stephen, a (rather pasty-faced, if you ask me) white guy with whom he spent the next six years. (What did he have that I didn't? He was rather on the short side, and didn't even have a funny accent.)

So I'd found out that men liked me, but didn't necessarily love me. Or if they did love me, like Shoji did, then I couldn't return it. This pattern would hold as I hurtled through my twenties, and then my thirties. Was it an equation without a solution?

## Oh Boy

I was committed now: it was my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and I was standing outside the Stud, the formidably named, long-running South-of-Market gay club in San Francisco, trying to decide if I had the courage to go in. I was a very late bloomer when it came to fashion sense: I was dressed in a paisley shirt and a red cardigan-sweater, looking, no doubt, like I was ready for a cozy night in front of the television rather than going to a gay club; the fact that it was the tail-end of the 80's is not an excuse.

I went in, finally, all 6'6 of me visible in my colorful outfit. My clothes notwithstanding, Gary Green, the slightly older, slim, boyish Brooklynite with a husky masculine voice sitting next to me in the line of guys cruising each other while pretending to watch the pool table, asked me where I was from. (Perhaps my clothes prompted the question; the only other obvious question – this being the dying edge of the reign of the “clone” look – would have been: “You’re not from around here are you?”)

That night, in his flat in the Haight, I had the most adventurous sex I'd ever had (which, admittedly, would not be difficult at that time in my life), climaxing three times before going to sleep. The next day, though, came the rude awakening: he was flying to Mexico to meet up with his boyfriend. I don't suppose I expected we'd date, but it was my first awareness that real boyfriends could have open relationships. (I met Gary years later after I'd moved to San Francisco; he was still with the same boyfriend, and still as sex-hungry as ever; they wanted me to go home with them together.)

In my last few years in Philadelphia, my grad-school friends 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 a younger, sexier John Malkovich, whose élan

and slicing wit I felt unequal to. I wondered, in fact, why he was my friend; what he saw in me. I was too unaware to realize that I had a different sort of sophistication than he did. Perhaps, also, he felt charmed by the sense of innocence I apparently projected (or so a few people had told me)

I suppose I was the butt of Greg's jokes and criticism. Next to him, I felt a bit squashed. He had the same ability to shame me as my dad, and the same power to make me feel inferior as my brother. It was a similar pattern, come to think of it, as in my relationship with Phillip. One long weekend, we went to Manhattan to stay with a friend of his, and, just before going out clubbing, after I'd spent my usual ten minutes showering, shaving and doing my hair (my gay gene was still dormant at this stage), he looked at me, eyes goggling, and asked me, smirking to his friend, if I was always so quick with my "toilette". He said that I had to love my body, meaning, I assume, that I had to, like most gay men, adopt a plethora of grooming products. (Even now that I unequivocally love my body, I don't spend hours in the bathroom, although some days it might take me about twenty minutes to deal with my increasingly difficult hair, wrestling with a flat-iron to straighten the curls I bewilderingly developed in my early forties.)

You can call me naïve and innocent all you like, but even to this day I don't understand why grown men feel the need to diminish or embarrass others. Perhaps the reason I'm so attuned to not embarrassing people is the fact that I've been so often embarrassed myself.

For years, Kurtz had been the go-to place in Philadelphia, while Woody's was just for boozers. No sooner, though, did Woody's open a dance floor, than the whole party fled the floundering Kurtz. In my last couple of years in Philly, I'd often go to Woody's

with my then roommate, a rather comical, loveable, hard-drinking Scottish bear of a man named Dougal. Around one o'clock, Dougal would unfailingly remark: "It's bargain basement time now," before tottering home. You always saw the same old people in Woodie's. Even a few years later, when I visited for a weekend after having moved to San Francisco, the same – now ageing – faces were lining up at the bar at bargain basement time.

I had to get out of insular Philly. Tiny Center City, for all the history I'd had there, was feeling increasingly claustrophobic. San Francisco, where it had seemed so easy to meet people, beckoned. I shopped myself as a programmer on a two week visit to California, and not only secured an interview with a software company in Berkeley, I nailed it. A month later, in January 1992, I was sharing an apartment high above the Castro, atop a hill with a shining, distant view of the tip of the Golden Gate Bridge from my bedroom window.

My mom had always promised that at some rosy future time my physique would "fill out". I'm not quite sure where she got her information from: by now, I'd developed nice tone, but it wasn't the robustly bulging muscle I admired in other men. Only in the right environment – riding my bike or playing tennis – did I feel sexy going shirtless. I'd hate it when people would tell me that I was skinny, even though they meant it as a compliment. I could consume a whole bag of cookies in one sitting and still retain a concave stomach, something of which I'm envious now that I'm in my early forties

I immediately fell in love with the city, and started making friends furiously. By April, I was in a serious relationship with Xavier, an enchanting, capricious devil of 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?”

I don’t remember the play, but it must have been good, because, without quite deciding anything, we soon found ourselves in a (passive-aggressive) relationship: we were completely unsuited for each other in every way except for our strong 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”. I stormed off, but, since the gay beach is at the bottom of a long hike down a cliff, it was difficult to storm very far before he caught up with me on his little legs to apologize and win me over.

He came from an upper-middle class family and was worldly, charming, witty and animated: a bit of a snob (hence his name Xavier, pronounced the French way, 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.”

As the honeymoon period passed into the fall, we decided – senselessly – that living together was a good idea, and we rented a small, inexpensive apartment near the

Haight. It was an apartment I'd grow to hate: not only were his paintings (most of which depressed me with their tortured subject matter and violent color) all over the walls, but he gradually – perhaps subconsciously to make up for what was missing in our relationship – began to buy plants, which ate up more and more of our precious floor space. Being a big guy, I'd inevitably brush against his precious plants now and again, which provided us fodder for our popular argument: “Mind the plants!” “How can I avoid them, they're taking up the whole fucking apartment!”

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 stoked by his narcissistic manipulation. 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. I have always had this unconscious habit of whistling whatever tune happens to be helplessly lodged in my brain, and I was doing so one day when we were driving to the movies. He asked me to stop, which I did temporarily, only to start up again, without thinking about it, seconds later. He was nasty in asking me once more to stop, and this went back and forth a few times until I stopped the car, got out, and walked off.

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. Staring at his depressing paintings made it that much worse. 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 my jealous imagination had been

couched in reality – he really had 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.)

How naïve must you be to believe your boyfriend's suggestion that he got crabs from the gym? And twice, at that! He always strongly claimed to love me; and perhaps he did: but he also promised absolute honesty, and, as you can guess by the crabs episode, that was a completely false claim.

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, as with Shaun only much worse, I was envious that Xavier could be so free with showing his body, and also jealous of the attention that would inspire.) 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 (even in the early nineties, you could still work out shirtless at his gym), there was no way I'd own up to checking his bag. I was just 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 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. (Decision points: if I could only have done the sensible thing that day early in our relationship when I'd caught him canoodling with somebody at the beach, I might have saved myself almost two decades of intermittent pain resulting from this first depression.)

I hired a feline French therapist. It was my first experience with therapy. While I liked her, I couldn't stand the fact that she asked me imponderable questions like "What color does your jealousy feel like?" Perhaps it's a French thing.

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 free of Xavier's gravity-well, though ejecting, in the process, any remaining faith I had in romantic relationships. I was effectively single for the next ten years.

## Hermit

I wish there was a way I could avoid writing this chapter. In its first draft, it began with extraordinary gloom: “Depression and fatigue were to haunt me in my new apartment in the Castro, then follow me for the next fifteen years.” So, instead, I’m going to try to give the gist of it as briefly as possible, sparing you the grist.

I was a tall, handsome, single thirty-year-old, living peak years of his adulthood in the heart of gay San Francisco: surely I must have had a swinging time? Well, the title of the chapter gives you the answer. I went into a slump, retreated from the world, went at least a year without sex, experienced growing chronic fatigue, and, for the first time in years, allowed myself to get out of shape, putting on a layer of blubber. There, I’ve blurted out most of it in one sentence.

On a lighter note, Xavier had started to stalk me, showing up at my apartment wanting to talk. One day, taking pity on him, I let him in. Once inside, I went into the bathroom. When I came out, he was naked in my bed, grinning at me. I found myself laughing, almost hysterically, at finding myself in such a sit-com 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. Unfortunately. No, I can’t say that.

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. (This was really starting to get nasty.) And I tried to have him deported, calling the INS; I knew Xavier was working illegally in a restaurant. “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; obviously Agent Johnson had not been terribly effective.

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. The whole episode has, however, provided good material for boyfriend stories over the years.

Unhappily, my real bitterness about Xavier combined with my fatigue and loneliness had the side effect of making me turn against the gay community. Although I lived in the middle of it, I felt excluded by it, and finally, I even started to turn against San Francisco itself, the jewel of my heart. I'd arrived here with such a sense of wonder, and now felt alone.

## Webcam

Michel was a humorous, gentle, hook-nosed, skinny Belgian I'd met playing badminton at UC Berkeley. In the winter of 1999, he invited me to stay with him in Brussels, a pretty, cobble-stoned, altogether rather boring city, home to much of the EU bureaucracy. Michel and his boyfriend, Evert, took me on a day trip to ancient Bruges, expecting that its beauty would make up for unprepossessing Brussels. Normally, I do like pottering about cities and towns that are new to me, although I'd rather do it without biting winds, and, quite frankly, prefer to do it by myself. I was awfully tired, and used the excuse of diarrhea to shamefacedly dash for the rest-room each time we entered a tourist destination, so that I could rest, and avoid having to walk about quite as much. Evert and Michel had also planned on taking me out for dinner that night, but I bailed out, this time being forthcoming about my (real) fatigue.

There remained a few frosty (both metaphorically and meteorologically) days left to my stay, and, still feeling contrite, I went with Michel, in a snow storm that admittedly put Brussels in a prettier light, to a warm, welcoming restaurant. After ordering, Michel told me, in his quiet way – but from a position of unassailable moral advantage – that he'd concluded I was a selfish person.

It's a weakness of mine that I'm not always able to parse conflicts I have with a friend, even though I find it easy to play Cassandra with others' disputes. When I'm in the dock, I usually take the prosecutor's side, and that was the case with Michel's accusation: As I flew home the next day, I couldn't concentrate on my book because I was replaying the scene with Michel, a lovely man, with the most honorable principles: if he said it, it must be so.

When I got home, I undressed and looked at myself in the mirrored closet door. I was the heaviest I'd ever been – 215 lbs. (Remember I'm 6'6 – just telling you so you'll form an accurate mental vision. Of course that comment reveals my self-consciousness as surely as this one uncovers my introspective nature, which eats upon itself... Oh shut up Keith.): There was still some definition in my body, but my whole frame seemed to be clothed with a layer of baby-fat. After a few moments baking in self-hatred, I decided Michel was right: I was a bad person; some sort of change was called for.

The body seemed the most obvious starting point, since muscle fiber is more plastic than the moral alternative, and I can afford to pay somebody to make up for my lack of physical energy. This is how I met exotic, fascinating, emotional but vulnerable Cecilia, a physical trainer who draws people seeking to understand her into an extended orbit of friends and – like all lesbians I know – ex-girlfriends. Her glamour and mystery came from her upbringing variously in Greece and Paris, her diplomat father and chronically neurotic St. Tropez based mother, her equally neurotic sister who had not spoken to her mother in years, and her sayings such as the one attributed to her by her dear friend Larry: “When the scent of attar wafts off the Bosphorus...” I'd seen her many times at the gym, and had always wondered about her. She looked intellectual and severe, with her square, black-rimmed glasses, dark hair, and high cheekbones, reminding me, for some obscure reason, of Nana Mouskouri – perhaps it was the glasses. During what would become six years of physical training, she not only whipped my muscles into shape, but also became a good friend, after the initial year or two where I was effectively paying her to be one of my few friends.

But lifting weights wasn't going to get rid of the baby flab, and I couldn't face the boredom of a tread-mill, and, of course, was way too self-conscious to do one of those silly classes. So I tried running, choosing a path through the woods in foggy Golden Gate Park where nobody could see my feeble efforts (I couldn't do more than ten minutes at first). But after I'd worked my way up painfully to thirty minutes, I found myself enjoying it, particularly in fine weather where there was an exhilarating freedom to the feel of the wind. It has become a life-long habit, although any day now I'm expecting my knees to go on permanent strike against the undue stress of having to carry my 200 lbs pounding along mud trails. (And sure enough, as I rewrite this chapter, that moment has arrived, and I'm now restricted to running on, of all things, a tread-mill.)

The baby fat melted off and dispersed as rapidly as it had formed, revealing a set of abs, and, under Cecilia's regimen, my muscles began to shape themselves into groupings and proportions that resembled a physique. I became proud enough of what I thought of as my skinny, sexy form to run shirtless on days where the San Francisco fog hadn't flooded the park.

I had a dorky website which pretended to be about a movie called "Keith Finishes his Website," and there were several characters, all played by me, including Nellery Queen, the detective, and Lady Bubbles Plantain de Jardin, whose disturbing photo contained my facial features blended, using Photoshop, into a photograph of Lady Diana. The site came with blurbs such as "Suggestive of new directions in tuber nurturing" by the *Quarterly Journal of the International Potato Institute*. (The lame innocence of it all has been excavated from the Internet graveyard at [brokenwhole.com/oldsite/main.htm](http://brokenwhole.com/oldsite/main.htm)).

After having sex with a guy who had a webcam, I became intrigued with the idea of doing one myself. You could have your webcam listed easily in a directory for gay men, and on the evening of the day I bought the thing, I went online, not doing anything in particular, but just working on my computer, shirtless. I found the most flattering camera angle possible, positioned my desk-lamp just so, and agreed with myself, with surprise, that the camera seemed to like my shirtless form. I could never have guessed how much this would affect my life.

The next morning I woke up in the unexpected position of being a gay webcam star, with emails from fifty admirers. Over the next few weeks, the attention I received swamped me with a powerful sensual energy I'd never felt before. Every time I was on camera, even if all I was doing was 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 scarcely 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.

Webcams were on the cusp of being commercialized, and I caught that wave just in time, albeit by accident. Initially, I didn't have paying members, despite many requests (mostly in the form of one-line demands accusing me of being a tease). I enjoyed spending time with the little community that attended my regular morning chat sessions; they were (self-selectedly) polite, urbane and (mostly) closeted. For me, the thrill was sensual: I was turned-on (I'm a little bit embarrassed to admit) seeing myself like that in the cam image on my computer, and even more so knowing that others were glued to my web-page watching the same thing. Okay, perhaps I am a tease.

Despite the limits on what I would do on cam, there were enough people attracted to my innocent-looking displays of sensuality to push me into the top ten gay webcams, causing my ISP's web-server to crash. The only way I could stay online and retain my audience was to move to an industrial-strength server via a new ISP, something that wasn't in my budget. To pay for it, I had to start a paying-members-only site offering, of course, special privileges to payees. And since my sisters will hopefully read this book one day, I'll not say anything more about what those privileges were.

The webcam laid the basis for a greater self-acceptance of my body, as well as a need to feel connected. I would not, most likely, ever have been able to get over my debilitated poor body-image without it. But the online friendships based on my web-site were not based on equality; it was a trade between youthful sensuality and the private needs of closeted older men outside of major cities. Through most of the time I ran the webcam, I remained lonely; my fatigue never waned, and the depression returned in strength.

## Recovery

I'm afraid we're back to loneliness, fatigue and depression in this story; by this time in my life, I could go whole weekends without talking to a soul. And depression left me feeling as though it were a metal bar through the top of my head. I'm trying, as I write, to find humor in the situation, but it's not coming to me.

On the bright side, it was the dot-com boom. I almost had money to burn since, in addition to my salary, I was making \$3000 a month from the webcam (and yes, in case you ask, I did declare this income on my tax-returns.). I lived in 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.

On the down side, there was virtually no street life on weekends – apart from shoppers in the Embarcadero Center – and I could walk through a modernist landscape – a landscape used in *Star Trek the Next Generation* as part of Starfleet – via skyways and plazas, all the way from my building to my usual take-out restaurant, Fuzio, several blocks away, without once hitting the sidewalk, or seeing another person. The host of Fuzio was a kind, skinny, flirtatious Peruvian; he seemed to find me glamorous, perhaps because I wore a motorcycle jacket, and was relatively youthful in this grey-haired neighborhood. Did the webcam make me glamorous? I wondered what he would think of me if he knew that he and my fans sometimes provided the only cheerful interaction of my weekend.

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 on 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, I thought fancifully (I'd just come back from Florence) with the same mixture of strength and vulnerability.

Since it was so early, and he was alone in the park, he couldn't have been trying to show off his body. I was probably the only person watching him, and I was already late to work after spending half an hour following him.

Moments like this left me feeling even more cut off from life: I both wanted to be with the skateboarder-boy, and to be him; yet here I was, feeling old, tired and sick, staring at him for hours. He seemed near enough to touch through the telescope, yet everything he represented couldn't have been 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. Magically, there was a Safeway next door, and, once again, I could get there without hitting the sidewalk, and could even bring everything home in a shopping trolley. I had to find something requiring no preparation that supplied grains, fruit or vegetables and protein: I settled on string-cheese, canned pineapple, roast-beef and Ryvita. For months.

Oh, there are other depressing things I could go on about here, but there's nothing you need to know to help the story along during this rather bleak period, so let's just cut to the point where I decide that I've had enough of it. It was a sudden decision, made probably out of revulsion. I'm not usually one to believe in the New Year's resolution approach to fixing your life. Nonetheless, I sat up in my bed one morning, and listened to the irritating screech of motorcycle engines on the Embarcadero and the quaint rumble of a cable-car. I surveyed the two huge monsters in my life: chronic fatigue and depression. I swore to myself that I'd take them on.

The fatigue was more than garden variety tiredness: it was a thickness to my breath; an almost indescribable, barely decipherable hint of influenza in my chest; a subtle ache to my limbs; and eyes that easily watered. It was a very odd set of symptoms that I was taking, once again, to my doctor. I was scared he would privately label me a hypochondriac. (Anti-diagnostic hypochronicitis anxiety – or AHA – would make a nice name for this. You can imagine me reciting my conditions and the doctor looking at me speculatively, thinking “ah ha.”)

Because of my AHA, and, being so self-conscious, I rarely went to the same doctor twice for my fatigue. But this time the need for change outweighed my AHA, and I got my kindly doctor to rack his brains and give me the name of somebody who might actually have some experience with people like me. There was an “ah-ha!” moment – it turned out that there was just such a person barely on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, a real, live specialist in chronic fatigue syndrome, named Jon Kaiser. I've no idea why my doctor hadn't volunteered it earlier. (Maybe he had, after all, thought that all I was suffering from was an acute case of AHA.)

A week later, Dr Kaiser, a kind-faced, gentle, methodical man took a scholarly account of my symptoms – oh what a relief to be taken seriously, ran some tests, measured my body-fat index, and signed me up for highly specialized blood-work and stool samples.

I was in a state of high anxiety when I returned a month later for the results: I knew that if he couldn't help me I'd be practically out of options. Dr. Kaiser, briefly ran through the results, and ... there was a long wait while he seemed to be further perusing them, a wait during which my heart sank: he was probably trying to find a nice way of saying I had AHA. He looked up and said, as if in passing, that 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. I had a condition; I had joined the ranks of the chronically sick recognized as such by the world. And don't conditions usually have treatment options, even a cure?

But CFS is a mystery, Kaiser went on, nobody understands its causes; perhaps it was caused by accumulated stress or trauma. (Was he playing with me?) It has to be attacked empirically and holistically, he said, treating the illness not as a single entity but rather as a cluster of hard-to-spot degradations of bodily systems. He used the example of a collapsed cupola – a dome supported by columns: you can't rebuild it without rebuilding all of the columns individually. Only, in this case, to extend the metaphor, each column was made of different material. Rebuilding ... that sounded hopeful. His treatment methodology was to uniquely treat each below-par system, while carefully monitoring them and adjusting things as necessary. Together these formerly withered columns of life would rise, and my chronic fatigue should dissipate. In my case there

were four columns to treat: bacteria in the gut, hormones, nutrition, and the familiar sodden neurons; I had to radically change my diet, take specially formulated vitamins, DHEA capsules and pro-biotic supplements, and rub my balls every day with testosterone cream. I took to the new regiment with a zealot's ardor.

But the black dog of depression was still barking, and I needed a protection against his vicious bites. I was talking to Cecilia, my trainer, one day about her chronically controlling mother. I'd met her a couple of times, and, although, she carried herself with the same intriguing exoticism as Cecilia (she lived in St. Tropez) and her husband – Cecilia's father had been a diplomat, I could see the terribly damaged person underneath the tailored surface. I mentioned to Cecilia that I'd read something in the New York Times about "narcissistic personality disorder" (NPD) – perhaps that's what her mother had. I subsequently read a book on the subject, and found myself wondering if I too had NPD. (I suppose I must have a little bit of hypochondriasis – there was only one of the symptoms of NPD that I truly identified with – difficulty in feeling empathy.)

I'd already roped in some of Cecilia's many medical providers – her masseur, chiropractor, dentist and GP (Cecilia and I are both Capricorns, birthdays two days apart – unlike Cecilia I don't believe in astrology, but the two of us do have a lot of similarities); so why not her therapist as well: she could assuage my fears of having NPD, while giving me some "pointers" about depression (I didn't believe much in therapy as being capable of doing more than that. I'd already spent a lifetime analyzing myself, what could anybody tell me that I hadn't already considered?)

Erika proved to be a wise, worldly, cat-loving, slightly earthy-crunchy ex-actress, licensed ... hypnotherapist. Trust Cecilia, with her belief in all things spiritual and

paranormal, to take an unusual path to the summit of self-understanding. I always picture Erika, now, wearing a cardigan against the chilled air of the hills above the Castro, drinking a cup of tea, her eyes wrinkled in a smile. I was a little wary of the thought of seeing a hypnotherapist, initially; it seemed such a wacky San Francisco idea, right up there alongside the ubiquitous thought-reading dolphins. But hypnotism was soon demystified for me, and, in any case, proved unavailing to my ever self-aware psyche, which meant that our sessions took the form of good old-fashioned talk therapy. I began to feel that we were very slowly – very, very slowly such was the strength of my protection mechanisms – peeling an onion: the onion that represented the layers of accumulated armor against painful emotions. Maybe we could even uncover the stinging smell of trauma that led gradually to chronic fatigue.

At this time in my life, I was looking back on my adulthood as being full of depression and loneliness, revisionistically forgetting the rich friendships of my college and graduate-school years, and the first exciting year in San Francisco. 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. In my memory there was no sudden, explicit change back then; no one moment when I remember changing from an 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 sat shivering in the assembly hall, feeling friendless and alone. And I was indeed almost completely friendless throughout my time at that school, at an age where you begin to form your long-term perceptions of who you are.

But what caused the sudden change already extant on my first day? We discussed the possibility that that early change in my personality could have been 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. Even at that tender age, I already knew that I found boys attractive, but I hadn't connected it with the barely understood concept of homosexuality. Nonetheless, I had lots of what I liked to call "girl-friends," all of whom I imagined crying at my departure. I write this so that you can see I was a very different boy than the person who takes up a lot of this narrative.

That night of leaving school, with the long North Eastern summer twilight stealing horizontally through our windows, and the black-birds singing through the open windows, eager to play outside with my friends, 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. This explains all of the no-teeth smiles in photographs of me at college. And, of course, this being England, no thought was given to the idea of rescuing the dental situation.)

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, to my satisfaction at least, 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.

Erika and I never had the Judd Hirsch-Timothy Hutton moment. I question, honestly, how many people ever have that sort of sudden breakthrough. But I'd bet that most people have cried in therapy more than I have – I can recall only two occasions in many years.

Rather than breaking through, we chipped away: we talked practicalities: why did I never meet anyone at the gay gym, for instance? I've always enjoyed the sheer pleasure of looking at sexy men, and practiced it with gusto at the gym, not, I hope, in an overly lascivious way (although I'm not sure that the phrase "overly lascivious" has any meaning for the Golds Gym I attended in the heart of the Castro.) My stares, however, were never returned.

It felt odd. I'd grown up believing I was extremely unattractive; but since then I'd accumulated enough evidence through my webcam and boy-friends, and had made sufficient modifications like getting my teeth fixed, a decent haircut, and a gym body, that I felt a degree of self-entitlement: attention was due, I felt, even though a healthy residue of self-doubt remained. Attention, however, was not forthcoming: nobody would make eye contact with me, I told Erika.

She asked the obvious question: had I ever tried to make eye contact with men at the gym. Of course, I began to splutter, before a thought hit me; no, I continued sheepishly: I guess I look away – immediately when I perceive myself about to be targeted by the swiveling cone of vision of one of the hot guys I've been ogling.

But I had a backup defense of my contention that nobody found me attractive at the gym: I might not make eye contact, but if they're turning to look, they couldn't have missed the rapid evasion of my glance once my staring registered; they'd thereby know of my interest, so now it was all in their court. I knew my argument was sounding increasingly weak.

Desperately, I flailed, it must be my height: I'm too tall. Surprisingly, Erika opened her eyes wide and half-closed a crafty eye, as if to say, finally you're hitting the

jack-pot. But the height thesis she was proposing was quite different than mine: rather than being repulsed by my height, maybe people were intimidated. In fact, they might be so intimidated, she said, that they think you're the guy with the most social currency: the one that should be secure enough to do all the work of making first-contact.

I instinctively recoiled at this idea; I might have grown accustomed to believing that I could be attractive, but it was just impossible for me to believe her idea about what was going on in my interactions – or rather lack of interaction – at the gym. That kernel of self-doubt never departed entirely; however, with time, I did begin to test her hypothesis, and, stretched over a long period of time, had little blips of behavior, smiling at somebody unexpectedly, thereby opening a door.

I don't really know why I'd ever left the Castro. Erika and I talked about it. It had felt like a home, when I lived there; a community, seeing the same faces every day, knowing every piece of chipped paint on store-fronts. Well, maybe not the last one. But at the same time, I had this enormous, romantic love with San Francisco, and all its neighborhoods. This explains, in part, why I had ten apartments in my first eight years in the city: I wanted to live on Russian Hill with its antique stores, peace and quiet, quaint lanes where you suspect to see Olympia Dukakis tending to her marijuana plants, and views of the bay; or in the Marina, since I loved to run shirtless along the stone jetty that ended in the always silent wave organ – feeling the cold wind against my skin – entranced by the whiteheads on the choppy sky-blue water of the bay, and then continue my run along the green grass fronting the Marina parking-lot (where Mr Spock and Captain Kirk were strolling in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, and Spock said “Would now be the time for a colorful metaphor?”). I especially lusted after the extremely hilly

Telegraph Hill, but it was way out of my price-range, parking was a mother of all bitches, and there were, in any case, very few apartments.

I even felt an attraction for the back of the financial district, between the Embarcadero and North Beach, with its modernist towers, sci-fi floating walk-ways, and the majestic, grey, stepped facades of the Embarcadero Center. I've already talked about my twelfth floor eerie there, over-looking the bay; a place in which I sought refuge a few months after the tumultuous end of my relationship with Xavier. I felt there was splendor to living there, even glamour, and yet Erika was right: it was not a neighborhood for a depressed individual; it was, in the end, soulless. It was time to move back to the Castro.

I cried a little the day I slowly withdrew from the view, on my moving day: I didn't know if I'd ever have that view again (a fear that has so far proven true, and is likely to stay that way since I now live in Hollywood.) My huge new two-bedroom apartment on Caselli Avenue was the antithesis of the studio: it was a garden apartment, with low ceilings, underneath a victorian. But it was a curiously interesting apartment, with odd, narrow walls topped with teak-wood in the main space, dividing it into a study, kitchen and enormous living area, with built-in, cushioned, wrap-around bench-seats (perfect for the seduction of first-dates) under a corner of windows. The bedroom, however, was always cold and dark, slightly musty, and even a little bit scary. I woke up in the middle of the night, once, when a dark mass the size of a small mouse scuttled rapidly over my arm onto the floor. I leaped out of the bed with a shriek, my hair on end, my skin in goose-bumps, my heart pounding. I never found out if it was really a mouse, or much, much worse, a ghastly spider.

The big day arrived: with trepidation, I set off for the gym, one fine Spring day, wearing the uniform of gay gym bunnies everywhere, an “A-tank-top”, (or “wife-beaters” as some call them; the British call them, “vests”. What Americans call “vests”, by the way, the British call “waist-coats”, which now, to me, sounds very quaint, especially since you’re supposed to pronounce it “westcuts”.) Why was this such a big day for me? It was medicine against the bitter memories not only of my sweater-wearing childhood, but also my fear of wearing even t-shirts well into my adult-hood. I was no longer feeling sickly in the mornings, and over the previous year or two, had had more energy for pushing heavier weight at the gym; this and the hormone supplements were giving me what I thought might finally be a tank-top body.

That first time I went to the gym dressed like this came with mixed reviews ... from me. To start with, I felt immensely naked as I walked in the door; but since nobody seemed to be staring at me as if I had no clothes (everybody else was, in any case, similarly dressed), that feeling of acute self-consciousness dissipated quickly. I worked on my biceps downstairs, close to the mirrors (which I later realized fall into the category of “always flattering mirrors.”) Close up, I could see my more muscular body as I hadn’t seen it before, and, more excitingly even, a couple of rapidly averted stares in my direction briefly registered. But there are other types of mirrors: upstairs, I suddenly saw myself in a full-length mirror from a long distance (why do they have to have so many mirrors in gyms?) Because I was so tall, my muscles weren’t as obvious from that distance; in fact, I thought, I looked rather skinny after all. Thoughts of my conversations emerged again.

Much as getting a real hair-cut, not long after coming out in grad-school, had marked the first stage in believing I wasn't a death's-head on a bean-pole, and buying a webcam had healed some of my bodily self-hatred, another seemingly unimportant decision ignited initially my slow-burning, long-lasting, but ultimately successful propulsion into the real world. My friend Brett and I used to go dancing regularly, to the Stud on beer-blast Wednesdays, where we interacted with nobody, but generally had fun bouncing around rhythmlessly like the white-boy dancers we were. (I didn't even know I was such a bad dancer until 2005, when I saw myself on video taken during a gay cruise, jerking spasmodically, my long arms waiving around like an indecisive windmill. I cringe now at the intervening two years, before my horrible discovery, when I not only danced badly – all the time thinking I had great moves – but also frequently exhibited it broadly by dancing on a podium, all six-six of me.)

When I'd first gotten to know Brett, he was newly out of a relationship with a woman, and before that a stale marriage. I, as, by now, a wise old queen, served as his guide to gay culture. But, Brett, it turned out eventually, really preferred being at home with his chickens (he lived in Berkeley), and tired of the gay scene. Nonetheless, on New Year's Eve, 2002, after we'd seen an art's house movie in Berkeley, I begged him to accompany me to San Francisco's reigning gay superclub, Universe. I hated the idea of going clubbing alone, but the alternative of going home alone, before midnight, on New Year's Eve, was even less attractive.

In fact, the idea was so unattractive that I decided, darn it, to go out clubbing: alone. There, after humming and hawing for a long time, in the walkways above the dance-floor, I plunged downstairs and into the crowd, and took off my shirt, revealing my

new body for the first time outside of the safe realms of the webcam. Later, I met a very hot army guy in line for the bathrooms, and we chatted a while. I didn't know, then that random – non-discriminatory even with the likes of drag-queens or “old trolls” – conversations — in bath-room lines, fueled by drugs that turned people into extroverts, were staples of gay clubs. I left the club that night, regrettably alone; but the seeds of self-acceptance had been sown, and roots would subsequently spread, anchoring me in the San Francisco gay-scene, and – straining the analogy – sprouting a growing belief that I was loveable, after all.

## New York

By the spring of 2003 I was in complete remission from chronic fatigue, 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 these men I'd seen – ogled – for years at the gym, but had never had the nerve to speak to. In the infectious energy of San Francisco gay clubs, social barriers were dropped, opening lines – admittedly obvious – like “Don't I know you from the gym?” formed easily; and brief dance-floor flirtations would follow, occasionally culminating in bed, friendship or both.

This is not to say that self-consciousness entirely deserted me, even on the dance-floor. Case in point, one Saturday night, Stephen (my club-going buddy) and I went to an event called Sugar, at the famous, old club The Stud, and had a riotous evening. The Stud is a tiny little place by the standards of most clubs, with a dance floor maybe 12 feet by 24, filled with a mostly younger, raucous, diverse crowd. I found myself getting a little carried away: at one point I grabbed this shirtless, muscular Asian boy and just started dancing with him. His short, studly friend joined in, along with Stephen, and we became a kind of human sandwich. The whole time, the analytical part of my mind was still going along saying "Woah, Keith, is this really you doing this!" (It seems quaint now to remember my innocently startled reactions, since this sort of behavior is a relatively regular experience when I go clubbing in Los Angeles.)

More important than the new friendships, or perhaps because of them, the statement I'd been running with for the previous few years, but had never quite believed – the old “I don't need a boyfriend to be complete”, was now beginning to feel like the truth; I was ready to approach a relationship as an equal. My mother had once said: “If

you're happily working in the garden, sooner or later somebody will look over the garden fence." (I can't imagine in what capacity she said this to me, since we at no time in my life ever discussed my romantic life.)

When you're a consultant, you have a love-hate relationship with business-travel; do it too much, especially if it's to boring places like (sorry) Richmond, Virginia, a city in which I recently had to spend half my time for six months, and it becomes wearisome, the only up-side being the acquisition of points in loyalty programs. It gets depressing to be sitting in a plane all the time, even if you're frequently upgraded to business-class, watching business executives board with their identical black laptop bags, and then see them all pound away on their spreadsheets during the flight, or play solitaire. From the snobbish depths of my novel by Trollope or James, I wonder at the complete absence of intellectual life in the cabin.

You always hope for, though, a juicy assignment in a sexy city, and that's what fell in my lap in June: six months in location in Manhattan, on full expenses. My company even agreed to pay for the occasional trip home to San Francisco. I sublet my expensive Castro apartment, which allowed me to recover somewhat from 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. And certainly, for the first week or two, since they initially had no real work for me, I felt like

a very expensive ornament. The excitement of living in New York quickly dissipated each day as I'd walk from my featureless apartment, to my featureless office building, where I knew nobody, and sit in my featureless cubicle writing speculative computer programs that might never be used. I was, of course, on a generous daily meal allowance, but I didn't even take advantage of it to sample New York's restaurants, such was my dislike of dining alone in a restaurant. (I didn't want to seem like Katherine Hepburn, dining self-consciously alone in Venice in the movie *Summertime*.)

I haven't yet mastered the art of imparting, in writing, my better qualities in a way that doesn't seem vainglorious, so I'll just get this out of the way: I ended up doing the best work of my career on this project. My company was beta-testing a very complex (unfinished) software product with a big financial institution, and nobody could figure out the innards in the short time in which we had to get the initial process working. Coming to it completely fresh, I was able to get it working in a couple of days, and the halo effect of that accomplishment stayed with me through what would eventually become a three-year project (although mostly offsite after my initial six months living in New York).

I had difficulties making new friends in New York. As I wrote in my online journal:

*I used to find making friends so easily. Now, I'm either faced with the lack of response; or the other side of the coin, where the person seems eager to get to know me, but I don't feel any excitement in return. It's a little pathological: if someone is charismatic and vital, I hold back, unsure that I can fit into*

*their life; but if they're more average - a little bland - I lose interest. I think what it comes down to, what it always comes back to, is that, deep down, I haven't truly learned to like people, because I still don't like myself enough; it always returns to this.*

In any event I spent a lot of time alone. I worked out hard at the nearby Golds, a loud, particularly sweaty gym where even the girls threw the plates around in a testosterone rage; and I ran regularly on the equally close and relatively tourist-free bridle path in Central Park. Lacking friends with whom to go clubbing, I mostly stayed home, or went to see a lot of art-house movies. It was ironic, I thought, that I had the best body I'd ever had, now that, for the first time in a couple of years, I wasn't showing it off regularly either on cam or in clubs.

I wasn't, however, a complete recluse. I did make a couple of friends – Chris and Phoenix, and I dated a fair bit, learning, in the process, about how different people can be merely because of their location. I'm thinking of Brian, who fell into the easy to categorize “Chelsea muscle boy” group. We'd originally planned on going for a drink, but since it was raining when I arrived at his beautiful apartment building – or maybe by his design to fast-forward past the opening salvos, he invited me up, and we sat on his sofa and chatted for a couple of hours, while I tried to avoid staring at his beautiful, silky biceps.

He was, at the same time, exactly what I expected, but also, inevitably, more than I'd anticipated. Yes, he was self-involved – In fact, I don't recall that he asked me more than one or two questions about my life; yes, he frequently went to circuit parties round the country; yet he admitted to being shy and uncertain when it came to meeting men,

and he teared up when he described a circuit party in Montreal which had commenced, in the Olympic Stadium, with an immense carpet of candles surrounding a huge Aids ribbon.

The date with Brian never went anywhere, but there were others, and I found it interesting to observe the big differences between the gay scenes of San Francisco and New York. To begin with, people dressed differently in New York: you'd still see guys in t-shirts, but they were more likely to be expensively funky, and, unlike aggressively masculine San Francisco, there were also guys wearing long-sleeved shirts by high-end labels, and sleek designer pants. Then the ethnic mix was distinctly different. In fact, in the Chelsea and Midtown bars, you seemed to mostly see white men. And although most of the younger men obviously worked out, they frequently didn't somehow seem to own their muscled bodies: you'd see an intellectual, grad-student face strangely attached to a muscular torso, and the two didn't seem to fit.

I was becoming friendly, with Chris, a charming, smart, tall and strikingly handsome guy, originally from Trinidad. I liked him personally immediately, but wasn't strongly drawn to him physically. But one night, at the Roxy dance club, we inebriated ourselves quickly during the two-drinks-for-the-price-of-one hour, and danced together, our heads inches apart, grinning at each stupidly. He looked great in his jeans, and suddenly I kissed him – it felt natural, if spontaneous; but I don't think I was ready, nonetheless, for his revelation, whispered in my ear, that he'd been interested all along in more than friendship. I still didn't know if I was genuinely attracted to him – it could be an alcoholic mix of friendly affection and the feeling of his hard, brown-skinned body against mine. I hoped that I wasn't playing with his feelings.

After that night, we didn't talk for the next few days, and both of us, I think, were pondering our next move. Finally, I called him on Wednesday, and we chatted about nothing in particular for twenty minutes before I finally said: "should we talk about what had happened on Saturday?" There was a deep intake of breath from Chris. "I knew that was coming." And inevitably, our talk left us both where we probably would have been had we not discussed it - in an undefined relationship, but open to whatever might come.

We went to Provincetown together for Labor Day weekend, sharing a King-Size bed, and had sex for the first time. But things stubbornly refused to click. I knew I had feelings of affection for Chris, but I didn't know if the dynamic spark was there. He was a lovely person, but I wished he wasn't quite so serious. I thought he'd wrestled all his life with feelings of self-worth, and, now that he'd reached a certain level of self-confidence, seemed tightly wound, as if scared that being playful would wound his hard won dignity.

Ultimately, my unresolved feelings about Chris dissipated into friendship, and, 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, while also knowing it made no difference.

## Ben

I'd always believed I could never date a doctor. I'm more than ordinarily squeamish, and I imagined my doctor boyfriend coming home at the end of the day with me wondering where his hands had been all day. So what was I to make of Benhur, who spent his days pottering about his lab at UCLA doing ground-breaking research in infectious diseases, and, in general, saving the world? In December, he'd responded, on a whim, to my profile on Planet Out, a gay dating website, after I'd been featured, for some inexplicable reason, on the front page. He certainly didn't look like a doctor: he was leaning back in a doorway, his lean, muscular torso cascading in smooth ripples down to a tight pair of Diesel jeans; and he was grinning, not lasciviously, but rather with the biggest, widest, most infectious smile I'd ever seen.

Hmmm. If I could get past the doctor, there was also the fact that he was Asian. Before you get all up in arms about that statement, let me first state that I was catholic in my tastes for men. At the time Benhur's email popped into my inbox, I'd been through seven boyfriends: two Latinos (although one of them was white Cuban), two black boys, two white guys (the first and most recent of my boyfriends), and one Asian, the little Japanese guy whose heart I'd broken when I fell in love with Shaun. But I just hadn't really had many – if any – exciting experiences, in the dating pool, with Asian guys.

However, there was also his body, and his obvious intelligence. So I exchanged a few e-mails with him; but in the excitement of my returning home to San Francisco from New York, I let things drop. Things were picking up for me; my depression had departed, and I suddenly found myself dating several different guys simultaneously. A sample from

my online journal reveals a startlingly different side to my life than what had preceded in my six months in New York:

*For one reason or another, I've met more than my usual fair share of eligible men recently. But with all of my travel, it's been difficult to schedule dates, and reach any kind of momentum. On Saturday late afternoon, I was finally settling in to San Francisco after two consecutive work weeks in New York, and called J, the Brazilian I'd met at a club the weekend before, to see if we could get together. I got his voice-mail, so I tried D, a guy I'd only talked with online, but who seemed like a great catch. I got him on his cell phone, and since he was in the neighborhood, he volunteered to stop by so that we could meet. Of course no sooner had he rung the doorbell than the phone rings, and the caller-id reveals it's J. I let it go to voicemail and answered the door instead.*

*D is a very tall Asian guy from Macao. I'd only seen one photograph of him - shirtless; he has a long, lean, muscular, smooth torso:- a very similar build to mine. He was extremely cute in person, with a charming, easy smile, and a boyishly enthusiastic manner. He's a research scientist so he's smart too. And it gets better; not only does he love classical music, but he's a pretty good pianist too.*

*My apartment has a corner nook in the living room which consists of two, long, cushioned benches wrapped around an "L"-shaped wall lined with windows. It overlooks neighboring gardens with San Francisco hills as a backdrop. It's a wonderful space for solitary lazing, reading the paper, taking a nap; or to hang*

out with a cute boy and chat. I felt we were instantly taken with each other, and, despite my honorable intentions, within an hour we were rolling around on the floor together. But at the back of my mind was the nagging thought that I'd asked J if he wanted to get together. Meanwhile, my phone was right there in the alcove, its message light blinking red with accusation.

So I tore myself away from D, went in my bedroom and called J back. We made plans to meet up at the apartment of a friend of his around eleven, to go dancing at my least favorite club, Mezzanine. At this point D and I were still at least in our jeans, and I made a last stab effort at keeping our first interaction from being all about sex. I wanted more from this guy. So we went out for dinner, and made plans to get together again midweek.

I did eventually meet J that night to go out to Mezzanine. He had to work early the following morning, so we didn't stay at Mezzanine much past two, and I drove him home. I was tired, still jetlagged from having arrived from New York at midnight the night before, so I told him we'd see each other the next day, because I wanted to get a good night's sleep tonight. But as I drove off, some devil within me said "Why not go to Metropolis?", the club I'd wanted to go to in the first place. I thought, well, I'll just drive over there and see what it looks like. I don't need to go in - I'll just drive past. But of course, I parked, paid another ridiculous \$20 and plunged in, checking my t-shirt at the coat-check.

I hadn't been there more than five minutes before I ran into T, the hot, sweet guy I'd met just before going to England in late December. We danced, and hugged, and yelled sweet

*nothings at each other. But in truth, I was tired. Moreover, I was feeling just a little bit ... uneasy, I guess. I felt that I was maybe reaching a point of just using people (three in one night!), rather than valuing them as individuals. In retrospect, I think I was wrong to feel that way. But that's how I felt that night. So I didn't stay long at Metropolis either, and went home to sleep alone, in my bed.*

*It's a good job all these guys have names starting with different letters - it helps to simplify the story a little. Unfortunately, the story gets more complicated tonight because I have a date with a 2nd J.*

One day, I came across an old email from Benhur, the doctor in Los Angeles with whom I'd exchanged an email correspondence when I was still living in New York, 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. Although, I suppose, judging from my journal of the time, it's not an outlandish thing for me to have said.

I decided to go with a look of masculine sophisticated sexiness; so I offered to pick him up at his hotel in my glossy, solar-yellow Nissan Xterra, a car that virtually screams "construction-site", even though I'd actually never been off road. Well, at least not on purpose. At the same time, I wore Diesel jeans, and a G-Star polo shirt – the latter being ostensibly conservative and almost business-like, but with the tight-fit that comes with that brand. I think Ben had gone through similar calculations since we almost could

have swapped clothes without anybody noticing; apart from, that is, my being seven-and-a-half inches taller than him. I drove him to the Whiskey Bar, in the Castro, a wood-paneled bar with arm-chairs that had pretensions to look like some sort of country club for upper-class homosexuals. We chatted with our jackets on, waiting for the moment when biceps would be revealed. He seemed very bright, well-read, engaging, funny, and easy-going: almost so much so that I began to become suspicious that it was an act. In any event, once his jacket was off, his biceps checked out fine.

I'd made a resolution to not rush into sex on first dates. Nonetheless, Ben was so appealing that if he'd made the slightest hint he was interested in "going for a drink" at my apartment, the invitation would have been accepted. After all, I had, despite my resolution, tidied up before leaving home, artfully scattering a few high-octane books a la Woody Allen.

But neither Ben nor I were bold enough to deviate from the act of playing adult, and I dropped him off at his hotel, receiving a peck on the cheek. I did, however, email him, as soon as I got home, saying that it had been a pleasure to meet him, and telling him, in a less than subtle hint, about the tidied-up apartment.

This was a rare find for me: a very sexy, super smart guy who was into me, didn't sound full of himself, and didn't appear to have any obvious baggage. In March I invented a reason to visit my good friend John-Paul, who, by now, had moved to West Hollywood, and set up a date with Ben Saturday night, for dinner and clubbing. Clubbing, you see, is the best way to be sure of getting somebody into bed, but not wanting to risk getting no sex out of the trip, I shamelessly set up a backup date on Sunday with Kasimir, a sexy Eastern European guy I'd met at the White Party in Palm

Springs the year before. Ben offered to let me stay with him, but I declined (obviously), smoothly lying that I had frequent-stay points to use at the Westin Bonaventure. I mean, I did stay at the Westin, but forked out for the bill myself.

It was a velvety Spring evening as Ben picked me up outside the hotel in his Volvo convertible. He was wearing a flattering, tight white long-sleeved t-shirt that showed off his lean muscular torso. But unfortunately he ran slap into one of my least favorite gay stereotypes by playing club music on his CD player. Could I accept that a mind that could tolerate nothing but dum-dum-dum might also co-exist with more admirable qualities? (It wasn't until we lived together that I found out he also has a wide collection of Mozart CD's. That's also a little unfortunate however, since I'm more of a big late-romantic orchestra guy myself – Mahler and so forth; or “bangy-clashy” music, as Ben calls it.. All of Mozart's pieces tend to blend into aimless tinkling as far as I'm concerned. Whenever Ben plays me something I'm clueless to tell whether I've heard it umpteen times before, or this was the first time.)

Ben, who, I now realize, loves the grand romantic flourish, booked us a table outdoors at Yamashiro, an expensive candle-lit oasis set on a slight rise, from where you could see city lights in the heart of Hollywood. Unlike most times in the past, where, if I was having dinner with a severely eligible man, I'd be unable to locate my personality, this night I felt free to be myself with a guy who, by any standards, was impressive. I don't remember what we talked about – although it must have been interesting since Ben has a lot of intellectual interests – but I do remember his infectiously beautiful smile. I'd always had a slight prejudice about Asian men: that they were either too agreeable, or lacking in curiosity. Okay, if I'm to be honest with myself, I'd always felt Asian men

were too conservative in their ways of approaching the world. Ben, however, had a pronounced personality of his own, and as I looked at his sparkling eyes, I felt my loins stirring with interest. I knew at that moment exactly how the date would play out for the rest of the night. (And my foresight was completely vindicated.)

After dinner, we went for drinks at the Abbey, a huge, popular, outdoors, upscale gay bar in West Hollywood, and began to show more obvious signs of sexual attraction: grabbing each other's biceps to emphasize a point – a less than subtle act mastered by many gay men, which makes it possible to more accurately assess the other guy's physique – while meeting eyes lingeringly, and, on my side at least, grinning lasciviously.

After the Abbey, we went back to Ben's house to get ready to go clubbing – the part of the evening, to be frank, we were both looking forward to the most, since it would involve taking our shirts off. I received a mixed impression from his house. On the positive side, we were greeted by two huge, beautiful dogs, Indira and Brewster, and there were a lot of books (many of them, strangely enough, about the Third Reich). But his interior décor was graduate student meets Pottery Barn, and there were surely too many photographs of Scott, his recent ex-boyfriend still on the shelves.

The night at the Factory was even more care-free and exciting than I'd hoped: Ben soon stripped off his shirt, whereupon I grabbed him and told him he had a flawless body. In return he told me I was the hunkiest guy in the club, and we danced in each other's arms and kissed for the first time, a kiss that honesty compels me to say that I don't remember. My silly side was let loose, and I made inane comments to other guys on the dance floor. People smiled, even if they didn't have a clue what I was saying. It was

almost as if the perfect version of me, without all the insecurities, inhabited my being, bringing out all of the sureness, wisdom and warmth reflective of who I felt 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 – which, at that time, isn't necessarily saying much, come to think of it. 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 imagined what it would be like to live here instead of in my beloved, cold San Francisco.

I was very tired in the morning, but blissfully so. 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 backup 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, reserving, for myself, the opportunity to enjoy other company.

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 (meaning, inside a week – nothing will keep gay men from their appointments at the gym), 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 felt spotty, skinny and fatigued: weak from a testosterone crash, not at all sexy, and the acne was still there.

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 were completely absent. Ben's friend Bill, who I was subsequently to grow extremely fond of, was as tall as me, but with a towering personality to match his stature, which, in my then state, was completely intimidating. As the rest of 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 (which I later

learned fooled Ben, meaning that I was a better actor than I'd thought). I'd initially followed Ben's lead in going shirtless to the party. But walking down the corridor, I caught sight of myself in the mirrored door of the elevator, and suddenly imagined I saw the death's head on a stick of my early twenties. I rushed back to my room to get a shirt.

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. We went to one pool party, and I recall feeling devastatingly depressed while I forced a playfulness – carrying Ben on my shoulders in the pool – that was infinitely remote. We were supposed to go to one more party on Sunday night, but after dinner, I couldn't face hiding my depression anymore, and dropped Ben off at his hotel. On Monday morning, driving home, I felt intolerably lonely, thinking I'd torched my chances with Ben. 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. Of course I knew Ben was wrong about me being beautiful inside and out, but it was nice that he, at least, thought so.

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 (as if these weren't 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 - 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, which I'd been keeping for several years now. People would develop feelings for me which I, of course, couldn't return, since I knew next to nothing about them. 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 they felt they knew. Hardly an original theory I know; but I think my conclusions about how to test it, and the subsequent results, are original.

I spent the entire weekend scooping up knowledge about him: drilling him, without explaining my motives, about his background, his interests, his family, hoping that somewhere, somehow, I'd find something that would stimulate stronger feelings. The idea was naïve; hopelessly naïve, I thought afterwards. Ben reacted to with puzzled good

nature: he was probably wondering why I'd suddenly developed such a fascination with his family, his high-school experiences, his best friends through the years, and his history with pets.

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 end up at home that night picking up his voice-mail and recognizing shamefacedly that I'd not thought about him once during the day. 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 very well; in fact a little too 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 fathomed the depths of Ben's bravery. He surprised me by again taking the risk of opening up his heart, despite all the signals I was throwing out, sending me, out of the blue, a beautiful card, ending with a quote from a poem by Yeats:

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

As if he didn't already have enough admirable qualities, he loved poetry. I 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 have no pride in admitting that 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) home 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. I was still very strongly attracted to him: his body was everything I'd ever wanted in a man: I told him that I could spend all night licking him.

Nonetheless, 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 gay couple who went to my gym with whom I'd danced flirtatiously several times. One time, I saw them at the gym, and when I walked in, I hesitated, not knowing whether I knew them well enough to stop to talk, or if I should just nod hello in passing. The decision point was upon me before I could decide, so I paused for conversation, my mouth opening and closing for a second, like a gold-fish. I found something obvious to say, but 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 their relationship or something – but I was still easily hurt.

In any event, 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 with a southern exposure. 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. 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."

That night, Bill, Stephane, Ben and I attended Mahler's 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, moving climaxes in all classical music. It represents a break through to eternal life, and has an astonishing power: Mahler instructs the organ, which joins the orchestra only for the final pages, to play with all stops, and the accompanying chorus to sing "Auferstehen!" (rise up!) "mit höchster Kraft" (with highest power). Not sufficed with that, he has bells ringing too (and in his own conducted performances, often used actual church bells).

As we joined the standing ovation which inevitably follows this work's conclusion, I watched Ben anxiously for his reaction, and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw him wiping tears from his eyes (I didn't yet realize how frequently and easily he's brought to tears.)

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 bantered with each other about whether we'd reached the stage where we could use the "B" word. Before we went in, we each took a deep breath, and decided to call each

other boyfriends. At this point, the full implications of the day hadn't really sunk in to my infatuated mind.

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. As horribly corny as it sounds, if I attempt to recall those moments, I could swear there was nobody else on the dance-floor but us. Ben 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 took a deep breath, and decided it was time to tell him that I'd suffered from depression for many years. I felt suddenly that perhaps telling him this was not, after all, a sign of weakness, but maybe more of strength: that I'd been able to live with my depression, not letting it control my life.

That night I went inside 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 sex in the morning was more passionate than ever. I even cried, which was hard at first for me to understand. My therapist suggested that tears of happiness are a misnomer: they're actually tears of sadness at the sub-conscious 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 perfect, warm day. I was a bit of a tart, and left my apartment without even taking my shirt with me, in stark contrast to that first night at the White Party when I'd had to go back to my

room to get a shirt after seeing myself looking so skinny in the mirror. 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 not only in the feeling of the sun on my bare torso, but also in the new-found, wholly unexpected reality: I was in love for the first time in at least ten years; and it was the first time that I was in love with somebody who also loved me. It was even now just sinking in that somebody wonderful loved me. I felt walls collapsing all about me as I thought through the implications: 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 impossible: I wasn't alone anymore.

The following weekend was July 4<sup>th</sup>, so I made spontaneous plans to fly down to Los Angeles to spend it with Ben. It was a luxury to be unafraid to presume being completely welcome for a weekend, contrary to my usual behavior of being scared to force my way into somebody's life. The sun shone gently all weekend; I took homoerotic photographs of Ben in his back yard, his shirt open, his torso sprayed with water, turning me on so much that not only did I almost drop the camera, I had to stop taking photographs while we went back to bed for yet another long sex session.

The evening before I left, we had sex yet again. I lay face down, my hands gripping the base of the headboard, while Ben lay on top of me, kissing my back and shoulders. I started to sob. I felt like I just wanted to let go and cry like a baby. But it wasn't really for joy; I felt like I was crying for myself: that my emotions, my tenderness, my vulnerability - they'd all been bottled up since childhood. Why had it taken me so long to uncork them? The weekend inevitably ended 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, for a time, until other dynamics came into play, even managed to smile at people in random situations: I'm sure people at work must have wondered what had happened to me.

I was called back 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 an outdoors restaurant in World-Wide Plaza, unsuccessfully hiding the fact that we were holding each other's hands under the table: even straight couples smiled at us - well the female halves of the couples, anyway.

I was forever wishing I wasn't such a complicated, moody, introspective person. On Saturday morning, despite my happiness at being with Ben, a chance observation in the mirror (comparing myself unflatteringly to Ben) left me feeling suddenly awkward and unattractive. Ben showered me with compliments all the time; and I had no doubt at all of his utter physical attraction for me - not just because of what he'd say, but because of how he behaved. Yet despite all this, it refused to sink in to my heart, and I was still vulnerable to flash-backs to the earlier, body-hating image of myself.

My depression didn't last for long, however. As it had for every weekend we spent together, the weather was unusually fine. Three days in July in New York could have been stifling; instead it was warm but not humid, with fluffy white clouds studding the sky. 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, and Ben and I went clubbing at the Roxy. Inevitably we had lots and lots of sex. One night, we ordered room-service, and completely stuffed ourselves, then had passionate sex anyway.

I became, for the first time in my life, something I thought was completely out of my system for ever: a romantic. I uncharacteristically bared my feelings, writing Ben a poem when I was in New York for work shortly after Ben had left. I wrote to him:

*I think you must have cast a spell on me. I hope I don't  
wake up from it! You've turned me into an emotional wreck. I got  
to work, and wrote this poem, and dissolved into tears as soon as  
I'd finished it. I had to hide myself in the corner of my cubicle  
so nobody would see.*

*I'm sad again  
Now you're gone  
I sit here at work  
Grey rain brushing the windows  
And dream of your lips brushing mine  
Of your breathing as I caress you  
Of your eyes staring at me in the darkness  
Of your voice whispering in my ear*

*Of you inside of me - both body and mind*

*I'm a fool for you*

*But a happy fool*

It was during in these summer months that we went through our first challenging time together: Ben's ex-partner, Scott, called him to say that he'd been diagnosed with HIV. There were numerous mini-crises, most of them happening when I was down in LA with Ben. Ben was really Scott's only remaining support, and he felt helpless to do anything other than get pulled into Scott's dramas. I realized that Ben was a very emotional person – he cried freely – and yet, at the same time, he was strong enough to help Scott get through his latest emergencies. Things reached, however, fever-pitch when Scott, a social worker, began to take party drugs daily, leading him to behave inappropriately with one of his teenage charges. He was arrested and charged with child molestation. I was in New York when Scott was arrested, and Ben had to stand for hours on two consecutive days, in very hot weather, in a long line, with the family-members of true criminals, before he could see Scott for the first time. Both of us knew that Scott was incapable of hurting anybody, and that the charges were groundless, but it took a massive emotional and financial support effort from Ben over many months before Scott was finally cleared. The episode ultimately fastened our relationship even more securely, since it showed me more clearly the extent of Ben's compassion and strength, while Ben was able to see that I was somebody he could count on, even in a situation like this, where it involved somebody that, for obvious reasons, I'd have preferred no longer being part of Ben's life.

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 to room together. I told him that I'd also be spending some time in Paris, and felt a little bit sand-bagged when he invited himself along. Lord, was this too much too soon?

Since it was his birthday just before the cruise, we agreed also to spend a few days together in Venice. I needn't have worried, though, about feeling hamstrung by being together for so long in a situation where there lots of pretty boys: 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 together 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. In fact, I almost regretted that Ben was heading home before me, while I continued on to Prague and Berlin with my Parisian friend Jean-Marc.

I had my first relationship crisis with him on that cruise. It was, predictably, over something that had come up in all of my previous serious relationships: clothes. I was always acutely uncomfortable around a swimming-pool: I'd almost drowned in one, when I was a kid; I'd hated swimming class with a passion, due to having to expose my skinny body to my peers; and even now, although I'd long since come to accept that I no longer had an unattractive body, I couldn't bring myself to feel sexy in swimming trunks (or in a "bathing costume", as I still called it: almost twenty years after leaving England, there were still a few British phrases populating my vocabulary.)

I steeled myself for the first pool day on the cruise, and felt awkward and unhappy despite my having chosen pool-chairs a whole deck away from the actual pool. Ben had no idea what was going on in my head; he wanted to watch the silly pool competitions, which not only could I not watch without being frozen in an inability to spontaneously have a good time, but which I also actively denigrated, finding their appeal almost impossible to understand. Ben was wearing almost white bathing trunks, whose sheer appearance, particularly when wet, particularly upset me. When Ben said he wanted to move closer to the pool, I couldn't take any more torture, and retired to our state-room "to read". It was the modern day equivalent of an eighteenth century lady claiming a headache as an excuse to avoid company. When Ben later came to the cabin to find out what was going on, I couldn't hide my distress from him, and I found myself, to my surprise, burying my head in the pillow, crying, but unable to express the complexity of my feelings.

Rare moments like that aside, 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 burnt but available for each other. Almost from the time we fell in love we knew instinctively that this was life. 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.

## **Interlude I - 2006**

### **Part 1 – Riding Lexapro; Spring to Summer**

*Several months before going crazy...*

Now that I'd been living with Ben in Hollywood for over a year, the honeymoon ease of our relationship had been eaten up by my own insecurities coupled with loneliness and insufficient occupation. The long drought in project work from my company went in tandem with the deep trough in my spirits, and, by late March, I was ready to trade orgasm for mood, by trying one of the few anti-depressants – Lexapro – I hadn't yet tried. My sex-drive had never been affected by depression. I was inordinately proud of my morning erection, particularly because of my vast age, and I knew that Lexapro would render my libido obsolete. It was either depression or suppression, for SSRI's had the effect, in my experience, of making orgasms ... well ... less orgasmic, if you could even get there to begin with.

For an upcoming project that will later loom large in this story, I maneuvered my way into a training class in Mexico City. It was highly convenient that the flight there was shorter and cheaper than the alternative of taking it in the Baby-Factory (otherwise known as our world head-quarters in North Carolina), but nonetheless I was surprised when my boss agreed to the idea.

On my first night there, I had dinner on a beautiful, warm evening in the courtyard of the Four Seasons, where I was staying (since it was fortunately positioned right across the street from our office in the Torre Major, the tallest and most prestigious skyscraper in Mexico.) I called Ben while I waited for my appetizer, wheezing only

slightly due to the Distrito Federal's acrid air, which even the scent from the vases of impressively arranged orchids failed to mask. I was in a sparkling mood, and was beginning to wonder if the Lexapro was already whispering sweet nothings to my neurons.

Next morning, I was an extremely tall white guy – in a class full of sweet, industrious Mexicans – capable only of pidgin-Spanish, including the classic phrase “un pocito mas.” Naturally, I felt “other than,” standing out like a sore thumb as I'd always done, being the tallest, skinniest, most awkward kid in any group. At the lunch-break on our first day, my fellow students and colleagues invited both gringos out for lunch. I declined; I could see the naturally generous friendliness – typical of middle-class Mexicans – written on their features, and knew that I'd feel wretched sitting with them at a table where the only other non-Spanish speaker was the outgoing teacher, a large, cheerful man from our corporate headquarters, who obviously felt himself under no handicap, despite not even knowing “un pocito mas.”

That night, rather than being challenged by my conscience for the sin of hiding in my hotel room, I walked through uncomfortable humidity along the Paseo de la Reforma, which, I seemed to remember from a previous visit years earlier, was a lively thoroughfare. However, no matter how far I walked, through plazas, and past banks and musty hotels, I didn't find any sign of life, unless you counted the little cars that whizzed past going somewhere fun, or the occasional resplendent door-man. Mexico City felt like a big European city shut-down for the night. The cobwebs in my brain seemed to stretch out into the wide boulevard, crawling up the sides of the buildings, robbing them of all color. I trailed back, with extreme tiredness and despondency, creeping up to my hotel

room, where I endured the rest of the evening feeling acutely unhappy, the two more days ahead, including one extra day I'd booked for downtime, promising to stretch into a haze of misery.

By noon on Friday, class was over, and I had the rest of the day and much of Saturday to myself, a moment I'd been dreading since my depressive attack the previous evening. A date with Edith Wharton in my hotel room beckoned; but I knew my pride, not to mention Wharton's heroine Lilly Bart, would berate me if I surrendered to that temptation.

With my brain feeling as if it was water-logged, I walked, guide book in hand, to Chapultepec, the huge park which begins just at the edge of the business district, and began to look around the world-renowned National Museum of Anthropology. Looking at dusty old stuff is not really my thing, but, as a distraction from my own mind, or perhaps in order to look less like the pathetically lonely individual I felt like, I was drawn into photographing both the striking building, as well as its exhibits as artistically as I could. My spirits ticked up a notch.

In the evening, I had dinner with Guillermo, with a worldly, charismatic friend whom I hadn't seen in over a decade. I'd met him in my job at Penn, just after I graduated with my Masters, through my then best friend, Niju, an almost comically smart and attractive Indian woman. The three of us had become an inseparable troika. We'd started playing bridge together regularly, the problem being pulling in a fourth person, which proved frequently difficult since nobody wanted to play with us a second time after seeing how much we argued about every play – sometimes Niju would end up striking Guillermo. My first trip to Mexico City had been with the pair of them, not longer after

my break up with Shawn. By that time, they'd become involved romantically, and I frequently found myself on the edge of tears in the back of the car – when I saw them kissing or holding hands – feeling constantly on the verge of screaming “Get a room!”

Now, years later, Niju was a senior vice-president of research for GE and a suburban soccer mom in Connecticut, married to a balding, traditional Indian man found for her by her parents, while Guillermo was still a free spirit, earning his keep as a professor of city planning. His heart was in his new-found hobby of kilning ceramics. Guillermo, still calling me Keithito, to my secret pleasure, urged me to not hold back from pursuing my own frustrated artistic dreams du jour - at that time I was dabbling in interior design and screenwriting. I can't blame Guillermo for everything that happened subsequent to that dinner, but his was one of the voices in my ear as my mania ramped up that summer, and I came to the (erroneous) conclusion that there was nothing I couldn't do.

That night, I had a couple of fortifying drinks in my room before crossing the street to enter Mexico City's most chic gay club, which I'd discovered the night before when I'd asked the hotel's concierge, out of curiosity, if the sophisticated building across the street was a restaurant. “What a coincidence,” Ben had said in a sarcastic voice when I'd told him earlier in the evening. But my conscience was clear, and, of course, knowing it was so close to my hotel, I was duty bound to check it out, if only in the name of ethnographic research. I did not, decidedly, expect to have a good time, but duty called. The first thirty minutes confirmed my prediction that I'd feel out of place. I wandered around like a lost soul, trying to look curious and happy while attempting to blend in, but doubly visible and therefore self-conscious on account of the vast height differential

between myself and the other customers. Javier, a heavy-set ex-pat now living in San Diego, took up the cause, and I took advantage of the lack of sexual tension between us (at least on my side) to engineer introductions first to a cute girl named Amelie (pretty women in gay bars always know the hot guys), and then to her shirtless friend Jorge, a gorgeous, lean and muscular professional dancer, supposedly bisexual, and frustratingly resistant to my charms. I spent the rest of the evening dancing with Amelie while flirting rather pointlessly with Jorge, and being cruised equally pointlessly by Javier. I didn't leave until four in the morning, despite knowing that I had to get up three hours later to pack, eat, and then go for my pre-booked six-hour personal-guided tour of Teotihuacàn, the huge pyramid complex outside of the city. The bad taste left by my sad Friday evening plodding along the Paseo de la Reforma was beginning to fade.

The next day (or rather later that morning), under a relentless sun, I clawed all over the (not so) ancient monuments for five hours or so, exhausting my enjoyable, heterosexual companion, Joseph, a charming, intellectual high-school teacher, who, like most middle-class Mexicans, was as culturally sophisticated as his American counterparts are not. In the ordinary course of events I'm something of a whiner when it comes to walking through ruins, always wanting to take the easy route. (My excuse is that I don't need the exercise since I run and work out so much.) So where was this insane surplus of energy – after such a late night – coming from? Lexapro seemed the most likely source.

Back home in Los Angeles, though, my mood quickly proved to be as unimpressive as my sexual performance. It seems unfair that the sexual side-effects of SSRI's always come much in advance of any major improvement in your spirits. I still

work up every morning with an erection, and, for the first half hour of waking life, my depression was not immediately discernible; but, despite Ben's heroic help, reaching orgasm was time-consuming, and, if reached, proved something of a damp squib. My depression would descend soon thereafter.

For the second time in a month, I went clubbing by myself, this time at the once-a-year Blue Ball in Philadelphia. (I was there on business, and was as innocent of the timing as I had been of the location of the club in Mexico City.) Once again, I was despondent at the beginning of the trip, despite being back in my old, beloved Philly, and once again the night out on the town had the effect of picking me up.

The next morning, I drove out to Valley Forge to meet with my colleagues on a new work project. I'd never met my project team-mates before in person, and, once I got there, I felt like the new kid in school. Literally. I recalled my first few weeks at college in London, seeing other people – complete strangers to each other – suddenly and mysteriously start behaving as if they were buddies. How did they do it? It was as if I was missing some fundamental aspect of humanity. Part of the explanation, my therapist afterwards told me, is that seventy-five percent of Americans are extroverts compared to twenty-five percent of Brits. I shouldn't feel badly about it. He even said that people find tall, dark silent types compelling (which explains, I suppose, my extreme fondness for Mr. Spock.) Whatever the explanation, here in Valley Forge, the rest of the team chuckled and chatted, apparently failing to find me "compelling", while I sat glumly by myself, feeling familiarly like an outsider, trying, and probably failing, to look perky, but certainly looking tall, dark and silent.

Although I'd made plenty of work presentations in the past with no problem, my stomach was roiling as I sat in my seat, staring panic in the face as my time came to present my guesstimates (time-estimates for each piece of work on my plate) to a group that included my boss, and the director of our business group, a formidably cheerful guy who calls colleagues by their last names as if we were all still in school. Although I was not included in the school-boy camaraderie – tellingly, I told myself, he calls me “Keith.” – I really did feel, suddenly, like I was a child in school again, shivering with fear that I was going to be humiliated in front of the class. My depression rose up in my throat and formed a ball of fear: what if my depression caused my nerve to fail in front of them? What if I froze? My courage was dropping off the edge of a chasm that had opened up out of nowhere.

I was sitting in the front of the class – err – conference room, and was sure I'd be called up first in front of teacher. But the bad boys at the back of the class had to go first, and they hadn't done their homework. After their screw-ups, my carefully organized time-estimates, plucked boldly from thin air, spoke for themselves (good thing, because I couldn't have spoken for them.) My boss' boss called me “Adams” for the first time, which was a very good sign, and I was left to wonder once again how depression had the power to completely upend your perspective.

Under appropriate stimulation, talking with strangers was never a problem, at least on the dance-floor. In fact my problem there was talking too much: I'd come back from clubbing with my jaw muscles positively aching from too much conversation. (The nadir was when I found myself chatting with somebody about the latest Microsoft O/S patches in the middle of our favorite Kelly Clarkson song right after a track in which the

two of us had simultaneously recognized, buried in the mix, the red-alert klaxon from the original *Star Trek*.) But now, over the next few weeks, I noticed that the unselfconscious ease with which I talked to both our friends, as well as new acquaintances on the dance-floor, was leaching into my daily life. For the first time in my adult life, the little observer inside went quiet, or at least stopped commenting about my every action, and I started to feel like a normal person – that is, like somebody who could enjoy things without odious self-consciousness.

I wrote in my private “depression journal”:

*This weekend, I realized on a very deep level that people really like me, and also that I've grown to really like myself. I had amazing, intimate conversations with Mike, Kean, Randy and James separately, and I felt I was able to offer them genuine care and wisdom. Although this would sound unbearably conceited to say anywhere but here, I think I'm seen as an unusually magnetic, bright, sexy, sweet guy. (And to think that I thought it was safe to write that last sentence since my journal was my-eyes-only. My perspective on life was now over-compensating for the years of self-denigration. I wasn't aware of it, but I was already slightly manic – grandiosity is one of the hallmarks of mania.)*

At the beginning of July, Ben and I took our close friend Dean with us to London, where we stayed in my brother's high-ceilinged flat on Harley Street near the BBC World Headquarters, at the top of Regent Street. Brothers do sometimes come in handy, especially if they have a flat within easy walking distance of the West End of London. They were away on one of their trips – to India, or was it darkest Peru – which always

seem mysteriously to coincide with our trips to England. It was Euro-pride in London and we clubbed through the long weekend. Dean – a blue-eyed, extraordinarily handsome guy only a couple of inches shorter than me – and I fought good-naturedly for the attention of cute guys. (I scared away some of his admirers with false whispers of the rotten case of crabs Dean had once given me.) I felt very gay (in the old-fashioned sense).

Ben and I took the train mid-week to visit Manchester (where Ben had been asked to give a talk at the university), Edinburgh, and my home town, South Shields, where I showed Ben the house in which I'd grown up (which looked barely different than I remembered, albeit seemingly much smaller). I didn't forget to show him, of course, the life-size model of the world's first self-righting lifeboat. The weather was beautiful throughout our three day trip, even in South Shields, where the temperature reached as high as fifty-five. (Ben had to buy a thick sweat-shirt.)

On the night we arrived in Manchester, the Pakistani taxi-driver barely spoke a word of English, and had no idea where the hotel was; it was clear, though, as we drove through increasingly depressing red-brick suburbs, that it was in the middle of nowhere. Actually, on the edge of nowhere. (Wasn't there a Star Trek episode of that title?) Ben had booked this hotel through his contact at Manchester University – it was the only part of the trip he'd organized, and apparently he'd screwed it up. Once we found a staff-member – we had to wander around for quite a while to locate him, he told us there was only one “singles” room (“single” in the British sense - literally only room for one person). My simmering anger blew up. Ben obviously hadn't even told the professor who had arranged his accommodations that he was traveling with me. It was unusual for me to have such an explosive temper – its expression reduced Ben to tears. I took the cab to

downtown Manchester, where, pulling my suit-case, I went from hotel to hotel, all of them expensive, and all full, until I found a tiny room without air-conditioning tucked onto the top floor of an old hotel sorely in need of renovation. It wasn't until I tried to go to sleep that I remembered my Dad's advice never to go to bed angry with each other, and texted Ben to apologize for making him cry. Had I known it, the anger was another clue that I was becoming manic.

After we came home, my mood inched upwards consistently, until I went one whole week with no depression at all. I was working very long hours, at high stress but with great effectiveness. What was most remarkable was that I could switch off the work stress almost instantly, and enjoy myself with just as much intensity as when I was working. And I almost never felt tired any more. I didn't know it, but I was on a speeding train. And you know what can happen to speeding trains, often in slow-motion.

## Part 2 – Hot Pants in San Diego; End of July

*Not long after returning from London.*

“I’m going to be a superstar,” I told Ben. In fact, I’d told him several times already. I knew there was almost a manic glee on my face as I said this. I felt better than I’d ever felt in my life. There was an unstoppable, surging excitement quite different than the usual euphoria I felt at gay dance events.

Ben and I were dancing in each other’s arms, his head buried in my chest. I had an undeniable advantage whenever we danced like this, since I could see over his head and play the game of making eye-contact with cute boys.

“That boy over there is looking at you,” Ben said.

I turned to look. “You mean the tall one with the tattoo around the bicep?”

“Yeah.”

“Nah, I can’t believe it.”

Nonetheless, I began to become aware of a presence backing up through the crowd, like an ocean liner docking in reverse. I sneaked a look. Sure enough, it was the tall boy, with his entourage, now dancing with his back to me. I had a few inches on him, so I slowly rotated on the dance-floor, as if trying to look for distant friends, and took in the faces of his buddies. Nobody was making any commitment. We were all playing that game of feigning disinterest because we didn’t want the glaring shame of being rebuffed.

Although we never had any intention of doing anything other than going home alone together, half the fun for us in going out was in engaging in this type of encounter. This one ended as many did; he wouldn’t make eye contact, so I gave up on him.

“Shame,” I whispered to Ben, and we both laughed. It had become a buzz word between us ever since I’d talked about this issue with my therapist David Epstein. It had not come up in the context of dance-floor mechanics, but rather in countering my own long-held shame about my body left over from childhood. I’d built a muscular body to wall in the skinny kid inside me; but that skinny kid was sometimes more insistent than he appeared, and even now could still get the better of me from time to time.

“You’re a good-looking, intelligent, sexy guy, Keith,” my therapist had said. “So I’m going to challenge you. Next time you’re walking along the street, and you pass a cute guy: make eye-contact. I’ll guarantee that nine times out of ten they’ll avert their eyes, and it’s shame each time.”

I had been tempted to ask David: “What if they’re averting their eyes because they think I’m an old troll?” But I held back. In any event, since receiving that advice, whenever I’ve been bold enough to put it into practice, I’ve found it to be true. And in the one time out of ten that a guy meets my eyes, he smiles.

Ben and I circled the dance-floor, looking for fresh meat. We must easily have known fifty friends there from back home in Los Angeles, and an almost equal number of friends from San Francisco.

Ben excused himself to go to the bathroom and I immediately locked eyes on a tight-bodied muscular Asian with a huge grin and smiling eyes. No shame there at all, I thought. I walked right up to him and put my arms around him and started to grind against him. If only the real world was more like this, I thought: imagine how different every elevator journey could be.

We did finally get down to names, home-towns and occupations, but by this time he had his hand inside my jeans. I felt a sharp knock on my shoulder, and immediately released the boy to find Ben behind me, his eyes glaring with unaccustomed anger. He walked off. I tried to grab his hand, but he wouldn't be held.

Ben is not the jealous type under most circumstances. He has let me get away with murder many times. But being Asian himself, his one area of insecurity is when I misbehave on the dance-floor with cute Asian boys. And that I'd let it go so far was inexcusable. I realized that I'd let the intoxicating excitement I'd been feeling all evening go to my head, and had crossed a boundary. I caught up to him, and took him in my arms.

"I'm sorry, Ben. I'm really sorry."

I could see he was close to tears. I hugged him tight.

"That was very wrong of me. I'm really sorry. I won't let it happen again."

We held each other a while, until I felt his arms relax, and I knew his anger – always short lived – had passed.

"Anyway, did you think he was cute?" I hazarded, with a cheeky smile.

He grinned, to my relief.

The next afternoon we had brunch with our closest friends from San Francisco, a pair of couples: Randy and Kean; and Mike and James. We all made a token effort at bleary-eyed sight-seeing before returning to our hotels to disco-nap and get ready for yet another party, the big one, held in a field at the San Diego Zoo. Ben always accidentally calls tea-dances (the name for dance events that start in the late afternoon) "tea parties". Of course they couldn't be more different than their tea-drinking cousins.

“I feel so uncomfortable,” I said while we were walking through the parking lot at the zoo. “I mean, what will all these normal people – tourists from Omaha for instance - think of seeing me dressed like this. You can get away with it, but at my height I’m impossible to miss.”

I was wearing a low-scooped John Galliano tank-top made out of material printed to look like newsprint, and skin-tight, custom-made, extremely low-hung, bright red pants made out of a very thin material. I was not, of course, wearing underwear either.

“They’ll just think you’re with Cirque du Soleil.” Ben turned his huge grin on me; something I never tire of seeing.

“I don’t think they have Cirque du Soleil in Omaha.”

“Good point.”

Once we were safely inside the party area I relaxed, and things began to take off much as they had the night before. Only tonight, my excitement was, if anything, even more inflated. We learned that a friend of ours, Nick, was going to be on a new MTV reality series, “Nemesis.” For some reason this ignited a fuse in me. My mind started to take flight as Ben watched, with increasing worry. Before the end of the evening I’d persuaded him, using the bait of letting him have sex with Nick, that we should make tentative steps towards opening up our relationship to other sexual partners. It was the first time Ben began to worry about my sanity.

For months – even before I’d started recovering from depression – I’d begun to think that the growth I was experiencing in therapy could, at some point, kindle: that, all of a sudden, the strands of my life would come together and I’d finally find the full extent of my abilities. Now I felt that that moment was arriving, but in a most unexpected form.

It had always been my mind to which I'd looked for a path heading in the direction of great achievement. Indeed, it had been the self-dislike grown out of my poor body image that had done more than anything else to block my path. Now, at the Zoo Party, having cut out of my gut all the remaining shards of hatred for my body, I told Ben I was on the verge of superstardom, without quite defining either to him or myself what that meant. What, after all, could I do with my notion that I was on the edge of great things on account of making peace with my body? The answer to that was in the very near future.