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# Sometimes magic

Corey Taylor

*Eastern Illinois University*

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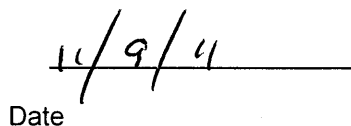
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Sometimes Magic

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(TITLE)

BY

Corey Taylor

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2011

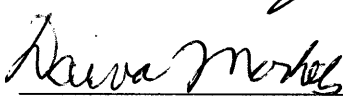
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Thesis Introduction  
by Corey Taylor

As an undergraduate at the University of Memphis, my concentration was literature. Being a creative writer, I felt that a working knowledge of what made good writing good would help me improve my own writing. I desperately wanted to be published, and such a track seemed like the best course to achieving my goals. Studying theory, critical analysis, and other major literary tropes, I learned how to develop an argument and to write about creativity through an academic lens. In addition, I read *On Writing* by Stephen King and began following the steps he took to get published. One of the first magazines he wrote for was *Playboy*. As a gay man, I decided to query the gay versions of that publication. After spending a year developing a relationship with the editor at *Unzipped*, he finally decided to take a chance on me and assigned an article for me to write. I wrote for him for three years, supplementing my income with freelance magazine writing that helped me work my way through college. One of the articles I wrote for an Australian gay culture magazine called *DNA* eventually led to a book deal, and I realized my dream of being a published creative writer.

When I enrolled in Eastern Illinois University's graduate program, I proceeded with my literature track and began a trajectory toward writing a thesis based in literary and historical theory. At that point, I was not only interested in continuing working as a writer, but I also wanted to teach at the community college level. I was under the impression that a concentration in literature would be the best way to achieve all of these objectives. Eventually, I had to put my graduate education on hold temporarily and work full-time. During this hiatus, I got the opportunity to teach developmental reading and writing at Lake Land College as an adjunct instructor, and I learned that a concentration in writing would make me more marketable for a full-time position teaching these disciplines. Also, having achieved what I had originally set out to do by following a literature concentration (determining what makes good writing good), it made sense that I should return to creative writing to continue developing my skills in that area. Since almost all of my creative writing experience, both for magazines and my book, is creative non-fiction, I sought out other writers of the genre on whom I could base choices of style, format, length, and tone.

I had read a lot in preparation for writing my book, so I had been influenced a great deal by the writers of famous biographies such as that of Queen Noor, Hillary Rodham-Clinton, Jenna Jameson, and Tina Turner. These were written primarily in chronological order, as was my biography of Michael Lucas. Therefore, when I began to write my own memoir about how paranormal phenomena combined with my queer sexuality to shape my paradigms, I approached the details in the same way.

When I started writing my narrative, I also began reading more authors who had incorporated the subject matter I was working with in a contemporary memoir style that I

would also come to be significantly influenced by. For example, In *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, author John Berendt wrote about the four trials that antiques dealer Jim Williams underwent after he shot and killed his homosexual lover during a mutual altercation and the ways that Voodoo played a part in Williams's defense and ultimate acquittal. Part of my narrative deals with injustices I have endured as a result of my sexuality, and I wanted to write it in a way that dealt with those biases fairly—that could illustrate the severity of the situations they created without being maudlin or positing me as some sort of victim. Berendt's text helped me strike that balance.

John Neihardt's treatment of paranormal phenomena combined with Native American perspective and ancestry in *Black Elk Speaks* was also helpful as I joined my own experiences with these subjects in my memoir. Neihardt was able to write about them in a way that lent itself to practical understanding of what would otherwise be incredible claims, thereby taking far-fetched ideas and turning them into something widely relatable. By understanding and applying the same techniques of style and structure, I attempted to translate that relativity to my narrative so that I could further analyze and interpret the deeper meanings this combination offers.

Ultimately, I came to a point in the process where my chronological approach was not as successful as I was hoping in terms of readability, flow, and establishing a connection with the reader. In order to reorganize what had become one extensive narrative, I looked to the short-essay format of contemporary memoir so that I could make creative decisions about finding the most meaningful moments within the longer piece, break them apart into stories of their own, and then restructure them based on common themes. For this, *White Field, Black Sheep* by Dr. Daiva Markelis gave me a clear perspective on how to achieve in the more current format what was failing in the sequential effort. Finally, *The Chronology of Water* by Lidia Yuknavitch allowed me to blend elements of sharp vernacular with creative prose to produce the kind of figurative language I needed to craft a series of essays that reveal humor, emotion, strength, and catharsis. The result is much more effective than the chronological layout with which I started the thesis.

By experimenting with time and space, the thematic links between the essays that make up the overall work are more significant and enduring. I was not comfortable with the style change at first because my experience had established what I considered a strength in sequential storytelling. In truth, I wasn't sure I could pull it off. However, by forcing myself to think differently about style, I was able to see that these creative risks are vital to the successful outcome of an original non-fiction endeavor.

SOMETIMES MAGIC

Corey Taylor

DEDICATION

...this is for Emaei



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Daiva Markelis for, first of all, agreeing to direct my thesis; it was a leap of faith she didn't have to take, and I'm really grateful. Once I started working on the project, her feedback was always timely, efficient, and clear, and every suggestion she gave me made me a better writer. She has been extraordinarily helpful and patient with me over the course of the year I've taken to develop this body of work. Finally, her memoir *White Field, Black Sheep* was not only charming and inspiring, but served as a practical source for style and structure at a critical stage of the project.

I want to thank Dr. Christopher Wixson and Dr. Roxane Gay for both agreeing to be readers for me without reservation or hesitation. Dr. Wixson is on sabbatical, yet has provided me with immediate and important feedback. Dr. Gay has been supportive since the first day I met her, having recommended a book that really shows she understood what I was after from the beginning.

I also would like to recognize and thank my bosses, friends, and mentors at Lake Land College, Judy Bennett and Salisa Hortenstein-Olmsted. For the first time in a job, I feel supported and respected for the work I do. Thanks, also, to all my professors at the University of Memphis and Eastern Illinois University who have helped guide me academically, professionally, and personally.

Thanks to Ashley Klinginsmith for all the hours we spent writing at the Love Shack. And finally, whenever I asked my mother for advice, she would always answer, "be happy," and I want to thank her for that.

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*“This you knows. The years travel fast. And time after time I’ve done the Tell. But this ain’t one body’s Tell. It’s the Tell of us all. And you got to listen it and ‘member. ‘Cause what you hears today, you got to tell the newborn tomorrow. I’s looking behind us now, into history back. I sees those of us that got the luck and started the haul for home. And I ‘members how it led us here, and we was heartfelt ‘cause we seen what there once was. One look, and we knewed we’d got it straight. Those who had gone before had knowing of things beyond our reckoning... even beyond our dreaming. Time counts and keeps counting. And we knows now, finding the trick of what’s been and lost ain’t no easy ride. But that’s our track. We got to travel it. And there ain’t nobody knows where it’s gonna lead. Still and all, every night we does the Tell... so that we ‘member who we was and where we came from...”*

*— from the motion picture Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*

## HAUNTED

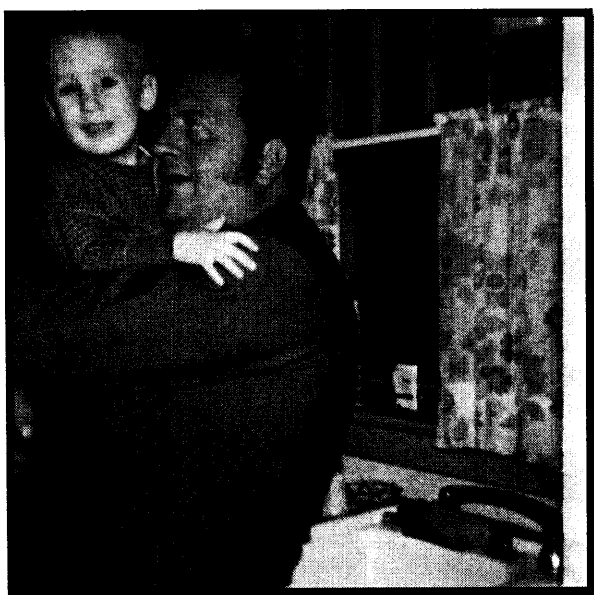
I see ghosts. They're everywhere—all around me. My expectation has always been that at some point their familiarity will mitigate my anxiety and fear. But, no. I still get the same sharp awareness I've always gotten, whether I'm driving alone at night down an abandoned country road, entering the home of a new friend for the first time, or even navigating the loud, dark hallways of a bathhouse full of men. A worse circumstance would be if they were no longer there. While their continuous presence still scares me, they've become companions. I've come to like how they scare me; I would miss them if they were gone. They would take a part of me with them like the passing of a loved one.

I used to work at Wal-Mart. The people who shopped there would bring their family dysfunction and act it out in front of me as if they forgot they weren't within the paper-thin walls of their tenements. They'd unload and push it around in their carts as if it were another gaudy purse or screaming brood covered in tears and snot. They made a show of telling their children to shut up, screaming louder than the kids as if such a victory would produce the spoils of silence. It never worked. Nor did it work when they pulled the brat up by the arm and delivered a sharp hit to the butt, one to the leg, another to the back before slamming him or her back down into the built-in seat. "There! Now you've got something to cry about."

There's a ghost in those words.

Or when they would bring their son up to the cake counter for a special treat and

replace the pink cupcake he had chosen with a “boy” cupcake. No amount of insistence by the boy in support of his own choice would make the embarrassed parent concede. Those moms or dads would peer at me through the tops of their eyes with their faces down as if his selection portended the devastating prospect that he might be queer. And he might be; at his age, I probably would have chosen the pink cupcake. Once when I was about six, my sister and stepsister both got new purses at the mall. I threw a screaming fit (complete with bratty tears and snot) until my doting father agreed to buy me one, too. It was white and had two cartoon chipmunks on it, and I swung it proudly as I walked next to the rest of my quiet family.



**This was the kind of dad who would buy his son a purse if he wanted one.**

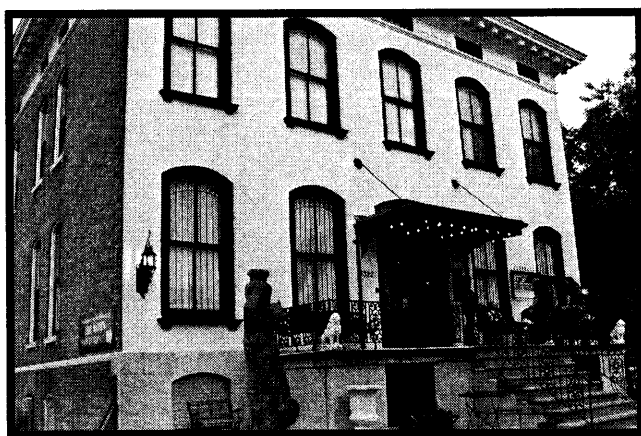
If I ever reach a point where the ghosts no longer scare me, then perhaps I'll have reached a point where the past that they evoke is acceptable. One of my students says that his mom tells him that his friends don't really like him. She keeps threatening to kick him out of the house and sell his dog. His dad complains about all the faggots on television. They even walk right down the

street now, in plain sight, he says as he shakes his head and points his finger. Then he accuses Alex of being one of them. So I asked Alex, “are you gay?” Bisexual, he reveals. I introduce him to the students in the LGBT club at Lake Land College where I teach. They take him to Pridefest in Champaign with them and then dancing at C-Street, the gay

bar. The words of his parents are ghosts, and I remember how it was to be haunted by them. I want to help him escape, and I tell him he needs money for his own place, so I spend the day with him helping him fill out employment applications. He has an interview on Monday.

If the ghosts weren't there to remind me, maybe I wouldn't care when I see others going through the same shit I had to bear, so I want them to stay. Besides, I suppose if I didn't want them around, I wouldn't seek them out.

I got a call from Sheryl, a lady I used to work with, telling me she was going to spend the night at the Lemp Mansion in St. Louis and asking if I wanted to go. *Life Magazine* rated it one of the top ten most haunted places in the United States. Not *Fortean Times*, not *New Age Digest*... *Life Magazine*! I can sort of understand why the word of a mainstream publication over the word of a magazine that specializes in the paranormal gives credibility to an otherwise incredible claim, but it makes me angry and a little defensive when people attack those who believe in paranormal phenomena. And New Age is even worse—it's a bona fide laughingstock. Why? Because it's full of tree-huggin' weirdos. What the New Age boils down to is the power of positive thinking. What the hell is wrong with that? Anyway, Sheryl didn't have to ask me twice.



Lemp Mansion—St. Louis, Mo.

We arrived at the Mansion just before dark, having signed up to take the paranormal investigation tour. Participants are allowed to bring cameras and recording devices, and the tour company provides each party with an infrared camera, which is common for catching evidence of a haunting while exploring in the dark. I had my digital camera, and Sheryl's daughter Janie was our cinematographer.

Being in an unfamiliar place in complete darkness is unsettling enough, but I got the feeling I experience when something paranormal is near me. It's sort of like gay-dar (the ability to tell when someone is gay), only for sensing ghosts as opposed to potential dates.



**The orb revealed on the photograph next to the lamp looks strikingly different from dust.  
This is the Elsa Suite, the room we slept in.**

Before the tour started, the guide explained to us the difference between seeing



dust on camera and seeing orbs (small balls of energy that appear in pictures and on video indicating the presence of a ghost). People often see dust floating in their image; it reflects off the flash of their camera or the infrared video beams, and they mistake it for evidence from beyond. On *Ghost Hunters*, The Atlantic Paranormal Society never uses orbs as evidence of a haunting, so before my trip to Lemp, I was never impressed by floating balls. On both video and on digital camera, we saw a lot of orbs that were so numerous they couldn't all have been ghosts. However, in a picture I took in the room we slept in, an orb near a lamp looks like a cell under a microscope. It has a nucleus, a cornea, and seems to have an energy around it. I tried to recreate the photo under similar conditions and could not. On this particular photo, I do not believe the orb is dust.

On the infrared video, a lot of dust is flying around, in and out of frame, and in a few cases we caught orbs that do not look or move like dust. Dust moves with the flow of air; it doesn't stop... then change direction. At a point approximately 18 minutes into the video, the tour guide's flashlight casts a purple glow on the opposite wall. A brighter image comes into view in the glow and moves from one side of it to the other, then disappears. A second later, an orb appears in its place and trails toward the camera. In a bedroom on the same floor, I was sitting alone on the bed where one of the Lemp sons had committed suicide when the camera bag strapped across my side got tugged. Then later in the evening, it would get tugged a second time.

The most impressive evidence to me is when disembodied voices are caught on tape. This is called Electronic Voice Phenomena, or EVP. Both Sheryl and I left Lemp Mansion with such evidence. I was recording in the Elsa Suite, the room we spent the night in, said to be the most haunted room in the house. I was talking to any ghost who

might be with us.

“Move the bathroom door,” I said, looking in that direction. I didn’t expect it to slam shut; I was just hoping for a small move, maybe a creaking hinge to go along with it. But nothing. “Sheryl, why don’t you ask it? We seem to have better luck when you talk to them.”

“Will you move the bathroom door?” she asked politely. “Is that something you can do?”

That night, we heard no response. However, a second or two later on the tape, we heard the faint voice of a child reply, “No.”

After we finished the tour/investigation, we asked one of the staff if we could get our things and check into the room. We were able to bring our bags inside, but we had to wait to check in because they still had tours going through. We were invited to wait in the bar where they served Lemp beer (the Lemp family had made their fortune as brewers). During our wait, the gift shop closed. I wanted to buy a t-shirt, so I asked the Lemp employee who would eventually check us in what time it reopened in the morning.

“Oh, I can let you in there to get one, and I’ll be here until about 1:00.”

“Who comes in after you?” I asked. Sheryl, Janie and I exchanged looks.

“No one,” he said. “All the staff leaves. You’ll be on your own for the night.”

## REBEL YELL

I was worried, growing up, that my youth would be wasted in submission to the painful rules my parents imposed. I ached to be free. When the movie *Irreconcilable Differences* came out, starring a child Drew Barrymore as a girl who decides to divorce (emancipate from) her parents, I only caught bits and pieces of what the plot might be for the new movie with the little girl from *E.T.* Because of her, I was interested, but every time a trailer for it came on television, my stepmother Judy changed the channel. I guess she didn't want me to get any ideas. The truth was, though, I already had those ideas.

When I was fourteen, I crept out my bedroom window and ran—ran so fast and so hard. The cold night air felt like pinpricks in my lungs. Behind me, I heard Judy come out the front door and yell for one of the dogs to come back inside. Fear sent adrenaline gushing through my body, and I ran even faster. My plan was to round the block and double-back in the other direction and go to my friend Lisa Antrim's house (she was in on the plan, as were her parents). When I got there, I explained the harsh conditions my parents had me under, and I called the police and told them the same thing. I spent a few nights in a foster home before meeting with Dad and Judy to negotiate my return.

During the meeting, they sat there acting as if they were Ward and June Cleaver. "We don't understand what's bothering him," they said with genuine concern. That, and, "Why didn't you talk to us? You know you can talk to us," with a calculated calm, dressed in their Sunday best. The psychologists saw right through it, and I was relieved. I called them on all their shit. I didn't want to be away from my sister, Emalei, so I agreed

to go back home with them. I just wanted some control backed up by the law. I wanted to wear my hair the way I chose to. I wanted to wear a shirt in the summer. I didn't want to have to mix all the food on my plate together and eat it that way anymore (a punishment of Judy's design, I don't remember for what).

After Dad died, Judy swept in and took over everything even though she and Dad had been separated for months. *She* arranged the funeral. *She* made all the decisions. *She* went into *our* apartment and commandeered all of Dad's possessions. Things that were supposed to go to Emalei and me were placed in "storage," and we would never see them again. Dad didn't have much, but the one thing I wanted was a Japanese sword that had hung in our living room since before I was born. Judy's trailer became Dead Dad Central, and she moved Emalei's and my things back in with her.

Emalei was eighteen, and was gone within a week. She had friends she could stay with. However, I was still a minor, and with Judy being the only one telling me what to do, I thought I was legally bound to stay with her. Even though she and Dad had separated, they weren't divorced yet. It didn't take me long to realize, though, that I did not belong there. The limited sense of freedom I had experienced after Dad left her blew wide open, and I ached to express myself. When she and Dad were together, the only things I had been allowed to do were be in band (because it was a class that earned me school credit) and work a job. With Dad, at least I had begun having a social life. And Emalei's social life was in full swing, to say the least. Her friends also became mine. A few days after she moved out, so did I.

The disagreements Judy and I had were frequent and arbitrary. She was trying to regain the control she wielded over me in the years before she and Dad separated, and I

was fighting to maintain and amplify the control I had established over my own decisions after the separation. The last evening I spent with her, I was sitting on the couch in the living room. She was a few feet away from me at the dining room table. She got up and, within seconds, was in front of me with her hand drawn back to hit me. Instead of cowering, I stood up and, taller than she was, glared down at her. She retreated, and the next day I packed my things and joined Emalei where she was staying. Our friend, Lisa Wood, was dating Benji Boone. He lived in Effingham with his parents, Ben and Sue, sisters Missy and Shannon, and little brother Rusty.

In hindsight, Benji's parents were completely irresponsible. They knew we were drinking when we smuggled beer out of the house under my leather jacket but didn't care. They knew we were getting stoned upstairs in Benji's room. Not only would they have had to smell it, but Sue discovered the remnants when I had abandoned a large bowl of popcorn I had mistakenly covered with seasoning salt instead of table salt. Again, they didn't care. At the time, we thought they were the coolest parents on the planet. They found it more important to be friends to their children than authority figures.

I don't know if this approach is bad. I only know that I would not be so lenient if I had children of my own. Ben and Sue cared about their children, and I believe they cared about Lisa, Emalei, and me, too. For example, once during the short time I lived there, I got the flu, and Sue nursed me through it as if I were one of her own. She let me take a nap on her king-sized waterbed because it was more comfortable than the twin mattress I had been sleeping on upstairs. And when I craved chocolate milk, she made sure I did not drink any. "Milk," she said, "will curdle on an upset stomach and make you sicker." Still, their cool parenting meant I could be in complete control of my wild liberation.

The change in me was impossible to ignore, and the principal at school took notice. Many of the mornings that I actually decided to go to school, I showed up with a buzz. One day I was completely drunk after a night of partying and a breakfast of strawberry schnapps. The principal came to Mrs. Davis's door to make the routine announcement: "No one can leave the room until further notice, and the door must be kept closed. We have the drug dogs searching lockers." Everyone in the classroom turned and looked at me.

"I don't have any *on* me," I said with the principal still in the doorway. "I'm not stupid."

My hair was growing. My ears were pierced. Each day I looked more and more like the rock-n-roll vampires from *The Lost Boys*. I was collecting Social Security checks from Dad's death, but they went to Judy's address; my checks were made out to me *in care of* her. Every month when I tried to get the money from her, she withheld it. She knew I was drinking and using drugs; well, she suspected it, and her suspicions were correct. But she didn't care so much about that. Controlling my money was a way to control me. I assumed the checks were made out the way they were because I was still a minor. However, the real reason was because the people at Social Security thought I still lived with her. They did not know that she and Dad had been separated before he died, and she was collecting a check of her own.

I went to the Social Security office with Sue Boone at my side. We explained to them that my checks should come directly to me. I told them I wasn't living with her and that she was keeping the money from me. I also told them about hers and Dad's separation. Since they had been separated for six months or more at the time of his death,

she was not entitled to his benefits. My checks started coming directly to me. Her checks stopped coming altogether—a serious win for me.

I always had money, but I never had to buy alcohol or drugs; they were just always around. At a party on my seventeenth birthday, I got drunk on Purple Passion (a grape drink spiked with Everclear) and ate Chinese food. Emalei, drunk herself, begrudgingly cleaned up my puke. Lisa and I played a game of strip dice that left both of us in the middle of a crowded room completely naked. I was young and cute, but unfortunately no one in that heavy metal crowd would have dared take advantage of my drunken state. Around these men and women, I was sort of in the closet, even though I had crushes on many of the guys and tried my hardest to get some of them alone.

Halloween was another reason to party. So was Tuesday. So was Saturday. Before long, alcohol and pot weren't enough, and Tim Kuhlman gave me my first hit of acid. I could slide those little red pieces of paper, each printed with a musical note, into the photo holders in my wallet and take them anywhere. This period of rebellion was something I needed. I had been oppressed for so long, I needed to be out of control. Something inside me knew it wouldn't last, but when the principal at school called my birth mother and asked her to come get me, I wasn't ready to stop.

The day she came, I begged her to let me stay. In a way, I feel bad about that day because she had spent two hours in a car, her health poor, to be met with a surly teenager clinging desperately to defiant freedom. I made a promise that I wouldn't miss any more school days, which I kept. If I missed any more, I would not get to graduate early, and I wanted that very much. She met Sue Boone, who was on her best behavior. Later, my mother would tell me that she knew Sue was allowing things that she would not have

allowed, but she would also be keeping an eye on me from afar, and could step in again at any moment if things got too extreme. Basically, she trusted me. She allowed me to stay in Effingham and to finish high school at Beecher City.

I graduated in January and continued partying with my friends throughout the spring and summer that followed, but living like that got old fast. Essentially, I lost interest in drinking and using drugs. I was finished rebelling against Judy and my dead father—they weren't there anymore. My life was my own, and I no longer had anything to rebel against. I was ready to have a man in my life, though none of the men in my current circle would qualify. It wasn't for my lack of trying. Although I didn't tell any of these people I was gay, it would not have surprised any of them, so this "glass closet" I was in was not protecting me in any way, and my sexuality began to assert itself more significantly. I would innocently ask the guys I liked to come hang out, and I would plan for us to be alone. It never worked; I was always too scared to make a move once I got them there. Eventually, I changed my mind about how I should approach my sexuality, and knew I needed to be immersed in gay culture if I wanted to meet viable men. I also started thinking differently about the drugs I was doing. I was not addicted to them, thankfully, and when I decided to stop using them and stop drinking, I simply stopped.



*GHOST  
STORIES*

## ABANDONDED, BUT NOT ALONE

When you're a child, decisions get made for you. Sometimes the people who make them have your best interests in mind, sometimes not. Even adults have moments when they must concede to circumstance, which is like having a decision made for you. The year I spent abusing drugs and alcohol in my late teens was a bold attempt at making every choice I knew was the wrong one just because I could make it myself. Perhaps the option to move the family was one born out of circumstance. Perhaps Dad and Judy felt the trailer in Elliotstown wasn't big enough, but I have to admit that when they told us we were moving, I was completely on board.

On October 31, 1979, our family—which at the time consisted of my dad, Bill; Judy; her daughter, Tonya; Emalei; and me—moved to the empty farm house in Eberle, Illinois. Eberle is not a town, but a rural expanse of fields, trees, and county roads that get



The farm house in Eberle.

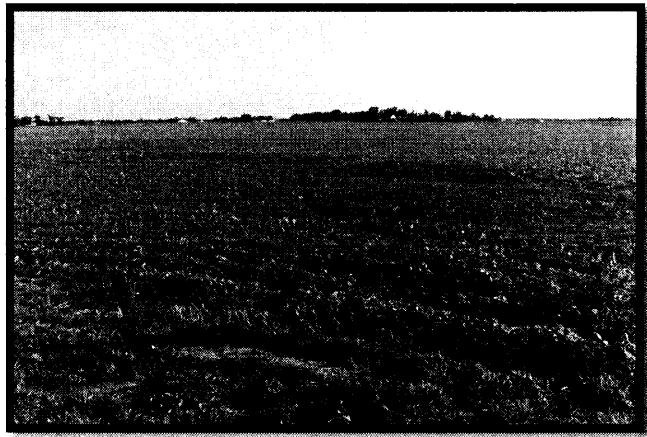
a fresh coat of oil and rock every summer. Our nearest neighbor lived half a mile away. On the property we rented sat the farm house as well as a large garage apart from the house, a large barn, and, in the back, a chicken house. All of the buildings

were old; they looked old and acted old, with doors that were hard to open and close.

Prior to moving in, we had only seen the farm house one time. My first words

upon entering the front door with outstretched arms and the wonder of a nine-year-old were, “It’s so big!” Until we had moved to the farm house, the five of us had been cramped into a small, three-bedroom, single-wide trailer. I could say “mobile home” to give it a sense of dignity, but no, it was a trailer. Living in a rural community at nine years old, I was unaware of the stigma associated with living in a trailer. No one at my small school knew it was anything to tease about. Hell, half of my friends lived in them.

The first time we had seen the house was a beautiful, sunny fall day. However, when we moved in on Halloween, the sky hovered in a thick, grey overcast, and a sharp, chilly breeze swept the scent of dead leaves into our faces. While Tonya and Emalei were in the house



**Eberle—our view of the area surrounding the farm house. A wide open landscape of nowhere-to-run.**

unpacking, I stood alone on the cold, concrete front porch at dusk enjoying the smell of the leaves. At one point I was flanked on either side of my body by independent swirls of wind that, together, seemed to be cradling me. I even imagined, as I stood there in my little maroon coat, that I was controlling the wind. I imagined that I had magical powers and could control the elements. And at nine years old, maybe I could.

The master bedroom was downstairs. The upstairs was one wide expanse of floor, separated by the staircase and a doorway (alas, no door). Tonya, being older, had claimed the front half as her own room, which meant that Emalei and I would be sharing the back half. In spite of moving in on Halloween, I don’t recall anything strange happening that

night. The three things I can remember about the night we moved in was the smell of the leaves, the way I controlled the wind, and the fact that Tonya was thrilled because she found pumpkins and gourds in the abandoned garden the previous tenants had left behind.

In a large number of documented cases, paranormal phenomena centers around one or more pubescent teens or pre-teens. We moved into an old, isolated farm house on Halloween with one family member just past puberty, and two more on the verge. It was a recipe for disaster, even with my wind-controlling magical powers at hand.

I believe that our fear of that house started with just a feeling—an inexplicable sense of dread. In the same way that when someone angry is nearby, their anger has an energy that can be picked up on, we could tell that there was something to be afraid of there. Although mildly so at first, Emalei and I had apprehensions about living in the house that grew over time. Also, in the same way you can tell if someone has walked into a room you are in—even if your back is to the door and you haven't heard them enter—just by how the air in the room changes, we often experienced such sensations in rooms of the house. We knew we were not alone out there in the middle of nowhere.

An old family legend suggests that when the movie *The Exorcist* was originally released in theaters (I would have been two years old at the time), my mother did not have a babysitter, so she took me to see the movie with her. Knowing my mother, she would not have exercised such poor judgment. I watched and loved scary stories, but nothing *that* scary.

I hadn't always lived with Dad and Judy. When Dad and Mom split up, Emalei and I both stayed with Mom. I was too young and not around Dad much when Judy came into his life. I don't know why he fell in love with her, or if he actually ever did fall in

love with her. I do know that he saw her as a mother for his children, maybe because she was already a mother to Tonya. Dad got us every other weekend, like most divorced dads who had children. He lived in Effingham, and Mom lived in West Frankfort. Twice a month, Dad would pick us up on Friday evening, drive us the two hours to his place, then drive us back on Sunday. At some point, Judy and Tonya were there, too.

Emalei desperately missed our father. Mom moved us to Effingham so that we could be closer to him and see him more often, but that wasn't enough for Daddy's girl. She wanted to live with Dad. Mom did not want her to be unhappy, so she allowed it even though she had custody of both of us. I did not miss Dad so much, but after Emalei moved in with him, I missed her. After a great deal of difficult consideration, Mom decided it would be best if I lived with Dad so that I could be with my sister. One Friday, she dropped me off at Dad's for his weekend. She never returned.

The hardest part about this new arrangement was that it was never discussed with me. Mom



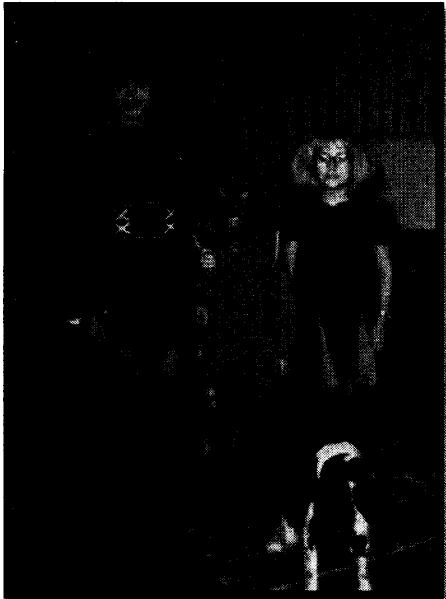
My mother, around the time she left me with Dad.

knew that I missed Emalei, and wanted me to be happy, but I never had a conversation with her that indicated I wanted to move in with Dad. Although I have since come to

understand my mother's reasoning, the Sunday she did not return was a day of sadness and abandonment that I remember as if I were still five years old. If she had asked me what I wanted, I would have said, "I want Emalei to move back here." I would have come up with any solution except the one that was created for me, and without my consent. But Mom thought she was doing the right thing. Ignoring her own wishes—she wanted her children with her—she did what she thought was best for me.

Mom moved back to West Frankfort, and I saw her less and less. Visits turned into boxes of gifts shipped to Emalei and me on a Greyhound bus. Later, those boxes became cards with money in them. Later still, there were notes in the cards indicating that Mom and her husband Sonny were putting money into accounts for us. Judy hated Mom, and loved the fact that she was never around, but often used it to drive home the point that Mom was a bad parent. I was not allowed to want to see Mom. Wanting to do so was a betrayal of Judy, which always caused a fight. Eventually, wanting to see Mom was a betrayal of Dad as well, and so it became easier to concede that Mom was a terrible mother, and I would go ten years without her. Three of those ten years were spent living in the farm house in Eberle.

## UGLY



**One Halloween, I dressed up as the devil. In cowboy boots, red short-shorts, and red leotards. Could there be anything gayer?**

Sticks and stones. I am amazed by how powerful words are. Even though, as a Wiccan, I have a considerable understanding of their power, it's still hard to get my head around the fact that language doesn't only have the ability to push people's buttons, it can also transform us. When ugly words come from someone we are expected to trust—forced to love—then our perceptions of

authority are influenced. Since obedience to authority is ingrained in us as babies, and is

mandatory in every situation and relationship we have for the rest of our lives, what do you do when you know one of your first authority figures is full of shit? You believe her anyway. Then you distrust every authority figure after her.

While I was in my mother's care, if she had taken me to see *The Exorcist*, it would have affected me even though I would not have understood what was going on. If she did not take me, I do not know what formed my fear of possession. I did not believe that the presence I felt in the house was a demon. I did not make any distinction between what might be ghosts, demons, or poltergeists. All I knew was that I felt something there, it felt angry or mean, I could not see it and did not want to see it, and the worst thing it could do was take me over.

My fear of possession did not stem from religion. Mom had been a spiritual person, but was not a churchgoer, at least not on a regular enough basis that I remember being dolled up every Sunday to attend. The same was true after I moved in with Dad. He believed in the Bible, and would often talk about the “good Lord above,” but his use of this line was more of a cliché than a religious reference. He did not attend church, nor did he require it of Emalei or me. Judy and Tonya did not attend. They talked about being Christian, but again, it was more out of lack of imagination. They did not know any other viable option existed, but on more than one occasion they both disdainfully pronounced that they were “probably going to hell anyway.”

My fear of possession came not from my parents’ beliefs, but from television and movies. From as far back as I can remember, I had loved monsters. My coin bank was not a pink piggy; it was a coffin. When you put the coin on top, a skeleton hand would come out and scoop the coin into the security of the sealed sarcophagus. Although some of the comics I read were of superheroes, most were of werewolves and vampires. I *loved*

Dracula; he was my hero. I was so excited in 1975 when Post cereals had glow in the dark monster posters—collect all four! And I did. The last one I needed was the wolf man, and one night Jimmy Richards, a family friend whom I had a little-kid crush on, brought it to the house



The Post cereal monster posters.

Mom was renting on Banker Street, right by the Dairy Queen in Effingham.

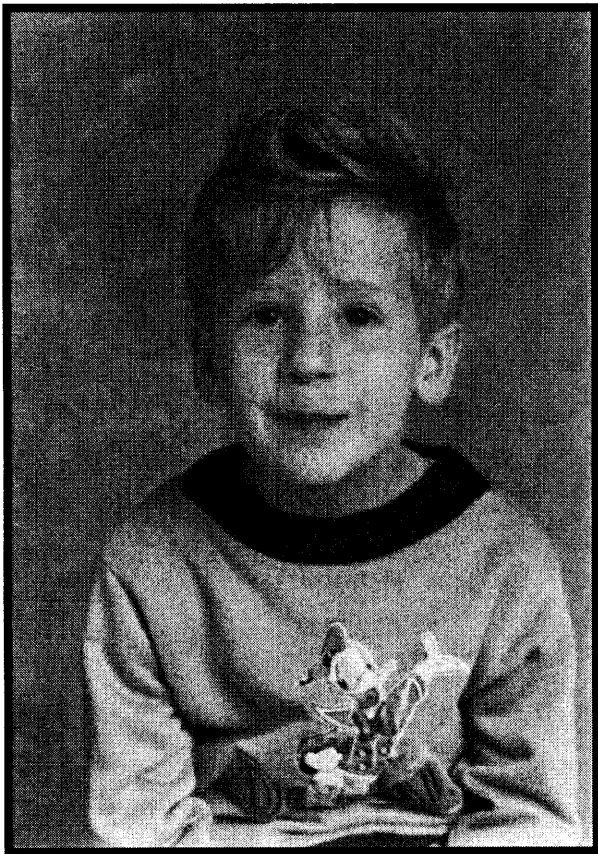


However, after I moved in with Dad and Judy, something changed. I began having nightmares and night terrors. The characters and mythical creatures I once loved now terrified me. Judy put a stop to my watching scary movies and television shows. But I still found ways to get my horror fix. The lady who owned the Village Book Shoppe at the mall in Effingham kept my comic books in stock because she knew I would buy them with birthday money and the money Dad periodically gave me. Dad and Judy never realized I was reading horror comics. They probably didn't even know horror comics existed.

I was never skeptical about supernatural phenomena because I had grown up reading stories about it. My exposure to these stories, television shows, movies and comic books significantly formed my frame of reference of the world. The same is true of popular culture on a broader scale. The movies we see and the books we read directly influence what we think of supernatural phenomena and the values we assign to our experiences of them. Even though I knew as a child that those stories were made up, they made the supernatural so common for me that I could readily accept it. Eventually, my nightmares went away and I began loving my monsters again. But when we moved into that farm house, and every member of the family was directly dealing with his or her own experiences, I knew I wasn't projecting the influence of all those movies and comic books onto real life because the events in the house were happening to all of us.

Emalei and I both told our dad we wanted to move. We told him we were scared of the house and that we felt like we were being watched. He must have sensed our fear because he sat us down and explained to us what our grandfather had told him. In what seemed like a very forced diplomatic tone, he said that there were things that people

couldn't explain, that sometimes after dying, people might have trouble getting to where they needed to go. But he also tried to make it very clear that they were just people, like you and me, and they wouldn't hurt us if we didn't hurt them. The talk did not do much good. We were still scared because even though what we were feeling in the house might just be people, like you and me, we knew that some people were just evil. Some of those evil people were in the house scaring us.



**This is what I looked like the first time my stepmother called me ugly.**

One morning before school, I was in the bathroom combing my hair. My dad had always kept my hair short and parted it on the left side. My friends at school had their hair combed differently, in ways that I liked better. I told my dad I wanted to try different things with my hair. He didn't like the idea, but he was willing to hear me out. I wanted to part it in the middle like my friend Wayne did. I thought it would look good on me, and it would be more up-to-date. He said okay, that we could

try it out. Judy, however, resisted. Dad was a peacekeeper, damn him, so it became a rule that I had to keep my hair the way it had always been.

One particular morning, however, I parted it in the middle. I combed it straight back. I combed it forward, in bangs. I liked doing that because my hair had grown some.

I so wished for long, straight hair (it was the 70s).

“What the hell ya doin’ in here so damn long?” Judy asked me as she stormed in without knocking. (Children did not deserve or require privacy).

“Just getting ready for school.”

“You need a damn haircut. Bill!” she shouted toward the kitchen, “Your son needs a haircut tonight!”

I didn’t respond. I was combing my hair, quickly but neatly, with a part on the left side.

“You and your damn primpin’,” she said. “You think you’re so damn hot. I’m tellin’ ya right now, you ain’t cute like you think you are. You look just like your damn mother. Ugly. Just like her.”

This was not the first time I had heard these words. I had been hearing them for about four years by then, every time Judy caught me looking in the mirror. That word, ugly, hurt me more than almost anything else Judy did to me. With enough time and repetition, even though a part of me knew better, and an even bigger part of me wished it weren’t true, I accepted that word as my identity. That truth actually became inherent, as if it had always been what I thought of myself, in such a way that it is impossible to know exactly when I started believing her.

She used the house as a weapon as well. When she found out that Emalei and I wanted to move, that we were scared of the house, she threw another screaming fit. She loved the house. The rent was \$50 a month, cheap even for 1979, and she looked forward to having a big garden in the summer. Also, she knew we hated it. It was something else she could subject us to.

The fact that I was a pre-pubescent gay boy who resented his stepmother's authority because her rules were at best arbitrary and at worst vindictive has to have influenced me and why I was scared of the house. I had a fear that an unseen force was seeking to control me, which was exactly how I felt about Judy. The situation, from an objective standpoint, seems textbook. I would defer entirely to this analysis if the unusual experiences in the house had remained solely my own. I knew the difference between Judy's abuse and the experiences I began having in the farm house. However, there seemed to be a parallel between Judy's malice and the phenomena around me.

I make this assertion going back as far as the night terrors I experienced before we even moved to the house, even before Judy's abuse became so prominent. I had never been afraid of monsters until I had spent a significant amount of time under Judy's authority. Fear set



Dad and Judy at play in the farm house. *Sigh... good times.*

in only after she became a part of my life. Then, when we moved to the house, the severity of the phenomena seemed to grow in relation to the severity of her cruelty. Was the house haunted before we moved in, or did Judy's presence cause the activity to occur? If it had been her presence alone, then the places we lived before the house and after it would have had the same activity, yet they did not. There *was* something special about that house. On the other hand, Pam Woods, a tenant who occupied the house after our family moved, insists that nothing out of the ordinary occurred during the years that

she lived in the house. It's as if whatever was malevolent in the house was feeding off Judy's energy, and vice versa. Judy had become my Aunty Entity in the post-apocalyptic world that followed my mother's leaving.

## SHADOWS

If I had grown up in a normal family, would my parents have protected me from the things in the farm house that scared me? Would ordinary parents, if they believed me or not, have done something to ease the anxiety I was obviously feeling? I wanted so badly for my parents to be typical. Why should I expect that of them when I resented that they expected it of me? They had their ideas of normal, which I didn't fit into. I had my own ideas of normal, which they didn't fit into. The difference was that I was nine; they were supposed to be a grown man and woman. It makes sense, then, that if I have an example of unrealistic expectations, I should learn to make them of others. Unrealistic expectations are intimidating and unfair, and intimidation lived in that house like a party guest who says all the wrong things to everyone.

The first paranormal experience I was aware of in the house happened to me. Although my sister and I slept in the same room with our beds almost right next to each other, she never heard or saw what I saw. About a month or two after we had moved into the house, winter's crisp chill blew through Eberle and permeated every board and plaster wall of the house and me, too. Emalei and I had just gone to bed, and I was snuggled under my covers because the upstairs was not heated. My eyes were closed; I was working on going to sleep.

Next to my bed was a half-door that led to a small attic space. It was held shut with a clicking latch. I heard the latch open. The door creaked open, then closed again, and I heard the latch click. With short, rapid breaths, I stared at the attic door adjacent to

me. I was waiting to see if it would open again. I hoped it wouldn't, but if it did, I would run for the door and get downstairs as fast as I could. After what seemed like long minutes of waiting, staring with heavy, tired eyes, I finally relented and looked forward, down toward the foot of my bed.

There, standing motionless, was the shadow of a person. I couldn't make out if it was male or female; it was just a human form positioned as if it was looking down at me,



**We were all having unusual experiences in the house by the time this picture was taken. The smiles were lies. And the way they dressed me was hideous.**

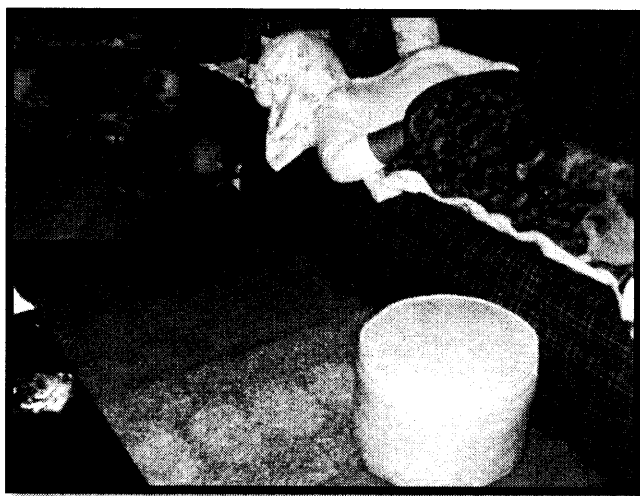
right at me. I believed that if I moved—hell, if I even breathed—it would see me for sure (because maybe it hadn't?). I did not try to get my sister's attention. Talking would give me away, too. I just laid there looking at the shadow, petrified, until at some point fear and fatigue overcame me and I fell asleep.

The next morning, Judy woke us up as she did every morning, by turning on the light and shouting, "Kids! Get up and get

ready for school!" I was still in the same position on my back, snuggled under my warm covers, facing the foot of my bed. The shadow was no longer there. I immediately told Emalei what had happened. She saw the fear in my eyes. She knew I was not kidding or

lying. I asked her if she had heard it or seen it, but she had not, nor would she ever. Recently, she told me that she remembered one night having to sleep in my bed for some reason, and she had made it a point to face the other direction, to lie perfectly still, and to hold her eyes tightly shut to avoid seeing the shadow.

At this point, I went to my dad again. I told him about the shadow, which he dismissed as a nightmare. “You were tired,” he said rationally. “You had to have been asleep.” After that night, for almost every night in the three years we lived in the house, I heard that attic door open and close, and that shadow stood at the foot of my bed, watching me sleep.



**Dad asleep on the couch. Notice, no shadow is standing over him. I even looked for orbs in the photo, but nothing.**

Eventually, the members of my family began to experience certain phenomena together. I often wonder what my dad, or Tonya, or even Judy, may have seen or heard in that house on their own that they never told Emalei and me about because they knew we were already scared and didn't want to exacerbate that fear. I will never know the answer



to that, but once Emalei and I started experiencing phenomena together, and with other members of the family, it became harder and harder for Dad, Judy, and Tonya to deny that anything was wrong.

One afternoon, Emalei and I were upstairs in our bedroom, and no one else was home. The hardwood floor that she and I were mandated to keep swept, mopped, and polished had a ventilation grate that looked directly down to the downstairs hallway below it. This hallway led straight from the kitchen to the bathroom, with Dad and Judy's bedroom off one side of it, and the living room on the other side of the wall on the other side of it.

The game we were playing was interrupted when we heard the door to the back porch open and close. The house had a front door that opened into the living room, but we rarely used that door. The driveway took us closer to the door that opened into the enclosed back porch, so that was the door we used most of the time. Also, by entering on the back porch, we could take off our muddy boots or shoes before coming into the main part of the house. When we heard the back porch door, we assumed that someone else was home (which meant the fun was over, because Judy couldn't understand why we children should waste time playing when she had work around the house or yard to be done).

Emalei and I scrambled to the vent to see who was home. If it was Dad, we would be able to continue playing. Whoever it was did not take his or her boots off on the porch. Heavy footsteps stomped through the kitchen and approached the hallway. The same heavy footsteps came into the hallway. They passed under the grate we were looking through, but there was no one there.

The footsteps continued through the bathroom and out the other side, and they stopped at the foot of the stairs. Terrified once again, we jumped up and raced to the window to see if a car was in the driveway. There was no car. Neither Dad, nor Judy, nor Tonya had come home. Cautiously, we peeked around the corner and down the stairs. No one was standing there.

At least, no one we could see.

Shadows continued to play a part in the phenomena we were experiencing on a regular basis. Often at night, after Emalei and I had gone to bed (our bedtime was 8:00), we stayed awake talking as long as we could. This was usually until Tonya came upstairs and went to bed, or until Dad or Judy came up to check on us. One particular night, as Emalei and I were talking, I looked over toward the stairway, which came up right in between ours and Tonya's room. The light from downstairs shined up the wall in such a way that if someone were on the stairs, it would cast a shadow on the opposite wall and you could see the person there.

We knew this because Judy often snuck up the stairs so that she could catch us talking and yell at us for not going to sleep. This was one of those nights. I saw her shadow hunched over at the top of the stairs, bent in so she could hear our whispers (which were usually whispers about what a bitch she was). "Shhhh!" I warned.

Emalei stopped talking, and I pointed over toward the stairs. "Look," I whispered. "Judy is over there listening in on us. I'm gonna go over there and scare the shit out of her."

As I quietly got out of my bed, Emalei tried to stop me. "Don't do it," she said.

“You’re gonna get us both in trouble.”

I tip-toed across the floor toward the stairs. I reached them, undetected, and paused. Then, I jumped around the corner, bracing myself with the wall, and shouted, “BOO!” But there was no one on the stairs. The shadow, which remained there, began swaying back and forth.

From downstairs, Judy shouted, “I don’t know what the hell you’ns are doin’ up there but you better get your asses back in them beds!”

I ran back and jumped into my bed.

“Who was it?” Emalei asked. “Judy yelled from downstairs. I told you you’d get us in trouble.”

“Emalei, there wasn’t anyone there.”

“You’re full of it,” she said.

“No, I’m not,” I said. “Look.” I pointed toward the stairs.

The shadow was gone.

## PANTY-WAIST

The ghosts I see are bound with heavy chains that are so tight they bleed. Every time a remark is made berating someone for being gay is a link on those chains. Every time someone is scared because of a bully—and bullies are not only found on playgrounds—is another link. Even when I hear a gay person say something wracked with heterosexism and homophobia like, “Yeah, I’m out. I just don’t *advertise* it...” Another link. My haunted mind is filled with the anger of those confined ghosts. And the pain.

As I have described, not everything that scared us occurred at night, and not all of the experiences were as brazen as a figure standing over my bed. Some of the incidents were less conspicuous as paranormal phenomena go, but nevertheless unsettling.



Emalei showing off the animals to some little boy who visited us at the farm.

The sun one early spring day was high in the sky, but the weather was not hot. The fields that surrounded us were bare; no corn or beans offered food for scavengers. No hawks circled the sky to alert others of something dead or dying to

feast upon, a common occurrence with a landscape full of wild raccoons, opossums, and skunks, not to mention our own nasty lot. At one point or another, we had every farm animal known to man at that old house.

We had turkeys (Tonya was in love with the head male, whom she had named Zinky), ducks, guineas, and chickens that grew so big their legs would break. Their huge eggs often boasted two or three yolks. We had hundreds of rabbits every year, which we would sell as pets or food—every year we butchered many of them for ourselves. We had pigs, a bull, horses, and more dogs and cats than you could shake a stick at. Every day, twice a day, rain or shine, in fair weather or foul, I had to make sure every one of them had plenty of food and water.

On several occasions, I had begged Dad and Judy to let me switch chores with Emalei. I would have much rather cooked, washed dishes, and cleaned while she took care of the animals outside and helped cut and carry wood in the winter (in fact, Emalei and Tonya both helped with cutting wood; they loved it). Emalei wanted to switch, too. She would have preferred the outside chores because she loved the animals, but it was crucial to Judy that I handle the “boy work.” She saw my queer sexual orientation burgeoning, and she would do anything to squelch it. Dad could tell I was gay, too, and he didn’t like it either, so he let Judy have her way about this rule.

Resigned to my fate, I was outside taking care of the animals one day while Emalei played with them and helped me a little. Suddenly, the bright sunny day turned dark. In an instant, the sky was overcast, and the sky was screeching. Emalei and I looked at each other, then up at the sky. Out of nowhere, the sky had filled with ravens. The birds were flying so low I thought they might even hit the house. We felt as if we were under attack. None of the birds came down at us, yet we ran to the relative safety of the house. Once inside, we stayed at the window watching the birds. After a few minutes, they were gone. Gone as instantly as they had come. I have no explanation for the

behavior of those birds that day, how they came in such numbers from seemingly nowhere, or why they were flying so low. Why they screeched, not to attack, but almost as if fleeing? The day of the birds was just one more thing Emalei and I added to the list of things about living in that house that was disconcerting.

Every time something happened, we went to Dad and told him. We did not care if he thought we were crazy. We knew we were not crazy. We were terrified, and we hoped, with each incident, that we might be closer to convincing him to move us out of there. It wasn't long before we recognized, though, that he was having unsettling experiences of his own.

My dad's sister, Aunt Aloha, lived in Metropolis, Illinois with her husband, Uncle Alfred. My grandfather fought in World War I, and had fallen in love with Hawaii while he was stationed there; when his only daughter was born, he had honored his affinity for the Pacific islands by naming her Aloha. The drive to her house took about three hours, give or take, so anytime we went, it was an overnight trip (sometimes, if we were lucky, we got to stay two nights). Aunt Aloha looked like a female version of my dad. They were both thick-bodied, short but solid like the trunks of old oaks that are impervious to damage. Their warm smiles were the same, their lips so thin they were almost invisible among the



Aunt Aloha and Uncle Alfred

curves of their round faces. Their thick, dark hair grew in wild, unmanageable waves, which they both kept managed in outdated styles from their youth.

Aunt Aloha was always good to me, and defended me against Judy. She was, for a long time during my childhood, a heroine. Uncle Alfred was quieter. He never got involved in family politics. If he disagreed with Judy (actually, if he disagreed with anything when I was around him), he just remained silent. He smelled like the pipe he



**Grandpa King; Dad's and Aunt Aloha's father.**

smoked, and he was gentle and kind.

Although the three-hour drive was not fun, I always looked forward to visiting my aunt and uncle. I endured the long drive by aggravating Emalei and Tonya—who flanked me in the back seat—with the most ridiculous behavior I could manage. They would get so furious that they would ball up their fists and punch my legs over and over, which made me laugh even more because I knew I was

getting to them. My laughter only fueled

their fury, but by the time we got out of the car at Aunt Aloha's house, all (well, *most*) was forgiven.

One morning, we were awakened so early it was still dark outside. Our bags for the trip to Aunt Aloha's were packed and ready to be put into the trunk of the car. We had had our baths the night before, yet there was much to do before we could leave. Judy

cooked breakfast for us while we got dressed. Once downstairs, she told me that before breakfast I needed to go out to feed and water my dog, Babe. Babe was tethered to a tree on the edge between the property and the adjacent corn field about halfway between the house and the chicken house. The bright light on the pole in the front yard did not shine this far into the back yard. Apart from the dim yellow bulb inside the back porch, there was total darkness. Even the moon seemed too weak to matter that early morning.

With a bucket of dog food in one hand and a bucket of water in the other, I started toward Babe's doghouse by the back tree. After rounding the corner of the house, however, I stopped. Something was not right. I could not see anything, but Babe was whining. Some dogs whine when their boy brings their food to them, out of hunger and anticipation. Babe never did that. She would always quietly paw at the ground, tilt her little head to the side, and curl her lips up into a smile. This morning, however, I heard her yanking at the end of her chain, and she was whining.

I put the buckets down and went back to the house to get a flashlight. However, halfway up the back steps, Judy met me at the door.

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I can't see back there; it's too dark. I was just gonna get a flashlight to take with me."

"You ain't so dumb you don't know the way. You go back there every damn day. Now just get out there and feed and water her and get back in here to eat."

"Somethin's wrong with her though," I insisted. "She's whining and tuggin' on her chain."



“If you’re goin’ to Aunt Aloha’s you need to get your ass out there right now!”

She stayed in the doorway, blocking it so that I couldn’t get in for the flashlight.

“Why can’t I just have a flashlight?”

“What the hell do you need a damn flashlight for? No! You don’t need a flashlight. Just get your ass out there!”

At this point, she came forward onto the steps, forcing me back. I did not fall, but I had to move back down the steps to avoid her stepping on me. She would not yield. I would have to go out there alone in the dark. The prospect of this made my eyes fill with tears.

“I’m scared,” I admitted.

“Scared?! There ain’t a damn thing out there to be scared of.” Her anger was building to a climax, and I knew she would be getting the belt or the board soon, but I would not go. My fear of the unknown thing in the dark far outweighed my fear of Judy. “Get your ass out there right now!” she demanded as she struck me with her open hand.

Now on the ground, I crouched down, trying to make myself heavier as she pushed and kicked at me, and she continued screaming demands at me. My sobs became screams. Finally, I heard my dad at the back door.

“What the hell is going on here?” he wanted to know.

“Your panty-waist *son* won’t go feed and water his damn dog because he’s scared of the dark,” she mocked.

Through tears and hyperventilation, I managed, “I just wanted to take a flashlight with me.”

“You wouldn’t even let him take a flashlight?” Dad said, not hiding his anger. “What the hell’s wrong with you, woman?” He grabbed a flashlight from the back porch, the big lantern kind with the handle that took the large box-like batteries, and came out to me where I still crouched on the ground. He held his hand down to me. I took it and stood up. He walked with me around the corner to the back of the house to where I had abandoned my buckets. Still crying, but with Dad by my side lighting the way, I picked up the buckets and proceeded to Babe’s doghouse.

When we got to her, her whining diminished and she clung to me as I dumped the contents of my buckets into her respective food and water dishes. After I finished, I clung back to her for a moment. “Come on,” Dad said. “Let’s get back to the house so we can get ready and go.” I gathered my now empty buckets, and he and I started walking back toward the house.

About halfway back, I heard Babe tug her chain again, and I heard another sound that I could not make out. Dad heard it, too, because he stopped, turned, and shined the light in the direction of Babe’s tree. I did not see what Dad saw because he quickly turned back around and sped up to almost a run with me. “What did you see, Dad? *What did you see?*”

“Nothing, just *keep moving!*”

He never told me what he saw in the dark that early morning. When we reached the house, he chastised Judy. “Don’t you *ever* let me catch you gettin’ him in a state like that *ever again!*” Shortly after that, we left for our road trip to Aunt Aloha’s house. When we returned home the next day or the day after, Babe was still there, healthy and smiling at me. For Judy, this was a battle lost.

And Judy was keeping score.

## METAMORPHOSIS

When I was a toddler, I know that my dad thought that Emalei and I were perfect. He treated us like every breath he took was for us, and I believe that's exactly how he felt. All the money he earned went toward making us happy. Every bit of energy he spent went to us as well. Living in that house, he began to change. Expressions on the face that once gazed at me only in adoration could now provoke such trepidation that each time would shock me into sadness. People who believe in ghosts say that when someone dies, their energy does not die; it just changes form. Anger doesn't die either. It grows.

Winters at the farm house were hard. Everyone pitched in when we had to go chop loads of firewood for the woodburning stove that was our only (yet remarkably efficient) source of heat. However, once the loads were at the house, stacked neatly along the outside of the west wall, I was the one who had to carry them into the house every morning and every night. Feeding the myriad animals was no more difficult, but breaking the ice out of their water bowls (or pans, or tire halves) meant I had to be outside much longer and left me cold and wet twice a day, every day.

Summers had their own burdens. Judy had an enormous garden each year. She often bragged about her 300 tomato plants (which was not an exaggeration). In addition, we grew green beans, turnips, peas, corn, Brussels sprouts, carrots, radishes, and watermelon. The burden of having such a large garden was that I was the one who had to tend it. The biggest part of each day had to be spent outside doing some pretty hard chores to keep Judy's simple country life a happy one. Actually, more manageable than

happy. She was never happy, so she made everyone around her as miserable as she was. For example, I was quite shy when I was young and did not like to go without a shirt, even in the summer heat. So Judy made it a rule that in the summer I was not allowed to wear a shirt at home. Any time I was caught wearing a shirt in the summer, I was punished and made to take it off.

One shirtless summer day, I was playing in the camper we had parked in the front yard. We never went camping; the camper just stayed parked in the front yard, and Emalei and I liked playing in it. She and I were playing Monopoly on this particular day; it was our favorite game. Suddenly, Dad threw open the door to the camper. A look of pure terror was blazoned across his face. "Who's hurt?" he shouted.

Emalei and I looked calmly at each other, confused. "What?" she asked.

"Which one of you is up here screamin'?" he demanded to know. At this point, his fear that one of us was hurt was turning to anger. He was now beginning to assume that one of us had screamed, possibly as a joke, and that now we were trying to lie about it. He displayed anger on his face as well as he had shown terror before.

"Dad, we swear," we assured him, "we did not scream."

His expression softened. He knew by our confusion (and fear of him in an angry state), that we were telling the truth. Neither Emalei nor I had screamed. In fact, we hadn't even heard a scream, but Dad had heard it so clearly and precisely (from the area where we happened to be playing), that he had run all the way from the back yard, around the house, and tore into the camper to rescue us from whatever harm had befallen us.

The scream had been real. It had come from somewhere. Over the course of the three years we lived in the house, we all heard screaming. Each time, we reacted as if

someone was seriously hurt, only to discover that everyone present and accounted for was fine. The screams did not come from neighbors because we had no neighbors. Instead, we had corn fields and woods. Once again, the screaming had us admittedly disturbed. And again, we begged Dad to move us out of the house. He was running out of excuses for not letting us move. The main thing keeping us in the house was the fact that Judy refused to leave it. Eventually, though, Dad had to come up with a “reasonable” explanation for the screams, particularly since we all heard them so frequently that they had become undeniable.

Tension among our family had reached a crescendo. Dad was no longer the devoted father I had once known him to be. Judy fueled that tension by constantly running to him the moment he got home from work to complain about how bad his children had been all day. I don’t remember what evils Emalei would commit, but Dad’s only son was a sissy, and Judy played that card often because she knew it upset him. It didn’t take long for Dad’s point of anxiety to break, and he became an active participant in the never ending shouting and violent reaction game. Dad, however, was much bigger than Judy, and the threat of his anger caused a fear that rivaled our fear of any ghosts in the house.

I heard Dad yelling at Emalei one afternoon while I was outside doing my chores. They were in the kitchen, and I could hear her getting in trouble. Eventually, the shouting stopped, and Emalei came outside and began filling a bucket with water from the tap on the outside of the house under the kitchen window. She was sobbing, and so I approached her from behind to commiserate, to tell her that one day we would be grown up, and we

wouldn't have to take it anymore. Dad heard her crying, too, and just as I got to her, he was coming out the back porch door.

“Emalei,” I said, “are you okay?”

She turned to face me. She was not crying. Her face was completely clear. “Okay about what?” she asked.

At this point, Dad was standing there with us. “Why are you cryin’?” he asked, as if he needed to know after yelling at her. But there were no tears. No one was crying. No one had been, yet Dad and I had both heard it—me from across the yard, and Dad from inside the house, right where Emalei was standing at the water tap. Emalei, however, had not heard the crying at all.

One night, Dad and Judy gathered us in the living room to explain the screams we had been hearing. The story they told us went something like this: Years ago, a travelling circus was going through the area, and one of the trucks had a wreck. The trailer the truck was hauling was carrying the panthers, and one of them got loose and ran into the woods. The circus was never able to find the runaway panther, so it still lives out in these woods somewhere. Now, when a panther screams, it sounds *just like* a woman screaming! We've been hearing that panther all this time. It's not a spook in the house, so you can stop worryin' about that. Now if you're ever out in the pasture, or out in the yard anywhere, and you see a big, black cat, you just be real careful and slow get back up to the house.

I have been to the zoo, and I have heard what a panther sounds like. Recently, I even Googled it to see if other people had such stories. Many people claim that the sound these wild cats make is identical to the scream of a woman, but in all the footage I have

seen, and in my brief experience being around caged panthers, the two are not identical. In fact, they are quite different. I have also tried to find a record of any circus wreck in the area, and there is none. If we were in real danger from a wild animal, there is no way our dad would have allowed us to roam around outside. I don't deny the possibility of a panther in the area, but I do deny that the screaming we heard had come from one. What we heard was a woman, one we could not see. The poor explanation we were given was because Dad did not want us to believe that the house was haunted even though he was having experiences of his own. He did this because he was still trying as hard as he could to be a peacemaker.

If Judy denied that the house was haunted, then the house was not haunted. She knew that if Dad conceded to us about the haunting, he would agree to move. If Judy was feeding off the bad energy around us, it made perfect sense that she would aggressively protect her life in it. And she did. Any time the unusual experiences were brought up, or if we showed fear, Judy reacted violently. Even if Dad was bothered by the strange activity, he could deal with it much easier than dealing with Judy. He had to go on



**Theresa Rexroad**

denying anything was wrong. For Emalei and me, he would have told us anything to put us more at ease, which is why they made up the story of the panther, but we were smart enough to know that it did not fit with what was going on.

Dad worked at Fedders, an air conditioner factory, in Effingham. He was friends with his co-worker, Arnold Rexroad.

One night, Arnold, his wife Ellen, and their five children came to the farm house.



Everyone had such a great time, visits with the Rexroads became a regular thing, and our two families quickly became close friends. They lived in a trailer in Shumway, approximately 45 minutes away, yet we saw them often. We got to spend the night at their place, and they got to spend the night at the farm house. With all our attention on our new friends, one might imagine that all this ghost nonsense would have disappeared. If our imaginations had been in overdrive and our experiences, collective as they were, had been easily explained as something else, then that might have happened.



**Janice Rexroad**

On one of the many nights that the Rexroads were spending at the house, all four adults were sitting at the dining room table playing cards. All eight of us children were in the next room, the living room, quietly watching television. Between the two rooms was a large, wide



**Greta Rexroad**

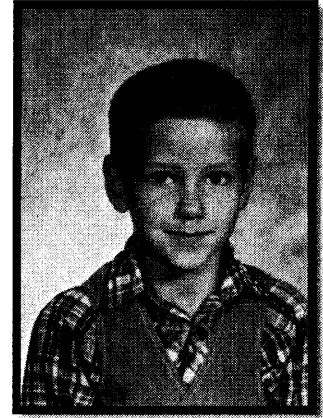
archway, but no door. The rooms were separate, but the space between them was wide open. We could see into the dining room clearly, and the people in the dining room could see clearly into the living room.

Suddenly, we were reliving the camper incident. All four of the adults in the dining room jumped out of their seats and rushed into the living room wide-eyed. “What’s the matter?!” they all wanted to know. We all looked up from our movie in confusion.

“Nothing,” we said. “Why?”

“Which one of you was in here screamin’?” Arnold asked.

The Rexroad children remained confused. We, however, had been down this road before. We assured them that none of us had screamed. No one on television had screamed. In fact, those of us in the living room had not even heard the scream ourselves.



Gary Rexroad

“That’s impossible,” said Arnold. “We heard you plain as day. Someone in this room screamed, goddammit!”

I do not know how Dad and Judy explained the screaming to Arnold and Ellen, but Emalei and I told the Rexroad children—Theresa, Janice, Arnie, Greta, and Gary—the truth about the house. We told them stories of everything that had happened to us since we moved in. We told them the panther story, but I am certain that no panther was in the living room with us that night.

## MOVIN' ON UP

During the fall of 1981, after living in the house nearly two years, we heard that Dad's brother, Uncle Joe, was selling his trailer in Effingham and moving to Georgia to work for his other brother, Bud, who owned a trucking company. Emalei and I were excited because we assumed that if Dad bought it, we would be moving to Effingham. However, Judy would not accept the idea of moving. We were disappointed, but our friendship with the Rexroads was a welcome distraction because it gave us time away from the house.

Most weekends, if we were not in Shumway with them, they were at the farm with us. We had a tent set up in the yard between the house and the garage, so we all played in it and camped out in it as much as we could before the weather turned too cold. Sometimes, even if we had planned on staying outside all night, we ended up going back inside if we couldn't sleep. Judy, however, insisted one weekend that if we went out to the tent to spend the night, we would have to stay out there. I understand the motivation for her arbitrary rules; it was all about control. I also know why Dad went along with what she said; it was easier. However, Arnold and Ellen Rexroad were not obligated to her whatsoever. The only way she could get by with such a rule when the Rexroad children were with us was if their parents went home.

Arnold and Ellen had dinner with us, asked which of their children wanted to stay, and the rest of them piled into their car to leave. Janice, Arnie, and Greta had chosen to

spend the night with us. With sleeping bags and pillows tucked under our arms, we all made our way out to the tent for the night.

“Now once you’ns are out there, ya ain’t comin’ back in,” Judy said as we trekked out in our pajamas.

“We know,” we said confidently.

“You better pee and get a drink before you go out. Ya ain’t runnin’ in and out for that either.”

“We did.”

She had allowed us a flashlight.

We settled into the tent, which had the pungent stench of canvas that had often been wet and each time had dried in the sun, and zipped ourselves in. We tied the outside flaps down and zipped the inside ones closed, and the five of us sprawled out together in our puffy bags.

We laughed and told dirty jokes, and proudly recited sixth grade poetry:

*There once was a man named Dave*

*Who took a dead whore and threw her in a cave*

*It stunk like shit*

*I have to admit*

*But look at the money he saved.*

As well as even more sickening nuggets like:

*You hag, you bag, you dirty old skag, you sleazy, slimy slut*

*Between your thighs a fungus lies, and maggots crawl up your butt.*

*Before I climb your scraggly legs and suck your slimy tits*

*I'll eat a bowl of buzzard balls and die of bloody shits.*

When someone would finish a punch line or a poem, the rest of us would get higher and higher from the ecstasy our laughter brought. Emalei and I told the Rexroad children jokes we had heard at our school, which they could then take back to theirs, and they told us the jokes they had heard at their school so that we could proudly do the same. About two hours after we had bid Judy a good night, during a winding-down lull in our clangor of laughter, we heard a shuffling noise outside the tent on the side that was facing the house.

Our breaths stopped in gasps as we all turned our ears toward the sound. We stopped moving except when Janice reached to turn out the flashlight.

“What was that?” Greta asked. Her intrusion on our self-imposed silence broke the tension in the tent. We all stirred in our bags. Our eyes had adjusted to the dark.

“It was one of the dogs,” Arnie offered. “Judy probably let Lady out.” Lady was our Doberman.

“She ties her outside the front right off the porch. She never lets her or Fancy loose,” Emalei said. Fancy was our Pit Bull. “And all the outside dogs and other animals are in the pens.”

“One of the cats, then,” Arnie insisted. “They run around.”

“What I heard was too loud to be a cat,” Janice said. Arnie didn’t argue with Janice. She was the oldest one out there, probably the smartest, and definitely the most level-headed, but she was clearly disturbed by the sound we had heard.

In the distance, Babe growled and barked, and her chain clanged several times as she forced herself to the end of it, trying to break free. Finally, she stopped barking, and

completed her protest with a few more growls as if to say, “That’s what I thought, bitch. You’re just lucky I’m on this chain.”

More minutes went by in darkness, in silence.

Then, footsteps. The shuffling sound we had heard before.

“It’s your dad or Judy,” Arnie insisted once again. He leaned over, grabbed the zipper, and quickly raised it. “Hey, Bill, is that you?” he asked as he stuck his head out the front of the tent. “Bill?” He crawled half out of the tent until he was past the zipper enough to stand outside. Inside the tent, we heard Arnie’s footsteps going around it. When he got to the side that faced the pole light, we saw his shadow pass by, and...

Other footsteps. Arnie stopped. The other footsteps did not. “Bill?” we heard Arnie say with much less confidence than before. “Judy?” Seconds later, Arnie burst back into the tent under the half-zipped door flap and zipped it back down.

“Arnie,” Janice said calmly but sternly, “who was out there?”

“Nobody.”

“There had to be someone out there. We all heard it.”

“I heard it, too. But I didn’t see anybody. I didn’t see anything.”

“Are the lights in the house still on?” I asked him.

“Yeah, they must still be up.”

“We have to go in.”

“We can’t,” said Janice. “Judy’ll get pissed.”

“We can’t stay out here. All we have is a zipper.”

Footsteps.

A shadow on the wall by the pole light passed by.

Five whispered gasps.

“Bill!” Greta screamed.

“SShhhhh!” the rest of us said. The footsteps stopped. Babe wasn’t barking, the footsteps weren’t walking, and we weren’t breathing for a long time out there in the dark. Were we shivering now.

“I’m going inside,” Greta whispered. “I don’t care if I get in trouble.”

“I want to go inside, too,” I said.

“You guys are gonna get it,” Emalei said.

“What can she do if we all go?” Arnie asked.

“*We’ll* get the belt,” Emalei said.

“She won’t whip me with no belt,” Greta insisted. “I’m going in, but I don’t want to go out there by myself.”

“I don’t care if I get the belt,” I said. “I’m going, too.” Greta was relieved.

“I ain’t stayin’ out here,” said Arnie.

Finally, Janice relented. She told us to quietly gather up our bags and pillows. The plan was that we would unzip the tent as fast as we could and, together, we would run to the back porch door and go inside.

The plan worked! We reached the door unscathed and fell over ourselves and each other getting in. “Who the hell’s in this house?” Judy demanded from the living room.

“We all are,” Janice replied.

“Ohhh, no,” Judy said as she rounded the corner into the kitchen and came toward us, finger shaking, “You’ns ain’t doin’ this shit.”

We started to tell Judy about what had scared us, but Janice broke in. “It got *really, really* cold out there,” she said. “We were all freezing.”



Me, Tonya, and Emalei opening presents on Christmas Eve at the farm house.

Judy sighed. Perhaps she imagined the Rexroad kids telling Arnold and Ellen, *she made us stay out there and freeze*. “Fine! You get your asses upstairs right now and get in them beds. I don’t want to hear tent anymore. I’ll throw the sonofabitch away.”

We did as we were told, more than happy to go directly to bed.

The next day, Dad took the tent down and stored it in the garage. The weather would be getting too cold for real soon anyway, and we had no intention of asking to sleep outside again.

The weather did get cold. Christmastime brought snow. We were excited to show our friends what huge drifts the snow made out in the country—perfect for digging tunnels. But the snow didn’t drift as badly that year, which was actually fortunate. If it had, visits from our friends may have stopped, and so would our visits to them. Instead, we were in Shumway at the Rexroads’ place when Dad told us that we were definitely buying Uncle Joe’s trailer. The Rexroads were moving out of theirs and into a house that was for rent three blocks down the street. The lot that their trailer now sat on would be vacant.



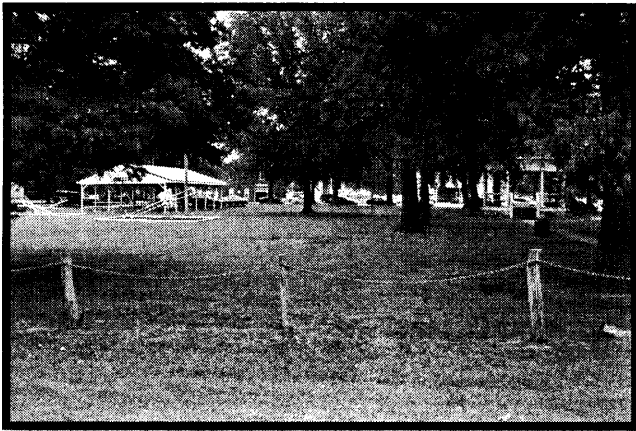
“How would you like to move to Shumway?” Dad asked.

We screamed with delight and relief. Judy sat quiet, sour. “It ain’t for sure. It’s just something we’re thinkin’ about!”

“Oh, please,” we begged. “Please let’s move here.”

“It’s either that,” Dad said, then he looked at Judy, “or we might just park Uncle Joe’s trailer over where the garden is and use it like a little summer place, since it’s got central air.”

We fired an arsenal of no’s and pleas at a deafening decibel force. Our assault was furious, and we meant to have victory. The ammunition made its way through his shield and armor swiftly. We knew we had reached our target, his heart, when his mouth opened into a smile and laughter rang from all the way down in his belly. He had heard us. He had known for a long time that we hated the house. Judy was livid. We would finally be moving.



The park in Shumway.

Since we had to change schools, we would take the next few months to get everything ready, and we would move in May once the school year had ended at Dieterich. Those months would be filled with disdain from Judy, who knew that

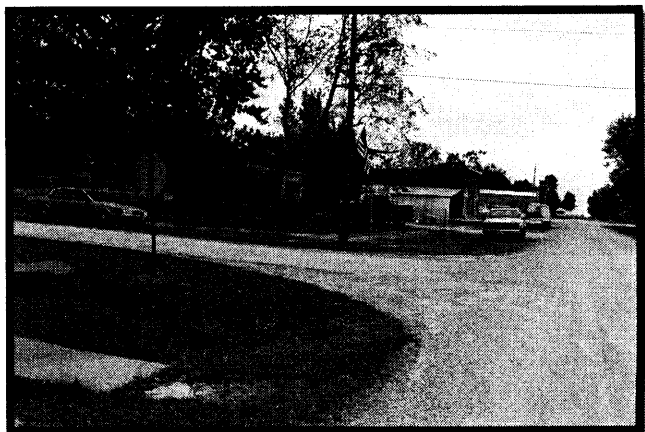
this meant we were not only leaving her beloved hell house, but that we were moving to a town big enough to give us our first taste of friends because when we lived in the country, Judy would have had to drive us to see friends, and apart from the Rexroad kids,

she never did. Shumway had a park we could ride our bikes to and even Bud's little store with dirt on the floor where we could spend our money on Jolly Ranchers and Chick-o-sticks—yes, freedom. In the meantime, Judy continued making threats that they would change their minds and keep us in the country if we did anything wrong.

We just had to get through those last few months.

The chill of winter hung on extra long that year, and I ended up getting the flu just before the spring thaw. I had always hated having to miss school. True, school got me out of the house and away from Judy, but I loved it because I truly did love learning. I wanted so much to develop my mind in such a way that would get me out of the country, not only physically, but intellectually and culturally as well. I never identified myself as a country boy. I longed for the city, even though I had never lived in one. I wanted all those people around me, and I wanted to live in a place where I would never run out of things to do. Shumway was by no means a city; it was barely even a town, but it was a step in the right direction. Living in the country had terrified me. People assume that living in the country is safer, but that is a myth. True, in a city there might be so many people around that no one cares when someone is in trouble, but in the country, no one is there. You don't have the security of having other people around to help you if something were to go wrong.

I was glad that Judy had



A typical trashy street corner in Shumway, which was an oasis to me.

errands to run in Effingham the day I was home from school with the flu, so at least I didn't have to spend the day with her. I had my sick-day homework done early, so I heated up some soup and threw myself down in front of the television. We had an antenna, but cable would be another three or four years into my future. We got the ABC, NBC, and CBS stations that broadcast out of Terre Haute and Champaign. All I cared about watching during the day was CBS, so I could catch up on *Young and the Restless*, *As the World Turns*, and *Guiding Light*.

Just after the mid-day news, right when *As the World Turns* was getting ready to come on, I felt a tremble in the couch. It felt like a vibration at first, and I looked down at it to try to see what I was feeling. The tremble got worse, and the couch shook me back and forth. *Cool, we're having an earthquake!* I had never experienced one before, but I knew what to do. I jumped off the trembling couch, kept my balance as I crossed the moving floor beneath me, and sat against the archway between the dining room and living room. I heard the dishes rumbling in the kitchen cabinets. I looked at the television and wondered if I should go over, turn it off, and unplug it. But then the shaking stopped.

I waited a while just in case it started up again, but it did not, so I got up and went into the kitchen to check the cabinets for broken dishes. They were all intact. But, oh no! The model cars I had put together were on a shelf in my room. They had to have fallen off. Would they be broken, I wondered as I raced up the stairs? I rounded the corner into my room and faced the model shelf. They were untouched, exactly in the places where I always kept them, but not everything in my room was where it should have been.

Emalei and I each had a metal wardrobe in the room since there was no closet space. Hers was closed and stood where it always did. Mine was wide open and was

moved halfway across the room. The hangers, some of which had fallen to the floor, but most of which were still hanging in their place, were bare. My clothes were a strewn mess in piles all over the room. The only sound in the house was the television from downstairs. Before, when unusual things like this would happen, I would be so disturbed I would run right to Dad. But Dad wasn't home, and I was frankly tired of the house. And we already had begun packing boxes with winter things we would soon no longer need to speed up the moving process come May.

I sighed, went into the room, and spent the next fifteen or twenty minutes putting my clothes back on their hangers and organizing them in my closet: good coat, play coat, school shirts, school pants, play shirts, play pants. I went back downstairs more disappointed than terrified. I had missed almost the entire episode of *As the World Turns*. By the time I reheated my soup, I would have missed it all. I picked up the phone while I stirred my soup on the stove and called the family that lived about a mile down the road from us. Their eldest daughter, Jackie, answered the phone.

“Hey Jackie, it's Corey.”

“How are you feeling? I heard you were home with the flu.”

“I'm feeling better, thanks. Say, did you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“The earthquake.”

“What are you talkin' about?”

“Almost an hour ago now, there was an earthquake. The whole house shook.”

“I didn't feel a thing.”

No one else had either. The people who lived across the field from us hadn't felt it. My friend Wayne's mom was home, and she hadn't felt it either. I watched the news that night. Surely they would mention the earthquake, but they didn't. I asked Dad if he had heard anything about an earthquake; he hadn't. The only house that shook that day was ours.

By and large, when we think of ghosts, we imagine spirits of dead people. And I'm sure that's the case some of the time, but not always, not by a long shot. I have to consider other possibilities. In some cases, I believe that we may be experiencing a time anomaly. When we are able to communicate with unseen others (what The Atlantic Paranormal Society—TAPS—calls an *intelligent haunt*) we may be addressing a person from the past or future—someone who is occupying this space with us in a different time. Some paranormal investigators believe that if you encounter a ghost, it doesn't know it's dead, so you should tell it that it is. But what if he or she isn't dead? Also, what if the "ghost" is an individual who is in this time and space, but who is not the spirit of someone dead because it has never experienced life as a human? TAPS also recognizes *residual hauntings*. In these cases, an event was so emotional or full of force that it created a lasting "imprint" on a space. It plays itself over and over like a movie on a loop.

Any of these possibilities (and I'm sure many others I haven't considered) are all sources of what we lump together as "ghosts." And when we speculate whether or not a presence is "good" or "evil," what we're really asking is, does it mean me harm? Or, even if it doesn't *mean* to hurt me, can it? Will it? What good and evil comes down to is, is my life going to be made better or worse by whatever this is? This judgment has

nothing to do with the intention of the other (whether the other is seen or unseen, an idea or an action, or a demon or a donut); it is all about *us*—how *we* will be affected.



*TRANSITIONS*

## FATTY

My father's identity was forced upon me like the ugly clothes I was required to wear and the archaic hairstyle I hated. If I did or said something that even remotely resembled the way Dad would have done it or said it, he came to life—was reanimated by it. I picture him as a chimpanzee at the zoo who becomes suddenly amused by something arbitrary, jumping up and down and swinging from the rope vines in his habitat. “Well, you come by it honest!” he'd say, or, “Yeah, you're just like your Dad in that way!” His glee would shoot from every pore. I was constantly told how much I looked like him, and I disagreed. No, I looked like my mother.

Every time I was compared to Dad, I pulled out every overtly prissy action I could imagine. I wasn't trying so much to build an ultra-nelly gay identity; I was just trying to act as gay as possible in an effort to reject being like him. Judy knew I hated being told I was like him, and because it bothered me, she did it a lot. Dad was always overweight, as were all his siblings. Part of me started rationalizing the comparison as comments about my own weight. I knew I wasn't fat, but I could also see that I had a genetic predisposition for it. I would *not* be fat. I loved my skinny little body, and I meant to keep it no matter the cost.

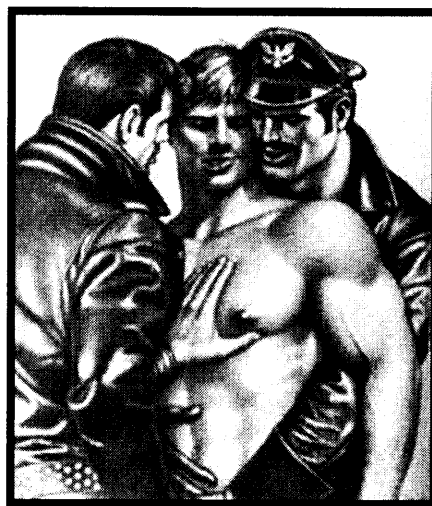
I started the “I Love to Hate Food Diet.” I even wrote out what I would do in a little notebook and drew graphics on the cover. In 1983 when I started losing weight, my exposure to gay culture was limited to two things: one, reports about AIDS on the news; two, Steven Carrington on *Dynasty*. Gay culture's obsession with youthfulness and being



skinny (or, twink, as we called it) didn't really begin until the early to mid-90s. The best way to get an idea of style trends in queer culture is to look at the pornography of the time. The 70s was the Tom of Finland, uber-masculine look, complete with handlebar moustaches. In the 80s, the hairless look was in; the porn producers had taken cues from bodybuilders who shaved it off to accentuate muscle mass and tone. That look extended into the 90s, but in response to America's fitness craze from the late 80s (thank you Jane Fonda), we started seeing a lot of younger, skinnier men (called "bois," with an i, to further emphasize their young appearance). I certainly didn't set the thin trend myself, but my diet wasn't influenced by this element of gay culture because I was ahead of the curve.

I love to eat; I always have, so the first thing I had to do was turn myself off to food. I began trying to gross myself out with it. Every time I looked at a plate of food, I imagined it was piles of dog shit I had to clean up out of the yard. In my mind, I made it look like that, and made it smell like that. My imagination was extraordinary, and I was able to believe that food was disgusting with very little effort.

Judy kept a huge stash of Phillips Milk of Magnesia chewables in the medicine cabinet. The bottle billed them as antacid, but with a dose of ten, they could also be used as laxatives. From a big blue bottle of 1000 pills, she wouldn't miss ten here or there. I had to keep up appearances; I had to eat in front of people, and the family ate dinner



**Finnish artist Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, was a prolific producer of pornographic gay male art starting in the late 40s to early 50s and spanning a career that lasted four decades before he died in 1991. His timeless art—which featured masculine, muscular men with large penises—is iconic in gay culture worldwide.**

together every night. Laxatives would be the perfect way to get rid of all those fatty calories. Judy could control a lot of things in my life, but not this. I would lose as much weight as possible, and she wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

Eventually, I had to take more of the chewables to get the laxative effect, and I was worried Judy would start to notice that so many of them were missing. I needed a more efficient way to get rid of those calories. Then providence presented me with the perfect answer: the flu. After three days of throwing up every morsel, I had lost more weight than I had in the entire previous week. The first time I put my finger down my throat, I was scared. I did not like to vomit. On the other hand, I did not want to be obese like Dad, so down the finger went. After a few days, I was used to it, and I actually looked forward to it. The sense of control I got from it was addictive. The emotional abuse I experienced from my parents was unbearable. Evangelical Christian James Dobson can write books that tell parents it's okay to hit your kids, but no one has written a book that tells children and adolescents how to handle being abused. By focusing on food, I didn't have to deal with the real issue—my parents—because I didn't know how.

I figured that no one had noticed my weight loss. I was just trying to stay skinny—no big deal. But one day, an article on Karen Carpenter showed up in my locker. She was a famous singer in the 70s who died of heart failure as a result of Anorexia Nervosa. I would make sure that no one was in the boys' bathroom when I went in after lunch (if I had eaten lunch). I avoided eating whenever I could, but again, I had to keep up appearances, so I ate in front of people to avoid suspicion. But here it was. Someone knew. In fact, when the librarian approached me in study hall and gave me yet another article on Karen Carpenter, I realized that a lot of people must know.

Then my plan for control backfired. When I entered eighth grade, I weighed 93 pounds. By the time the guys in P.E. caught me changing my shirt and could see every bone in my body, I was down to about 50 pounds. They freaked out and made a big deal of it right there in the locker room. I tried to calm them down. I lied and explained that I had just been sick recently, that I was already starting to put weight back on. "Come on you guys," I pleaded, "I've always been skinny. You know that." They lied, too. They told me they wouldn't tell anyone.

My principal lied. He said if I told him the truth about my dieting, he wouldn't tell my parents, but he did. When I got home from school, they asked me if I had anything to tell them. They said my principal had called and was concerned, and asked me why he should be. "It's no big deal," I said. "Some of the guys in P.E. saw me changing and thought I looked too skinny. It's just because I was sick. I lost a little weight." But they already knew. Judy had even gone through my room and found my notebook featuring the "I Love to Hate Food Diet." They made me take off my shirt. They were horrified. They weighed me on the bathroom scale. I was actually pleased with myself at their reaction. I was able to deliver this stunning blow from right under their noses. My weight loss gave me some leverage for a while, just like running away would, but eventually it was referred to as "that stunt I pulled." I was grounded, and after that, they watched me closer than ever before.

## FREEDOM

I had gotten too accustomed to Judy being my mother. I had spent too many years hearing stories about how my own mother had malnourished me by feeding me dessert for dinner. How she had beaten me. Stories about her that I didn't remember, but that a part of me believed. But, I also believed I was ugly. I guess it's easier to believe bad things about people. The mother-figure in my life had always been Emalei; as a child, I had called her Little Mommie. In *The Crow*, Brandon Lee's character squeezes heroin out of the tracks of a washed-up barmaid whose daughter runs the streets at night letting cops buy her hot dogs because it's all she has to eat. And he says to the woman, "Mother is the word for God on the lips and hearts of all children." When I hear that line, my visceral reaction is just like when I was a kid and would see a man and a woman together—it just didn't make sense somehow. Just wasn't true for me.

The administration at my high school knew what my situation with Dad and Judy was like. After I had run away, *everyone* knew my parents were abusive, as if they couldn't just stand outside our trailer on any given day and glean the circumstances from the shouting coming from inside. I had told the school counselor everything, and now it was a matter of record with the police. I didn't like my principal, who seemed to always side with Dad and Judy, so I bore an attitude the day he called me into the office to say, "I just got off the phone with your mother."

"Oh?" I asked with a raised eyebrow. "And what did *she* have to say?"

"Your *real* mother."

I felt a broad smile forming on my face. Mr. Sullivan smiled, too. “Really?” I whispered. He called her back on his office phone, and I spent the next hour catching up with the mother I had needed, but hadn’t seen, for ten years. The following summer, I got on a Greyhound bus and went to spend a week with her. She was a stranger, overweight yet small, and seemed like an old lady to me. She was aged past her years, and took fistfuls of pills throughout the day for her many ailments such as diabetes and heart disease. I didn’t come out to her then, but she knew.

Because she had my number, she gave me *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to read, and she introduced me to a very feminine male friend of hers. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t push me, but it was her subtle way of letting me know that everything was going to be okay. I loved Oscar Wilde. Not only was I able to pick out the cloaked gay parts, but I hadn’t read anything supernatural in a while, and it re-piqued my interest. I started reading more and more of it, and Stephen King became one of my favorites as a teenager.

I wonder how deeply my reconnection with Mom influenced Dad. He knew I wanted to leave and move in with her, that the only thing keeping me from doing it was Emalei. In any case, just after the second semester of my junior year in high school started, Dad told us to get ready. We needed to pack our things. He was leaving Judy.

No single event finally made the decision for him. He knew that Emalei and I weren’t happy, but for a long time he had failed to realize that he, too, was unhappy. Our family had fallen so gradually and comfortably into our patterns of tension that, in the same way I wasn’t able to pinpoint the exact moment when I started believing it when Judy called me ugly, Dad wasn’t able to determine when his life had become so

miserable, so unmanageable, or even that it *had* become that. Undoubtedly, his close friends Tony and Rosie helped him gain some clarity about his discontent.

Tony and Rosie were a couple from nearby Altamont with whom Dad had been spending a great deal of time. He had taken me to visit my mother in southern Illinois and had reconnected with old friends from his younger days. His exposure to these influences gave him a frame of reference for a time when his life was different, better. Tony and Rosie would never openly advise him to get a divorce. They didn't feel it was their place to make such a judgment on someone's marriage, but they were there for him, and he was able to use them as an emotional barometer when he needed to talk out his feelings about his failed relationship with Judy as well as how he saw us growing up under her influence.

Although I was a full-time, above-average high school student, played French horn in the band, and had a part time job as a dishwasher at the TA truck stop in Effingham, I had my belongings packed and ready to go in less than half a day. Rosie's sister had a small apartment behind her house that was vacant, so Dad moved us into it. It was only a two-bedroom apartment, but it was big enough for the three of us. Emalei was finishing her last year of high school and was planning to go to Florida after graduation to work for her friend Ashley's mother.

Even though we had left Judy behind, we quickly fell into our pattern of my irritating Dad, and Dad irritating me. The bathroom didn't have enough electrical outlets, and he needed to cut a hole in the wall to slide an extension cord through to the utility room. First of all, I told him that he shouldn't cut holes in the wall since it wasn't our place. He did it anyway with the justification that the hole would be small. Once finished,

he needed to feed the cord through, and I had to be on the other side to pull it through. He couldn't get it pushed into the hole, and I couldn't get to it well enough from my side to pull it through. He was hot, sweaty, and frustrated, so he got up, came into the utility room and pulled me out across the floor. Yelling at me about how useless I was, he rolled me onto my back, straddled me, and dropped his 300 pounds onto my tiny frame. While he held my arms down with his knees, his right backhand—on which he wore a small ruby ring and two large diamond rings—swept hard and fast across my face. Then again, against my jaw, as his fist followed through in the other direction. His irritation with me had finally reached a violent crest, and this would not be the last time I came under the rock-solid fist of my father's rage. I hadn't suffered this kind of physical abuse at Dad's hand before this. Before, it had been confined to whippings with his belt that got out of control and left welts or bruises. It was as if something about leaving Judy either made him more tense or liberated his rage in such a way that he now felt comfortable letting it manifest unrestrained.

This is not to say I was completely powerless. I could still influence him in some ways. The apartment was cheap, which was good because Dad was supporting us on his disability check, and Rosie had helped him sign up for food stamps and medical card. Every morning, Emalei and I would stop by the S&W store for Cherry 7Up and a box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pies on our way to school. After school, Emalei would go to work or out with her friends. Dad would be at Tony and Rosie's house. I was only working part time, so I was left alone in the apartment most nights. My first night in the apartment alone, I sensed a presence I had not felt since we had moved from the old house.

While watching television, I felt as though someone were standing at the bottom of the stairs watching me. The kind of recognition I felt is difficult to explain. There was no tingle in my stomach, no pain in my head. I simply felt like I remembered feeling when we experienced activity in the old house. The awareness I experienced was instinctive; it ran through me like some kind of inherent knowledge. I looked quickly in the direction of the sensation but did not see anything, so I returned my attention to the television. Minutes later, I heard a knock on the wall next to the stairs. The knocking sound made the situation seem as if whatever I had seen, knew I had noticed it, and had found a way to assert itself. Right away, I assumed it was a ghost because its response to me indicated a consciousness. I looked over again. This time, however, a blur seemed to hover in the air. It was not a mist or a shadow; it wasn't solid enough to be either. Instead, what I saw was more like a visible movement in the air. I remembered how I had felt when I had had experiences in the house, knowing the difference between someone or something who was friendly versus someone or something that was angry or malicious. And this presence scared me; I felt threatened. I stood up and took a deep breath... and, exhaled. I held my arm outstretched in front of me, and imagined the palm of my hand was glowing with white light. With it, I traced a pentacle in the air—a five-pointed star with a circle around it—for protection. It must have worked because the air cleared, and the sensation I had felt went away.

I told Emalei as soon as she got home. The next day, I told Dad. His first concern was that Rosie's sister had done us a favor by renting the apartment to us, which I didn't understand because it had been vacant. She wasn't using it for anything else. He didn't want to just up and leave after she had been so kind. That part I did understand. I also



knew, though, that the apartment was haunted. I even reminded Dad that he told us if we were ever scared of a place again, he would move us right away. It took a couple of months, but by summer, Emalei was off to Florida and Dad and I were moving to a different apartment across town. For all his flaws, I have to admit that Dad was always true to his word. At first he didn't want to move, but because he had made that promise to us, he kept it. In fact, he ended up thanking me. The apartment I talked him into was low-income subsidized, which meant he would only be paying \$6 a month in rent. Also, the building was pretty new, so the apartment was much nicer.

Instances of Dad's gratitude were rare, yet his rage seemed to flare more and more often because, as I was getting older, he expected me to grow out of my "gay phase." The more he began to realize it was not something I would grow out of or try to change, the angrier he got. Although he had stayed true to his word and moved us to a better apartment, his violence and threats of even harsher brutality ("If you back-talk me, I will peck you in the head with this hammer") caused my hatred for him to continue developing. I had gone from the clichéd frying pan of Judy into Dad's raging fire. When Emalei returned home from Florida, her presence did not alleviate Dad's hatred of me, nor mine of him. His random impulses that led to his fist coming into contact with my face, head, or chest were unbearable and frequent. I was ready to leave, and had plans after high school to go to college in Long Beach, California. I had already been accepted at a fashion design school there. I was okay at art, certainly no master, but it was a way out, and that's all I wanted at that point. When, with a hammer in his hand, Dad threatened to bash me in the head, I believed him. I hoped I would live long enough to get away to Long Beach.



**The purple satin tuxedo I designed and made for my senior pictures**

Just as Emalei's return did not improve Dad's mood, neither did his girlfriend Joyce, whom I adored. She was kind and fair. She was everything that Judy had not been. While Emalei was in Florida, I got to know Joyce well, and I liked everything about her. The night I rolled out the paper to make the pattern for the tuxedo I designed for my senior pictures, Dad said he did not think the pattern would work because I had never made one before. I had never been taught how, and I didn't even know how to sew. However,

Joyce looked at it carefully, laid it out, and even pinned it together. "Yes," she confirmed. "It will work. What material are you going to use?"

"Purple satin!"

Dad's relationship with Joyce was going well, and I was grateful for it, too. Which is why I was shocked the morning I woke up to find Judy sleeping on our living room sofa. Dad's rage be damned, I wanted to know what the hell she was doing there. Thankfully, she didn't stay long, not even for breakfast. But I wouldn't let up on Dad until he told me why she had been there. I feared that they had been talking reconciliation.

I was relieved to discover that they hadn't. Since we had moved to Altamont, I was living in a new school district with only my senior year remaining. I wanted to finish

school a semester early at Beecher City, where I had attended since we had moved to Shumway. If I had to transfer to Altamont High School, I would have to go the full year with people who were not my friends. I only had to live in the Beecher City district the first week of school; after that I could live anywhere and still finish there. Dad had talked to Judy so that I could stay at her trailer that first week. I would have preferred that he make the arrangement with the Rexroads, but it was only for a week.

During that week, I was grateful that I barely had to see Judy. I was up each morning and gone to school before she even awoke. She was working nights at the same truck stop where I worked, but even there, I rarely saw her. We were always so busy, and she was a waitress. Front of the house staff didn't really mingle with back of the house staff. It's been that way at every restaurant I've ever worked in. I had short evening shifts on Monday and Tuesday of that week, but I was off work and asleep long before Judy got home. Wednesday before school, Dad came by to see how everything was going.

I think he specifically came by to give me hell about my hair. I had straightened it, bleached it blonde, and it was longer than it had ever been. I know that Judy didn't like it, and she probably had complained to him about it. I loved it. It was the best my hair had ever looked up to that point. Emalei even told me that she liked it. It was very cute, but also looked very gay. After he asked me how things were going, and I told him they were going fine because I barely ever saw Judy, he went right to the hair.

“When you plannin’ on getting’ your hair cut?”

“I wasn’t really planning on it. I like it how it is.”

“I don’t really want it gettin’ any longer than what you’ve got it.”

“I’m not trying to grow it very long, but the length it’s at now is okay, isn’t it?”

“Did you go to Sherrie and have her fix it this way?” I had been having Sherrie at the French Quarter Beauty Salon in Effingham cut my hair ever since I had started working and making my own money.

“No,” I said. “I straightened it myself with a home perm, and I bleached it with a kit. It came out just like I wanted it to.”

“Not bad for doin’ it yourself.”

“Thanks.”

“You still need to get it cut.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so. You can either go to Sherrie and have her cut it, or I’ll get the clippers out and cut it myself, but it’s too long.”

“I want Sherrie to cut it.”

“Do you have the money?”

“I get my paycheck from TA today. I’ll go by the mall after I pick it up.” He had started off telling me he liked it, but ended with a mandate to cut my hair anyway. I was getting used to the little freedoms I had in Judy’s absence, and I was angry that she seemed to be inching her way back into my life. My hair was off limits. At least, it should have been. “Well, I need to get to school.”

“Have a good day,” Dad said. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” I didn’t mean it. In fact, I hated him. I hated his fists, his threats, and I hated the fact that he could still tell me what to do with my hair. He walked out the door. From the kitchen window, I saw him walking away from me toward his truck. Under my breath, I said, “Why don’t you just die?”

He couldn't have heard me, but oddly, at that moment he turned, smiled, and waved goodbye to me. I smiled a fake smile and waved back.

I didn't have to work at TA that night, but after school I went there to pick up my paycheck, then went to the accounting office where truck drivers could cash their checks and cashed mine. From there, I went to see Sherrie at the mall. I was pleased to hear that her night was booked solid and she would not be able to cut my hair for at least a couple of weeks. As I walked back to my car, I saw that the mall theater was showing a vampire movie I had been dying to see, *The Lost Boys*. I had never treated myself to a movie at the theater before. I was finally able to watch scary movies with my friends and my cousins, but I wouldn't be seventeen for another two weeks, and *The Lost Boys* was rated R. Surely they would card me. I was almost seventeen, but I looked like I was about twelve. Still, I had car keys in my hand, and I was by myself. Maybe if they saw I was old enough to drive, they would just assume I was old enough to get in. The worst they could do was say no.

The timing was perfect; the movie was about to start. I went to the theater and as confidently as I could, I asked for one ticket to *The Lost Boys*. The lady at the box office printed out the ticket, I paid her the money, and with an excitement I could barely control, made my way to the concession stand. I fell in love with that movie, my first rated R movie I got to see by myself, paid for with my own money. On so many levels, that movie represented freedom. Plus, it was about cool vampires, and I wanted to be just like them. Also, it was set in California, and in a year, I would be there in college for fashion design. Two hours later, I emerged from the theater proud and elated.

But there was a cop in the lobby talking to the ticket lady. When I first saw him, he was leaning on the glass counter that held the oversized boxes of all the best movie candies: Jujube's, Lemonheads, Sno-caps, M&M's, and Good'n'Plenty. When he saw me, he raised up and did a double-take, but kept talking to the ticket lady. My breath caught in my chest. Could I get in trouble for seeing a rated R movie before I turned seventeen? My mouth dried instantly as if I had mopped it out with a wad of gauze. I felt my face flush red, but I kept walking. I kept the corner of my eye on the officer as I got closer to him... closer... shivering as I passed right beside him... and finally, I had passed him and pushed the large glass door to exit the theater into the mall. He hadn't tried to stop me, but I still had the impulse to break into a run once I was free of the lobby. I probably started walking faster in spite of myself. I walked through the mall, the spit returning to my mouth, to the entrance where I had parked my car.

Although it was August, I was shivering when I put my key in the door, and I heard someone call my name. I looked up to see another police officer headed my way. "Are you Corey Taylor?" he asked.

I only thought I had avoided arrest. The cop in the lobby must have radioed to his partner waiting outside that I was leaving the building and to apprehend me. I had broken the law. I was going to be arrested for seeing a rated R movie. *I'm going to be in so much trouble; I'm going to get killed for this.* My mouth dried up again, and my shivering body began to shake noticeably. Then I heard my name again.

I looked across the parking lot to see my dad's brother, Wayne, and their cousin, Karen Sue, get out of a car and rush toward me. At that point I knew it wasn't about the movie. They were both crying as they ran to my side. I stood there shaking, terrified. It

seemed like forever before anyone would tell me what was going on, what was so urgent. Finally, Karen Sue took me by the hands and looked me straight in the eye. “Corey, your dad was in an accident.” She shook her head.

“He’s—” I knew it already.

“He’s dead,” she said.

I stood there in shock. I tried to look sad, and maybe I wanted to be sad. But I was relieved.

I was free.

*ROOM*

9



## LOSING IT

When I was a teenager, I figured it might pay to advertise. In my mind, if I “acted gay,” guys I was interested in would know and they would make the first move. I would have more control that way and be less vulnerable to embarrassing rejection. But my school years went by with no bites on my bait. And believe me, I was casting that bait out. One night when Dad, Emalei and I were living at the first apartment in Altamont, I almost had a hit. I had told Steve Doty that I thought the place was haunted, and he suggested I have him and some of the other band kids over to the house to see what they thought.

Dad readily agreed to let me have my friends over for a band party; he didn’t know we were planning our own little paranormal investigation of the house. Steve came, as well as Sheri Durbin, Joanna Helmbacher, and the trumpet player I had a mad crush on, Aaron Legg. We had a good time scaring ourselves talking about the old house, what was going on in the apartment, and listening to the others tell their own ghost stories. Eventually, someone suggested we turn out the lights. The living room was in the lowest level of the apartment, practically a basement, so no windows let in any light from outside. The room was pitch black. Eventually, the ghost stories turned into a game of dark truth or dare.

“I dare you,” Joanna suggested to Steve, “to take your pants off.”

“No way.”

“Come on!” we all encouraged. “You have to do it!”

“It’s no big deal,” said Aaron. “It’s too dark for anyone to see anyway. I’ll do it.”

The room went as silent as it was dark for a few moments, then Aaron said. “Okay. I have my dick out. I have a boner, too.”

“Oh, my God,” said Joanna. Steve laughed. My mouth watered. Aaron was on the ottoman and I was sitting on the floor right next to him! Sheri Durbin was on the floor on the other side of the ottoman.

“Yeah, right,” she said.

“If you don’t believe me, give me your hand.”

“It’s too dark,” she said. “I can’t even find it.”

“Here,” I said. I touched Sheri on the shoulder. “I’ll put your hand in his.” I took her by the hand and raised her arm. When we found Aaron’s hand in the dark, I let go of Sheri’s hand and grabbed hold of Aaron’s.

“Okay,” he said. “You ready?”

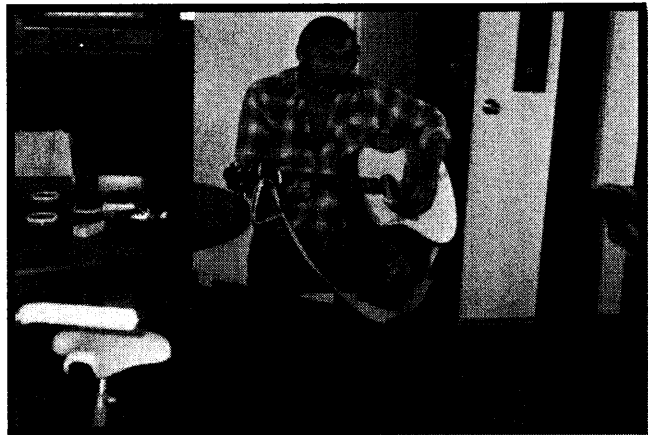
I wanted so badly to touch Aaron’s dick. I was dizzy at the prospect and the ensuing suspense. My heart thumped against my skinny, little ribcage so hard I wanted to say, “Sshhh!” However, what I heard myself saying instead was, “Wait.” *What?!* “That’s *my* hand.”

I chickened out. Aaron dropped my hand, found Sheri’s again, and I missed my chance to “grope his bone,” as I put it when I confessed the story to Steve, who I was hoping would spend the night. I even offered to give him a blow job. He politely declined, and he left with the other band kids. With still no tangible proof of a ghost, and with my virginity intact, the party was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

A year or so after I stopped rebelling with alcohol and drugs, my relationship with Judy began to change. Dad had been dead for two years, and she was dating a Greyhound driver she had met while working at the bus station in Effingham. I was glad to see her with Charlie, who was a portly southern man. He was average height, with salt and pepper hair, and liked to sit at the kitchen table playing his guitar. And he sang. His slow speech seemed like a physical manifestation of his slow, carefree temperament. Something about him made an impact on her in a way that genuinely changed her.

Judy reached out to Emalei and me. With no drugs or bad friends in our lives on which to place judgment, she began treating us differently. In fact, she started talking to us like we were people, peers even, instead of chattel.



**The remarkable Charlie Nipp.**

Charlie brought out the best in her. He made her, if there is such a thing, normal. I wanted some extra money, so she got me a job at the bus station, too, even though she was still angry about my getting her Social Security checks stopped. And even under Charlie's amiable influence, she never let me forget it.

Judy met Charlie's children before Emalei or I did. When they first met, he was based in Memphis, Tennessee, and she had taken trips there to stay with him a few times. While she visited, she got to know his son, Barry, who was my age, and Kim, who was two years younger. However, after several months of courtship, Charlie transferred to Effingham and moved in with Judy.



Judy with Charlie's daughter, Kim Nipp.

Barry and Kim had been living with Charlie's second wife in a town near Memphis, but after Barry graduated from high school, he had gotten his own apartment with his friends in the city. Kim came to visit Charlie in Illinois the

summer after her junior year. While she was there, I met her and was infatuated by her southern accent, the music she listened to, and the comedy tapes she had bought from the famous radio broadcasts in the big city of Memphis. Since I could remember, I had felt drawn to cities, but I had been too intimidated by the thought of moving to one without knowing anyone. Kim and I got along as if we had always been brother and sister, so through her, I finally had a connection to a city.

However, she did not get along with her own stepmother, and Judy (again, under Charlie's magical influence) treated her very well. Kim wanted to be with her dad, and it didn't matter to her that she would be changing schools just one year before graduating. She was the kind of person who would never have trouble making friends wherever she was. She and I had become close almost instantly. So close, in fact, that soon after we met, she confided in me that she was concerned about Barry, whom I had still not yet met.

"Why?" I asked. "Is he into drugs really bad or something?"

"No," she said. "Nothing like that. But I can't really tell Daddy or Judy about it because I don't know how Daddy would react."

“To what? What is it?”

“Barry’s not gay, but he told me that he went to a gay bar.”

I did not check out of the conversation, but I couldn’t help but begin fantasizing about the day I would finally go to the big city of Memphis where, I now knew, they had gay bars! After high school, and around my group of delinquent and drug-dealing friends, I had almost entirely retreated back into the closet (even though people could tell I was gay anyway), but I got the impression that Kim might be someone I could talk to. “It bothers you that he went to a gay bar?”

“I don’t know,” she said. She was assessing my reaction.

“Okay, if it bothers you, what part exactly is the problem?”

“I just don’t understand it,” she explained. “What kind of person would go to a gay bar if they’re not gay?”

“Someone with an open mind,” I said

This was all the confirmation she needed. She no longer had to test my ability to handle the burden she was carrying. Having said this, I was obviously a person with exactly the sort of open mind I had mentioned. “Barry’s gay,” she finally admitted.

“Well, sorry to make this a double-whammy,” I began. “I’m gay, too.” For some reason, telling Kim was more liberating than I had felt when I had originally come out to Dad, Janice Rexroad, and Steve Doty at thirteen. Maybe it was because, through her, I might finally meet other openly gay people, and I would do the one thing I had been craving since my adolescent dreams of men in pools and showers—I would be able to have sex.

“Why would that be a double-whammy?”

“Well, because you just found out that your brother is gay, and you meet your new almost-stepbrother, and you find out he’s gay, too.”

“Yeah,” she laughed, “but since you’re gay, you can soften the blow with Daddy and Judy about Barry.”

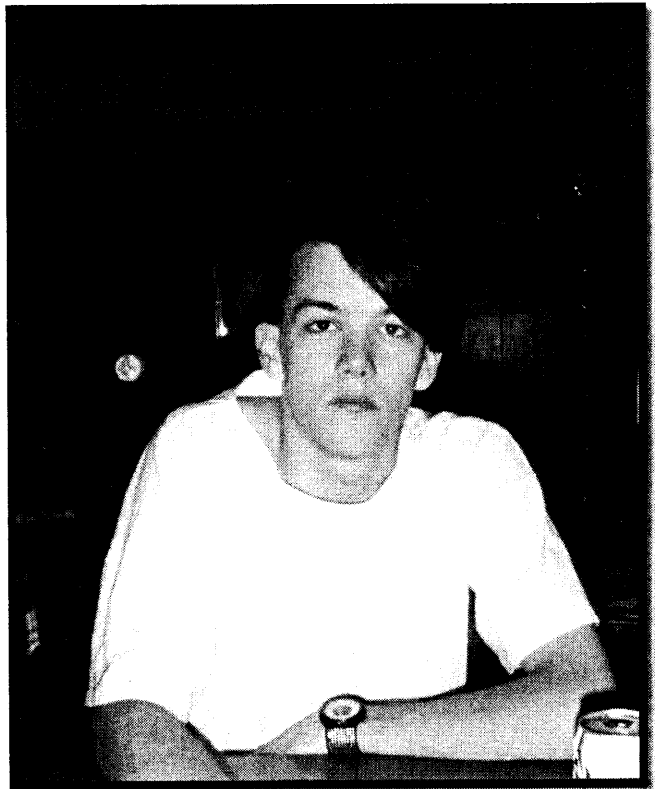
“That’s true. So, does Barry have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he’s been seeing this guy named Joe. He’s a lot older than Barry, but Barry’s happy.”

“That’s what matters.”

“Yeah.”

Kim showed me pictures of Barry, who worked at Spencer Gifts and camped out for Prince tickets with their friend Jessica. Every photo she showed me of him made me hungrier to meet him. I was beginning to think I never would, but then suddenly and unexpectedly, Barry moved in with Charlie and Judy, too.



Charlie’s son, Barry Nipp.

He wore Obsession by Calvin Klein and listened to The Cure, 10,000 Maniacs, and The Smiths. I had heard of them all before, but because of Barry, I started listening to them all the time. He smoked clove cigarettes, had a new wave haircut, and was the most gorgeous man I’d ever laid eyes on. I didn’t care that he was my almost-stepbrother by

my former stepmother. Technically, even when Judy and Charlie got married, we wouldn't be related at all, just by association. But even if he had been my full-blooded brother, he was *hot*. Unfortunately, he still had his boyfriend back in Memphis.

At the end of August, he was planning a trip down to visit him, and I was over the moon when he asked me to go with him. Maybe the two of them would know someone for me, I thought. It was, in fact, *all* I could think about. Joe was living back at home with his parents, but his aunt was out of town, so for the duration of our stay in Memphis, we would be at Joe's aunt's house. Barry and Joe took the master bedroom, and I settled into the spare room. I was comfortable in Memphis right away. I had been concerned early on that the tall buildings and graffitied walls of the rundown areas would intimidate and scare me, but I was wrong. I felt right at home.

The first thing Barry wanted to do was take a shower. Joe turned on the television and stretched out in front of it. He was slightly older, as Kim had mentioned, but he wasn't quite middle-aged. No grey had crept into his dark hair yet, but he had started balding at the crown. He was tall, with a slim build, but wasn't very fit. And he was hairier than average. Still, Barry and I were eighteen, and if Joe was anywhere near 30, that would have seemed old to us. Besides his age, though, Joe was charismatic. His southern accent was captivating, and his genuine friendliness was infectious. I sat on the couch, not really interested in what Joe had chosen to watch on television.

Joe must not have been very interested either, because he started rubbing his crotch on the outside of his pants right in front of me. *Could this be happening?* I admit, I had wanted it to take place, but now that my fantasy seemed to be coming true, I was nervous as hell. Joe's hand went into the front of his jeans and I saw him adjust the large

bulge that was forming there. I stared at the swell, then quickly turned my eyes back to the television when Joe checked to see if I was looking. My naivety charmed him, and he slid his jeans down his legs and then completely off. His dick was enormous, and his



Barry, during our trip to Memphis.

white briefs did not completely cover him.

“Do you want to suck my cock?” he asked me.

I was genuinely shocked, and he knew it. “What about Barry?!” I whispered, pointing toward the bathroom.

“Brothers can have fun, too,” Joe said.

“What do you mean? I can’t. You’re Barry’s boyfriend, and I’m not going to do that to him.”

“Do what to him?”

“I don’t want to be the guy you cheat on him with.”

“Barry and I have certain rules, and certain things we can and can’t do with other guys.”

“Well, that’s between you and him.”

“But it was his idea,” Joe said. “And when he comes out of the shower, he’s going to come in here and join us.”

“He is?” I wanted to have sex with Barry, and, since he mentioned it, I wouldn’t have minded having sex with Joe either.

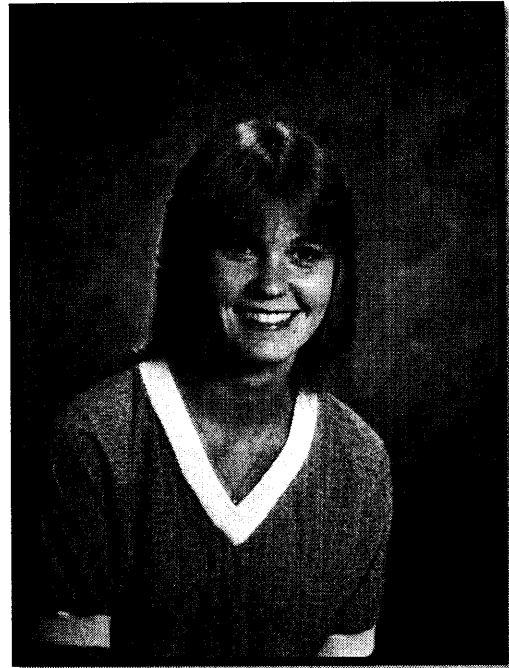


“So, do you want to suck my cock?” Joe asked again. He stood up, took his underwear off, and walked over to where I was sitting on the couch.

“Okay,” I said, still nervous. And I opened my mouth wide.

## VISIONS OF, WELL... NOT EXACTLY SUGARPLUMS

I was about nine years old when Tonya told me that “gay” was when a boy wanted to kiss another boy, or a girl wanted to kiss another girl. This word, if nothing else, would explain the strange dream I had been having the past year or so. The dream was always the same. I found myself in an unusual place filled with stunning men. Parts of it were beautiful, like the pool area, but parts of it were just

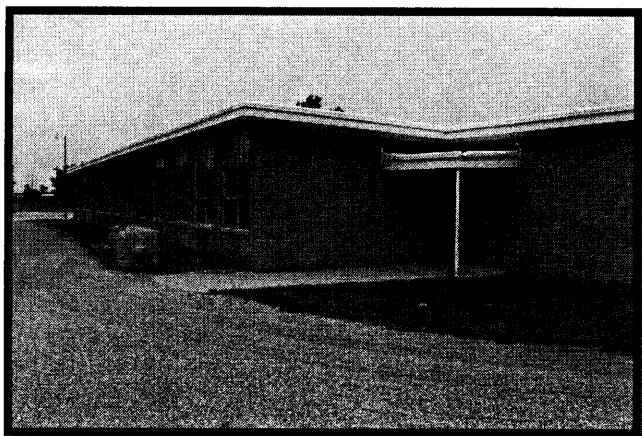


**Tonya... I would learn a lot from my older stepsister.**

bizarre. Areas filled with black walls that had holes in them. The men were standing at the walls with their dicks in the holes. Men were on the other side as well, crouched down, sucking. I thought, “Why the wall? Why not just walk around?” I breathed in, expecting the sterile, burning smell of chlorine from the pool, but a different odor hung in the air, a heavy smell—sweet, but pungent at the same time. The smell lingered even as I found myself in the shower stalls. The air in the showers was hot and wet. The blue square tiles were the same on the walls and the floor. In the shower stalls, I joined the men. I watched, and I did the same things they were doing.

Back then, I had no idea that such places actually existed. I hadn’t had any exposure to the existence of bathhouses, these strange and wonderful places I had dreamt

about. I thought it was all in my head at the time. In fact, it wasn't until I was in my twenties that I found out they were real. How, then, could I have imagined them so vividly as to dream about them? How was it possible for me to have access to such knowledge? Was I psychic? Was I having out-of-body experiences and visiting a bathhouse as an astral projection? Were my dreams the key? Or was I attuned to some archetypal knowledge of my queer ancestors and contemporary queer brothers because of the gay blood coursing through my veins?



**Shumway Grade School where we waited every morning for the bus to take us to Beecher City where the high school was located. On the other side of the school, in the direction of this photo, is where Roger's family lived.**

Soon after we moved to Shumway, I developed a terrible crush on Roger Stephens. He and his two sisters lived about a block away from us on the other side of the Shumway Grade School. The Grade School playground was better than the playground at the park, and any

time I saw Roger over there, I raced to join him. I wasn't allowed to invite him over, of course. Our pit bulldog, Fancy, would have torn him apart. The Rexroads had been around us enough for her to be used to them, but Fancy was violently protective of the family, and no one else could be around her. Plus, we couldn't trust anyone in the house. Judy was sure that any of our friends would steal from us.

I loved Roger, no doubt about it. He was a few years older than I was, blonde, and always had a tan. In the summer, I never saw him with a shirt on, for which I was grateful. He always had on muddy jeans from playing basketball or baseball at the school,

or from riding around on someone's three-wheeler or four-wheeler. The hair in his armpits was slightly darker than his platinum locks, and I stared at him for so long and so often, he had to notice. Everyone noticed. One day when I was sitting in my room, Kelly McWhorter shouted at my open window, "Hey, Corey! Your boyfriend's out here." I looked out to see Roger grinning from ear to ear. He hadn't seemed to mind what Kelly had said. I smiled back, but played it cool. "Hey, man," I said. "What's up?"

I was never brave enough to approach Roger about having sex. He was never brave enough to approach me, either. He eventually would marry a woman, but if one of us had started something back then,



**Emalei under a pile of various pets, including our Pit Bulldog, Fancy, Mama Kitty, and Cinnamon.**

we would have gone all the way. I know that I was thinking about Roger when I started touching myself and discovered masturbation. In those terms, Roger was my first. Roger and all those gorgeous men I dreamed about in pools and showers. One night, I realized that someday a man would want to fuck me. I hoped it would be Roger, but I also figured it would hurt to have that done. So, of course, I had to start practicing with my fingers.

I urgently wanted to experience sex, and I was still imagining going to a place like those in my dreams, thick with the smell of chlorine and sex. My eventual exposure to queer pop culture was what educated me that they actually existed. These fantastic, magical places were known as bathhouses. Their history goes back hundreds of years, but

their popularity increased in the United States in the mid- to late-1970s after California passed a law allowing sex between consenting adults. Just a few years later, I began having my dreams of the bathhouses. Even though I became increasingly sexually active after losing my virginity in Memphis with Joe and Barry (and later that same evening, with Chad), many years would go by before I would actually have the grand privilege of purchasing my first bathhouse membership and spending a night experiencing ecstasy after ecstasy, with stunning man after stunning man, in my six by eight foot dimly-lit rented room.

I was 40 years old when I planned my first trip to a Chicago bathhouse. I was taking the train, so I was at the mercy of schedules and ways to get to the location once I was in the city. Still, trying to find parking would have been a lot worse. When the cab driver dropped me off in front of the club (bathhouses are officially called “men’s clubs”), I found myself a little nervous even though I had decades of experience with men of every size, shape, and color. As soon as I opened the door, I was hit with the low-rent, skeezy odor of unwashed sex. The facilities themselves were not dirty as in unmaintained, but the place was filthy with the air of vulgarity, ineffectively whitewashed with plants and art décor. I was raised in a trailer. I grew up getting crushes on other boys who were trailer trash—the cheapness of these rooms and halls thrilled and fascinated me. I was in heaven.

I showed my driver’s license, got my towel and the key to my room, and the attendant buzzed me in. The club is members only, but my lifetime membership was only ten dollars. Another 25 dollars got me the room for eight hours, not that I would be there that long. I had to be back at the train station to go home in eight hours. Some men just

rent a locker, which is cheaper, but I wanted the convenience of a room. And for 25 bucks, why not? I rounded the corner past the locker room and found the hallway leading to number 9. I was inside the bathhouse less than a minute, hadn't even made it to my room yet, when a gorgeous, muscular Latino in a tight, white sweater was already cruising me. Cruising is eyeballing some dude to let him know you want to hook up.

I dropped my stuff in my room and didn't even get undressed. I didn't want to lose white sweater guy. Apparently, he didn't want to lose me either because he was waiting right outside my door. I followed him around the corner and we started making out in the hallway. His lips tasted like strawberry, which was nice—he had coated them with a tingly balm called Nibblers that people buy at erotic Passion Parties (similar to Tupperware parties, but with vibrators and other adult accessories instead of airtight bowls). I pulled up his sweater, and was pleasantly surprised to find that his nipples were coated as well. Even his dick tasted like strawberry, and when we got to my room, I discovered that he tasted like strawberry *everywhere*; I could have eaten his ass all night. We hooked up, but we just had oral sex because he wouldn't fuck me without a condom. Afterwards, we kissed, thanked each other, and introduced ourselves.

After José, a parade of hot Latino men followed. I would no sooner come out of my room after having sex with one man than another one would be in the hall, and I would catch his eye. All I had to do was motion him into my room and we had a date. Sometimes I got their names, sometimes I didn't, and I lost count after about twenty of them. Halfway into my eight hours, business had started to die down, so I took a break and rested in my room for a little while. I didn't sleep; loud dance music piping throughout the place saw to that. When I got back up, I found that the pool of men had

refreshed itself, so I made the rounds again. Ecstasy, for me, is not about romance. The last time a man gave me flowers, I raised my eyebrow and asked, “you do realize I’m a *guy*, right?” Flowers are for women who think that means a man cares. My idea of real romance is a man who anticipates my genuine needs—a man who comes to my job and takes my truck to get the oil changed because I’m too busy to get it done myself. So ecstasy is not about a soft touch or meaningful cuddling. The real thrill for me is passionate and powerful, raw, animalistic. What made the bathhouse erotic to me was the sheer volume of men who fucked me, sucked me, and fed me their dicks all night. The quantities of cum in piles around the room.

*TWO-SPIRIT*



## TRIBES AND TOTEMS

After my weekend in Memphis, I needed to see my mother, to tell her about everything that had been going on in my life. She and I talked on the phone and wrote letters every now and then, but apart from her visit with Sue Boone, I hadn't seen her since Dad had died. Our correspondence would have been more frequent if she'd had her way, but talking to Mom on the phone was always something I had to set aside time for. They were never quick calls just to touch base. But a few weeks after I got back from my weekend vacation to Memphis, I spent my days off with a trip to southern Illinois. Her



**Grandma Edith and Mom. Our Native American ancestry can be seen so prominently in them.**

house looked the same as it had when I was fifteen.

I don't think she owned a photo album. Every picture she had of anyone and everyone was in a frame—even wallet sized photos were in wallet sized frames—all of

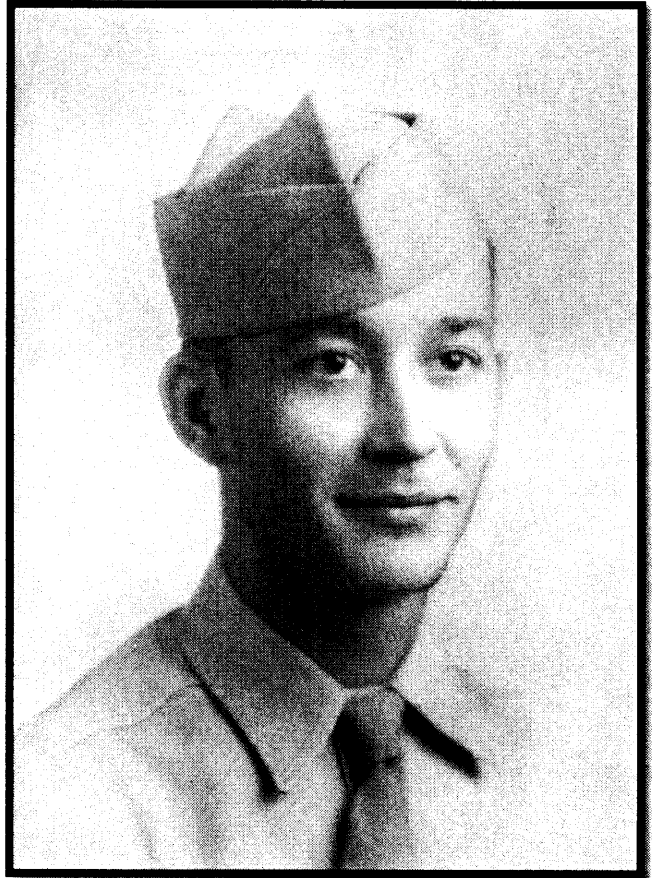
which were dispersed strategically

throughout her house: on walls, shelves, the coffee table, all the end and side tables.

Everywhere. And her house was not large by any means. It was comfortable, especially for just her and Sonny, but not large. However, the pictures did not make the house cluttered. They were the personality of the house. Everywhere you looked, smiling faces

looked back at you. And even though the smiles were posed like they always are in photographs, in my mother's house, they seemed true.

In addition to the pictures, shelf and table space was also tastefully decorated with realistic looking artificial flowers. These were not the kind of dollar store plastic indoor-outdoor flowers that smell like Memorial Day spreads and fade (even when they're inside) in a short amount of time. No, the flowers my mother had chosen were high-quality fabric flowers, and all of them looked real until you got right up to them. Years later, Sonny would tell me the story that every



**Mom's Dad, Grandpa Gass. I think I look remarkably like him. His mother was full-blooded Cheyenne.**

time he bought Mom flowers, she would replace each one as it died with the very same artificial one so that she could have them forever. And knowing my mother, she could probably tell you the occasion for each bouquet. The main difference from what I had remembered was that her medications had become so numerous that she kept them in a pill box that separated each dose by time of day, five times a day, for each day of the week—35 squares, each with its own lid that made it look like an advent calendar. But instead of a piece of chocolate for each day leading up to Christmas, the contents of these

squares were keeping her as comfortable as she could be, keeping her alive. Being in her home brought on a calm that even my well-practiced yet novice meditation skills couldn't achieve.

The first thing I told her during the visit was that I was gay. I did not have any expectations about how she might—or how I thought she *should*—react. I wanted her to take it well. Even though she was my mother, the time we had lost when I was a child and the physical distance that remained between us no matter where I was living kept us from being very close. I hoped that my news might be a way for us to bond. Hopes and expectations are two different things. I had no idea how she would actually take it, so I was surprised when she told me she already knew. It was why she had introduced me to the nelly guy at the park when I spent the week with her that summer in high school, and why she'd had me read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I got exactly what I wanted. Dad had rejected me because I was gay. I didn't come out to Judy until she was with Charlie. My mother was my only supportive parent, and it did provide us with a way to connect and strengthen our relationship.

During the very same conversation, I also told her that I had been practicing Wicca, or Witchcraft. Again, she was unmoved. "Well, as long as you have the right people showing you," she said. I told her that no one was showing me, but that I had a lot of really good books, and I showed her the big blue book by Raymond Buckland. I felt uneasy laying everything out for her, and thought myself odd for telling her such disparate things in the same conversation, but she explained to me that the two are not unrelated. My paternal grandfather's mother was full-blooded Cherokee, and my maternal grandfather's mother was Cheyenne, so she compared Wicca to Native

American spirituality, and told me that in their ancient traditions, most tribes treated homosexuality with respect. Some of the most fierce warriors would only have sex with men; they felt that sex with women would diminish their masculinity and make them less fierce. The only reason they would have sex with a female would be to produce offspring, sort of a warrior heir. And if she bore a boy, he would be taken from the female to be raised by a male or group of males in the tribe. Some tribes even had the equivalent of transvestites or transsexuals—men who took on the roles of women, and women who took on warrior roles with the men.

“The reason why it makes perfect sense that you would tell me that you’re gay and Wiccan at the same time is because some of the homosexual Indian boys would be trained as the tribe Shaman because they were considered more enlightened,” she explained. “So they would become spiritual leaders *because* they were gay. The same thing is happening to you.”

The comparisons between Wicca and Native American spirituality include their mutual basis in nature. Both have multiple Gods and Goddesses because they consider divinity to be a balance of masculine and feminine energies. In many Indian tribes, homosexuals were considered enlightened because they seemed to have that same balance, which is why gay Indians today are called two-spirit. I discovered that day that, like my ancestors, my sexuality and spirituality weren’t just connected, they’re the same thing.

Mom had given me a lot to think about. My conversation with her changed me, even if only subtly. I realized that what I had been experiencing was real and that there was a reason for all of it. I had been shaping my identity based on my sexuality and my

practice of Wicca without even realizing the broader connection between the two as well as the broader connection they had to the world. That historically, the spiritual path I was on had sprung up in different parts of the world, made me a citizen of the world, and connected me to my ancestors who were European, to those who were American Indian, and to my ancestors, whether blood related or not, who were queer.

## DANCES WITH HAIRY, MUSCULAR DUDES

The next books I read were all about gay Indians and what animal totems symbolized. I believed what my mother had told me, but I wanted to confirm the information somehow, and I was able to. And I didn't just want verification. I needed to figure out how totems were relevant to me personally. I knew that American Indians had traditions for what certain animals represented, but how did I fit into that? Not a lot had been written about it, but enough had, and Mom had given me some good places to start. She had helped me identify my totems as the dog, the wolf, and the bear.

My Indian ancestors passed down the belief that dogs represent faithfulness, companionship, and protection. Some people who have a connection with dogs may crave these things if they don't have them, or defend them if they do. For example, this either makes a person need to be protected, or makes a person need to be protective of others to whom we feel love or loyalty, depending on whether we are or are not alpha personalities. I am an alpha—a dominant personality, which makes me faithful and protective, but to a precious few. The wolf has these dog traits, too, but also represents the wilderness, and wildness of spirit. Wolves are excellent communicators, are dedicated to ritual and routine, and they teach us to trust our instincts. And the rest of the symbolism is a perfect match to me; I communicate really well, both in listening and in speaking. I'm Wiccan, so I'm trained on ritual. And even though my actions sometimes betray it, I know that my instincts are pretty spot on.

I am like a lot of people who have a bear totem. Whether or not they realize it, lots of people identify with bears because of their ability to stand upright and walk on their hind legs. The hibernation of bears is said to symbolize meditation in humans. Just as bears live off their inner stores during hibernation, humans can learn to go within themselves to access what we need for spiritual survival. Within ourselves, we can find the answers to our macro- and micro-universal questions. Reading about what bears represent made my identification with bears perfectly sensible. I had actually had this hibernation experience over and over in my life, and would continue to do so.

The specific symbols vary among different tribes and regions, but I found the places where they agreed. I also had to understand that totems have two levels of symbolism, the first ancestral or historical, the next level individual, so I had to really think about what these animals meant to me personally. My wolf spirit is an alpha, and is migratory. Although I have travelled as far as Alaska, I would spend most of my adult life in nomadic shifts between the central Illinois plains region and the city of Memphis. An acquaintance of mine more than once remarked that I keep moving because I don't have a place where I belong. On the contrary, I keep moving because there are so *many* places where I belong, and they all draw me to them. My wolf keeps me moving and keeps me connected to the moon.

My individual symbol for the bear has a lot to do with the men I am attracted to. In the gay world, we have a subculture called bears. "Bears" include a lot of different body types, ranging anywhere from slightly hairy to covered in "fur," and from muscular to morbidly obese. Even among gay bears, subsections like "otter," "cub," and exaggerated lists of others further define specific looks or interests, so much so that it is

impossible to keep all the labels straight (no pun intended). For me, I specifically am interested in those who are tall, muscular (not fat), and hairy (not furry). And the hair has to be in the right places—chest, yes; legs, yes; pubic, definitely; stomach and bum, negotiable. Shoulders and back, however, never! Additionally, my bear spirit called me within in the first place. He was the one who, in my bedroom in the trailer in Shumway, showed me that the light from that little white candle was actually inside me, and helped it grow.

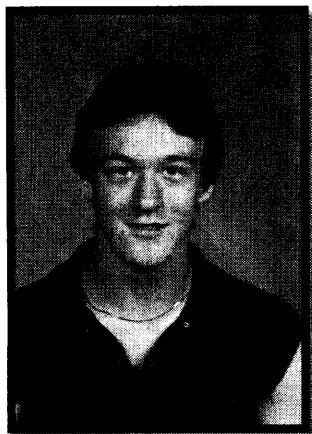
In the books I was now reading about Indian spirituality, I also learned that the dreams I had had when I was nine, the dreams where I joined all those beautiful men at those public pools and showers had been what Native Americans call a “puberty vision.” This is a vision that all Indian boys have as their sexuality begins to emerge. This puberty vision allowed a boy’s elders to determine what role he would assume as he matured in the tribe. Most commonly, the boys would become hunter-warriors, marry a female, and reproduce. However, if his puberty vision revealed a different inclination, that boy might be directed into a life as a hunter-warrior who would partner with another male, into a life as a feminine or “berdache” role (this was the transsexual role Mom had told me about), or into training as a tribe Shaman or medicine man. My own puberty vision was not a revelation for me, in that I did not understand it until after I was well on my path.



*AN' IT HARM  
NONE, DO WHAT  
THOU WILT*

## BELL, BOOK & CANDLE

One of the last things Dad and I bonded over was a television movie he and I watched one night when Emalei, Tonya, and Judy were all at work. The actress Shirley MacLaine had made a movie from a book she had written called *Out on a Limb*. It was a true story about her experiences with what she called metaphysics. I had never heard of such a thing, but she had had encounters with UFOs and extraterrestrials, and she even knew people who could go into a trance and channel wise old spirits who had revealed to her that she would win an Oscar for *Terms of Endearment*. When the movie was over, Dad noncommittally told me that he believed what she had said, but after that he pretty much dropped it. I did not.



**Steve Doty, with whom I practiced out-of-body experiences, and one of the first people I came out to.**

I went out and bought every word Shirley MacLaine ever put down. I started reading about Edgar Cayce. My friend Steve and I started reading about Franz Mesmer, and we even experimented with dream travel. I would fall asleep thinking about leaving my body and going to see Steve. Once I was asleep, I would become aware when I started dreaming, and I took control of the dream. Then, I would head to Steve's house. I knew roughly where it was, but I had never been there. When I got there, I would walk around and make mental notes of the layout and any details I could remember. The next day at school, I told him what I saw, and he confirmed that I was correct. Steve got the details about our trailer right, too. When I first

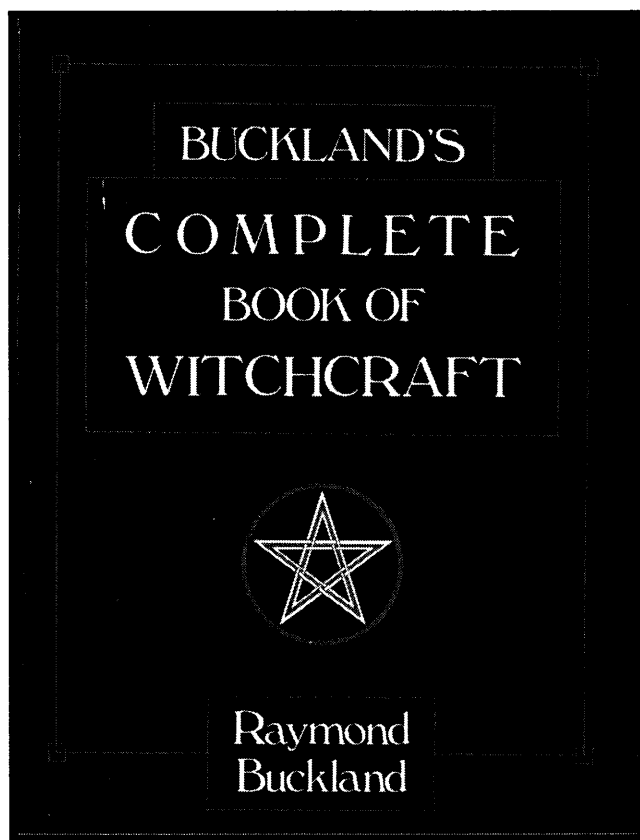
started reading Shirley MacLaine, I wasn't aware that her reputation was marred by her interest in metaphysics. But I started talking to people about what I was reading, and soon discovered that people thought she was a joke. I got made fun of not only for what I was reading, but because I was taking the content so seriously. I don't read Shirley MacLaine anymore, but not because I don't take her seriously. Instead, I've moved on to deeper, more meaningful content. I am a fan of her acting, but whether MacLaine is a crackpot or not is irrelevant to me. She opened my mind to the pursuit of spiritual understanding. For that, I am grateful to her. One book led to another, and I must have gotten put on some mailing list somehow because one day I got a catalog in the mail from a bookstore in Salem, Massachusetts called Pyramid Books and the New Age Collection.

The first book I ordered was a big blue book called *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*. I had never read anything about Wicca before, so this book introduced me to a whole new world. For the first time, I was reading about a form of spirituality that made sense to me. Everything about the rituals and practices of Wicca had to do with nature. It made a real connection between everything I had always felt spiritually and the real world around us. It even allowed for explanations of the supernatural things I had experienced, not only in the old farm house, but those which I had begun to have after researching New Age writers. It even allowed for me to be gay.

Every Christian thing I had ever heard up to that point told me I was wrong to be gay. Of course I would reject a religion like that. Being gay had given me more strength than anything else before it. My sexuality had been a way to assert myself in a situation that viciously sought to control everything about me. With Wicca, everything fit. I learned to meditate, and I taught Steve how to do it, too. Providence, it seems, had

provided me with the most widely-read text that modern witches use, and lovingly refer to as “the big blue book.” I was what Buckland had called a solitary practitioner, and using the rituals he laid out, I became a witch.

The first time I meditated, I used a combination of the techniques I had been reading by Shirley MacLaine and other New Age authors and the practices I was learning from the big blue book and other books on Wicca. In spite of the minimal chance that Judy might storm into my room at any moment, I lit a small white candle I had bought, turned off my light, and began.



**The Big Blue Book**

I sat in lotus position; I knew that was how you were supposed to sit when you meditated. Many cultures that practice meditation have sat this way for serious, focused meditation for thousands of years, though the form is not called “lotus” position by all of them. The person practicing meditation sits upright with both legs crossed in front. The arms are positioned straight down in such a way for the backs of the hands to rest comfortably on the knees. This shapes the body like a pyramid, which is important because it is believed to be most

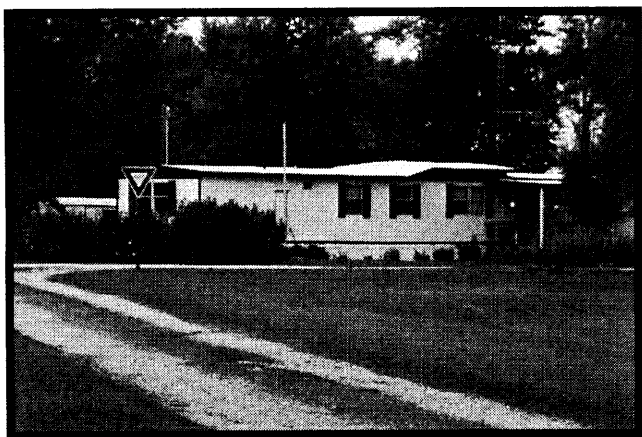
favorable to the flow of energy in the body. Finally, on both hands, the tips of the thumb and forefinger should be touching so that the flow of energy is not allowed to dissipate.

I concentrated on the dancing flame of that single white candle, and I began to focus on my breathing. Inhale... Exhale... Again, slower this time, inhale... exhale... Even slower the third time... inhale... and, exhale. I stared so intently at the flame that it became the only thing in the world. The dark room around me faded away and ceased to exist. The smell of the burning wax went away. The only thing I was aware of at all was the flame that seemed suspended in the air in front of me.

After several minutes of deep breathing and concentrating on the candle, I realized that the flame was not, in fact, in front of me. Instead, I was looking at the small, dancing light inside me. It did not illuminate anything; it did not shine against the inner walls of my human body. But there, just in the center of my being, the small amount of hope and life I had left flickered in response to every breath I took. Ugly had not touched it. It did not have crooked teeth. Judy had not screamed the fragment of luster away. It was nothing like my fat, sweaty, stinking father. The light I saw was me, the very essence of me. It was the part of my soul that connected me to this world. It was me and only me, and I could love it. This glimmer inside my body was gay, I realized, because being gay was the only thing I could love about my physical self. Being gay, in a very fundamental way, connected me to my spirit.

This was when I really began to realize that my sexuality was more important and relevant to my life than merely being a definition for the gender I was attracted to. It was more than just a way to rebel. It reified me somehow, and I hadn't understood that until paying attention to my spirituality brought me face-to-face with that part of myself.

Before, I had been proud of who I was sexually, but what meditation forced me to grasp was that I was wholly defined by difference. That, in fact, we all are. Many of the books I had been reading (and later, a really good episode of *Queer as Folk*) taught me that the fact that we are all different is what makes us all the same. My difference, which was marked primarily and most obviously by my sexuality, not only connected me to my spirit, but to every living thing in the world.



The trailer where I grew up in Shumway, and where Judy lives to this day.

In time, using this meditation, I began to be able to make the light shine brighter. Each time I meditated, no matter what was going on in my life at the time, that is what I tried to do. Sometimes

it would shine more than others.

Sometimes I could not get it any

brighter than the flame of the candle. On the rare occasions when I could get the light to fill me up, I would leap into the air with it, and I imagined myself flying far away from Shumway, from Dad and Judy, from the small towns and corn fields that I hated the smell of. I flew to the lights of the city. What city, I didn't know, nor care. I found those magical places with pools and showers and holes in the walls. I found dark alleys with half-burnt neon signs flickering on the scruffed faces of muscled men wearing leather. I found expensive condos painted beige with shaved male couples kissing, sleeping. Maybe I was just daydreaming or imagining all of it, maybe not. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I had found a way to turn on one small light in what was otherwise a dark

place. Sometimes, that is all you need to do. Sometimes, that's all it takes to keep you going.

## HOT FOR TEACHER

I was becoming adept at casting circles, which is the foundation of any and all rituals. Almost everything in Wicca is done within the circle. Basically, it is a way of setting yourself up to experience spirituality, a way of laying the groundwork. You put your spirit “between the worlds,” which means you have a clearer vision of the bigger picture. It is done for clarity, as a bridge between the spiritual plane and the earthly plane of nature, and for closeness: as a way to commune with the Gods and Goddesses.

I had come to a point in my meditations where I wanted to choose my deities. I had read about the significance of each of the deities in the many books I had acquired. I knew what they all stood for, and I was ready to form relationships with them. The first Friday night of summer, under the waxing moon (the phase of the moon that goes from new to full), I cast my circle, I called the quarters (a part of the ritual where the witch acknowledges nature by paying respect to the guardians of the four directions: east, south, west, and north), knelt before my little makeshift altar in my bedroom, and closed my eyes.

I found myself in a lush meadow between two forests. In place of my altar was a large tree stump, big enough to stretch my arms across. Into the wood of the stump was etched a perfect pentacle, each of the five points representing the elements—earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. I climbed onto the stump, instinctively, and sat in lotus position in the center of the pentacle facing north. From the thick woods to my right came my first deity, commonly regarded as the horned God, Kernunnos. However, I did not see Him as



I had seen him in pictures or other renderings. He was tall. He had beautiful white skin and chiseled bone structure. He was dressed in a fine black silk shirt and pants. His long, blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He approached the stump where I sat and stood before me, although it was more like I was *sitting* before Him.

“Blessed be,” said Kernunnos.

“Blessed be,” I answered. “I ask to be received as one of Your followers, that I may call upon You to assist with my magical working and my daily life as a witch.”

“I represent vanity, the pride you take in yourself. In every way that you care for yourself, so will be shown in how you appear to the world. Love yourself.”

“Thank you, Kernunnos. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be,” He answered.

Next from the woods came Pan. Pan stood at average height, a stunning example of Latino masculinity. On His head was a mass of thick, dark curls, and His mouth was framed with an impeccable moustache and goatee. From His forehead came two horns, between two to three inches in length, that curved to point straight upward. He smiled to reveal a faultless white smile, his canines slightly elongated. His shoulders were broad, and His big muscles were laid out perfectly under His smooth, brown skin. His chest was covered with straight black hair that came down into an hourglass shape under His pecs and formed a straight line down the center of His abdomen all the way to His pubic hair. His legs looked less like animal legs and more like furry chaps on male human legs, except for the fact that He had hooves instead of feet, and a tail. The fur at the tops of His legs separated into a V to frame his human-like, yet inhumanly large, uncircumsized penis, which engorged and became hard (and even larger) as he approached the stump

where I sat. In many cultural traditions, no human man comes close to the sexiness of Pan, and the same was true for how he appeared to me. I was breathless as He began our exchange.

“Blessed be,” said Pan.

“Blessed be,” I answered. “I ask to be received as one of Your followers, that I may call upon You to assist with my magical working and my daily life as a witch.”

“I represent your sexuality. In every way that you express yourself sexually, I am there with you. Love the beauty of the men who will come into your life and all your sexual energy. Love yourself.”

“Thank you, Pan. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be,” He answered.

Next came the Goddesses. Diana, who had long, blonde hair and wore a gauzy white dress, who represented love. Selene, with Her long, black hair, wore a blue gown and represented logic and intelligence. Finally, Hecate. Hecate had long, curly, red hair that seemed to spark in the light. Her dress was red, and She had fangs like a vampire. She would preside over my sense of self-preservation, anger, and fight response. She represents justice. Just as the practice of Wicca, and our experiences with magic, are unique to every individual witch, so are our experiences of our deities. Traditions have set forth common representations of these deities, but we all see them in ways that are exclusive to us.

From that night, each time I have cast a circle, I have invoked my two Gods and three Goddesses. Each time I draw a pentacle, their names come to mind as I come to each of the five points. As they each represent a part of me, together they create a balance

that sustains my physical life as well as my spiritual well-being. Even in the periods of time during which I have forgotten my spirit, they have been there, keeping me together, patiently waiting for me to reclaim myself when I have been ready. Each time, I am able to learn a new lesson and evolve myself. In Christianity, followers think of their God as someone or something to worship. In Wicca, my deities serve more like guides for me, teachers, who work *with* me rather than in demand of my worship. I do not *worship* them, rather, I am *grateful* for them. Eventually, I would come to understand that gratitude is the seed of happiness.

From my deities, I sought protection from spiritual matters that scared or intimidated me. I was still responding to those movies I had been influenced by that gave me an irrational fear of possession. Still, though, I had to concede, because of my experiences in the farm house, that not everything I encountered spiritually would be positive. I knew that some things could hurt me. So because of this, I counted on my deities for these protections, which they graciously provided and continue to provide.

## THE GRINNING MAN

Once, as my friend Travis and I were exercising on our walking route, we approached a younger guy straddling a bicycle. His bike was facing the other direction, but he was turned around, looking at us. He was probably about 20 to 25 years old. The skin on his face was as smooth as alabaster. He wasn't hot, but he was sort of cute in an unusual way. He was tall, but his arms and legs seemed disproportionately long for the rest of his body. The shorts he wore were decent-looking, but were way too short like they were from the 70s. He had on glasses that must be the kind that automatically tint darker in the sun, but they were only mildly dark, and he had on a red ball cap.

I noticed so much about him because, as we came upon him, we stopped talking and noticed he was looking directly at us, and he was grinning a foolish, overt grin. It was wide, almost like he should be open-mouthed laughing, but he wasn't laughing. He just had a broad, toothy smile. I figured he thought he knew one of us because people don't smile like that at strangers. I nodded in his direction. "Hey, man," Travis said, but he didn't say anything back to us. He just kept staring and smiling as we passed him. When we got to the end of the block, we looked back to see if he was still staring at us, but he was gone.

"Did you know that guy?" Travis asked.

"No. I was going to ask you the same thing."

The conversation we had been having before the grinning guy resumed, but the thought of his staring at us gave us both a shiver. There was just something strange about him.

“I want to watch something scary tonight,” Travis said.

“Scary like suspenseful, or jump out at you scary?”

“I don’t know. Suspenseful. Should we stop at Family Video?”

“No,” I said, “let’s just go through my DVDs at home.”

“What do you have that’s suspenseful and scary?”

“I don’t know; have you ever seen *The Mothman Prophecies*?”

“No. What, is it like *Godzilla vs. Mothman*?”

“You’re thinking Mothra, and no. It’s about this town that had a bunch of sightings of this alien-like being and it told them stuff that came true. It’s based on a true story, but I haven’t read the book. I should, though. It’s a good movie.”

That night, Travis and I huddled under a blanket—with the air conditioner blasting—and watched *The Mothman Prophecies* together. Within a week, I had called Waldenbooks and ordered the book—the book that would once and for all bring together all my experiences and shape my perspective about every extraordinary thought and thing in my crazy life.

The mild, comfortable chill in the room was surprising but welcome considering that we were having a sultry August. Normally, I kept my air conditioner at home turned on full blast all summer long with fans placed strategically through my apartment to keep the flow of cool air going. But I wasn’t at home. I was in a large conference room with

pale grey walls and easy, dark grey carpet. Dark red high-backed chairs were parked equidistant around the long black table in the center of the room, on one side of which was a door, and on the other side, a large picture window that looked out into the night sky at clusters of stars that sparkled more brilliantly than a *Twilight* vampire. In pinstripe black pants and a black dress shirt with a white tie, I took my seat at the head of the table but left the folder in front of me closed. I tapped my finger on the side of the folder, more out of boredom than impatience.

When the room filled, I called everyone's attention to the details of my folder, which they all had their own copies of. A lot of discussion brewed around the room as I directed the meeting with clarity and authority. The whole time, I was grateful that I was in dress clothes because of the t-shirt underneath and the long sleeves. The room was still chilly. As the meeting drew on, I found it harder and harder to breathe, and a jabbing pain in the back of my right knee was distracting me from my presentation. Every so often, when I looked up from my folder to make eye contact with a few of the people at the table, the others would look around the room and talk among themselves. My command of their attention would diminish every time I took my eyes off that folder. Eventually, the people at the table started to blur. There were fewer of them, it seemed. They were melting.

Rugby, my oldest Chihuahua, barked loudly from the kennel across the room where he and Chupa usually slept. The conference room was gone, and I was curled up in the blankets of my bed, startled from sleep. "Rugby?" I said. I strained my eyes open and raised up. The light from the living room shined into the bedroom and I could see Rugby and Chupa in their cage wide awake, ears perked. Both of my dogs are well-behaved. The

only time they bark is because of a strange noise or if they see someone they don't know. Rugby barked again as he looked directly at me. I looked at the clock. It was 3:23 a.m. Actually, I set my alarm clock 15 minutes fast, so it was really about 3:08.

In the movie *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, the priest who performs the exorcism explains to his attorney that demonic activity commonly occurs at 3:00 a.m. This time, he says, is considered “the witching hour” because it is a mockery of the holy trinity. I had never heard it put quite that way, although I had been aware for a long time that paranormal phenomena of many types tends to increase during this time. Experiences people have with ghosts are often reported to have happened during this hour. People who are reportedly possessed by demons either become active, or report to have been possessed, during this hour. In other words, a sort of statistical bunching happens regarding reports of activity at this time. Also—and I do not believe coincidentally—alien abduction reports bunch into certain time frames, and 3:00 a.m. is one of them. Although a fictional movie, the writer and director of *The Fourth Kind* drew from research of reported alien abductions to include this detail in the film.

I was alarmed that Rugby would be startled enough to bark at three in the morning, and I couldn't stop thinking about the reference to *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. So I was genuinely freaked out, but I was able to fall back to sleep. When I did, I returned to the dream I was having, sort of. I was back in the conference room, and Gale Harold (the actor who plays Brian Kinney on the television show *Queer as Folk*) was there with me. He and I were interviewing for a job with a Japanese man. The interview didn't go well; we weren't going to be getting the job. We left the interview, but not through the door. Instead, we pushed open the window (like the emergency exit on a bus or a train),

which now led to another part of the building, not outside like I had seen it before. The Japanese man got angry and started chasing us. He even got security to assist in the hunt. Gale and I stayed together avoiding them for a while. Eventually, though, we got separated. By the time the dream ended, I had not been caught, but they were still searching for me.

Dreams like this persisted over the next few weeks. Sometimes the dreams were scary or suspenseful, but other times, they were just vivid. In one dream, a bear was chasing me. I was back in Shumway, not as my age now, but as a teenager. It chased me around the picnic table and the tree in the front yard. Dad was trying to help me, but it just eventually stopped chasing me. In another dream, I swam from England to the east coast of the United States in about half an hour because it wasn't really that far. I was doing the swim with a woman who occurred to me might be Judy, but ultimately it wasn't her. It was a nice British lady instead. Half-way across, I said, "Are there sharks in these waters?" She started swimming really fast to outrun them, but I just laughed because I knew there were no sharks. We made it the rest of the way, and we ended up at this beautiful house with a lot of glass—a very nice, new house, and I think it was mine.

Some of the dreams were sexual dreams about people I went to high school with, then within days, I would see the person I had dreamed about or he would contact me on Facebook. Then I would be back to having nightmares. One night I dreamed I was living in Frayser (the neighborhood where Nick and I lived when we moved to Memphis). I was walking home from work at Red Lobster one night, and there was a lot of street activity going on. Pretending to be minding my own business, I started jogging, as if I were just out for exercise. But a few blocks from home, in the parking lot of the convenience store



at the corner of Frayser Boulevard, a young man approached me and started talking to me like he was going to get violent. I was able to get past him, but I was terrified. The dream, like all the ones I had been having, seemed so real.

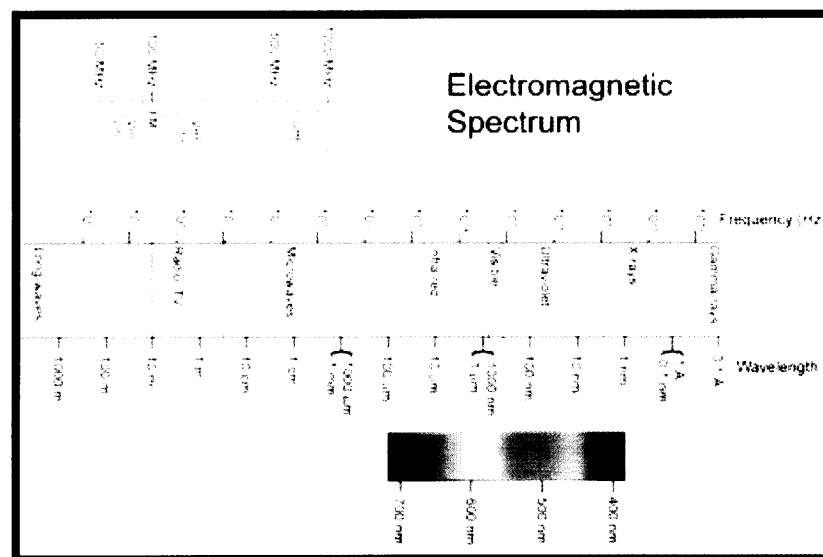
No matter if the dreams were scary or not, I kept getting awakened at 3:00 or soon after. Sometimes I would awaken because Rugby barked; sometimes I awoke on my own. This happened whether Travis was staying over or not, and he and I were both surprised that Rugby's behavior had changed, and I was getting really anxious about demonic activity. Demons were even figuring into the lucid dreams I was experiencing. One night, all night long, I dreamed of fighting off demons. One had possessed a rabbit, and I was swinging that rabbit, hitting its head on the ground over and over. Not a Christian, I searched myself and could say, with conviction, that I did not even believe in demons, so I was confused by my irrational fear of something I didn't even believe in and how to reconcile that with the fact that I was waking up every night at a time when paranormal activity tends to peak. What could be going on in my apartment as I slept?

But things were happening all around me, even when I was awake. I saw a strange black dog in the yard one day when I took Rugby and Chupa outside. It didn't approach them, but I was afraid for them and took them back inside. One night I couldn't connect to the Internet from my computer, and my phone wouldn't connect to the Internet or get a signal to send messages or dial out. The lights in my apartment kept going dim, then bright, then dim, then back to normal. And I would periodically see flashes of light, sometimes out the windows, but sometimes the flashes seemed to happen inside the rooms of my apartment.

In the midst of all this, I got the telephone call from Waldenbooks that my copy of *The Mothman Prophecies* had arrived, so I went and picked it up. I could tell from the first few pages that Hollywood had taken many liberties with the story, and that the book was going to be a lot different. The book was not well-written, but it was interesting nonetheless, and I was surprised to discover explanations to my current circumstances in its pages. Basically, the book (and in theory, the very freely-adapted movie) chronicles the events that took place over the course of about a year in the mid-sixties when residents of small town Point Pleasant, West Virginia began experiencing sightings of a strange creature. The being was large and winged, and it communicated cryptically with some of the townspeople in person and over the telephone. One interesting thing about the communications was that they included specific details about coming events that ultimately proved to be precisely accurate.

John A. Keel, the author of the book, makes a number of interesting points that changed my perspective of paranormal phenomena. He comments on descriptions of UFOs in the Bible. Not only are these descriptions explicit, but Biblical descriptions of angels in the Bible are very similar to abduction or alien visitation accounts of today. Even the language is similar. For example, in the Bible, angels often tell the humans they visit to, “fear not,” and they are surrounded by a great light. And in *The Mothman Prophecies*, when Woodrow Derenberger is visited by the entity who calls himself Indrid Cold, Cold tells him, “do not be afraid.” In this, and in many reports of “alien” close encounters, the entities are accompanied by a great light, and similar language is used in an effort to soothe the person being visited.

Keel, who by the time he had written *The Mothman Prophecies* had been studying and investigating the paranormal for many years, suggests repeatedly and explicitly in the book that many types of paranormal phenomena—angels and other religious miracles and apparitions, demons, aliens, and even mysterious creatures categorized under the heading of cryptozoology, “clearly share a common source or cause.” He also asserts repeatedly that they are not extraterrestrial, that they are indigenous to Earth, have always been here, and always will be. And through his descriptions of the events that he and the residents of Point Pleasant, West Virginia experienced, he makes a convincing case for his theory. Keel rejects the term extraterrestrials in favor of what he calls ultraterrestrials, which are, “beings and forces which coexist with us but are on another time frame; that is, they operate outside the limits of our space-time continuum yet have the ability to cross over into our reality.” He suggests that their origin is not a separate physical place, but a different state of energy. Considering the work being done at places like CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, in particle physics, this idea seemed perfectly logical.



The spectrum of visible light is very small compared to the full range of electromagnetic energy, and that only includes the types of energy we are aware of and can measure with our instruments. There is a staggering number of things around us all the time that we do not see with the naked eye because we are not equipped to see outside the visible spectrum of light. Paranormal investigators arm themselves with infrared and thermal imaging cameras to try to expand into unseen energy as much as possible, and they are able to get evidence of energies that are there, but unseen. Imagine the possibilities of what is around us, all the time, that we do not have the technology to access. For Keel, these intelligences have the technology to access us, but not vice versa. Only when they approach us is it possible for us to even become aware of them. For the most part, they do not seem interested in human affairs, and there is no way to know or understand what their motivations are because our human frames of reference are too limited. In the movie version, when the scholarly character explains that “their motivations aren’t human,” we get the chills because we automatically (especially in the context of a thrilling movie) register that as *inhuman*. Demonic! Malevolent! However, when we are incidentally affected by the activities of these intelligences, we want to label the human outcome as good or bad—divine or evil. But really they seem to just be going about their business and sometimes we get caught in the crossfire.

Sure, for the most part, I believe these intelligences are minding their own business. But, as Keel describes, some of them make contact and seem to want to mess with us a little bit. For example, tricksters like Indrid Cold. Indrid Cold was not the Mothman. Cold was a humanoid who represented himself to Point Pleasant resident Woodrow Derenberger as an alien from another planet. Once, when Derenberger became

ill, Cold presented him with a vial of liquid. Derenberger drank the liquid and was cured. Common with such visitations, Cold dressed strangely for the time period, and his features were somewhat unusual. He was tall, olive-skinned, had long fingers, and an unusual smile. Derenberger described flashes of light in relation to the appearance of Cold. And the other townspeople of Point Pleasant who had similar experiences with other entities even described antiseptic smells that accompanied the flashes of light, which Keel compares to the legend of the Mad Gasser of Mattoon.

“A black-garbed phantom terrorized Mattoon, Illinois, in the 1940s, spraying a noxious gas into bedroom windows,” Keel explains in a footnote. I looked up archives on the attacks to discover that, although incidents were reported all over town, many of them occurred on streets such as Dewitt, Champaign, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, and Charleston Avenue... the area where I currently reside. Theories about the identity of the Mad Gasser range from everything including a repressed homosexual chemistry student who wanted revenge on those who had bullied him in high school to speculation of the paranormal because descriptions of the assailant, who was never apprehended, were so similar to descriptions of the types of entities like Indrid Cold who made contact with the people of Point Pleasant 20 years later. And the descriptions are also similar to the grinning man Travis and I saw on his bicycle during our walk weeks earlier.

Everything I had been experiencing since seeing the grinning man—the dreams, the change in Rugby’s behavior at night, waking up every night at 3:00 whether Rugby barked or not, the flashes of light—were all being described by Keel as what was happening to the people of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. And the people of Mattoon had possibly fallen under the scrutiny of these intelligences before. Had Travis and I been

visited? Or were we having some sort of precognitive “living visions” to what we would later read about in the book (details, by the way, which had not been addressed in the movie)?

We finished reading the book, and the similarities to what was happening to us continued to amaze and delight us over the course of those two late summer months. If we had been influenced by these “ultraterrestrial intelligences,” none of them had approached us to talk or communicate (that we could remember, of course).

I still meditate often, and when I do, it can be on anything from animal totems, to basic clarity; from the ways of the warrior, to physical visualization. I’m learning more about my Native American ancestry, and I’ve taken some time to learn more about my place in that culture. As a Wiccan, I cast spells when I’m feeling magical, and Travis never lets me forget that magic is always around me, even when I don’t see it every day. I do rituals on the Sabbats, and I still prefer to work as a Solitary Practitioner. A group of my elders blessed and initiated me, effectively ordaining me as a Wiccan priest (although I prefer the term minister for some reason). My spirituality drives all my life decisions, and it gives me an objectivity that I find crucial. To other witches, and to anyone interested in pursuing the craft, I would say always remember the Wiccan Rede, our main tenet, “An’ it harm none, do what thou wilt.” (And turn your broomstick bristles up to get rid of an unwanted guest).

*QUEER  
REVOLUTION*

## NO OTHER ROAD, NO OTHER WAY... NO DAY BUT TODAY

When Jung talked about archetypes, I wonder if he considered how father-mother-child would affect gay kids? I've read some speculation and debate about it, but I've never actually read anything by Jung himself that addressed the question. I knew early on that I would grow up to have relationships with men (and by relationships I mean those that lasted 15 minutes all the way up to those that have lasted for years). I've never needed to know much about the men I have sex with for the encounter to be significant. I don't need to know his name; I'll probably forget it anyway. I don't necessarily need to see his face if it happens through a hole in the wall somewhere, though I must confess I love a good kisser.

In any case, by the time I was nine I had already begun to imagine sexual scenarios, but mine were radically different than what I had been seeing. I had always seen a man and a

woman together. That was the way it was on television. Anytime I snuck a peek at Dad's porn (or the magazines hidden in the desk at my uncle's trucking company), I saw a man with a woman. However, when I had tried to imagine myself that way, the prospect was foreign and disgusting to me. I didn't fit into that picture. Then, when Tonya told me the word "gay," angels sang down, a light shone upon me, (I probably controlled the wind again), and I had a word for who I was. On the other hand, she also said it was a bad



**Emalei, Tonya, and I were all given mugs with our names in gold letters. Who but a gay kid would get excited about drinking out of a man's pants? Look at that smile!**



thing, so I knew I couldn't tell anyone. As soon as I developed a sexual identity, then, Tonya had immediately and securely built a closet around it. Later, when the questions about my early specific knowledge of gay sexual culture would surface, combined with everything else paranormal that I had experienced, I would spend many years coming up with an understanding of these questions and experiences that was practical, that I could live with, and that I could believe, even if no one else could.

Once I had established my sexual identity, puberty would soon follow. When I found myself on the hormonal edge of that adolescent precipice, I had to pretend that the kind of puberty I would go through was like all the modeling I had seen up to that point even though my head was switching back to the way I had been picturing sex, with other boys and even with grown men. After I recovered from Anorexia, my disdain for Judy's authority had carried over onto Dad's as well. He was fat, and red-faced, and smelly, and shouting at me. Hitting my tiny chest with his thick pointing finger over and over when he was making a furious point. All the while I was jerking off to Roger Stephens and wearing afghans and throws like a sari when I was at home by myself. The time had come for me to tell the world. Well, at least three people.

I couldn't contain my excitement the day I decided to do it. I knew that Janice Rexroad would be the first person I would tell. I also had to tell my best friend, Steve Doty, and then that night I would tell Dad. Janice asked me a couple of questions just to try to make sure I wasn't kidding her, and to make sure I was sure about it. Coming out is the single most important experience in a gay kid's life. For me, it was no different. Nothing was more liberating. Steve wasn't surprised. People are always afraid of losing friends when they come out, but that never happened for me. Janice and Steve are still

friends of mine to this day. I didn't run around telling everyone else in the school, but I didn't really have to. That fall I dressed up as Boy George and lip-synched "Karma Chameleon" at our variety show, and was thereafter referred to as Boy Corey.



**Me in 1984, rehearsing for my performance as Boy George in the Beecher City High School variety show.**

That night, Dad's cousin had come to visit, but I had made up my mind that nothing would thwart my plan to come out. This was the day. Dad left Deon to use the bathroom, and passed by my bedroom door. I told him I wanted to tell him something when he was finished. He came back in and sat down next to me on my bed with a good-natured but curious expression on his face. His eyebrows were raised, and the lines in his forehead were creviced.

"Dad, I've been planning to tell you this all day. I know that you have company, but if I don't tell you now, I'll have to go to bed before I get a chance to tell you. I just want you to know that I'm gay."

Every bit of charm and expression drained out of his face.

"Now, you don't know that. That ain't true," he said calmly. Amazingly, he stayed calm during the entire conversation.

“It’s true. I’m sure it’s true.”

“How do you know?”

“Because whenever I see two people together, like on *Dallas* or something, and I get turned on by it, I’m looking at the guy, not the girl.”

“That don’t mean you’re gay.”

“But I am gay. Trust me, I know.”

“Have you been with somebody?” The tone of this question was blackened with impending anger. I thought about saying yes, even though it wasn’t true, just so he would finally believe me, but I really think he would have hit me if I had said yes, and demanded to know with whom. The other guy would have gotten killed.

“No.”

“Then maybe...”

“Dad. Believe me, I know. I’ve known for a long time.”

“Well, I’m glad you told me. Now we can work on changin’ this.”

“Dad, that’s not why I’m telling you. I don’t want it to change. I’m only telling you so that you won’t wonder why I’m not bringing any girls home.”

Three years later, when I got my driver’s license, Dad rallied his friends together to help set me up with girls, any girls, from the area who were my age and who had reputations. I dated them, and even took Kathie Winchester to her homecoming dance in Effingham. Every time, when I returned home, he would anxiously ask me, “What happened?!”

“We went to a movie. We ate at such-and-such restaurant. And that was it.”

“Didn’t you get any?”

“No.”

He would go into a fury each time, but particularly about Kathie Winchester, because I had spent money to rent a tux and everything. “Why didn’t you?” he demanded to know.

“You know why.”

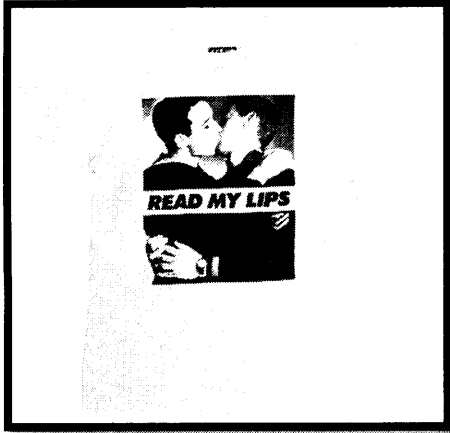
The bonding moments between Dad and me got far less frequent. He would eventually stop setting me up with girls, but constantly warned me never to tell anyone what I had told him. This was more out of embarrassment for him, of course. He was not concerned about what anyone would do to me when they found out.

## WARRIOR

The politics of my sexual orientation provided me my first experience of relevance to Eastern philosophies. I had seen an advertisement in a catalog for a book on Tibetan meditations that came with a music CD to play along. I had sometimes been incorporating Native American flute music into my practice, and I was curious about what new techniques I might learn from this vastly different approach. And what I learned was that it was not vastly different at all.

It made perfect sense that I could incorporate my interest in these ideas with my combined Wiccan and Native American spirituality. In the same ways these are similar, so is Eastern thought. All have a reverence for nature, they all incorporate forms of meditation, they all use magic, which can simply and practically be described as just a way of manipulating energy. Anything you read by His Holiness the Dalai Lama will focus on peace, but not all Eastern perspectives rely on pacifism. Some, like Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Takuan Soho's *The Unfettered Mind*, understand that part of our experience of the world is conflict, and they address the spiritual significance of the warrior. And by the time I was 19, I had taken up my Queer sword and shield—my sword was my dick, my shield would be a T-shirt.

Once I was completely out of the closet, I would soon come to understand the subtle nuances of gay oppression. For example, at Dairy Queen where I worked, my bosses tolerated my being out of the closet, but I couldn't talk about it at work in case someone might get offended. "This is a place of business," the owner Byron would say.



Midwestern-American queer armor.

Sometimes, his attempt at shaming me would be successful, sometimes not, but in every case I knew I *should not* be ashamed. I knew that my visibility and my voice would have to break down that oppression.

In the late '80s and early '90s, gay

subjugation extended to people with HIV and AIDS (PWH/PWA), whether they were gay or not. All levels of government worldwide at the time worked against PWH/PWA in research, funding, and education. Worse still, the pharmaceutical companies were also reluctant to contribute to working with doctors and patients to develop treatments. In response, Larry Kramer formed a group in New York City called ACT-UP, which stood for AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power. They were a radical group that used severe tactics and images to spread the message that we need to pay attention to this virus and come up with a way to increase the lifespan and quality of life for people who have it.

One of the ways ACT-UP did this was with visually provocative t-shirts. One t-shirt featured a black and white photograph of two men kissing, and across the picture was the bold message, READ MY LIPS. This t-shirt brought more attention to gay sexuality than the plight of PWH/PWA, but ACT-UP sold them to raise funds. I had to have one. I was living in Effingham, population 12,000. Openly gay population, one. I wore that shirt all over town, and quickly became known as the gay guy from Dairy Queen. This open visibility was my first feat of queer activism. Without consciously intending to do so, I had become a warrior. But when I realized I had, I embraced it. I

could piss off all the right people and bring gay out of the closet writ large in middle America at the same time. But even though being a warrior is a spiritual path like my sexual orientation, Wicca, and my Native American ancestry had been, I was not enlightened enough to practice it as such. Instead, activism was more of a way to channel my anger.

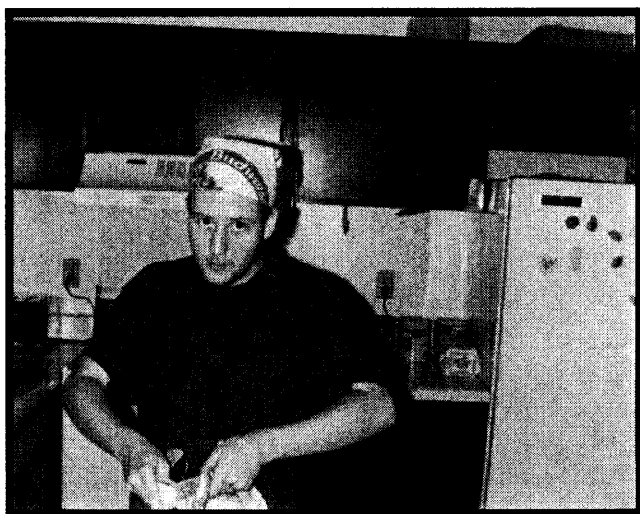
The whole reason I had become spiritual was to understand the paranormal phenomena I was exposed to growing up. But nothing paranormal had happened to me in quite a while (unless you consider Wiccan spell work paranormal, which I don't—magical, yes, but not paranormal). To say that I wasn't enlightened was more than just a little true, and my immaturity extended into many areas of my life apart from not being able to be a warrior spiritually. Even though being gay was a source of strength for me, it wasn't enough to combat the depression that crept through me like swinecress weeds, and had since Judy had called me ugly for the first time. I couldn't even enjoy my youthful promiscuity as a young gay man because I didn't feel attractive. Still, being openly gay in Effingham during this time gave me a sort of odd popularity.

From the time I started wearing that ACT-UP t-shirt around town, my friends and family worried that I would be gay bashed as a result of it. They were sure that my act of revolution would inspire retaliation from the homophobic masses, and their fears were not unfounded. I knew that being a victim of violence was a real possibility, but I also thought that someone attacking me could only further my cause. If I were seriously injured, or even killed, homophobia would get national attention, and this was way before that very horror befell poor Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming. I felt that if furthering the gay cause cost me my life, then so be it; it was what I had to give. No one

in Effingham ever gay bashed me, but later, when I lived in Memphis, I gained the experience that would help me understand that a death wish did not a martyr make.

One of my many roommates when I first moved to Memphis was a young woman named Karen. I don't remember what country Karen was from that gave her the thick accent that sounded almost Spanish. She was full-figured, smiled a lot, and her red hair was just long enough to get into a small ponytail on the back of her head. She became a roommate because the main tenant on the lease, Jessica, worked with her at a call center that answered a 900-number sex line. But what distinguished Karen more than any of these features was her active membership in the MACHS, the Memphis Area Confederate Hammer Skinheads. Karen was a neo-Nazi white supremacist.

Karen knew I was gay, but she was always friendly to me, and I was friendly to her in return. I was white, and that was all that mattered



**At the apartment I shared with the skinheads.**

to her. Her friends, on the other hand, were not so forbearing. One night, as was the case on many nights, a large group of skinheads crowded into our little apartment to hang out, listen to their skinhead bands, watch home movies of their rallies on the VCR, and spew rhetoric to each other, exactly like a scene out of *American History X*. I continued living there because, with so many roommates (at one point there were eight of us in the two-



bedroom apartment), the rent was cheap enough to afford. I did not have a car, and the best job I could find in walking distance was as a cashier at Godfather's Pizza.

My plan one evening, after I ate my dinner while watching a stand-up comedy show on television, was to retire to Karen and Jessica's room to work on writing the screenplay that would thrust me into stardom. During the show, another guest arrived at the apartment and wanted to know if anyone was interested in buying a hit of acid. They knew I had done acid before, so one of the skinhead girls asked me if I wanted any. It was just four dollars a hit.

"No," I said. "I don't really do that anymore. Besides, I have to work tomorrow. Thanks, though."

My comedy program ended, and I went back to the bedroom and tried to block out the sounds of the skinheads getting riled up as they relived the rally they were watching. But soon, I noticed that something wasn't quite right. I started grinding my teeth, and I remember thinking, "this is odd. I'm grinding my teeth like I used to when I was tripping." I dismissed the feeling and kept writing. By the time I stopped to go check the dryer to see if my laundry was finished, I was tripping on LSD. However, I had declined the offer of acid. I had no idea that I had started hallucinating. When I started taking my clothes out of the dryer, I had to wring out the excess water that was running out of them. Karen and Jessica were confused because the clothes were dry.

I was amazed and delighted when my poster of Jason Priestly from *Beverly Hills, 90210* started talking to me and called me over to him so he could show me his dick. Unfortunately, though, my enjoyment was cut short when I went into the bathroom and discovered that my wicked reflection in the mirror was mocking me, saying everything I

was saying and making every move I was making. Karen and Jessica thought I had completely snapped. After several hours with no sign of respite or any explanation for my behavior, they took me to the hospital. Days later, when I emerged from the effects of the drug, the doctors in the psychiatric unit where I had been placed questioned me about what had happened. They insisted that I had attempted suicide; I assured them that I had done no such thing.

The drug tests I was given after I was admitted to the hospital revealed that I had taken the equivalent of ten street doses of LSD. In addition, a suicide note had been typed on my typewriter. But I had not taken any acid, much less ten hits of it, nor had I written any suicide note. The only conclusion we could come to was that someone in the apartment that night had put the acid into my Dr. Pepper while I was in the bathroom and used my typewriter to write a suicide note. The skinheads, essentially, had tried to kill me. If they had succeeded, no hate crime would have been reported. I would have been a depressed, troubled young man who had committed suicide. No fame, no news reports, no martyrdom for my cause. Just gone. No one could even be charged with any crime for the apparent attempt on my life because I did not know the people who were in the apartment that night, and I do believe that neither Jessica nor Karen had known what they had done or who was responsible.

## THE UNIVERSITY CENTER

While living in Memphis had its challenges, it also had its rewards. The best blow job I've ever received was through a hole in the wall of a public restroom. The encounter started out like they always did down there—at the men's bathroom in the basement of the University Center at the University of Memphis. The building was similar to the MLK Union at EIU. It had couches, complete with sleeping students; study areas, complete with sleeping students. Televisions, a dining hall. And once I discovered the glory hole in the basement, I spent a lot of my free time there.

If the back stall was free, I would go in, take my pants down, and wait. Sometimes another man would come in right behind me. Other times, I would have to wait as much as half an hour before someone else would come. I was worried about entrapment—when cops come on to gays in restrooms and set them up to be arrested—so I was very careful. You could see the lap of the man in the next stall through the hole, which was a rough, dug out opening about three inches in diameter. I would watch his hand moving, and I would let him see my hand moving, but I never exposed myself until he did first. I suppose if a cop had ever been down there to arrest anyone, he could have lied and arrested me anyway, but that never happened.

Once I could see my neighbor's dick—and I saw dicks of every size, shape, and color down there—I would tap the hole to invite him to put his dick through it for me to suck. But one time the guy, a ginger by the looks of things, refused to let me suck his dick.

“I’m not putting my dick through a hole in the wall,” he insisted.

“Why not?”

“I just don’t want to,” he said. “You can put yours in it if you want.”

“You’ll suck a guy’s dick through a hole in the wall, but you won’t let him suck yours?”

“Yeah.”

I was disappointed; he had a pretty cock. But I picked up the pieces of my shattered luck, stood up, and went balls-deep into the wall. That man got hold of my dick and everything he did felt better than any sensation before it, or since. I don’t know what he was doing with his mouth, but the way he moved it, synced it perfectly with what his lips were doing, with a little bit of support from his hands, was so intense I had to hold on to the top of the stall wall. I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to stay standing.

“I’m really close,” I said.

He kept working.

“I’m going to cum, dude.”

Still, he continued.

“Do you want me to cum in your mouth?”

Actions speak louder than words; he kept going. A few seconds later, I finished. I tried to follow the guy; I wanted to marry him. But he had his pants up and he was gone before I even got his phone number. My years at the University of Memphis were some of the best of my life. Another man let me fuck him without a condom through that hole (which was the first time I had ever had “unsafe” sex). If he had been fucking me, I would have insisted on a condom. I suppose that even though I was the top (gayspeak for

the one penetrating), I could have caught any number of STDs by doing that, but I was lucky; I did not. While I was fucking the guy, a cute black brother was looking over the stall wall, and I tried to get him to come around and join me. He declined and stayed where he was, masturbating as he watched us.

## TO HAVE AND TO HOLD



Nick and me at the St. Louis zoo.

Finally, after seven or eight years of flailing about after high school, I decided to go to college. I hadn't entertained the thought since I blew off going to California for fashion design. But following a break-up with a drag queen who

turned out to be bisexual and wanted to have a baby with his mutually bisexual friend Kat, I was back in Illinois living with Emalei and her family. So, I enrolled at Lake Land College in their Radio/TV Broadcasting program and set about starting their first gay club, which I called B-GLADD (Bisexuals, Gays, Lesbians and Allies to Develop Diversity). Once again an activist, I had to fight a hard battle against the Student Government because they did not want to pass our charter. I took my fight to every newspaper and television station from Mattoon to Effingham to Champaign, and they were all too happy to run the story. It was delicious controversy, which I relished, but the struggle also took its toll on me academically. B-GLADD ultimately became a recognized student organization at Lake Land, and I am proud to say they are still going strong. But I had started Lake Land with a perfect grade point average. Two years later, my last semester there, I failed out.

I had paid for those two years entirely out of pocket, so at least I hadn't accrued any student loan debt. Unfortunately, however, I hadn't achieved the Associate's Degree I had set out to earn either. The only thing I left Lake Land College with was Nick, the boyfriend I had met there. He was younger than I was, having enrolled at Lake Land immediately after high school. He was cute, slightly chubby, and just a few inches taller than I. I was attracted to his dark complexion (for a white guy) and his genuine smile. Nick laughed a lot, and his sense of humor was infectious.

As a student at Lake Land, he majored in desktop publishing, but never had any intention of pursuing work in the field. His parents had encouraged him to be practical. I



Nick and me on our wedding day.

suppose I should thank them for forcing him into college to learn a trade. Otherwise, I wouldn't have met him. Since eighth grade, though, he had been performing as a magician, so by the time I met him at college, he had become outstanding at it. I encouraged him to develop his performing, and over the course of our relationship, I gave him the Corey Taylor lesson on gay history and how we should think of ourselves. Shameless. Impenitent.

Entitled. This is how gay rights must be approached if we are to persevere, so we must

establish this attitude as a fact within ourselves. Every stride we have made as a group—from Stonewall to ACT-UP—has come forth from this mind-set. Anyway, that’s what I told Nick. That’s what I tried to instill in him coming up as a young gay man. He wasn’t even out of the closet before me. But I had made up my mind I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life with some closeted punk who kept me in the closet and introduced me as his “friend” or “roommate.”

And I fully intended to spend the rest of my life with Nick, which was why I asked him to marry me six months after we started dating. Another six months later, we themed our commitment ceremony from the contemporary Cinderella movie, *Ever After*. For our reception, the invitations requested guests’ attendance at a Masquerade Ball, and the next morning we got on a plane to Las Vegas. We saw magician Lance Burton, and got our picture taken with him after the show.

When we arrived at the theater to see Siegfried & Roy (at \$90 per ticket for general admission), I told the usher that Nick was a magician, so she got on her walkie talkie and arranged to have us seated in the front row. We spent a week seeing shows up and down the strip. We didn’t gamble because Nick was only 20 years old at the time, but we did spend a lot of time at M&M’s World and the Coca-Cola museum. Our second to the last day there, we ventured off the strip and found a fun leather shop full of high-quality bondage and fetish clothing and equipment. Being of such high quality, everything was too expensive for us to indulge, but we enjoyed



**Our wedding cake. We had made the topper ourselves. After we broke up, with permission from me, Nick sold it on eBay to another gay couple.**



browsing and seeing what they had in stock (no pun intended). We went back home with photos and memories, no ball gags or leather hoods, but we had started our marriage, which would come to last seven years, happily.

## THE BLUES AND THE BOYS

I met Travis Porter on a bus going from Memphis to Effingham. Travis was nellier than I, but not so over-the-top that he irritated me. He was cute and friendly. His blonde hair was shaved close to the neck, but flopped in long, straight locks down into his face from the top. He wasn't wearing cologne, but he smelled good (which meant he didn't smoke). His complexion was light except for his thick, dark lips. The contrast was so severe I wondered for a long time if he might be wearing colored lip gloss. We sat across from each other and talked the whole way back to Effingham. He had been in Memphis visiting a family member who was stationed at the Naval Air Station in nearby Millington for a few weeks; I had moved back to Illinois after graduating from the University of Memphis because I had no job and thought I wanted a change until it came right down to actually moving. I thought Travis was cool because, for a younger guy, he was as promiscuous and sexually free as I was (so many young guys are too quick to jump into a heteronormative relationship); he thought I was cool because I was a published author (well, almost). I would have had sex with him at the mere mention of it, but he didn't mention it. At the time, I was in a bad place, and I wasn't nearly confident enough to make a move on him. He was too cute.

That spring, I got a job in Mattoon as a telephone operator for directory assistance and long-distance toll calls, and I applied for graduate school at Eastern Illinois University. The only thing motivating me to do anything remotely positive was that I needed to move out of my sister's house. She and her family made me feel welcome, but

I had been there long enough. The money I was making at the phone company was tragically low. I couldn't save for my own apartment; I was barely making enough to eat, put gas in my car and pay the insurance, and keep my phone. The shifts were a burden. I had to work split shifts every day—four hours on, four hours off, then four hours on. Emalei lived too far away for me to justify going home during the off time every day. I could only just afford the gas as it was. So, I took my laptop with me and played on the Internet every day for four hours. A few weeks in, however, I was doing a search on Facebook and came across Jackson Taylor, a guy I had met in philosophy class when Nick and I were still together. Travis had been trying to keep my mood elevated. He meant well, but kept insisting on inviting me to do things with him that cost money.

“Come to Joe Sippers with me,” he would say. “You don't have to spend money to just hang out.”

“Sorry, going to a coffee shop and sitting there with nothing sounds more embarrassing than fun.”

“I can get you a cup of coffee,” he would offer. Or, “Let's go to the movies, my treat!”

I never went with him. Eventually, he stopped inviting me. And after a while, even his phone calls became less frequent. Nothing mattered to me. But when I reconnected with Jackson, something changed.

Talking to him made me realize how much I had loved being in school, and I was glad I had applied to the graduate program at EIU. The spark of hope I felt in doing this was, for the first time since I left Memphis, real. I took time off from work to go to Champaign and take the GRE test required for acceptance. Another step in the process, I

met with the graduate studies coordinator who seemed thrilled that I wanted to attend EIU. I felt secure about my chances for acceptance, and the day it was confirmed, I finally felt like I had some direction in my life.

I combined the money I had left over from my book advance with my student loan and moved into my own apartment in Charleston. The apartment was a small, dark attic loft (which had been misrepresented as a one-bedroom) in an old Victorian house. Even the square footage was a misrepresentation because most of the floor space was unusable due to the deep-angled roof/walls. But I would live there for three years. As much as my life has been in a constant state of flux, I hate change. But at first I loved the apartment simply because it was mine.

Jackson had been working at Office Depot in Memphis, but was recruited away to be an office manager after he waited on one of the executives from International Paper. Once or twice a month, he would drive up from Memphis and stay with me in my crappy loft. When he was here with me, we were so close and intimate. The sex was good, but I confess I also fell in love with him. He fell in love with me, too, which made him heartsick on Sunday afternoons when he would have to drive back home to Memphis. Talking to him over the phone and computer became difficult, too. He started to withdraw, and his visits were less and less frequent. I blamed myself. The stress of graduate school had put some extra weight on me, and I worried that Jackson was no longer attracted to me even though he assured me that the reason we weren't doing well was because leaving me after two days was just too hard for him. Staying away, he said, was just emotionally easier. The long distance finally took its toll, and Jackson ultimately called off the relationship.

I had even gotten to know his mother, Beverly, while he and I were dating long-distance. As it turned out, I had worked with her briefly, long before I had met Jackson at school. He lived at home, so she soon realized he and I were together, and she was thrilled. Both times I went to Memphis to see Jackson during that year, she had insisted I stay with them. Normally a delightful lady, I was surprised to get a phone call from her a couple of months after Jackson and I broke up because she was crying when she called.

“Miss Beverly, what’s wrong?” I asked. She wasn’t hysterical, but her quiet sobs still made it hard for her to speak with much speed or clarity. “Did something happen to Jackson?”

“Baby, he asked me to talk to you. He wants you to give him a call if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind. But what’s this about?”

“He wants to talk to you, but he couldn’t tell you this himself. You need to go get a test, baby. Jackson’s come up positive.”

My heart stopped, I think. I don’t know what physically happened to me, but time and the air around me actually burst apart. All I could manage was a whisper, “Beverly.”

“I talked with him,” she said. “We had a good, honest talk, and we talked a lot about you. He did tell me that you boys was always careful, so I’m sure you’re gonna be just fine, baby.”

“I should come,” I said. “I want to come down there and be with him. I could quit school, and move back.”

“No. Don’t do that. You’ve got less than a year left now. You need to stick with it, plus he’s talkin’ now about this transfer anyway.”

“What transfer?”

“They want to send him up to Seattle, Washington so he can go through and organize the office there like he did here.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “We haven’t talked.”

I still loved him, but I had kept my distance to give him his space. When I called him to talk to him about his HIV result, he was so despondent I couldn’t bear it. He sounded as depressed as I felt, as depressed as I had been since my soul went missing. Jackson had given it back to me, for a little while at least. I found myself wishing now that I could return the favor. He told me, once my own results came back, that he felt better knowing he hadn’t passed it to me. The news genuinely seemed to brighten his spirits to some small measure.

“I’m so sad,” he told me, “that I can’t even cry.”

“Maybe it hasn’t hit you, ya know?”

“Oh, it’s hit me. Believe that.”

I believed him. I knew what it was like to be that numb to emotion.

At school, I kept up with my homework and worked diligently on my thesis prospectus, which passed. I would be writing about how the literature of the 1960s created the queer voice that helped allow for the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which marked the beginning of the contemporary gay rights movement. Jackson took the job in Seattle, and seemed to be doing fine physically. He was taking a lot of medication, but it was effective enough to keep him healthy. Still, he missed his friends from Memphis, and so did I.

When the semester ended, I went down to Memphis for a visit. Beverly asked me to stay with her for the weekend, but I didn't. As usual, the trip was a quick one, but I made sure I at least had lunch with her while I was there. She was so sweet; she couldn't stop hugging me. I wish Jackson had been there during my visit, but he was busy with work and couldn't get away. I was busy myself, having started working on my thesis, which was in full swing when school started back in January.

## CHEATED

My relationship with Travis has probably been the most practical and significant one of my life. More so than even Nick or Jackson. If I had to put a cliché on it, I'd say that he and I are friends with benefits. Sometimes when we get together, we don't hook up, nor do we mention sex. Other times, one of us mauls the other one with kisses and gropes the minute he comes into my apartment. From the first time he and I hooked up, we've both continued dating other men.

A couple of years ago, at work on my birthday, I was looking forward to getting together with Travis afterwards. He was meeting me at my apartment when I got off at 10:00 p.m. This was going to be a groping attack night, that was for sure. But when I got there and got hold of him, he put his head down and his hand up. He pushed gently on my chest. I thought, *dammit, this is my birthday. Are you seriously rejecting me and breaking off the sex part on my birthday?!*

"Remember that guy from Champaign I told you about? Kevin?" Travis asked.

"Yeah, the one you met when I was volunteering for GCAP." GCAP stood for the Greater Community AIDS Project. It provides services for people with HIV and AIDS in Champaign and the surrounding areas. Kevin was a client; he was HIV-positive.

"Well, I was up there last night, and he and I hooked up. The condom broke. There was cum everywhere. All inside me, all over me."

I was worried that he was going to break down in tears. It would be my turn to console him. I certainly owed him in that regard. But he didn't. Instead, he was searching



my face for my reaction, waiting for me to say something, but I didn't know what he wanted to hear.

"I probably have HIV now," he said matter-of-factly.

"Okay," I said. "But you realize that doesn't change anything between you and me, right? At least I hope it doesn't. I've dated POZ guys before. I mean, not that we're *dating*. But we don't even know if you were infected. Sure, there's a risk, but it's not definite."

"Well, it got me to thinking," Travis said, "when the condom broke. He busted right through the fucker. I could feel his real dick in my ass. It felt totally different. Better."

"Yeah," I said. "Of course bare feels better."

"I never knew. I've never had it bare before, either getting it or giving it. This was the first time I've felt a real dick in my ass. I feel like I'm not a virgin for the first time."

"Oh, honey. That ship sailed a long time ago."

"Shut up, fucker."

"Here's what we'll do. A test won't detect it for at least three months. So we'll wait three months and then go get you tested."

"That's fine, but I'll tell you right now I'm done with condoms. If the other guy doesn't mind going bare, that's how it's gonna be. But I'll wear one with you, of course, just in case I'm infected."

By December of that year, three months had passed, and I went to the health department with him for his anonymous test. They swabbed his mouth, gave him an ID

number, and told him to come back in a week. But as we walked out of the clinic and through the parking lot, he told me he knew that the result was going to be positive.

“You don’t *know* that,” I said.

“You weren’t there that night. I’m telling you, cum was everywhere.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean—”

“And there have been more.”

“More?”

“Exposures. Since that night.”

“Travis?” I stopped him by grabbing his arm and turning to face him. “did you get infected on purpose?!”

“No!” he shouted, then his voice returned to its normal calm. “No, I didn’t. But I knew the night I was with Kevin that he had infected me. I don’t know, I could just tell. He felt like shit about it. He couldn’t face me. I finally got him to talk to me a couple weeks ago, but before that I hadn’t talked to him since that night. I don’t blame him. I really don’t. It was an accident; it could have happened to anyone. Honestly, it could happen to us.”

And he’s right, but negative people and positive people have relationships that last for years all the time, and they just know how to be careful. I was determined that Travis and I could make it work. And a week later when we returned for the results, the lady at the health department told Travis what he already knew. He had HIV. She immediately retested him; there’s always the possibility of a false positive, but she knew what had happened. When we returned another week later, another positive test result confirmed that his HIV status was unequivocal. She encouraged him to get blood testing

done to determine a baseline of his levels for treatment, and he said okay, but told me privately that he did not intend to go on meds for it.

“I wait tables at Cracker Barrel,” he said. “Do you know how much HIV meds cost? Each one is like a thousand dollars a month, and they put you on like three or four of them at a time. I can’t afford it. It’s just going to have to run its course. There’s no point in getting blood tests done to figure out a treatment when I’m not going to get treated. I’m not taking those meds.”

It took me three months, but I finally convinced Travis to get a baseline. He went to a clinic in Memphis for it, so I went with him as an excuse to visit my friends. The blood results were promising. They ran another antibody test (the test that first of all determines if you have the virus), but with blood this time (the health department had used the mouth swab test), and it came out positive like the two before. But his viral load was undetectable, and his T-cells were well within normal range. Normal T-cell range is exceptionally broad (between 500 and 1500), and Travis’s count was at about 1400, which made sense to us. He hadn’t been infected very long, about six months at that point, and he exercised a lot. He was in great shape.

Another six months had gone by since Travis’s blood work showed an undetectable viral load and his T-cells were good, and a year had passed since the condom had broken, initially exposing him to the virus. I had been trying to get him to make another appointment for an update all summer, but he was so caught up in the grinning man we saw and the strange things going on at night that he kept putting it off. “Besides,” he insisted, “if the news is bad, I’m not going on a drug cocktail anyway.” Our lives had changed radically since the waning of the paranormal activity we had

experienced. I saw him three or four times a week, and he still wasn't showing any outward signs of the virus, nor was he having any non-visible symptoms like diarrhea, night sweats, fevers, or inexplicable illnesses. My cousin Buffy, who was a pharmaceutical sales rep, was surprised about this, too.

"A third of the people who get HIV develop AIDS within the first year," she told me. "I can't believe he doesn't have any symptoms yet."

"I see him a lot, and he even sleeps over quite a bit. I'd know it if he were sick."

"Are you and he still fucking?"

"Sure," I said, and I knew what she was getting at. "And yes, we're safe. He doesn't use condoms with other guys who are positive, but he and I always do."

"Be careful," Buffy warned. "Condoms break. He should know."

I was silent. I didn't want to have this conversation, and I certainly didn't want the conversation to be a lecture. So I just kept my mouth shut.

"Seriously, though," she said, "Do whatever you have to do to get him to do the blood work again. You know, when I worked at the hospital, there was an antibody shot for people who got stuck with needles to prevent getting the virus. They harvest these antibodies from people who are immune to HIV—"

"No one's immune to HIV."

"Yes, there are, sweetie. I think it's like 1 percent of Caucasians are immune to it."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. Maybe he could get the antibody shot and see if it does anything."

“But, Buffy, you said that shot was for people who have been exposed, but who haven’t been infected. It just keeps them *from* getting infected, right? He’s been positive for a year. He’s had three tests.”

“Well, but he should at least ask about it.”

“That’s sweet, but if it could cure people after they already have it, everyone would do it.”

I finally talked Travis into another trip to Memphis for an update on his blood work. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I was certain the news would be good. He works out all the time; he eats right. He’s an athlete, in fact. I figured that someone who takes care of himself so well (even if it’s more from vanity than for his health) must have a pretty strong immune system; the virus would take years, probably, to compromise it. The results of the test, however, shocked both of us.

“We didn’t run the viral load or T-cell screen,” said the nurse practitioner who met us at the clinic the day of the results. “We didn’t have to. You don’t have HIV.”

“I tested positive, though,” said Travis.

“Must have been a false positive,” she said. “They’re not terribly common, but it happens. Congratulations. You’re a lucky man.”

“There has to be a mistake,” he insisted. “It wasn’t a false positive, because there were three tests.”

“Were they blood tests?”

“Two were swab, one was blood.”

“Let’s retest you, then,” she suggested. But the result came back the same. Travis was no longer HIV-positive.

I rejoiced. An archaic word, I know, but it's what I did. I couldn't stop talking the rest of the day, couldn't stop hugging him. But his mood sunk like a stone. I tried not to notice, but he had clammed up right away, and he hadn't returned any of my hugs or other jubilant affections.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"This is impossible."

"It's a miracle! Travis, this *never* happens. Do you realize that? You should be studied!"

"It's not possible. I mean, even if the first test was a false positive, do you know how many positive men have fucked me bareback in the last year? Repeatedly!"

"How many?" I asked. It wasn't a rhetorical question.

"If I had to *guess*, counting the bathhouse visits and the gangbang parties, I'd say nearly a hundred. At least 70 or 80 easy. Plus I'm still seeing Kevin pretty regularly. The only person I use a condom with is you."

"Well, what's wrong then? You seem like you're pissed off about this. You should be jumping up and down. I am; why the hell aren't you?"

"You just don't get it."

"No, I don't. When I asked you if you had gotten infected on purpose, you told me no. Was that a lie?" I didn't even try to hide the judgment or challenge in my tone.

"No, I wasn't a bug chaser," Travis said. He was still despondent, and started to cry. "But when it happened I just felt such a relief. I had made my peace with dying. I even welcomed it."

"This isn't helping. I still don't get it. You're not making any sense, Travis."

“I want to die young because I’m scared to death of getting old.”

“What?!”

“I can’t stand the sight of old men. I see them in the gym or in the bathhouse, and I avoid them like the plague. That’s what they are to me. They’re fat, ugly, and old, and I can’t be that. I can’t be that guy. The way they limp toward you in the dark hallways, wearing their towel—or worse, nothing at all—makes me absolutely sick. And they have such hope in their eyes when they see me, like they would think for one second that I would touch them in a million years.”

I didn’t say anything right away. I understood him perfectly.

“I don’t even let them brush against me as they pass,” he continued. “It’s like I’m afraid I’ll catch it. Catch their oldness, their ugliness, their fucking fat. I know how this makes me sound, and I don’t blame you for looking at me like that, but I don’t care. If this makes me an arrogant asshole, then that’s what I’ll be. I’d rather be that than what they are.”

“But then, how on earth have you been able to have sex with me?” I asked. “The first time we hooked up, I was a *big* fatass, ugly, and I’m almost old enough to be your dad.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I could tell that wasn’t really you. And I was right. Look at you now. You’ve lost 40 pounds so far. You’re half way to your goal weight, and you look fucking awesome. You’re tan, and you work out almost as much as I do. You might be 39, but you don’t look it at all. And the *last* thing you are is ugly. I’m head over heels in love with you, but *this*. This negative result.” He shook his head.

“It seems like you feel worse about this than you felt about the positive result.”

“I feel...” He paused, “cheated. It’s not possible, and it’s not fucking fair.”

Travis was right about one thing. It’s not possible. There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. I called Buffy and told her what the result had shown. “I don’t know what kept telling me he should get retested,” she said. “I just had this weird feeling.”

The antibody shot that she had described to me before is, like I had said to her, for people who have had an exposure, but who have not developed the virus. It has to be administered right away and then *maybe* the person won’t become infected. Travis had been directly exposed to the virus literally hundreds of times and had tested positive. Getting three false positives, tested at two separate sources, is unheard of. But then so is someone getting rid of HIV. Today, it has been three years since he contracted the virus, two years since he retested as negative, and he is still negative. He still has unprotected sex with everyone except me.

Could something have been happening to us after our encounter with the grinning man that we now only remember as interrupted sleep and dreams that don’t make sense? Indrid Cold gave Woodrow Derenberger a cure for his illness. Had Travis been given a cure for his? After Travis’s negative result, I searched for a medical precedent for months. I called doctors, clinics, and AIDS hotlines to find out if there was a ghost of a chance that someone could go from positive to negative (without disclosing my real reason for asking, of course—what happened, I know, is unbelievable).

My interest in Keel’s point of view in *The Mothman Prophecies* led me to other sources on UFOs because I wanted to see if I could match what he theorized with contemporary (at least, more contemporary than 1966) reports of everything from



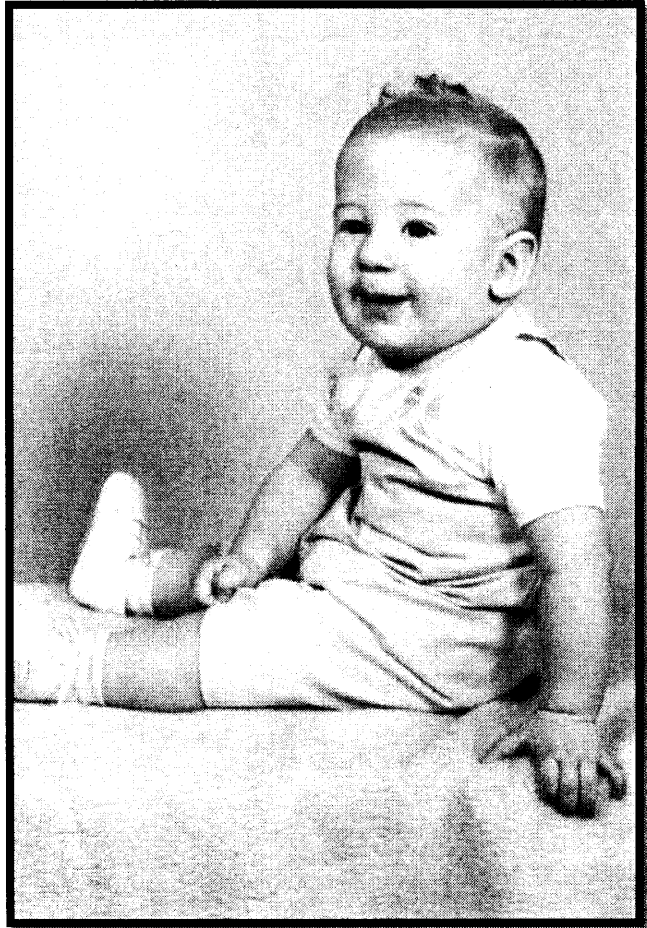
sightings, to encounters, to abductions, and sometimes even to reports of ghosts or demons. In every case, I could apply my new understanding to the situation I was reading about or viewing. That we are not in the presence of the devil or aliens from outer space. Instead, we are witnessing the crossover of an earthborne intelligent energy that we don't have a name for yet because we have no idea how to understand it or its scope. Whatever significance or frame of reference we assign to it will be wrong—whether religious, paranormal, or pop cultural. We will always have limits to our understanding, and even further, limits to our language. Language often fails us; even when we get something, we so often don't have the words.

In the research I was doing on UFOs, I came across the book *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at M.I.T.* by C.D.B. Bryan. The book is a compendium of the research presented by panels and speakers at the conference mentioned in the title that took place in 1992. During one of the panels on abductees who had experienced medical procedures during abduction, the speakers were presenting evidence and testimony on clients who had undergone highly invasive and traumatic ordeals at the hands of these advanced beings. At one point, hypnotherapist Yvonne Smith took the podium and described two clients: a female who remembered having her skull opened up, and a male member of the Los Angeles Police Department who described having a similar incision made in the back of his head. Bryan writes, "Someone asks if, after alien physical examinations, there are any indications of healing. Smith replies, 'I have an HIV-positive abductee who now tests negative.'" Apart from this, I have found no other accounts like Travis's where an HIV-positive person made a recovery.

*HAUNTED*

## VERTIGO

The ghosts are scary when they wake me in the night with their screaming. But their numb silences are so much more terrifying. I've been trying to deal with my pathological depression for as long as I can remember, by starvation, by running away from my parents, by moving from Illinois to Memphis and back—it's still the same, still about running. Dad moved us away from the haunted farm house, but he had stopped being the adoring father a long time gone. Most of the time



**Me, before the ghosts came.**

what I saw from him was rage; that's what I remember about him. He shouted his cheap cigarette breath into our faces, always too close, too hot. He and Judy shouted at each other. He and Judy shouted at Tonya. Every day was a fight about something. I started seeing the counselor at our school because I couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't do anything about it. Schools rarely intervene even when a child's situation is much more severe than mine was. Still, it helped to have someone with whom to talk about it.

After the skinheads tried to martyr me, I spent the next several years moving back and forth from Memphis to Illinois. I had my sexuality and my spirituality. I knew how to meditate and was pretty good at spells. But I had no direction or clarity in my life whatsoever. Nothing was at all satisfying to me. I went from bad boyfriends to abusive boyfriends and back, over and over. My decision-making skills were a repetitive exercise in ineptitude. Memphis wasn't right; I didn't belong there. Illinois wasn't right either. The only thing I could do was exist. No matter where I was, I felt like I was in the way, and there was no way I could have been on my own at the time even if I could have afforded it. The way I saw the world had changed suddenly. I had once felt at home wherever I was; now, however, I no longer felt comfortable anywhere. I no longer trusted myself at all.

After Nick and I got married, I suggested that we pick up and move to Memphis. We made a trip down to feel out the job market, fill out applications, and see if we could find a house to rent (an apartment would have been impossible since Nick had so many animals—the traditional rabbits, doves, and pigeons—for his show). The day after we arrived, I had an interview and got hired back at the Blockbuster Video store where I had worked the last time I lived there, we found a house to rent in Frayser (a dangerous, ghetto borough) a few miles away, and Nick got hired at the area Wal-Mart under the stipulation that it was only until he got enough magic show clients to support himself.

When my manager at Blockbuster got a job as a district manager for Waldenbooks, he recruited me to be the assistant manager at one of his Memphis stores. The promotion eventually led to another, and I was offered store manager of the Jonesboro, Arkansas Waldenbooks. The commute killed me, unfortunately, and I ended

up leaving Waldenbooks to be the assistant manager at a specialty mall store called Natural Wonders. I loved that store. We sold geodes, fossils, replica dinosaur skulls, and expensive Meade telescopes worth thousands of dollars. Unfortunately, the company bought out a competitor, World of Science, and went bankrupt soon after.

After less than a year of working at Wal-Mart, Nick had built up his business enough to leave his job and pursue performing magic shows full time. Nick is charming with clients and is an excellent performer, so he was always going to be successful. But I like to think that my encouragement and influence during the early years really motivated him to make this his life's work. Now, he has expanded his business so much that he has a revolving staff of dozens of collaborators and performers that he hires as support cast and crew for events as small as doing balloon animals at Memphis restaurants all the way to large productions for major companies like Pepsico and the Memphis Zoo, and sports franchises like the Memphis Grizzlies. He is constantly changing and growing, and he is loved by his audience members of all ages.

Natural Wonders had closed, and I was working as assistant manager at Hollywood Video when I got the call from Sonny, my mother's husband, that Mom was in the hospital. He had spoken with Nick, who called me at the video store to tell me. I thought it strange for Sonny to call. Mom had so many health problems, she was always in and out of the hospital. That night when I got home, I called Sonny back. He explained that this time was different. He had waited to call until the hospital informed him that she would not be recovering this time. "If you want to see her," he said to me, "you need to come now."

I had maintained contact with her ever since the summer I spent with her when I was fifteen, but Emalei had never made peace with her, had never reached out. Mom had never seen any of Emalei's now five children, so I didn't think it was relevant to tell Emalei what was going on. Nick, however, insisted that I let her know. To my surprise, Emalei met me at the Benton, Illinois hospital ICU unit where Mom was in a coma from complications with her diabetes and heart disease. We spent some time in the room with her, both together and separate, and said our good-byes to an unresponsive woman sleeping a labored sleep. A woman too young to be elderly, but who looked old. I spent the entire time I was there wishing I had called her more, wishing I had made the time for the conversations with her that always held up much longer than my interest in them. My feelings of regret confirmed how unfairly I had avoided those phone calls and how much I wished now that I hadn't.

Emalei and I both went home after the visit, but a week later, after a post-work nap I awoke from at 7:00 p.m., I called the hospital to check on her, and they told me that she had just died. Her graveside funeral was small, but the day was sunny and mild. Of the few people who were there, all had stories of the selfless things my mother had done for them. She had never told anyone about her altruistic relationships with these people. One woman would have died if my mother hadn't checked on her, discovered she was having a heart attack, and called the ambulance. A cute, blonde young man remembered how kind and giving she had been as he was growing up next door to her. I learned a lot about my mother that day, things she would have never been boastful enough to tell me herself.

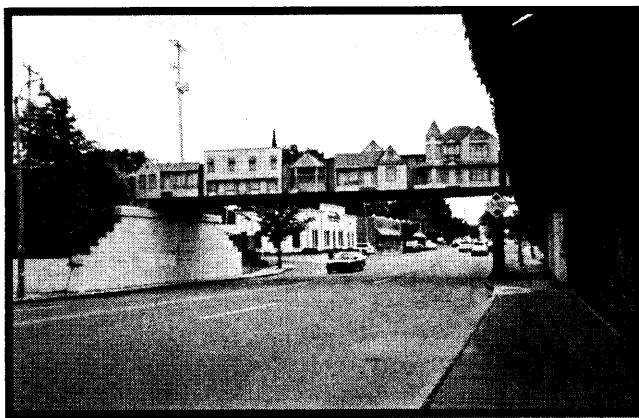
I wondered for a long time after her death if I would ever be visited by her spirit. On the one hand, I wanted to see her, but I also knew that I would be scared, and I would wonder if I was really seeing her or if something malevolent was taking her form. I dreamed about her, but they were just dreams of her, not visitations from her. I would have known the difference. She was, truly, gone.

I loved Nick, and he loved me, but the years of fighting over what the temperature should be in the house, the pets he kept bringing home to shit on the floor, the illusion-building projects left unfinished in the dining room for weeks, the costume-sewing projects left unfinished in the living room, also for weeks, his hoarding, and my floundering from job to job with little to no direction, exacerbated by my fits of depression, became exhausting and started making us hate each other. I was doing better personally because I had enrolled at the University of Memphis and changed my major to English, hoping someday to become a published author and maybe even a teacher.

My teaching hopes were further inspired one day in an intro to philosophy class with Dr. Amit Sen. Somehow, we had gotten on the subject of the theory of evolution, and with Memphis being the buckle of the Bible Belt, many of the students in the class were opposed to the idea. "My mother brought me up in a Christian home," said Jackson Taylor, a beautiful, tall young black man with his hair twisted into three-inch tight cords all over his head. "And I was taught that I didn't come from a lesser animal, that there had to be some kind of divine intervention for humans to emerge as the dominant species." Just to give him some perspective, I made an analogy about changes from father to son, and how even more significant changes would surely occur over millions of generations; he was easily convinced.

I was so glad the discussion didn't escalate into an argument. I didn't want to fight with Jackson, not because he was athletic and imposing, but because he was cute. After that class was over at the end of the semester, I was surprised to see Jackson at the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center a couple of times. I liked him a lot, and if I had been single, I would have made a move.

And somewhere in the middle of all this, after seven years together, Nick decided to tell me on Valentine's Day that he was breaking up with me. The fact that he did it on Valentine's Day didn't make it any harder; I've never really been a Valentine's Day kind of guy anyway. And I knew that we were headed in the direction of a break-up; I just wasn't prepared for it financially. Emotionally, I felt rejected, and I was sad because we still loved each other. The problem was that we had become more like brothers (complete with bickering and getting on each other's nerves) than partners or lovers. Love wasn't enough, not enough for either of us, so in that way I also felt relieved. One of us was going to do the breaking at some point. It just happened to be him.



Cooper-Young, the midtown Memphis neighborhood I moved to when Nick and I split.

I asked him if I could stay for 30 days until I found a place I could afford, and he agreed, but a week or so later, he said he wanted me to leave as soon as possible. I moved into an apartment in

Midtown, a much nicer Memphis

borough where all the artists, gays, and old ladies lived. I kept writing, working, going to school, and I even fit in enough time to star in a few community theater plays. I got to



play Lance in *Die, Mommie, Die!* And I played a drag queen named Barbie in *All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go*. I made new friends, and I was doing really well in school.

In addition to my interest in becoming a teacher, I also wanted to be a writer. I had read the book *On Writing* by Stephen King, and I decided to do what he had done to get published. That book had been my inspiration to enroll at the University of Memphis. Also, King had written for *Playboy* magazine, so I figured I would do the gay equivalent and write for gay porn magazines. After a year of begging letters, I finally got my chance to write for *Unzipped*, and I ended up writing features for them for three years. I sent out my clips from *Unzipped* to other magazines and, before I knew it, I was doing enough freelance work for magazines to supplement my income from Barnes & Noble while I went to school. Working at Barnes & Noble also afforded me the opportunity to dream of the day when I might get a book published. I spent a lot of time making the gay/lesbian section look great and, with so many titles published by Kensington, I decided that my book should be published by them as well.

My freelance work for the magazines was not only prolific, but also I quickly entertained more serious, less dreamy ideas of expanding into writing a book



I loved my apartment at 862 Tanglewood.

(again, thank you, Stephen King). The opportunity arose after I interviewed a popular American gay porn star/producer, Michael Lucas, for the Australian gay pop culture

magazine, *DNA*. After the article came out, I was talking to Lucas's publicist one day and said, "You know, if Michael ever wanted to do a biography, I would want to write it." Len, the publicist, was immediately interested. He talked to Michael for me and, after some persuasion and detail hashing, we agreed to write his biography. The process took several months, and lasted well into my final semester at the University of Memphis. Upon completing a finished product, I sent book proposals to several literary agents and landed a contract with one of them. I figured that since I had an agent, I would soon have a publisher; agents don't offer contracts unless they pretty much already know who will buy the manuscript. I was going to be a published author!

However, with no job prospects lined up after graduation to pay the bills until I was rolling around in my publishing riches, I used the Memphis heat and crime rate as an excuse to once again move back to Illinois. I asked Emalei if I could stay with her for a couple of months while I applied to graduate schools. She was there the day I left; she had come down to help me move. But after my beautiful graduation at the FedEx Forum where NBA's Memphis Grizzlies play, I broke down and cried desperate, violent tears. "Emalei, I don't even know why I'm upset! I'm tired of living in Memphis, and I want to leave. I don't have a job; there's nothing keeping me here."

"I know," she said. She stopped packing my things into boxes and sat me down.

"Why is this upsetting me so badly?"

"Because you really loved University of Memphis, and that's over now. You loved this apartment, and you're moving away from it, and that's all on the same day."

Leaving Memphis that last time proved to be a depression trigger that would begin a slow, steady path to despair.

## ONE WHO HAS WALKED THE PATH BEFORE

We got gas in West Memphis, Arkansas, and I still couldn't stop crying. I kept judging myself as I drove the 300 miles to Effingham. Why couldn't I have made it work in Memphis? Driving away filled me with dread like an animal that senses danger... a predator maybe. My life was in danger, but if a predator was to blame, it was me. Half way into the trip is a large mega-gas station called Reeve's Boomland. On one side is a cafeteria-style restaurant. The food is greasy and makes your stomach hurt, yet somehow manages to taste really good. The next section is a convenience store with lottery tickets, claw machines that never let you win the stuffed animal you're after, and overpriced snacks. Walk a little further down, and you run into a gift shop full of tacky souvenirs like wooden back scratchers that say Missouri on them and cheap ceramic figurines of Native Americans made in China. The final section is full of packaged fireworks, hence the name Boomland. Outside, rows of gas pumps line the lot. The gas price is always the best, so we stop there every time whether we need to or not. By the time we reached Boomland, I had stopped crying, but my sadness had deadened me.

The next day, the first thing I did was fill out applications everywhere I could think of in Effingham. After two weeks, I got a job waiting tables at Cracker Barrel. As with almost every other job I'd ever had, I didn't want to work there, but I was good at it, and I made decent money. Besides, being in Effingham was just a transition anyway. I had plans. I had applied to the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin in

Madison, and I knew I would need money to move and get settled in up there. I forced myself to think positively about Madison. I deserved to get in.

But real life raised its punitive hand to me again with a rejection letter from the University of Wisconsin. Cracker Barrel is somewhat homophobic as a company in large part due to the old country theme and their history of discrimination, but I've worked for worse (and would again), and the customers were never a problem in that respect. But I had not applied to any other graduate schools, and I had no idea where my life was going. The job I was hoping would be temporary was beginning to look more and more long-term.

My first night back after a brief trip to Memphis, the manager approached me and asked about my friend, Travis, who had been there that night to fill out an application. Soon, I would start seeing him at work. The night was long. We weren't busy, but I was the last to arrive, so I had to be there until the last customer left. I was able to get all my side work done early, though, so when the customers did leave, so did I. Afterwards, I stopped in at Walmart to pick up some snacks to take back to Emalei's with me and checked the messages on my cell while I walked through the aisles.

"Hi, Corey. This is Jim," said the voice of my literary agent. "I'm calling to let you know that we have a buyer for your manuscript. Call me back tonight, it doesn't matter how late, and I'll go over the main details with you." He said that he was hoping for a larger advance, but that I would earn through a smaller one faster anyway. What he considered small was a fortune to me, and I knew that as soon as I received the first half (paid upon signing the contract, the rest when the book was released in June), I would quit Cracker Barrel and move away.

I drove to Chicago, got a motel room for a couple of days, and spent my time walking and driving all over the city, filling out job and apartment applications. I wanted to move away because I missed living in a city. I didn't want to move back to Memphis because I craved a fresh start. Travis liked the idea of my moving to Chicago; he probably thought once I got settled, he could move there, too. Another friend of mine had a nice apartment in Roger's Park, and the manager of his building offered me a lease on a one-bedroom similar to his. Prospects for a job looked somewhat unsure, but they were far from bleak. I had enough money from my book advance to be okay for a month or two until I found something steady and paychecks started coming in. But I panicked.

I called my friend in Roger's Park from my motel room, hysterical with tears. "What do I think I'm doing?! I can't move to Chicago!"

"Why can't you? You're signing your apartment lease when the office opens tomorrow, and you'll have a job in no time."

"But what if things don't work out? I have no safety net at all. I don't know what to do with my life. Everything feels wrong. Everything feels like a bad decision." He was stunned by the desperation in my voice and confused by my loss of control that, from his perspective, had come from out of nowhere.

The next day I drove back to Effingham instead of to the leasing office in Roger's Park. I couldn't go back to Cracker Barrel; I was too embarrassed. Michael Lucas, the subject of my book, had decided before I signed with my agent that he did not want to pay me for ghostwriting the book, so he relinquished all the rights to me. Now angry that I had a book deal and would be getting all the money from it, he withdrew his support of it and vowed to sabotage the sales. I was devastated every moment of every day. My

depression disconnected me so severely from anything spiritual that I couldn't even think about taking any steps that might pull me out of it. I couldn't meditate. I didn't even want to. My soul was gone, vanished. And I didn't even care enough to want it back.

It was to be my last semester at EIU. I was irritated for not getting to teach a class of my own, but I did get to do mentored teaching in a composition class, and I was tutoring in the Writing Center. I had spent so many hours reading and writing, and I was so proud of my thesis. I had accomplished everything I had outlined in my prospectus. However, the morning in March that I was going to be meeting with my advisor, something felt unusual. I hadn't had such a strong ominous feeling since I had lived in the old house. Both physically and emotionally, I could tell that something terrible was coming.

"Corey, what's wrong?" asked Agata, a fellow graduate student, as we sat together in the Writing Center.

I didn't realize anyone could tell. "Oh," I said. "I don't know. I guess I'm just nervous. I'm meeting with my thesis advisor today." We were all in the same situation. Everyone was nervous about their thesis during that time.

The meeting did not go well, and when I left the room, I found it impossible to pull myself together to even walk down the hall. I didn't want anyone to see me crying, so I ducked into an empty classroom. My phone vibrated inside my pocket, and I pulled it out to see that Beverly had called. I dialed her number, worried that she would be able to tell that I had been crying. I didn't want to explain to her what had happened with my thesis.

“Hey, baby,” she said when she answered. She was crying, too.

“Beverly, what’s wrong?”

“Jackson had to go to the hospital yesterday for pneumonia. He’s just been working himself sick, and I guess he’s been sick for a while.”

“Okay,” I said. I felt like I had felt when I was sixteen, walking out of that theater to the news of my father.

“He didn’t make it.”

After that, everything at school went to hell. I could point fingers and talk about how unfair my thesis committee was to me, and at the time I certainly did. But the important thing that came out of the situation is that after two years in graduate school that were not hard academically, but that were devastatingly painful and challenging in many other ways, I left with no degree. I had all my coursework done with excellence except for my thesis, but you don’t get your master’s degree without it. I couldn’t take any more, and I gave up. When I got to EIU, I was a slightly overweight 175 pounds. By the time I abandoned my education, I weighed a massive 230 pounds. So with my tail between my legs, I carried my fat ass to a job at Wal-Mart.

Every year, the Human Rights Campaign publishes their Corporate Equality Index which rates corporate businesses on their level of fairness to LGBT employees. Many companies like AMC Entertainment and Abercrombie & Fitch score a perfect 100 points, and they strive to maintain that score. Wal-Mart’s score is 40, has been for years, and they have no intention of taking steps to improve their treatment of gay staff. In fact, when the issue of insurance benefits for domestic partners came up, the company sent a message to the shareholders encouraging them to vote no. This was a hateful, dead-end

job, but it kept me in an apartment, and it kept me fed, although the food was disgusting, fatty junk.

I was fat, ugly, depressed, and miserable, and I couldn't remember ever having been truly happy. Yet Travis was facing death, and I had already lost Jackson (and a few other friends) to the same disease. I knew that I was going to be alive for a lot longer than I was prepared for, so I also knew that I was going to have to change a lot of things about myself. If I couldn't be happy, maybe I could at least be content. And I thought, "Of all people, I should be able to pull myself together and take control of my life. I can make things happen, and I damn well need to start doing it."

*I'm a **witch**, for fuck's sake!*

I had a hard time understanding how power had eluded me. When I felt the depression coming on as I left Memphis, I had forced myself to think positive thoughts. I thought, "fake it 'til you make it," as Oprah says. Yet all those efforts were undermined by circumstance. I had no control, no power, no magic. The energy that is generated by building magic has a feeling to it that reminds me of how I felt all those years ago on the front porch of the haunted house as the wind swirled around me. No matter what I did during those severely depressed times to try to produce that sensation failed. But I knew that I had the power. Somehow I had forgotten how to access it. I needed to remember. I wanted so much for my life to be different, and that was the key. I had gone from not really believing I would ever feel emotions again to wanting something different. Then with that one declaration, "I'm a *witch* for fuck's sake!" I had commanded my personal power.



On the first day of June, I had Travis take a picture of me as I sat on my couch with a bag of Lay's potato chips in my hand. This was the day I would make a new choice. When Travis left, I lit a candle and started meditating.

I had to get clear about what I needed in my life. I still didn't think that happiness was a realistic goal, and I knew I was going to have to be here for a potentially long time



Fat and ugly; me, June 2009.

(having completely rejected the idea of suicide), so I knew I had to make myself as content as possible while I'm here. What would make me content? What would be the first step?

One of the first things that became clear to me after meditating for several hours over the course of two days, was this: If you want your life to change, you have to change how you're living. Again, this took me back to contentment. How can I change how I'm living to become content? The first goal that I realized was that I wanted to lose weight. I was not myself in this body. When I thought about this, Kernunnos appeared to me in my meditation. In charge of how my appearance reflects who I am on the inside, He showed me that I had not been ugly until I let ugliness overcome me. From the inside out. My change would also have to come from the inside out. I continued to meditate for several hours a day, every day for two weeks. I took my general goal of losing weight and used meditation to create specific goals that would make it real. And I visualized myself as a fit, healthy, *content* person.

I studied nutrition and determined that the best way for me to lose weight would be to take the controlled carbohydrate approach that Atkins provided. For exercise, I wanted something that I could enjoy. Something low-impact, low risk of injury, but that could be a good cardiovascular exercise. I meditated on it, and kept seeing myself walking. So I started walking. I walked as much as my work schedule would allow until a perfect solution dawned on me. I was living in Charleston and working at the Mattoon Wal-Mart. If I lived in Mattoon, I could walk to work. Not only would it be great exercise, but I would save a lot of money on gas. I found an apartment in Mattoon, and a month later, Travis and my friends Corey and Lisa helped me move into it. Travis even promised me he would exercise with me. He exercised a lot anyway, and he really wanted to be supportive.

But Travis was the only one who knew of my plan to get healthy. A girl at Wal-Mart had gone on a diet the year before, and swore she was going to turn her life around. It lasted a week. And when she failed at it, she still had dozens of people (me included) asking her how her diet was going. If I didn't tell anyone, no one would be any the wiser if I didn't reach my goals. My plan also gave me the opportunity, when I *did* succeed, to reveal my new body in dramatic fashion (like a proper gay man ought to). I even went so far as to lie when people started noticing. I continued wearing my big, baggy clothes to Wal-Mart, but when my co-workers asked me, "Corey, are you losing weight?" I would just dismiss them and say, "I don't know, maybe. I've been walking to work." I would lie on Fridays, the day the store provided us free donuts, and come back from break patting my stomach and telling everyone I had eaten four of them. On Atkins, I could sit down in

front of a whole rotisserie chicken and eat the entire thing. I didn't *look* like I was on a diet.

My new apartment was much nicer than the dark loft had been. Even Rugby and Chupa seemed more comfortable there. And Travis started staying with me more frequently. Every night after work, we walked together. We had a five-mile route planned out. On our days off, we often walked it two or three times. So many other guys would be outside, many of them shirtless (including Travis sometimes, which I loved). There was plenty of motivation all around me. Every time I saw a hot shirtless guy, I would think to myself, *I'm going to suck his dick some day.*

A friend of mine from graduate school at EIU, Kristy Van Amerongen, had been teaching zero-level classes at Lake Land College with her Bachelor's degree. In January, they needed an adjunct instructor to teach a MOD I Writing for Industry class, so Kristy suggested me for the job. When I talked to Salisa Hortenstein-Olmsted, the Humanities Department Chair, I was nervous, but excited, and I went into it with a hungry dedication and student-focused work ethic. Even though I was only assigned one class, she hired me right away, and I was grateful to be doing something besides Wal-Mart. Teaching improved my self-esteem, and a month later when I reached my goal weight, I was happy for the first time in my life. I had set out to become content, just to get through life with a little ease, and what I got was legitimate happiness.

When my class ended, I hoped that I could do more teaching. I was even interested in teaching in the summer. I didn't get a *lot* of money for teaching a class, but it was a lot to me, and I was just thankful for every cent of it, and for the experience I was getting. When I told Salisa that I hoped to teach more classes, and how teaching made me

feel, she suggested that I talk to the Coordinator of Developmental Reading and Writing. She said that she, Judy Bennett, might be able to assign some classes to me.

When Judy told me about the Developmental program at Lake Land, I got visibly excited about it. During our conversation, everything she and I talked about made our common teaching philosophies more and more evident. Our methods varied somewhat, but we both had one goal in mind: the success of the students. That conversation became an exchange of ideas that later resulted in my teaching my first Developmental class that summer, and I was hooked. I needed to go back and finish graduate school. I knew without a doubt that this is what I should be doing.

I needed to change my concentration from literary studies to a writing emphasis to be better equipped to get a full-time teaching job. And I had been told before that to do that, I would need to take two graduate-level courses in creative writing to be able to make that change. At the time I had originally asked, I was in the throes of my depression, and I could not make the decision to do that. Now, though, I was ready, and I re-enrolled at EIU so that I could finally finish my Master's degree. Travis and I had indeed changed.

## SOMETIMES MAGIC

During my most recent attack of depression, the one which I hope will be the last, Travis was there to try to keep my spirits up. The good thing this time was that I did actually have a little extra money and could join him when he asked me to do things with him. So he and I started hanging out with each other a lot that first summer I was out of graduate school. He dragged me to every funny movie that came out, and there were some good ones, like *Baby Mama*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, and *What Happens in Vegas*. He forced me to laugh, and he allowed me to forget—in two hour increments—my problems. My bad job and lack of degree were among them, but something much more serious threatened me.

I spent uncountable hours in dark corners of my attic loft screaming and crying into my pillow. The only things that got me out of bed during that time were Travis (because a miniscule part of me wanted to laugh, and loved him for giving me that), Wal-Mart (because I really didn't want to be homeless and hungry), and Rugby and Chupa, my Chihuahuas. Primarily, I would sit in that tiny apartment under a sagging roof with the shades drawn and the TV on. Piled around me were various bags of chips (both potato and corn), chocolate, Twizzlers, and enough soda to swim in. I couldn't commit suicide because I was afraid I would mess it up and live through it as a vegetable somehow. Then I would just be a burden on my sister. But I wanted to die. I sat in that apartment hoping for it.

Every time I thought I was at my lowest point, my telephone would ring, and Travis would be jumping up and down to let me know what time we were watching *House Bunny* or whatever was playing at the time. Sometimes, though, we would depart from the standard comedies.

“What time do you get off work?” he asked me from across the customer service counter.

“Four.”

“Hot! That’s *perfect!*”

“Why, what’s up? What’re we doing?”

“*Jumper*’s out on DVD. Can we watch it at your place?”

“Is that the one with Hayden Christensen?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re right about the hot part. Yeah, definitely. I’ll go home right after.”

All through the movie, which was about a guy who had the power to teleport, I kept thinking about what kind of power I would like to have, if I could have a power. I knew that teleporting would be the best one for me, and I would definitely rob banks like Hayden Christensen’s character had done. I would be rich, and hot, and no one could touch me.

Then I had a thought that would eventually change my life, my entire world, but this first time thinking it, I was too far under to comprehend and appreciate the real gravity of what I had thought.

I am a witch. I can do magic, and I’m not bad at it.

The movie finished. Travis used the remote to turn it off, and we just sat there. Every few minutes one of us would say something, but for the most part we just laid there on the couch, relaxing together. My drink, a can of Dr. Pepper, was on the end table on the other side of Travis, who was now resting his eyes. I slowed my breathing, and closed my eyes. After I got myself as relaxed as I could, I opened my eyes and looked at my can. I was feeling very magical, and something told me that I would be able to move the can with my mind. I could control the can.

*Move.*

*Come to me.*

I kept my breathing slow and steady.

*Come to me.*

I didn't blink. I kept my gaze focused on my drink.

*Come to me.*

I must have stared at that can for a full two minutes without blinking, if that's even possible. Finally, Travis stirred and opened his eyes. I broke my gaze from the soda and looked at him.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. Probably about six-thirty."

"It is way too early to go to sleep."

"You gonna stay here tonight?" I asked. He sometimes slept over. He even slept in my bed with me. I always wished that something more would happen, but at this point, nothing ever had.

"Do you mind if I do?"

“No,” I said. “I was hoping you would.”

“Well, then we’re going to have to figure out what we’re going to do for the next four hours,” he said as he stood up.

“I have no idea,” I said.

Travis stretched as he stood, and his shirt lifted exposing the mass of blonde hair around his belly button. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. He might catch me looking, but I didn’t care. When he finished his stretch, he reached down to the end table, picked up my can of Dr. Pepper, and handed it to me. Then he leaned over, cupped my head in his hand, and whispered in my ear, “Sometimes magic doesn’t look like magic.”



## YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

The stories of having lived in a haunted house would prove to be prime party fodder for the rest of my life. No matter what types of people I have ever been around, the moment ghosts are brought up, everyone has a story. Some of the things people tell me genuinely give me the heebee-jeebees, usually because they remind me of something that happened to me in the house. Other times, however, the skepticism that has crept in with the distance of time and space from what happened there makes me doubt some of them.

Moving away from the house was a relief, to be sure, and I have not stepped foot inside it since, although every now and then Emalei and I drive by just to have a look, to confirm to ourselves that, yes, all that stuff really did happen—just look at the place. I know that something horrible was in that house with us. I could feel it as unmistakably as I could feel Judy's hate. Thinking back, though, we never got physically harmed by anything supernatural. It's not as if the presences couldn't do anything physical. If they could open attic doors, shake the house, and throw my clothes around the room, they could have hurt me, too. I wonder, now, if something else wasn't also there, something good. Something that protected us from the bad things.

The most haunted I have ever been were the years—the decades—I spent enduring the dark, dirty grottos of my depression. No ghost or demon could tear me down like the hollowness of that overwhelming void. I look over at Travis lying naked in the bed next to me. He is sleeping on his stomach, embracing the pillows, and his back is

rising and falling with every slow deep breath he takes. His blonde hair is covering his eyes, and his beautiful, full lips are parted. I run my hand up his inner thigh and stop above his crotch where his ass begins to curve up. Again, I feel grateful, but it wasn't my magic that saved him. I don't know if he was spared for my own benefit or because he *didn't* want to be saved. Someone or *something* saved him, but I have no way of knowing if he'll stay negative. For all we know, it may be temporary, and he may test positive again at some point. The main thing, for me, is that he's here now. So, good things have come from some paranormal experiences I've had, but when Travis (or someone else) isn't here sleeping with me, I still sleep with the living room light on. I don't know *what* is in the dark, but I know that some of the things we can't see can hurt us, and the light makes me feel a little bit better prepared to deal with whatever may come.

And every now and then I sense a presence in a strange house, or I see a light in the sky that doesn't move like a plane should, and I just accept it the same way I accept electricity, particle physics, or a quick-lube oil change for my truck. I don't need to know how life works or why. I just hope I can keep being happy.

I wanted to return to the house. I felt like presenting this memoir there would give me a sense of closure to the childhood I cannot now change, no matter how many time travel fantasies I dream up in which I have that opportunity. I asked Emalei if she would go with me, and she agreed, but with reservations.

"Okay, but remember the last time we went out there and took pictures? That weird guy came out asking what we were up to?" she asked. We had explained to him that we used to live in the house, but he remained hostile. In fact, we were scared of him.

We later hypothesized that he must be a meth cook, which was why he got defensive about our taking pictures of the house.

“Yes, I remember, but he probably doesn’t live there anymore. People like that don’t stay in one place too long.”

“I’m staying in the van and leaving it running. If he answers the door, you get back in and we’re leaving.”

“Deal.”

We drove past the fields, trees and country roads that lead to Eberle, past the eight-foot piles of rock that would soon cover the fresh coat of oil the roads get every year. We drove past the old Eberle school where I attended the first grade and where, after the school closed, our nearest neighbor Rosalie Martin used to live; it has since caught fire. Half a mile later, we turned the corner to the road that would take us to the farm house, but something was wrong... the house was no longer there.

The old barn, the tin chicken house: all gone. In place of the garage where I once knocked a bird out of its nest with a slingshot stood a small grain silo. Across the



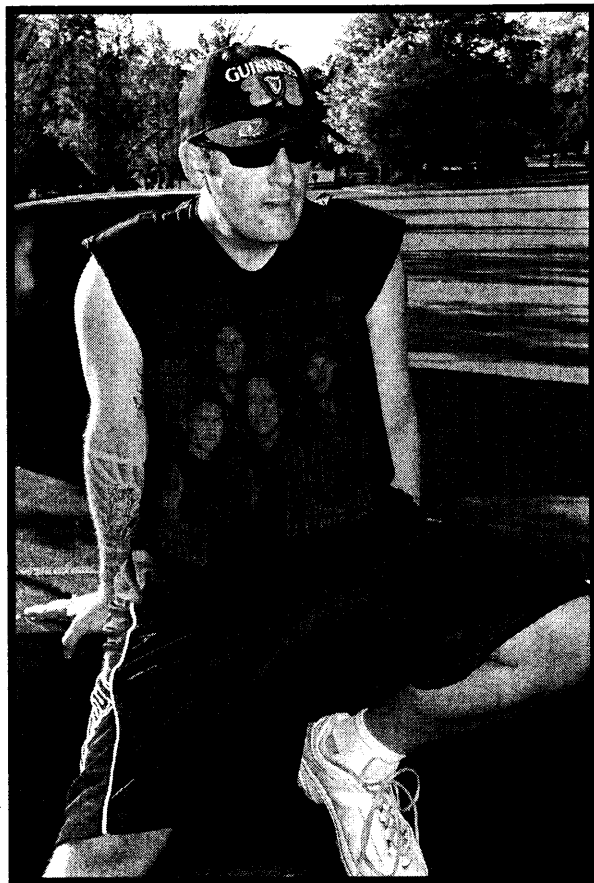
**The meager field where the farm house once stood. The absence of it makes the landscape of Eberle seem even more isolated than it was when we lived there over 30 years ago.**

driveway where the house used to stand, a bean field much sparser in the area of the house since nothing had grown there in a hundred years. The only remaining evidence

that anyone had ever lived there was the slab of concrete where the well house and water pump used to be in the front yard. Emalei parked the van, and we got out to walk around.

In the soil, we found various pieces of broken glass, porcelain, brick and concrete left over from the demolition... small, dirty pieces of painful memories that I can now hold in my hand and which seem small and benign. We both stood there, trying to get a sense of the spirits that had frightened us so; neither of us felt anything. We took photos which we scrutinized for orbs, but none appeared. Not even dust. Maybe someday we'll return to hike the woods in search of a panther.

But probably not.



**Me now, October 2011.**  
After a whole lot of men and a whole lot of magic. Taken  
in the back of my truck in a parking lot in Memphis.