

Part 2 – San Diego Gay Pride, End of July

“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, “circuit parties” in the lingo.

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 sweet 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.

Let me make it clear; nothing could ever have happened, except maybe Ben and I would have “dirty-danced” with him. But 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 looked, 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 were averting their eyes because they thought I was a troll?” But I held back. In any event, since receiving that advice, whenever I’d been bold enough to put it into practice, I’d found it to be true. And in the one time out of ten that a guy met my eyes he’d smile.

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, where I’d lived for twelve years before moving to Los Angeles to live with Ben three years earlier.

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 a circuit party, 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.

And I held my promise. We spent the rest of the party either dancing together or with friends.

As in most circuit-parties, we got to bed in the early hours of the morning, around six, had sensuous, eye-rolling sex, then, aided by ambien and xanax, slipped under the cover of sleep.

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. There was a fire in my eyes that would not be suppressed. And which indeed, could not be suppressed for many weeks after this.

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.