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Negotiating Academic and Personal Selves (Chapter 4 of the book *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*)

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***Between Gay and Straight:
Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation***¹

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4: Negotiating Academic and Personal Selves

Christmas Charade

I'm decked as the halls. The midnight blue slip dress and pumps are new. The hair is by Omar, the lips, Ultima II.

I park across from Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City. After the final touches—drop earrings on, engagement ring off—I make my way to the bar. Inside, I find Bob waiting at a table illuminated by a single votive. We kiss each other's cheeks. With a slight New Jersey nasality, he says, "You look wondahful."

"And you too," I tell him, admiringly stroking his soft beige sweater.

"Wine?" he offers.

"Red, please." When Bob returns with a house Merlot, I say, "Perhaps we should get a few details straight—so to speak."

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He smiles. "Like how we met?"

"Exactly. People always ask about that."

"How about the truth?" he proposes. "Through a softball league."

"Are we dating or just friends?"

Bob ponders this a moment. "Dating."

"For how long?"

"Um, a couple months?"

"Since September," I clarify.

Suddenly, his dimples recede, and his brown eyes focus. "You okay with this?"

I pause. "I'm happy to be here, Bob. And I can appreciate your predicament."

"I *am* an untenured high school teacher," he reminds.

"Not the most secure position," I say.

* * *

Under both Florida and federal law, an employer may refuse to hire and may take adverse employment action—including termination—on the sole basis of sexual identity. Perhaps no profession has felt the effects of this more than education. In 1985, the Supreme Court refused to hear the case of an Ohio guidance counselor fired for disclosing her bisexuality, letting stand a lower court's ruling that this did not violate her rights to equal protection.²

* * *

Still, even in a context prone to the misguided association of homosexuality with pedophilia, there's a difference between electing not to come out and actively constructing

² See Mohr (1994, p. 54).

a false front. In my mind, the latter tactic seems regressive, but in Bob's, it seems *necessary*, and right now, I'm not about to interrogate his definition of the situation.

Checking his watch, he says, "It's time."

We cross the Spanish tile floor leading into the restaurant, where mariachis play "Feliz Navidad," and the air smells of saffron and fresh Cuban bread. "Look just beyond the stage," Bob instructs, pointing at two tables, each with about 15 people in their finest sparkling attire.

When the group spots us, they greet with a round of, "Bob! Hey! You made it!"

"Everyone," he introduces, "I'd like to present Lisa. Lisa, these are my colleagues."

Several women and men rise to shake my hand. Taking the seat Bob pulls out for me, I struggle to keep up with the barrage of names.

"It's so nice you came," says a woman with long, pulled-back hair. "Bob is a great guy."

"He certainly is," I agree.

She then begins the anticipated interrogation. "How long have you two—"

"Since September," I reply before she can finish.

* * *

With that remark, I take on what Warren (1976) calls the "functional" role of a woman in a gay man's life, helping him keep a "straight face" for heterosexual associates.

* * *

The sangria-sipping woman next to her adds, "I'm glad Bob *finally* found someone."

Ten years ago, I silently correct.

"That guy is too sweet to be alone," she continues.

He had a partner for 10 years.

“I must say,” the woman tells us, “you two make an attractive couple.”

“Thank you,” Bob and I chorus. We lean in, holding back a laugh.

My evening with Bob opens an unforgettable holiday season. Doug and I spend Christmas with both our families, who come early to help organize The Big Event.

Wedding Bells

Walking down the aisle, I find a delightful mix: family from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Texas, and Washington, high school friends, college roommates, USF people, Walgreens people, and softball people.

Doug and I take our places on the veranda, and the minister offers a meditation on the scripture reading, a passage from 1 Corinthians 13. In his reflections, he praises our best friendship, our balance of independence and interconnection, and our engagement with diversity.

At that, I look to David, who wipes away a tear before coming forward to deliver the passage. You know the one—“Love is patient. Love is kind...”—the one presented at almost every Christian wedding. But somehow, its profound simplicity moves me each time.

We had to coax David into this role; he’s not fond of public speaking. “Why me, baby?” David implored.

“Because you’re the most upstanding, church-going person in our wedding party,” Doug told him.

A delectable pause followed, then David, right on cue, said, “Well ain’t that a switch!”

Our groomsman closes with, “Faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

When the ceremony ends, we direct everyone inside for the reception. Tim catches me on the way to the receiving line and says, “I saw the program: ‘Tim Mahn and Brandon Nolan—*host couple*.’” Studying me a bit, he grins.

“I was happy you consented to that. It doesn’t make you uncomfortable I hope.”

Tim pauses. “I just wonder what your other guests will say.”

“What *can* they say?” I reply. “It’s *my* night.”

And a fabulous one at that. Seventy guests spend the dinner hour sipping sweet Asti and feasting on Caesar salad, pecan-crust chicken, and chocolate-raspberry cake.

Afterward, we celebrate our new life (and the approaching new year) by dancing each other into a frenzy. When groupings form for a twirl with the bride or groom, I try not to take personally the fact that Brandon, Tim, and David join Doug’s line.

Years later, Tim and I reminisce about that night. “It was a turning point for me,” he says. “The whole experience of being out—up front and at a wedding. I remember that you encouraged Brandon and me to dance together. I’d danced with men before, of course, but never ‘couple’s dancing,’ and never in straight context.”

By 11:00 PM, I can’t take another hokey pokey, electric slide, or boot scootin’ boogie. My ivory satin bustle now feels like a 50-pound dumbbell. Stretching my lower back, I

decide to do a little meet-and-greet. I stop by a table of Doug's college friends to ask if they enjoyed the bachelor party.

"It was an eye-opener," Bruce says, and the group shares a knowing snicker. "Your friend David gave us a real tour."

"Where did you go?" I ask.

"We started at Fat Tuesday."

Thinking of my last visit there, I recall, "Mm, yuppie crowd, syrupy frozen concoctions. Not a beer joint like you're used to but still up your alley."

Bruce's brown eyes expand. "Then we went to The Cherokee."

"*The Cherokee?*" I repeat, laughing. "Why would you take Doug to a lesbian bar?"

Blushing a bit, he explains, "We wanted some exotic dancing, but David only knew where to find strippers who are, well, *men*. He figured lesbians would know where the hot chicks were."

"And did they?"

"They sent us to 7th Heaven."

"I'll bet. Did my husband enjoy the scenery?"

"Doug 'suffered through' his table dance," says Bruce.

"What a trooper," I reply.

"Then he bought one for David, who slipped the girl 20 bucks, saying, 'Puh-lease do not dance on my lap.'" When I laugh, Bruce queries, "By the way, who's the guy with the purse?"

"Oh, Larry. He manages the bar that sponsors Doug's softball team. He's a stitch."

"He's *somethin'* all right." He swills his Bud, then says, "We ended up at The Cove."

"That I heard," I reply. "Your first such establishment?"

"What do *you* think?" Bruce fires, eyes narrowing.

"Well, how was it?"

"Uh!" he exclaims in exasperation. "These men, they *gawked* at me—uh!"

I give him a once-over, noting his pudgy face and the gut that spills over his Sunday trousers. Sure they did, I think.

"One of 'em followed me into the bathroom," Bruce continues. "I said, 'Hey man, I'm straight. I just wanna take a piss!'"

"Sweetheart," I instruct with an edge of condescension, "when you're in a gay bar, people tend to assume that you're gay."

"You wouldn't understand," he insists, dismissing me with a wave of his hand.

"Right," I snap sarcastically, "I have no idea how men behave in bars. And I'm sure you've never made a woman feel the way you claim that man made you feel."

"Whatever," scoffs Bruce.

Time to move on, I think. Just then, the DJ begins spinning a lively polka. "Ah perfect," I remark, "I believe they're starting the chicken dance."

I walk away reflecting. On one hand, Bruce's encounter in the men's room could be instructive if he reframes it. He could view the experience as a window into another culture or as a source of insight into an apprehension women often feel.

On the other, the sources of apprehension are gendered. As a woman in that situation (alone with a propositioning man in an enclosed space), I fear for my physical safety while Bruce probably does not. For a (homophobic) straight man, this encounter

arouses fears about the security of his sexual identity; for a straight woman, such an interaction seems more likely to reinforce than to challenge this.

During the bathroom encounter, Bruce may have sensed—perhaps for the first time—just how precarious and questionable a (hetero)sexual identity is. Given the context, the gay man in that scene probably assumed that he was meeting a social equal (privileged by sex, marginalized by sexual identity). Perhaps Bruce’s hostility was a strategy to reassert his sexual identity-based privilege. But unless he recognizes this and wants to move beyond defensiveness, the only thing Bruce will glean is reinforcement for his homophobic framework.

And what about my role in his negotiation of identity? Given Bruce’s limited exposure to gay culture(s), could he have responded in any other way?

* * *

In his dissertation, *Coming Over: Friendship Between Straight and Gay Men*, Dwight Fee argues that entering gay worlds “means to transgress *the* normative standard of manhood: not appearing queer to other men.”³

* * *

Was *I* too defensive? Too confrontational? I make a mental note to keep working on my approach.

In the next room, I find my father standing at the bar. Straightening his bow tie, I ask, “What’s new?”

³ See Fee (1996, p. 25).

A smirk forms on his full lips, making round cheeks even rounder. “I was just talking with David.”

Anxiety pinches my neck. I’ve been afraid to ask what my father thinks of our groomsman and host couple. When I was growing up, Dad was no queer basher, but he tended to treat the subject of homosexuality with about as much consideration as he did an underemployed, overstepping in-law with his hand out for yet another loan.

Two nights ago, my father opted out of Doug’s bachelor party, claiming he didn’t feel “up to it.” I’ve been wondering what that meant but haven’t wanted to risk being disappointed by the answer. He knew, after all, that David was gay and in charge of the festivities. I love my dad intensely, but we don’t always agree, and tonight, I’d rather not be on opposing sides.

“David’s funny,” he says at last.

Funny “ha ha,” I wonder, or funny, y’know ... ?

“And nice,” Dad continues.

Nice, huh? First time I’ve heard him use that word to describe a gay man.

“A great guy,” adds my dad. For just a moment, his large brown eyes—the ones I inherited—drift away. He’s pondering something. But what? What’s going on here? I almost reply, “You don’t have to tell me,” but I bite my tongue when I realize that my father probably is telling all of this to himself as much as to me.

“David’s a good friend to you,” he observes.

I want to shout, “Eureka, Dad! That’s just how it happened to me! I’d accumulated a set of scripts about sexual orientation and identity. Then one day, I encountered this

human being named David—this “funny,” “nice,” “great guy”—and suddenly, the old associations didn’t work anymore, so I made new ones. And they’ve changed everything.”

But I don’t shout. Instead, I smile at the man who assembled my first bike, taught me long division, and clumsily danced through Camp Fire father-daughter banquets, and I say, “I love you, Dad.”

Back to School

The honeymoon’s over one day, second semester starts the next. It takes almost no time to discover that the impact of my fieldwork will continue to reverberate throughout my personal and professional lives.

“What a Waste”

As I grab my attaché from the back seat of my car, a familiar voice finds my ears. “How was Jamaica?”

I turn to find Tami, a graduate student in Humanities. We took a class together a year ago. “Hey, Tami! It was nice, really nice.”

We begin the hike to our buildings, and she says, “Heard your wedding was magical.”

“It was!” I beam.

Her lips purse. “I also heard that—aside from your husband, of course—the two best looking men present were there with each other.”

I laugh. “You must mean Brandon and Tim.”

“God,” Tami says, “what a *waste!*”

“Waste” hits like a dart, and emotions flood my body: first surprise (Did I hear right?), then confusion (What did Tami mean?), then disappointment (She’s supposed to be educated!), then anger (To whom does Tami think she’s talking?). I flash back to my disappointing conversation with Bruce. Here we go again! How do I respond this time?

Silence falls between us. Another woman’s voice resounds in my mind. “What a waste!” she said of gay men. Then another’s. “What a waste!” she too insisted after meeting our host couple. With incisors gnawing at the tip of my tongue, I shake my head.

“What’s *that* look for?” asks Tami.

Without unfurling my brow, I bite back, “How exactly is Tim and Brandon’s relationship ‘a waste?’”

She pauses, unsure how to answer. “I, um, only meant that they must be handsome.”

Gazing into her espresso eyes, I know that at her core, Tami is a good person, a visit-the-sick, care-for-the-animals humanitarian sensitive to others’ experiences and feelings. She’s well intentioned. She probably *did* mean only that Tim and Brandon must be handsome, and I suspect she now recognizes the heterosexism in her comment. All that in mind, now would be a good time to step back and be understanding. Isn’t that stance more likely to promote learning than a hostile one? Besides, *I’ve* said worse things than “what a waste.”

But in this moment, I can’t get past the anger.

I release another arrow, “So it’s fine for unattractive men to be gay, but—”

“I didn’t say that,” she replies.

We near the crosswalk, and Tami steps away, allowing a mass of book-baggers to file between us. What now? Should I push further? With what kind of approach?

Adversarial, cooperative, educative? Part of me wants to shout, “Your comment was stupid!” But what would that do besides raise my blood pressure and alienate a cohort? Another part feels obligated to mediate between gay and straight communities. If I don’t play this role, who will? But part of me is *exhausted*. Heterosexual ignorance is so assaulting and pervasive that many of my recent interactions with straight people have left me feeling angry, hurt, or empty. How do *gay* people stand it? I now think I understand why so many enclose themselves in their own communities. It’s about self-preservation. Sometimes *I’d* like to feel enclosed again. Can I renegotiate such a position in my straight worlds, or must I leave them behind? This gay community seems to have a place for me, but can it ever be *my* community?

When Tami and I reconnect at the other side of the street, I say nothing more about her remark. My silence doesn’t reveal how much I understand where she is; I was there not so long ago. It doesn’t promote dialogue on this issue and doesn’t teach her to react differently. For those things, I feel regret. Still, I know that right here, right now, my silence is what keeps me from screaming.

New Courses

I return to my classes and teaching with a new consciousness. I see, like never before, how gay and lesbian experience can be distorted and silenced in readings, discussions, and assignments. As a result, I reexamine my own syllabi and course materials. When I notice my complicity in marginalizing gay and lesbian life, I decide to make some changes.

In Family Communication, I show *The Wedding Banquet*, a film about a gay man struggling to tell his traditional Chinese parents he’s gay. Instead of framing this as a text

about nontraditional family forms, I use it the week we happen to be talking about family secrets. Though I would have liked to address issues related to sexual orientation and identity more directly, this “back-door” approach allows me to test the waters as a facilitator of such discussions. The results are encouraging. Weighing the merits and consequences of secrecy and disclosure, many students invoke their own experiences with concealment and revelation, demonstrating an ability to identify with the gay male protagonist.

When I later teach Gender and Communication, I show the HBO documentary based on Vito Russo’s (1987) *The Celluloid Closet*. It’s my first direct classroom engagement with sexual orientation and identity. I schedule the film late in the semester, giving me time to lay some groundwork. In scenarios and activities I’ve used before, I change gender-identifying names to gender-ambiguous ones. In lectures and discussions, I consciously speak in terms of “partners” instead of “spouses” and “commitment” instead of “marriage.” By the time we watch *The Celluloid Closet*, my students seem prepared to respond thoughtfully, and our conversation ends up almost totally devoid of the kind of reactions I had to *Threesome* in 1994.

But not every classroom interaction is quite so inspiring.

Family Communication I

It’s the last meeting of the spring 1996 semester for 60 Family Communication students. From their final presentations, we’ll learn what sunk in and what washed over.

The second group sets up. One student turns off the lights while another presses “play” on the VCR. Elbows propped on the desk, I rest my chin on folded hands.

The scene opens in a middle-class living room, where a young man argues with his sister. The student-scripted dialogue sounds too contrived, and the acting is overdone; still, I'm impressed by the extra effort that went into producing the video. I begin writing in my notes, "Nice use of—"

It is a thought I never finish.

"You're such a faggot!" screams out from the monitor.

My spine straightens. What? No. No way did she say that. I couldn't have heard right, could I? The character puts any doubt to rest. "You little faggot!" she jabs again.

Uh! After 16 weeks of talking about diversity, multiple definitions of family, and deconstructing canonical stories, how can this be? Haven't I seen that woman every Monday and Wednesday since January? Didn't she get it? Didn't *anybody* in that group get it? I slump against the backrest, covering my face with my hands. The tape rolls for several more minutes, but I don't hear another word.

The lights come on and the room clears for a 10-minute break. Art Bochner, the professor I'm assisting, approaches. "You okay?" he asks.

Images flash in my mind, images of David, Chris, Tim, Brandon, Al, Gordon, Bob, and so many others. I look up at my advisor and query, "What should we do?"

"I'll handle it," Art assures.

While students retrieve Cokes and snacks, I ponder the options for dealing with this. Option one: let it go. The moment has passed, and perhaps ignorance doesn't always merit a response. On the other hand, wouldn't our silence make us complicit in the denigration? If university instructors don't address this issue, who will? What changes if we say nothing? Wouldn't we be telling our gay and lesbian students that it's acceptable for them

to be verbally assaulted in our presence, and suggesting to our straight students that “faggot” is an appropriate term for the classroom when it’s not an appropriate term *at all* (except, arguably, between gay men)?

Option two: get angry. Believe me, I’m already there. Anger conveys the seriousness of an offense. In this case, it would advise students in no uncertain terms that the word “faggot” is as inflammatory as “nigger” or “spic.” But is the classroom the proper context in which to communicate anger? In any situation, I find it troubling to express this toward a student, who’s already in a one-down position. Besides, offering a diatribe might accomplish little more than the public shaming of the offending parties. It also could foster a larger sense of defensiveness, moving other students to wonder if their ideas only are welcome if they align with the (often left-of-center) politics of the faculty.

Option three: build a bridge. This comment could be used as a “teachable moment” about heterosexist assumptions. We could talk about audience analysis, reminding students that 10% of the population—meaning at least five or six people *in this room*—identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and that many others are offended by terms such as “faggot.” “After all,” we could tell students, “we shouldn’t alienate those we’re trying to influence.”

My thoughts are interrupted when Art directs everyone inside. “Let’s have group three,” he says, and with that, we continue moving through the presentations.

After the final skit, Art takes a chair at the head of the class and offers some parting comments. “Your performances today illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of our semester. Many of you demonstrated an understanding that family stories function to connect generations, to shape personal identity, and to define the family’s hopes and

expectations. At the same time, there were some lessons your instructors must not have conveyed clearly enough. Had we done so, I doubt we would've seen, for example, a final presentation in which the word 'faggot' was used so flippantly and derogatorily. I assume responsibility for that failure and will rethink my approach the next time I teach this class." Art then moves on to other issues, saying nothing more about the incident.

My advisor's handling of the situation gave me an option I hadn't thought of: take responsibility. In the moment, I worried that Art too quickly absolved the student group. In retrospect, however, I find his approach rhetorically savvy. He conveyed the message, "What was said was not appropriate," while allowing everyone in class (except perhaps the instructors) to save face. Assuming responsibility seems particularly effective at the end of a term, when all material has been presented and all lessons (supposedly) learned.

Family Communication II

In the summer of 1996, I teach my own section of Family Communication. Near the end of class one afternoon, I look out at my students and say, "To review, if Tim believes that his partner Brandon needs too much 'we,' whereas Brandon thinks Tim is overly 'me'-focused, then the couple is grappling with which relationship dialectic?"

"Stability-change," one student answers.

"No," corrects another, "independence-dependence."

"That's the one," I say. When I turn to write the words on the board, mumbling breaks out in the back corner of the room. "What's that?" I ask over my shoulder.

Trying not to grin, a guy with Sigma Chi on his T-shirt and cap replies, “She said you give us a lot of *gay* examples.” From across the aisle, the pony-tailed woman I assume made the comment swats her classmate on the shoulder.

She clears the embarrassment from her throat. “Do you have a lot of gay friends?”

“Yes,” I tell them, “my husband plays on a gay softball team.” Muffled laughter and whispering crescendo into a dull roar. A bit rankled, I ask, “Something funny?”

“How did *that* happen?” inquires a wide-eyed male.

I smile at his surprise and explain, “Doug’s trainer at work recruited him.”

“*Recruited* him, huh?” he retorts.

Ignoring his classmate, another guy probes, “His trainer’s gay?”

“Yep.”

“Is your husband the only straight guy?” the woman next to him queries.

“On his team, yes.”

“He *is* straight, right?” quips the man of (Greek) letters.

Unsure whether he aims to tease or annoy, I reply, “As far as I can tell.”

The ball keeps rolling. “What if he did, ah, come out of the closet?”

“Ohkaaay,” I redirect, “unless there are questions related to *the material ...*” The class groans. “We’re adjourned. Read Chapter Seven for Wednesday.”

They file out, some giggling, some smiling, some eyeing me. When I bid him goodbye, Sigma Chi warns, “If I were you, I’d keep a close watch on my husband.”

I spend the walk to my car grumbling about how “small minded” my students were. But as I drive home, I try to imagine our situation from a 19-year-old undergraduate’s

perspective. At that stage of my life, I surmise, *I* would have thought it odd. Still, some—particularly the men—didn’t just find Doug’s participation in Suncoast Softball “strange”; they found it *suspicious*.

Doug once told me that some of his teammates thought him a “closet case” when he first joined. I wonder what they think now. *Should* I be concerned that my husband is so comfortable around gay men? *Is* more than friendship on his mind? As I park next to his Grand Am, I scold myself for asking that. Besides, even if he is curious, is that really something to worry about? Whatever his fantasies, he’s married to *me*; he’s sleeping with *me*. Just then, a little voice in my head whispers, “For now.” I shout down the voice, head inside, and throw my arms around my husband.

Endings and Beginnings

In the classroom, I continue grappling with how best to incorporate issues related to sexual orientation and identity. It remains a bumpy ride of trial and error, but my generally receptive students help keep my chin up.⁴

Outside the classroom, however, as my (“What a Waste”) encounter with Tami illustrates, many of my professional relationships are withering. I once devoted myself to the departmental community by hosting parties, organizing outings, and championing graduate student causes. But more and more, I find myself on the periphery, making fewer phone calls to colleagues, arranging fewer meetings, even turning down invitations. Am I “going native”? I wonder. What happens then?

⁴ The bumpy ride persists. In the fall of 1999, for example, a student reported to the Dean that I had “child pornography” on my reading list for Interpersonal Communication. She was referring to a chapter from Rita Mae Brown’s lesbian coming-of-age novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*.

The last two years, I spent my birthday with many fellow graduate students. This year, when Doug asks whom he should invite out to dinner, I name only Brandon and Tim.

“You sure?” he asks.

“I’m sure,” I say, concealing the ball of alienation and confusion thrown by this neither-here-nor-there social position.

Birthday Blues

Outside Castaways, the gulf folds into the rocky shore. Inside, candles flicker, and a baby grand softly serenades as couples lean in, trading spoonfuls of conch chowder for a taste of coconut shrimp. Our waiter stops by a third time. “Why don’t we order?” Doug suggests.

“We’ve been here 45 minutes.”

“All right,” I reluctantly agree. “I just hope nothing’s happened.” Doug grins when I request seafood pasta in a very naughty cream sauce.

Taking a sip of water, I feel a hand on my shoulder. We look up to find Tim. He kisses my cheek and says, “Hey, birthday girl.”

Scanning the lobby, Doug asks, “Brandon’s parking the car?”

“Brandon’s ... at the apartment,” Tim reports. “Long story.”

“You aren’t going to leave it at that,” I protest.

He begins rubbing his forehead. “We broke up,” Tim says. When I gasp, he adds, “and now we’re half together again.”

“Half?” I probe.

“It’s complicated.”

“You didn’t have my permission to break up,” I say to lighten the mood. He smiles.

“You always can come to me, to us.”

“I know.” Eyes fixed on a still-fanned napkin, he asks, “Have you eaten?”

“Just ordered,” Doug tells him.

“Great,” he says, “I’ll go track down a menu.”

When Tim is several paces away, Doug fires a stern glance. “Be careful,” he warns.

“He’s hurting,” I demur.

“And how can *you* help? You don’t know what it’s like to be in a same-sex relationship.”

“I know what it’s like to fall in love with a man, to hurt and be hurt, to leave and be left. What else do I need to know?”

Tim reappears, and Doug shakes his head. “I have no idea,” he tells me, lowering his voice, “but since you never leave anything alone, I’m sure you’ll find out.”

I crinkle my nose at him. If it were your break-up, I silently retort, you’d run to the nearest woman willing to hear your sorry-ass tale.

As it turns out, I hear nothing more of the conflict tonight. Tim asks that we spend dinner talking about “anything else.”

Later this week, however, I gain another perspective on their problems.

“I Want to Be with Him ... Regardless”

“Yeah?” I say into the phone.

“Lisa, it’s Brandon.”

“How *are* you?”

He pauses before admitting, “Not great.” As I settle into the couch, Brandon begins, “Tim said you wanted to know if things were falling apart again.”

“I only meant I’m here for both of you. Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Well,” he says, straining to get the words out, “Tim’s not sure what he wants.”

“Meaning ...?”

“I don’t know. I fell for him so hard and so fast. We moved in together right away. Now he thinks maybe it’s all too much.”

“What do *you* think?”

“I love him,” he says, his voice cracking. “I want to be with him ... regardless.”

“Regardless of what?”

Silence, then, “He, um, he cheated on me.”

I exhale my disappointment, saying, “That must be very painful.” As soon as the words leave my lips, I wonder about my involvement here. Maybe Doug’s right; maybe I *am* too nosy! And maybe my relationships with men are *not* comparable. After all, my understanding is that gay male couples tend to be less monogamous than lesbian or heterosexual couples, more tolerant of outside sexual involvements, fraught with power struggles, and (because both partners are socialized into masculinity) lowest of all romantic relationships in expressiveness and nurturance.⁵ Bottom line: I don’t want to impose a (heterosexist) set of standards not applicable to Brandon and Tim’s relationship. Just listen, I tell myself, let him guide you.

⁵ See Wood (1997) for a review.

“When I first found out,” Brandon reports, “oh!” Unable to go there, he changes gears, “But I can forgive that.” Shifting again, he says, “Anyway, I thought you could come over, maybe help us talk it out.”

Doug’s don’t-meddle gaze appears in my mind. “What does Tim think of this idea?”

“He just walked in. Hold on.” Brandon puts down the receiver and crosses the room. In the background, I first hear soft pleadings, then low, muffled arguing, then footsteps.

“Lisa?” The voice is now Tim’s. He stumbles through what sound like embarrassment and betrayal, “I, I don’t know what to say. I didn’t think Brandon would ... god, I can’t believe he told you! I never wanted ... I’m not proud of—”

“Tim,” I interject, “it doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

“Sure it does.”

“Tim—”

“I should go,” he says, slipping away. “Brandon and I need to talk.”

The click startles me, and I listen to a few seconds of silence before hanging up.

Strings of sadness and dread knot in my stomach. I wonder what they’re saying to each other. What should I do? On one hand, I feel honored that Brandon thought enough of our friendship to solicit my support; on the other, Tim seemed really upset that his partner tried pulling me in as a mediator, a role I probably would accept but a risky one for all the relationships involved.

Soon after, Tim and Brandon separate. Doug and I try to maintain relationships with both friends, a feat I’ve never managed successfully with any straight former couple.

Still, we try our best. Doug and I visit Brandon at Impulse, where he tends bar, and we meet Tim for movies and meals. Despite their relational turmoil, our encounters with each remain light and pleasant ... until one February Sunday, when Doug and I find out what else has been going on.

"I Have Something to Tell You"

Seated at our dining room table, I push away the remains of our post-game dinner.

"The chicken cacciatore was great," Tim praises, smiling yet clenching his jaw tight. Tension lines his brow.

"Glad you could come," Doug tells him.

We sit without talking for a few moments. Doug's fork scrapes and clanks against the bottom of his pasta bowl. I take small sips of a mild Cabernet that gently warms my throat. Tim watches as hot wax flows like tears down the sides of cream tapered candles, their vanilla scent perfuming the air. "Listen," Tim says at last, "I have something to tell you."

"About Brandon?" I inquire, wondering if the separation is now divorce.

"Well, that's a whole other mess." He clears his throat. "A few months ago, I went to the doctor." My pulse quickens. "I got tested."

"For HIV?" I ask, just to make sure.

"Yes." I swallow hard. Tim peers into Doug's eyes, then stares at me, then looks down at the table. "I tested positive," he says, exhaling audibly.

My god, how did this—oh, I don't care how it happened! Pasta, vegetables, and chicken slosh in my stomach. When I close my eyes, droplets spill onto my cheeks.

At some level, I knew this day would come. This is part of the deal, I suppose, part of being invested in the lives of gay men. But I'm not ready, Tim. I'm not ready to watch you waste away. I'm not ready to sing dirges at your funeral.

But I'm here. Biting my lower lip, I reach across the table for his hand. I lock gazes with my friend and say the only thing that comes to mind, "Whatever you need ..."

"I know," he replies.

"Come live with us," I offer. Tim laughs. "I'm serious. Our housemate Jennifer is moving home in May."

"Jennifer has cancer, right?" Tim queries. When I nod, he quips, "What are you running here, a hospice?"

"Will you think about it?" Doug asks.

"Sure," Tim promises. "Look, I'm sorry to lay all this on you. I haven't talked much about the HIV—to anyone. I mean, Brandon knows, of course." My lips part, but I say nothing. "He tested negative," Tim reports, "in case you're wondering. Anyway, I know you won't, but please don't tell anyone about this."

"You're the boss," Doug assures.

"What about Brandon?" I inquire. "Will you tell him that we know? We could be here for both of you."

"May I think it over?"

"Of course," Doug replies. "How are you handling everything?"

"Better now. At first, Brandon completely lost it."

"He must have been so afraid," I say, "for you—and for himself."

"Mostly for me. In fact, a couple times, Brandon wanted to be unsafe."

“So he could share this experience with you,” I surmise.

Nodding, Tim rises from the table. “I’ve given you enough to think about for one night.”

“Don’t go,” I plead.

“Really, I need to. I haven’t studied at all this weekend.”

Reluctantly, Doug and I follow him to the front door. Tim opens his arms for a farewell embrace, and I grip him extra tightly. He then turns to Doug, who draws him close. Thanking us again for dinner, Tim takes his leave. From the front steps, we listen as soft, damp mulch squishes beneath his feet, then watch as our friend climbs into his Jeep, pulls away, and disappears.

Unable to sleep that night, I try writing field notes. The scene in our dining room is fresh and vivid, but no words come. These friendships, the “objects” of my study, have become my life, and I’m not sure I’m prepared to deal with the consequences. An hour later, I shut down my computer, still staring at a blank screen.

I return to bed feeling pained and terribly naïve. All this time, I presumed to grasp what was happening between Brandon and Tim. Perhaps I understood the infidelity, but HIV adds a dimension quite foreign to me—until this evening. Was Tim’s diagnosis an unrelated, contributing, or causal factor in their dissolution? Nothing Tim said provided a clue. Whatever role HIV played, the advice and support I offered now seem embarrassingly inadequate.

All week, I imagine their fear and despair. I so want to call Brandon, but I can't break my promise to Tim. I must wait.

"It Reminds Me of ... Happier Times"

On Sunday, I sit in the dugout, pretending it's softball as usual. When he arrives, Brandon greets me warmly. How I wish I could reach out to him! Throughout the game, he and Tim avoid even eye contact with each other.

Afterward, as I'm walking to my car, Brandon yells, "Hey!" across the parking lot.

"Hey yourself!" I shout back as we move toward one another.

In the midst of an embrace, he tells me, "I read your paper." My heart skips a beat.

I had been inspired by Fine's (1994) notion of "working the hyphens." The hyphen refers to the punctuation between terms culturally constructed as binaries (e.g., gay-straight). When we "work the hyphen," we promote equitable relationships in the field and dialogue about and across our differences. This in mind, I gave copies of my Qualitative Methods paper to Brandon, Tim, David, and Gordon.

But as a novice fieldworker and a straight woman only beginning to understand gay men's experiences, relationships, and cultures, I had no idea how these men would respond to my portrayals. After a deep breath, I ask, "What did you think?"

"I loved it," Brandon says. "Since it was for a class, I expected it to be somewhat dry. But you wrote the report as a story. It was like reading a novel where I was one of the characters." He pauses. "What you said about Tim and me—about us being beautiful together—made me cry."

"Oh Brandon," I sigh. "I had no idea things were so complicated."

“Tim said he told you about the HIV.” I exhale my relief. “I wanted to tell you weeks ago,” he says, “but Tim thought we should keep it between us. I understood why, but then he shut down. I felt so isolated.” His blue eyes fill with tears. “After we found out, I wanted to get sick too. I did some crazy things.”

His willingness to be so vulnerable stuns me. Both Tim and Brandon have opened themselves to me in ways unprecedented in my experiences with men. I take his hands in mine. “I know, Brandon. Tim told me.”

Brandon looks down and away. “He did?”

“Your intentions were noble; you didn’t want Tim to be alone.”

He nods. “I thought we could cope with it together.”

“But Tim would *never* want that for you. He’s got enough to absorb without feeling responsible for you contracting the virus.”

“And if we get back together, Tim will need me to be healthy ... down the road.”

When I touch his cheek, he says, “Listen, I should go. May I keep the paper?”

“Of course.”

“It reminds me of ...” His voice trails off. Then, in almost a whisper, Brandon says, “happier times.” We smile for each other before returning to our cars.

In the coming weeks, I leave several messages on Brandon’s machine, some just to check in, some suggesting meetings. I keep thinking he’ll need to talk, to reach out to someone trying to understand his pain, but perhaps Brandon feels he already reached out too far. Maybe his openness to me now makes him uncomfortable. He doesn’t return my calls.

Rewind

One Sunday morning, I speak onto the familiar tape. "I'm thinking of you; I hope—"

Suddenly, the recorder beeps. "Hey Lisa," Brandon says.

"It's great to hear your voice," I tell him.

"Sorry I've been so distant."

"Make it up to me by coming over for dinner and a movie."

Given the unanswered calls, I await his refusal. After a pause, he asks, "What time?"

I smile. "Six o'clock, Blockbuster. The three of us can pick out something together."

"Okay. Meet you there."

Throughout the day, I half expect Brandon to call with an excuse not to come. I know I get reclusive after a break-up, reaching the point when even supportive comments from close confidants open wounds and grate my nerves. But by 5:45, no such message has arrived.

At the video store, Doug and I find a surprisingly upbeat Brandon already perusing the new releases. A case ahead of me, Brandon stops in front of the Js. "Let's rent this," he suggests, pulling the film version of Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* from the shelf.

Remembering the plot, Doug and I exchange a panicked glance. "You sure?" Doug asks. Brandon nods, tucks the box under his arm, and heads for the register.

Back at our place, Doug and I settle into the sofa. We make room for Brandon, but he chooses the empty love seat instead.

Like the play, the film centers on Jeffrey, a gay New Yorker who swears off sex only to meet Steve, a dashing bartender. Jeffrey's intrigued but backs off. Friends intervene, convincing him to give Steve a chance, but when Jeffrey finally agrees to see him, Steve discloses he's HIV positive.

At this, I turn to Brandon and ask, "Did you know what this movie was about?"

"Yes," he says, meeting my gaze and nodding reassuringly.

"We can turn it off," Doug offers.

"No," Brandon insists, "I'd like to see how it turns out."

A second time, the title character takes flight. After breaking his date with Steve, Jeffrey rages, "I hate the world for giving me everything and then taking it all back!"

I again look over at Brandon. His body is rigid, his face frozen, his unmoving eyes filled with yearning and grief.

In the end, the death of a close friend convinces Jeffrey that he cannot be merely a spectator of AIDS. Jeffrey seeks out Steve, making him promise that he will never get sick, never die. They embrace, and the credits roll.

Jeffrey and Steve: beautiful, healthy, and together at this fairy tale ending. Were their tale to continue, however, either might find loving too painful in the face of AIDS. And Steve's promises would prove impossible to keep. He *will* suffer, he *will* die—and die young. Biting my tongue, I reach for the remote and press "rewind."

That evening is the last time we see Brandon for a while, though he remains present in my mind. At the next game, Tim informs the team that Brandon has decided to quit Suncoast Softball.

Tim, Doug, and I continue batting around the idea of becoming roommates. Though Tim decides to remain living downtown, 20 miles south of us, we stay in contact with frequent phone calls, none more dramatic than this one.

"It Gets Better"

"Lisa?" says the low, smooth voice.

"Tim," I say back, "what's up?"

"Are you sitting down?" he asks.

Man problem, I silently predict. Easing into my desk chair, I tell him, "I am now."

"I just got back from the clinic," Tim reports.

Oh god. HIV problem.

"Are you there?" he queries.

"I'm here." Here shifting in my seat, drowning in the blue of my computer screen, dreading what comes next.

"Nothing's final yet," Tim says.

With my trembling left hand, I begin tracing the spaces around my function keys.

"I had some more tests run."

Keep it together, Lisa. He doesn't need you freaking out. As I drag and sweep, specks of white and grey collect at my index fingertip.

"My T-cell count ... "

Offer reassurance, comfort, support. With a puff, the particles scatter into the air, settling into and atop the camel carpeting.

Then he tells me, almost in a whisper, "It's normal."

Not sure I heard correctly, I spit out, "Wh—what?"

"*Above* normal, actually," Tim says, releasing a blissful sigh.

"W—wonderful," I respond, joining him in laughter. "That's wonderful."

"It gets better," he continues.

"What do you mean?"

"They tested me again for HIV."

Against my better judgment, I allow myself to consider the inconceivable. Could it all have been a terrible mistake? Oh please, please let it have been a mistake. "And?" I probe.

"And it came out negative."

We exhale together. "Oh my god, Tim."

"Not too ecstatic," he warns. "I don't get the final results for another 10 days. But for now, everything looks good."

"Oh my god, Tim."

He laughs. "You said that already."

"We're here for you either way."

"I know," he responds. "Listen, I need to get to class."

"Thanks for the update. You take care." Hanging up the phone, I lay my head on the desk and mouth, "Yes!"

The verdict is rendered. After months of fear, anxiety, and dread, followed by 10 days of fear, anxiety, and dread, we hear the words: “false positive.” Nothing ever sounded so sweet.

Early in the summer, Doug and I bump into Brandon at a club. I smile as our friend speaks dreamily of a new love interest. When I invite them to dinner, he lights up, exclaiming, “I can’t wait for you to meet Beau!”

That night, Brandon walks through our door with his companion, an almost alarmingly handsome man with ebony hair and eyes, smooth, dark skin, and perfect white teeth. These two went to the same orthodontist, I predict. Doug must be equally struck by the pair, because as we ready dinner, he whispers, “What a shame they can’t produce children together.”

It proves an enjoyable evening of wine, pasta, and conversation. Beau seems confident and caring, and Brandon looks wonderfully content. We bid them goodnight thinking another friendship has begun. But, for whatever reason, we don’t see this couple again for months.

Around this time, practice for the fall season starts. Stewart, a relief pitcher tall enough to play basketball, has returned from a brief hiatus, and new to The Cove are Joe, an auburn-haired right fielder with an infectious laugh, and Pat Martinez, a strong-hitting, half-French, half-Latin pitcher who looks closer to 25 than to his 35 years. Pat also agrees

to take the coaching reins from Tim, who continues to play and recruit. One night, he brings a 29-year-old blue-eyed blond to the field.

“Meet Rob Ryan,” Tim introduces.

Comparing the two men’s stature, build, handsome features, cropped hair, and mid-ear sideburns, I observe, “You two could be brothers.”

When Tim replies, “Well, we’re *not*,” I assume that they’re dating.

Later that night, when Tim and I are alone, I tease, “What’s the deal? First you and Jack play ball together, then you and Brandon. Bringing Rob to the field could be dangerous.”

“Rob’s got a boyfriend,” Tim assures. “We’re just friends.”

The “just friends” stage of their relationship barely lasts through the weekend. At first, I’m a bit skeptical. Tim’s dating history leads me to wonder if he’s ready for another commitment. Still, Rob strikes me as someone worth hanging onto.

Watching them together is a lot like watching Doug and me. Rob mirrors my husband’s kindness, stability, and quiet ambition, while Tim reflects my independence, emotionality, and occasional volatility. One night, I tell Doug that I hope Tim doesn’t “mess things up with Rob.”

“Why would Tim be the one to mess things up?” Doug asks.

“Just a hunch,” I say, the real answer being, “Because *I’d* be the one.”

Rob and Tim soon are inseparable. For a time, I remain uncertain about their future, but one Saturday morning, Tim makes evident both the depth of their partnership and the link between *our* partnerships.

Two Grooms and a Maid

I'm revising a conference paper when the phone rings. "Hello?"

"Lisa," Tim says, "Rob and I are lying in bed discussing you and Doug."

"Discussing us in bed?" I banter. "What have you been saying?"

"I was telling Rob that Brandon and I were the host couple at your wedding. Rob said that was very cool."

"Maybe some day we can be the host couple at *your* wedding," I hint.

"Actually, I was thinking you'd stand up for us."

"Really? So what, like groomsman and *groomsmaid*?" Tim laughs, then shares my new word with Rob. "This is pretty serious," I reflect.

"Yeah," Tim replies with a bit of shyness.

"Well, know this: we honor your relationship with Rob and will do anything to support you."

With great tenderness, Tim says, "I love you."

"I love you too," I reply. "Now get back to bed."

I spend a lot of time processing how my interactions with Tim and other members of this community impact my personal and professional lives. I increasingly notice, for

example, that my relationships with the Cove men alter my interpretations of other cross-sex encounters, both past and present, with both straight and gay men.

Dancing Dialectics

On this crisp March night in Memphis, the crowded Beale Street pub smells of Jack Daniels, lager, and sweat. “Left a good job in the city,” begins the blues singer, smoothing back wiry blond curls. “Proud Mary” ala Tina Turner entices the crowd. “Workin’ for the man every night and day...”

From behind, an arm slips around my waist. I glance over my shoulder and find the attractive young professor my colleague Chuck recently introduced. We’re all in town for the same regional conference. Hesitantly, I begin rocking back and forth, and he moves with my rhythm. I shake my head, trying to clear the cloud of Michelob. As he undulates against me, I remember the last time I danced like this with a man not my husband.

I’m two drinks past sober when Tim yanks me out of my chair, the sudden motion sending three vodka tonics rushing to my head. Navigating the dance floor, we find our space. As Brandon and Doug look on, we begin singing the Pointer Sisters in each other’s ears.

“We are family.”

“Rollin’ ... rollin’, yeah ... ”

The beat picks up, and so does the young professor's urgency. He pulls me closer, swinging, grinding. Reaching under my leather vest, he spins me around. When our brown eyes meet, he says, "You're a great dancer."

I run my hands over Tim's well-defined chest and stomach as he holds onto my swaying hips. When I begin sliding my body up and down his, he stares at me with those soulful green eyes and says, "You are so sexy."

His comment surprises me a little. Am I sexy *to him*, I wonder, and if I am, does that change the meaning of our dance? Oh Lisa, don't spoil this moment. For once, just live it.

"I got all my sistas with me."

"Rollin' on a river..."

A familiar tape clicks on in my head: who is this man; what does he want from me; what messages am I sending; is this dance too much, too close; what comes after? Heeding my internal warnings, I decide to sit the next one out.

I study Tim's face, his shoulders, his arms. *He's sexy*, I think, and tell him so. Adrenalin surges through me, and I wonder: what is this rush; how can I feel so uninhibited yet so safe? Fighting the urge to intellectualize it, I throw back my head and laugh.

Why was it that I could "live in the moment" with Tim but not with the young professor? Why did the latter case feel so much more forbidden and troubling?

I have two answers, one more immediate, the other more retrospective. Within hours of the Memphis encounter, I reflected on my dance with Tim. At the time, the contrast felt striking, and I attributed nearly all of that to my dance partners' different sexual identities. In the former case, I was locked into the assumption, "He's a straight man; therefore, he may want something beyond this." In the latter, I found freedom in the notion that, "He's gay, so this dance is just this dance." I decided that Tim's gay identity allowed me to explore attraction in the comfortable context of an encounter where sex (though not sexuality) was taken out of the equation, while my colleague's straight identity kept both in the equation.

Since that time, my assessment has become more complex. Perhaps Tim and/or I found safety not in our sexual identities but in our trusting friendship or in our relationships with Brandon and Doug, who sat watching. The young professor and I, on the other hand, came together as strangers and outside the presence of our significant others. It's also possible that Tim was just "playing it straight," portraying an attraction he didn't feel. Perhaps the young professor was doing the same.

Looking back on my dance with Tim, I also have to ask what it *could* have meant for him, me, and/or us. Was he stepping outside the boundaries of his sexual identity? To what possible consequences? Did I risk developing a lingering attraction to him? After all, *I'm* not gay. Mutual or not, such an attachment could have disrupted our friendship and/or our primary relationships. I thus conclude that my immediate assessment, though experientially true, was fraught with false (or at least incomplete) assumptions.

However, none of that changes the fact that I continue to feel more at ease being close and affectionate with gay male associates than with straight male ones. Why? Is it because I feel more equal to gay men in terms of social power?

A gay man is privileged by sex but marginalized by sexual identity, while a straight woman is privileged by sexual identity but marginalized by sex. When they come together, their privilege and marginalization may offset one another, rendering them more like peers than might be possible in straight cross-sex friendships or in friendships between lesbians and men. As Malone (1980, pp. 4-5) suggests:

A gay man who is arriving at a more positive feeling about his homosexuality and a straight woman who is discovering a heightened sense of her own independence are traveling in the same direction, even if along different paths. Both, in essence, are reaching out toward an enhanced certainty of their own worth, and in many cases they are able to assist one another in taking new steps forward.

In "Dancing Dialectics," I show how an encounter with a straight man moves me to reflect on an interaction with a gay man. But the process works the other way as well. That is, sometimes encounters with gay men move me to reflect on interactions with straight men. Such is the case in "A Tale of Two Proms."

A Tale of Two Proms

"I had such fun at the Christmas party," Bob tells me, "that I agreed to chaperone my high school's prom. I would be so honored if you would accompany me."

Immediately, my eyes dampen. Why? I am touched by his sweet, if old fashioned, invitation: "I would be so honored." Did he really say that?

But there's more here. For me, there's a hunger for a world where, without fear, Bob could bring a tuxedoed date and hold *him* beneath the cardboard and glitter stars. And, deep down, there's also an old ache rooted in a prom long past.

Staring into his locker, Ken says, "I was thinking maybe we might, y'know, go to, ah, prom." At that last word, my heart dissolves into under-set Jell-O.

All but ensuring a prom night of Charles Dickens or MTV, I turned down two really nice boys on the off chance that this one (whom I've had a crush on for nearly a year) might, just might, ask me.

The four blocks home feel like walking on water.

Short, sexy, flirty, fun, and best of all, *black*. My dress might not measure up to the elegant ensembles high schoolers are wearing today, but it seems pretty fine for an old married woman. Stand back, Bob!

A real trooper, my mom keeps handing gowns over the dressing room door: floor length, ballerina, and above the knee, long-sleeved and strapless, jewel tones and neutrals. All get the same response: "This makes me look *fat!*" I settle on a ho-hum number of loose-fitting ivory lace. Gazing into the boutique mirror, I think to myself, "If I were beautiful, Ken would love me."

Pulling out my chair, Bob insists, “Get whatever you want.”

I open the menu and gasp. “My god, I can’t let you pay for this!”

“You can, and you will.”

Flipping to the back, I say, “Maybe they’ll let me order from the Kiddie Kitchen.”

He takes the binder from me and reopens it at the center. “I asked if you liked lobster, and you said, ‘Yes.’ You are *not* getting ‘chicken chunks’ at The Lobster Pot.” The waiter arrives with our sodas, and I guiltily order the lobster dijon.

Bob grins all through dinner as he watches me devour what may be the best seafood I’ve ever put in my mouth. “You’re worth every penny,” he says.

Zack dashes around the car to open Rebecca’s door. Our double daters then look on in disbelief as my escort scoffs, “Lisa’s liberated.” Ken’s halfway inside the restaurant by the time I retrieve my purse from the trunk.

I order lobster that night—twin tails, market price. After dinner, my date’s eyes pop at the sight of the check. “How much money did you bring?” he asks angrily.

“None,” I sheepishly reply.

“I think we’re keeping up,” Bob observes, spinning me around the dance floor.

“I *know* we are,” I say. “We’ll be the talk of the school.”

Just then, the relentless, deafening beat gives way to an easy sway. “A slow song already?” Bob jokes. “They just played one *an hour ago*.” He puts his arms around my waist, and I rest my head on his shoulder as several of his students eye us closely, smiling and giggling. We finish with a dramatic dip.

Ken reluctantly agrees to go through grand march. In return, I'm not to bother him for too many dances. I spend this beautiful May evening standing by the rented fountain, sometimes with him, more often alone, watching the happy couples whirl about the cafeteria floor, wishing that I too had someone to sing corny Bon Jovi ballads in my ear.

On the ride back to Tampa, Bob and I merrily recall the lobster sauces that spilled onto our plastic bibs, the faces of boys who looked 12 as they tried to keep pace with girls who looked 30, and the now-circulating speculation about the computer teacher's date. At a stoplight, he slides across the front seat and sweetly pecks my cheek.

Ken takes me home three hours before the curfew for which I begged and bargained. When we pull up to my house, he leaves the engine running. I sit still a moment; he makes no move. I grab my handbag from the floor and pause; he makes no move. I place my fingers on the door handle and wait; he makes no move. I turn from him and say quietly, "Thank you for dinner. I'm sorry it was so expensive." In my mind, Ken spins me around and pulls me close for a cardiac-arrest-inducing kiss. In his car, he says and does nothing. My door still closing, he drives away.

"Lisa," Bob tells me, "you were the queen of the prom."

"Bob," I reply, "*so were you.*" We laugh so hard I nearly fall out of his truck.

When I read over these pages, I see that my prom experiences hardly could have been more different. Then again, *I* hardly could have been more different. With Ken, I was self-doubting, lonely, and desperate for some kind of completion. With Bob, I wasn't chasing a dream of romantic love but fulfilling a promise to a friend. For him, the evening provided a bit of "cover" and some pleasant moments. For me, it was nothing short of redemption for painful memories associated with my only high school prom.

Going Home

"A Tale of Two Proms" is an example of how my "gay" encounters move me to reflect on my "straight" ones. But not all reflection involves delving into my past. Because I take my new consciousness into straight circles, the impact often is felt in the moment.

Revelations

I'm gazing into a near-empty bottle of Amstel Light when the chair beside me swings away from the onyx Formica table. My eyes meet tan thighs, then pan upward: cut-off jeans, tight and faded, black leather belt, and white stretch tank. I smile. Even before seeing the long, sun-lightened mane, I know this figure. We survived Bluffview Elementary through Lincoln High School together, from sports to sleepovers, from choir to crushes, from dreams to detention. Rising for an embrace, I ask, "How are you, Kara?" Her perfume is faint yet deep and alluring. Obsession maybe. Or Lauren.

"Fabulous," she says.

As we did in 5th grade, we pull our seats close together. Leaning in, I inquire about her lover and her impending return to college. In turn, Kara asks of my teaching and PhD program. Then she says, "I heard your wedding was beautiful."

"Had you been there," I tell her, "it would've been perfect."

An awkward silence falls. Her smile recedes as Kara peels the label from a Genuine Draft. "My brother said he ran into you at The Old Bank Bar." I let out a sigh. "He said it was nice to see you after all this time."

"Three years," I reply.

"Tony's getting his life together," Kara lets me know.

"I'm really happy for him," I remark, pulling a piece of lint from her hair.

After a pause, she queries, "So what else is new?"

"I've been hanging with a lot of gay men," I tell her, though I'm not sure why.

"They can be great friends," Kara says.

I clear my throat and stare into her intense emerald eyes. "I just realized why my mind went from your brother to these men." She leans in, tilting her head with curiosity. "I think if I'd grown up with less stifling ideas about sexuality, I would've had the affair ... with you." She lays her hands atop mine and smiles.

This encounter with Kara expanded the horizons of my sexual orientation. Talking with her about Tony moved me to see that falling for her brother years before may have stemmed from feelings I had *for her*. After all, she was the one I grew up with, the one to whom I told my most intimate secrets, the one I ran to when feeling pained or self-destructive. Tony was several years older and lived away from home during most of my

formative years. At 22, I had a brief affair with him that sent me on an emotional roller coaster. I never understood why my feelings deepened so much in such a short period. Now I think I may have been projecting. Tony was a male Kara, a “proper” object for my abiding love for his sister. My revelation of this to her and her supportive response provided a moment of profound connection between us. I hadn’t felt so close to Kara in years.

Much later, Tim and I have a conversation about this story. “I never knew you had thoughts about women,” he says. “I was kind of shocked, actually, but at the same time, I felt closer to you. That you not only felt those feelings but also were willing to share them so publicly, it was like we were the same somehow.”

Unfortunately, not all my hometown interactions are quite so progressive.

Regressions

The summer air smells of exhausted charcoal and the pine of Deep Woods Off. Always the good hostess, Cindy asks, “Does anyone need anything?”

“Sit down!” someone orders. “We’re all stuffed!”

Her husband Stan meticulously scrapes the grill as I walk over to thank him. Doug and I first connected here three years ago. “No problem,” he says. “I love to cook out.”

“Not just for the barbecue,” I say, looking over at Doug. Stan follows my gaze and smiles. “Without you, I wouldn’t know him.”

He laughs. “Bet you never thought you’d meet your husband in Lake City.”

"Bet *you* never thought I'd marry your college roommate."

"Hell, I never thought that old playboy would *marry*."

"Stan!" Cindy calls from inside.

"Better go," he says.

I glance across the second-floor deck. Most of the dinner guests puff on three-dollar cigars, some for the acquired taste, others to discourage the swarming mosquitoes. As I listen to the voices of old friends and new acquaintances, the arms of my small, rural hometown enclose me in a warm, familiar embrace.

Doug sits talking with a college buddy. The pair giddily reminisces about intramural sports and fraternity escapades. "And remember those guys?" his friend asks.

"Which guys?"

"Those, those faggots," Wyatt says. "I don't remember their names." Doug's eyes narrow and his lips part, but no words come. "Who were those fags?"

"I'm not sure who you mean," is Doug's only reply. I look over at my husband, impatient for him to respond. We stare at each other, not knowing who should make an issue of it. Tensing my neck, grinding my teeth, I wait. Unable to stand it, I open my mouth to speak. Just then, Doug says to Wyatt, "You make it to Drake Relays this year?" I simmer.

Later, as we drive home, I will scream out my anger. "How could we have let that slide by? We just sat there! We're disgusting, pathetic hypocrites!"

Now, I feel the hands of my small, rural hometown enclosing around my throat, choking me into silence.

The incident at Stan's leaves me disappointed, both in a cohort and, even more, in Doug and myself. It proved that despite all our experiences, we remain capable of letting overt homophobia pass. That it was a pleasant evening and a meeting of old (straight) friends seem weak excuses for choosing passivity over protest.

Doug, however, is slower to anger than I, less politically charged, and more accepting of others' shortcomings. After hearing me rant for a few minutes in the car, he asks, "Can't you just move on?" The differences in our approaches to such issues put a momentary strain on our relationship. As the following episode shows, this isn't the only time.

One Daunted Kiss

Throughout the night, Impulse echoes with sounds of pool balls smacking, darts popping, rocks glasses clanking, and men flirting. Set on "mute," the TV mounted above the stage plays a stripper video. I'm trying not to stare at the G-stringed Swedish meatball moving to the groove only he can hear. "How's Brandon?" I ask as Doug returns from the bar.

"Busy," he replies, holding out a bottled water. I reach for the container, but Doug maintains his grip. My fingers playfully caress his hand, now cool and damp from condensation. Slipping his other arm around my waist, he pulls me close. I peck his lips and turn my cheek, but Doug moves in for another kiss. Our mouths meet, first briefly, then for a prolonged conference. When I feel his tongue prying, I push him away.

"Enough," I say, a little too forcefully.

With a wounded look, he steps back. “What’s your problem? You’ve never seemed to mind a public display of affection.”

“That isn’t what that was,” I tell him.

“What *was* it then?”

I look up, staring into his azure eyes, and say, “A public display of heterosexuality.”

“*What* are you talking about?” he asks indignantly.

“You *never* kiss me like that in front of people. Maybe you were trying to prove something to the men in this bar.”

“Whatever,” Doug snaps, taking a few soothing gulps of Michelob Light.

“Regardless, I’m trying to show a little respect.”

“For whom?”

“For them! In straight spaces, how often does a gay man feel he can stick his tongue in his boyfriend’s mouth?” Flicking his wrist, Doug brushes me off. “We’re on their turf,” I say. “We don’t need to flaunt the privileged access we have to one another’s bodies.”

He downs the rest of his beer.

Intelligent retort, I think. I then try to read the strained expression on his face. Beneath the anger, is Doug embarrassed or hurt by my political reaction to his (perhaps innocent) affection? However he feels, that daunted French kiss will be this evening’s final passionate gesture.

Late that night, questions reel through my mind. Was Doug using me as a badge of heterosexuality, or did he just want a kiss? Does he feel he must prove his sexual identity—to gay men, to me, to himself—or has my consciousness about these issues been raised out

of the stratosphere? Am I experiencing “straight guilt”? How *did* the men at Impulse perceive our affection? As I feared? As a *positive sign* of our comfort there? Did any of them even notice? Surely they have more important things to watch than a straight couple. Then I look over at Doug and wonder, did I harm *us* by that reaction?

Still, if he hadn’t met me, if Doug were straight and *single*, would he have the same kinds of friendships with gay men? It’s an unanswerable question. To establish and deepen these bonds, each of us needed the other. Without me, Doug wouldn’t live in Tampa; without Doug, I wouldn’t know David; and without each other, we might never have had the courage to enter and explore David’s world. But now that we have, what are the consequences?

When he opens his eyes the next morning, I smile at him. “I’m sorry about last night,” I say. “If I overreacted, it’s because our place in this community still seems precarious, and I’m sensitive to anything that might jeopardize it. But I want you to know that I’m really happy with who we’re becoming together.” Doug leans over, and I offer him a belated kiss.

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