

Out

I pull up into my parents' driveway and stop the car just behind my mom's blue 1988 Mustang. A tinge of nostalgia grips me as I remember the many times I borrowed the thirsty five-liter beastly last year. Alex turns to me and tries to look encouraging.

"It'll be OK," he says, "you'll see."

How I hope so. We're both nervous; I can feel the shared emotion flowing between us, just another form of communication between lovers. This will be the first time my parents have met Alex. In fact, it'll be the first I've seen them since I told them over the phone three weeks ago that I wanted them to meet my partner, and he was a man. Alex is too important a part of my life now to remain a secret from the other people I love. As we sit in the car, delaying the moment when we approach the large, threatening, heterosexual, family-valued home, my mind is drawn back inexorably to the weekend almost a year ago. The weekend when I took my first step on the threshold of my adult life.

It was the morning after a senior year dance that I realized I was gay. OK, I guess I'd known for while before that, but it was on that Sunday morning that I finally let the truth flow into my consciousness and give rise to the thought "Well, I'd better do something about this."

Sabrina Cosulich was my date for the dance. We'd been out together a few times during our senior year, and I really liked her. She was very attractive, in a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, clear-skinned, firm-breasted kind of a way. That was the problem. She had all the things going for her that a great date should have, but I my feelings for her only reached the level of friendship. My two best buddies, Mikey and Johnny, were totally crazy over her, and gave me a tough time about why didn't I take her out more often, and had I got to first base with her, the usual kind of male bullshit. The thing was though, I really liked Sabrina. She seemed to have stuff going for her that a lot of her friends didn't, like an interest in things other than the jocks in the football team and fixing her make-up in the ladies' room during recess. On our dates we always spent a lot of the time deep in conversation, discussing music, our favorite books, TV, our friends, families, hopes and dreams. The evening often ended with an air of unfulfilled promise though, at least for me, as though I hadn't quite done what was expected of me.

The dance loomed and the 'who's taking who' rumors and speculation started to spread round the school. After some thought, I decided to ask Sabrina. I didn't attach much importance to the event myself, but people seemed to be regarding this thing as a dress-rehearsal for the Senior Prom (to which I also didn't attach very much importance), so like a wimp I responded to the peer pressure and asked her for the date. I did it in a way that gave her an out if she needed it, saying, you know, if somebody's already asked then that's cool, but she jumped at it. I was glad she said yes, really, if only because it got Mikey and Johnny off my back for a while.

The night of the ball came, and for all the build-up it had been given by some of my friends, I'm sure it was very anti-climactic for most of the kids. Which isn't to say I didn't enjoy myself. There was plenty of dancing, of course, which I love to do, getting really wild and uninhibited. That's very different from the way I usually behaved at that time. I was a little restrained, especially in group situations. I was afraid of making a fool of

myself by saying something gauche or knocking over someone's drink. I often felt slightly as though I was out of it, on the periphery of things and any attempt to insinuate myself into the mainstream would lead to disaster or embarrassment. I'm not really clumsy, but I have the potential to be because of my size. I'm six-two, but skinny, so my limbs always seem to be sticking in places where they shouldn't. I wish I could contract myself in sometimes, shrink my arms and legs and body, the opposite of the werewolf transformations you see in the movies.

I had some slow dances with Sabrina as well as the manic raves that I preferred. She kept looking at me in an enigmatic, knowing way, as if she had something she wanted to say to me but couldn't think of the right words. It felt good to be close to her, to have that physical contact with someone, but when I looked at the other guys nuzzling their girls' ears or sliding their hands onto their bottoms, I couldn't bring myself to emulate them. As usual we just chatted mainly: how our classes were going, what we were going to do at the end of our final semester, that sort of thing. She'd gotten into MIT so she'd be flying to Boston at the end of the summer. That saddened me. I'd miss her. I told her I wasn't sure what I would end up doing. In theory I'd be going just as far as the East Bay, starting at U.C. Berkeley in September, but I told her there was something that seemed unresolved about the way my life was going and I didn't know whether starting college was going to help any. She gave me that knowing look again.

I drove her home. I thought about driving to a quiet spot first, as a lot of the guys were planning, but it seemed too cliched for words, and it didn't feel like the right way to end the evening. I pulled up outside her family's large house off University Avenue in Palo Alto. It was in tactful darkness. We sat in my mom's car with just the amber glow of the street lamps for illumination. Somehow we got talking about the group Nirvana. That was another thing I liked about her: she had great taste in music. She said that she thought that their blonde lead singer, Kurt Cobain, was really cute, and that I reminded her of him. I realized that she was complimenting me and I should have been flattered, but what I was actually thinking was that I found him kind of cute too. Eventually we exhausted the Seattle music scene as a topic for conversation and fell into an easy silence.

"I had a really great time, Larry. Thanks." She said the last word with a low breathiness that sent a chill down my spine. I looked at her face. It was a pretty face. Full, rounded lips, cheek bones that were the envy of her senior high girlfriends, cheerful blue eyes from which she occasionally brushed away a wisp of fine blond hair. I blanked my mind and went onto autopilot, and slowly moved my face closer to hers. Our lips met. I closed my eyes; I assume she did the same. I opened my lips slightly and found the tip of her small tongue waiting to come in. I let it, and the feeling wasn't at all unpleasant. I moved my hand up to her right breast. It lay there, wondering what was required of it next. I wasn't at all sure either, but I gave it a squeeze anyway. Suddenly, it all seemed wrong. I'd been enjoying myself more when we'd been talking about how the fashion industry had jumped on the grunge bandwagon. I dropped my hand and moved my face away.

"I don't think we should be doing this," I said, somewhat lamely. Sabrina just smiled.

"Don't worry about it. I don't want to push you if you're not comfortable with it." Her voice had an ironic tone, as if she was aware of the role reversal, my reluctance having robbed her of the chance to play the traditional female part of unwilling victim.

“I guess I should go in. I meant what I said, Larry. It was a lot of fun. I hope you get yourself sorted out. Give me a call, huh?”

“Sure,” I said, wondering what she meant exactly about sorting myself out. Deciding about Berkeley I guessed.

As I drove away, I felt guilty about not walking her to the door, but that might have led to another embarrassing “do a I give her a goodnight kiss” decision. I did make sure she was safely in the house before I pulled away though.

I felt exhausted when I got home. My folks had gone to bed, so let myself in quietly and went straight to my room, pulled off my clothes letting them fall on the floor around me, and clambered into bed. I fell asleep quickly, but as I faded into oblivion I was aware of a nagging thought at the back of my mind that wouldn't come out and show itself properly. Maybe it would be clearer in the morning.

Wakefulness came upon me suddenly, in the middle of a dream. Bizarre images danced around my mind. I tried to retain them, but already they were fading. I could sense that Sabrina had been in there somewhere, and that she was angry or disappointed with me. There was something erotic happening too, and I felt aroused, but even as I tried to pin it down, it darted from my mind's eye's view. The song *Smells Like Teen Spirit* had formed the backing track to the dream.

I shifted my body so that my erection didn't press so painfully into the mattress. Soon I was fully awake, all hope of recapturing the elusive dream gone. I glanced at the LCD clock on my Walkman radio/cassette that I kept by the bed. It showed 8.05 a.m. - time for Hibernia Beach on Live-105. I switched on the radio and inserted the miniature headphones into my ears. Revelation burst upon me as I listened to the announcer introduce the show:

“Good morning, Bay Area. You're listening to Hibernia Beach on KITS - Live-105, the rock of the nineties. This is our program devoted to gay and lesbian issues. And this is the latest from the Cranberries.”

My God, I thought to myself, I make a point of listening to a show specially for gays!

They say that adults who have been abused as children can be totally unaware of it until something triggers the memory later, and then it comes flooding back with an overwhelming intensity that can send them straight into emotional trauma. I can only think that my mind had been playing the same sort of trick on me. Deep down I must have long known that I was gay, but had been repressing it very effectively. I'd gone along with the dating thing to try to fit in with the norm, as an act of denial. Then a single unconscious act, listening to a gay radio show, had pierced that armor of self deception, and the truth came flooding in. Of course, the previous night's confusion must have helped to weaken the barrier I'd erected around my true nature. Now, as I thought about the dance, and taking Sabrina home, and the reluctant grope, I could scarcely believe that the cause of my confusion hadn't been obvious to me.

I lay in bed, trembling with excitement and fear. Memories, long forgotten or suppressed, came back to me. One particularly embarrassing episode in my freshman year sprang vividly to mind. I was in the locker room after a gym class, taking a steaming shower. I

looked at some of the other boys, enjoying their uninhibited horse-play. Suddenly I was aware of myself becoming aroused. I had to turn away quickly and hide the evidence of my excitement with my towel, not daring to look at anyone else until the unwanted erection had subsided. At the time I must have put it down to the sort of spontaneous hard-ons that teenage boys are cursed with, but now, lying in bed and reliving it, I knew that it was the sight of the athletic young bodies that had gotten me excited. There were other times too. Talking to my friends during recess or walking home after school, I'd be aware of a kind of *frisson*, a feeling of excitement that deep down I must have known indicated something. And all the time I was hiding its real meaning from myself.

After the shower incident, I entered what I recognize now as an extended period of latent sexuality. I even stopped masturbating, which must be a rarity for any teenage boy. My sexuality lay dormant, unable to find an outlet amongst the girls that I was expected to mix with and date, and not strong enough to overcome the overwhelming heterosexual socialization that's prevalent even in late 20th century California. With hindsight, I regard that period of sexual inactivity as a positive thing. I avoided a lot of the intense emotional and sexual angst that my "normal" contemporaries went through, and used the mental energy instead to get the A grades that I'd set myself as a target. Ironically, as I approached graduation, academic perfection had started to lose its allure, and I'm sure this coincided with the reactivation of the sex centers of my brain. The exaltation that was to follow my release from asexuality more than made up for the slight loss of academic single-mindedness that I suffered!

While I welcomed this new-found sexual self-awareness, it brought some scary consequences. Before, I'd been living an unconscious lie. Now I would still be deceiving everyone except myself, and very consciously at that. There was no way that I could consider telling anyone about this. My parents would be devastated, I was sure of that. My father was the CFO of a very successful Silicon Valley computer company, and my mom was every bit the traditional woman behind him. In general they espoused liberal ideals (though we'd disagreed about the recent anti-abortion demonstrations in the San Francisco area. I thought that the Operation Rescue pro-lifers were dangerous extremist murderers - remember that doctor they killed?- who should be arrested on sight, whereas my parents believed that abortion was usually wrong, and anyway, the pro-lifers should be protected by the First Amendment.) But there's a difference between thinking we should have better free health care, and equal rights for all, and accepting that your youngest son is a raving queer. Jake, my older brother, might understand, but he was still down at UCSD, trying to sort out a post-graduate placement. I could forget telling any of my friends. It'd be all embarrassed silences or forced good humor, and then whispers behind my back: "Look, there goes Larry the fag." Not that I could blame them. A month earlier I would probably have reacted in the same way if one of my friends had admitted he was gay.

The rusty, slow-moving gears of my Sunday morning brain ground on, and eventually I realized who I could tell. Sabrina. Her strange comments and looks from the previous night made sense now: she'd known about it before I did! She must have had a clearer view of what I was going through because she didn't have to try to see it through an opaque wall of self-denial. Or maybe she wasn't perceptive at all, but just concluded that anyone who didn't find her totally desirable must be a homosexual! There, I'd used that

word to myself. It was tough to do. “Gay”, even “fag” and “queer” are nice monosyllabic words that you can almost lose in a sentence. But “homosexual” is different. Its four syllables have an insistent, dominating quality, and of course the “sex” in the middle makes it an impossible word to ignore.

That was settled then: I’d call Sabrina later, at a more civilized time. For now I could at least listen to the radio show and not have to tell myself that it was because they played good music, instead of the truth: that I could identify with the people and issues they were talking about.

I called Sabrina at 11 a.m. and asked her if she wanted to go for a walk. We arranged to meet at the Stanford campus. The Rodin Garden was one of our favorite hang-outs. I was quiet and we both really enjoyed the sculptures. My favorite piece was the Gates of Hell. There was so much pain and suffering there. I was captivated by Rodin’s vision, and speculated about what private demons he must have harbored to inspire such an anguished scene.

Sabrina was already there when I arrived at just after three. She was standing between Adam and Eve, staring at the Gates, shielding her eyes from the intense mid-afternoon sun. She wore yellow shorts and a white tee-shirt which reflected the sunlight in brilliant contrast to the age-darkened bronze of the Gates of Hell. She turned as she heard me approach and smiled radiantly, her teeth competing with the brightness of her shirt.

“Hi!” she said, “how’s it going?”

I’d decided to tell her everything and worry about her reaction later.

“Just fine. I’ve been thinking about some stuff, and wanted to share it with you. You’re probably the only person I can talk to about it right now, which is kind of ironic in the circumstances.”

“Sure, fire away. It’s what friends are for.”

We’d ambled over to the less exciting sculptures: “Head of the Mayor of Calais”, etc., where there was a clear patch of grass to sit down on.

I crossed my legs and stared at a blade of grass over which a lone ant was climbing haphazardly, finding the going tough. I identified with it. It was difficult to begin. I decided to approach it in terms of my relationship with Sabrina herself.

“Well, you know that I *really* like you?”

“Yes.”

“God, this is tricky...”

“Go on...”

“...and that all my buddies are, like, totally envious that we go on dates and probably imagine we get up to all sorts? And we don’t? Well, this morning when I woke up, I had this revelation, this big insight into why things like last night happen. Or don’t happen, I should say.”

“Because you’re gay.”

“Because I’m gay. What?! Oh, you know? Well, yes, actually.” I was right: she *had* known before I did. It was quite unsettling in a way. I’d arrived at an earth-shattering, fundamental truth about myself, and someone else had gotten there before me. I frowned.

Sabrina laughed. “Oh, I’m sorry, Larry,” she said, placing her hand on mine. “I mean, I didn’t know for sure, but I knew it wasn’t just shyness that was holding you back. I kind of assumed that you’d decided that, well, that’s the way you are a while back, and didn’t know quite how to tell me. I didn’t want to say anything in case I was wrong. So you only just realized it, huh?”

“Yeah, it was really weird. I was lying in bed this morning, I guess thinking about last night on some level, but then I automatically switched on the gay show on KITS and it came to me, practically in a blinding flash. I mean I didn’t immediately start having wild fantasies about men or anything. It was more of a recognition that if I was going to fantasize about anyone, it would be a man, like an awakening, if you see what I mean.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, I’m glad I was right, in a way. But it’s a shame too. I really like you too, Larry. I feel much better around you than some of the other jerks that I’ve been out with. I guess it’s because you’re not trying to hit on me the whole time. I suppose I was hoping you *were* just a bit shy and that in time it would lead to something more. Oh well.”

“God, you’re making me feel guilty now!” That made her smile. “It doesn’t mean we can’t be friends. You know they say that a gay is the best friend a woman can have? The fact that I told you and no-one else must count for something.”

“Yeah, I’m touched, really I am. So what are you going to do now? Get a boyfriend?”

“Hell, I haven’t even thought about it. It’s like I’ve just given myself permission to start to live a whole part of my life which was out of bounds before. It’s exciting and scary at the same time. When I was cycling over here, I caught myself staring at the guys playing volleyball on the Oval and thinking ‘I wonder if he’s gay?’ It’s a weird feeling.”

Sabrina started to speak, then stopped, and looked embarrassed.

“What? Come on, we’ve talked about all sorts of things. You can’t go all coy on me now.” I tried to look encouraging. It was doing me a lot of good just talking about it, and I didn’t want to stop now.

“Well, I was just wondering. What about the physical side of it. I mean, could you, you know, ‘make love’ with a man.” The quotation marks she put around the phrase let me know that she wasn’t totally comfortable with the concept. That was all right: neither was I.

“Um. Well I haven’t really thought about that too much. I know that if I think about naked men, you know, in a sort of fantasy way, it makes me... aroused. But as for having sex, well, I’m not really sure. To tell the truth, I feel really strange about it. Sex has been so far to the back of my mind for so long that whatever happens it’s going to be mysterious and frightening.”

We talked for a long time, cycled back into town to get a milk shake at the Good Earth, and talked some more. Sabrina was great. She was so different from a lot of girls in her

year. They would have feigned disgust (or maybe not even feigned it) and come out with phrases like: “Oh, gross!” and “Blech-o-rama!” and mimed sticking two fingers down their throats to be sick. I was glad I told her. She had a pensive air sometimes, and I guess she’d thought about us going steady a little more seriously than I’d realized. But mostly she was just supportive, and it was she who had the idea about my getting into the ‘scene’.

We were sitting by the window, sipping our rich malted shakes. She’d relaxed a bit and had adopted a more flippant attitude, maybe trying to compensate for what she was really feeling inside.

“So as I see it, we’ve got to get you laid.”

“Sabrina!”

“All right, but you’ve got to start to meet people of the same, you know. If only to make sure this is really what you want, how you truly are. And you’ve said you don’t know anyone here you can turn to. Why don’t you put an ad in the personals in *Metro*: ‘GWM, inexperienced, seeks older man for initiation and hot sex.’”

“I don’t think so. Anyway, who said anything about an older man?”

“OK.” Her eyes widened “I’ve got it! Come with me.”

“Where’re we going?”

“Stacey’s.”

We threw a couple of \$5 bills at the cashier on the way out, and Sabrina practically dragged me up the street into the bookstore. She stood in front of the piles of freebie newspapers by the door and grabbed a copy of *OUTNow!*.

“Here we are,” she said, flipping through it and finally turning to an advertisement on the inside front cover. “Pleasuredome. San Francisco’s largest gay dance club. 177 Townsend at 3rd.” The advertisement showed a halftoned picture of a slim, naked tanned man, his groin area discreetly hidden by a box containing the club’s name. The cashier was staring at us.

“Erm, can we get the hell out of here please?”

Out in the street, Sabrina handed me the paper. “There you go. You like dancing. There’ll be lots of gay men there. It’ll be a hoot. Next Saturday.”

“I don’t know. Will you come with me?”

“I can’t really, can I? It’s for gays. I’m definitely not a lesbian. I wouldn’t feel safe! But seriously Larry, I think you should do it, or at least something like it. If you don’t, you’ll start to worry about it and it’ll get you down.”

She was right. This new self-knowledge had a price attached. I had to be true to how I felt and start exploring the options, otherwise I’d begin to doubt myself and maybe end up confused. I looked at my watch. It was time to go home and finish some homework assignments. I gave Sabrina a big hug, safe in the knowledge that it wouldn’t be misinterpreted. I promised her I’d think about going to the club.

It was an interesting week. On the surface, everything seemed just the same. Joey asked me about Sabrina and if there'd been any interesting developments. I thought it was only fair to put an end to his speculation, so I told him we'd had a long chat and for various reasons we'd decided to be just good friends. I could tell by his expression that he was thinking "Too bad, she didn't dig you enough, huh?" and was happy to let him think that. I toyed with the idea of telling him the truth, but wasn't sure enough of what his reaction would be. No, for the time being it would have to be my secret. And Sabrina's - I trusted her to keep it. It was a relief to find that I hadn't become instantly and strongly attracted to all of my male friends. I guess the friendship aspect was such a major part of the relationship that there wasn't room for anything else. I did catch myself eyeing up a couple of cute-looking sophomores once or twice, but resisted the temptation to approach them.

The weekend arrived, and I'd made my decision. I *would* go to the ball! I'd spoken to Sabrina once on the phone and told her. She was pleased, but I think her initial enthusiasm had died down a bit too. She told me to be careful, as though I was going into combat. I promised her I'd look after myself. Saturday was a long, slow day. The advertisement in *OUTNow!* said "Front floor 8 til ? Back floor 1am til ?" I planned to arrive at 10pm. I read for a while, played Nintendo, hung out with Joey for a while, watched some MTV, played some more Nintendo, listened to the request show on Live-105. Finally it was 9pm and I could get ready. I felt totally out of my depth. What should I wear? I had a vague idea that certain items of clothing had some significance to gays, but didn't know what they were. In the end I settled for black jeans and a dark blue short-sleeved shirt, and black sneakers. I didn't want to stand out. I got mom's car key (I'd told them I was going to see Sabrina again; they'd seemed pleased) and escaped into the balmy Mountain View evening.

The journey up highway 280 seemed very quick. I was barely aware of the mechanics of driving. Lane changes, passing, speeding up and slowing down were all done on autopilot. I jolted awake when I saw the blue and red flashing lights of a highway patrol car ahead, but he'd already pulled someone over, so I was safe. My mind was occupied, of course, with what awaited me at the Pleasuredome. I imagined a scene from the Martin Scorsese film *After Hours* that I'd watched on video. The lost hero stumbles into a bizarre Manhattan warehouse nightclub, populated by all sorts of punk weirdos and filled with a deafening disco sound-track and blinding light show. I imagined getting lost in a sweating throng of crazed bodies, having strange hands stroking my body and then being dragged off into a darkened room to meet a depraved fate. Actually it wasn't at all a bad thought.

I found somewhere to park a few blocks from the club. I walked quickly. I find San Francisco at night fairly intimidating, and this area of littered streets had its share of homeless people and weirdos and pan-handlers. I walked fast, kept my eyes open but avoided eye contact with the human wrecks I passed, and tried to look tough. I could hear the thumping bass from the club's PA system from a block away, so I guessed I was right about the loud music at least. As I approached the door, I got my wallet out to find the \$7 admission, and was struck by a dread realization. They'd ask for ID, and mine would show clearly that I was only seventeen. The youngest these clubs allowed was 18, and often it was 21. I quickly moved my driver's license to the back of my wallet.

I peered through the window into the dimly lit cubicle that housed the cashier and tried to

look mature. I felt about ten years old. The large bouncer guarding the entrance smiled down at me.

“\$7, please,” said the cashier, who looked like somebody’s granny. “ID?”

This was it. “You know what? I mislaid my driver’s license, and the DMV still hasn’t sent me a replacement, and I just haven’t had the time to collect a temporary ID card yet.” I thought it sounded like the single least convincing plea in the history of teenagers trying to pretend they’re older than they are. The old lady looked at me over the tops of her half-moon glasses. But instead of saying “No ID, no entry,” she said “Well, try to have it next time,” and smiled encouragingly.

This was it. I was in. The big bouncer took my hand, stamped it and said “Have a good evening, sir.”

Inside, the club wasn’t as Dante-esque as I’d feared. It was crowded, but not packed and there was room to walk through to the bar without being pressed up against bodies. And what bodies! I’d never seen so much flesh and leather before. Most of the revellers were men. They wore leather pants, leather jackets and vests, leather studded wrist bands. There were a even a few with leather dog collars. Many wore ear-rings and some sported shiney metal rings either as pendants around their necks or attached by small thongs to their jackets. I discovered later these were called cock-rings (we gays aren’t great ones for adopting the polite euphemistic sexual language of the straight community), and are used to sustain an erection during love making. They’re also a badge of gay chic.

I noticed some guys checking me out as I fought my way to the bar, but no one stared as though I didn’t belong there. The music got louder as I neared the bar, and I could see the dance area now. It lay behind the bodies that were sitting at the few tables or standing round the edge. The dancefloor was heaving! The dancers had a carefree exuberance, a kind of unaffected exhibitionism that I found exciting to to watch. There was a lot of contact between them, guys dancing close and face to face, or face to back, stroking their partner’s face or neck or arms. Some kissed, but that was mainly left for off the dance floor. The music was deafening; the solid bass of the hard-core house track vibrated the floor under my feet. The lights were impressive too. They were suspended from gantries above the dance area about 20 feet up, and shone their multi-colored beams left and right, up and down in computer-controlled synchronization with the music. It was a dizzying spectacle to gaze upon. Any residual fear I was experiencing evaporated in the heat of pure excitement. I felt good about being here, felt that I belonged. I bought a diet Coke, took a large swig, placed it down on one of the tables around the edge of the dance area, and hit the floor.

I’ve never been one to hold back when it comes to dancing. I probably lack a certain finesse, but make up for it in enthusiasm. I lose myself in the rhythm of the music. It’s an atavistic activity for me; I forget about school and grade averages and the future, and revert to a more primitive form of existence, where having fun is the only aim. I lost track of how long I danced for. It was maybe 40 minutes, but it could have been an hour and a half. The music was mostly house and hip-hop, with a couple of Madonna tracks and an Erasure song thrown in (even *I* knew Erasure are a gay pop icon). I kept my eyes closed mostly, to get right down into the groove, but once in a while I’d glance up. Several guys danced close to me, and I smiled at them, but didn’t know what else I should be doing.

Then I saw someone who looked really attractive. He wore black leather pants and a black string vest, and a single gold ear-ring in his left ear. His hair was dark and slicked back and his face was tan, lean and just slightly unshaven. Although he was slightly shorter than I was, his body was more solid, dense and sturdy-looking without being outright muscular. I guessed he was about 25. I caught his eye and smiled. He returned the smile, danced his way over to me, and stayed facing me. I started flirting with him in an outrageous way that would have shocked me just a week before. I pouted, flicked my hand through my hair, put my hands on his shoulders and slid them down his strong arms. I even turned my back on him so he could grab me from behind.

Eventually my partner mimed getting a drink, so we headed back to the bar and fought our way through the crowd, which was much denser than when I'd arrived. He shouted "Let's go upstairs," and looking up I noticed that beyond the lighting rigs was another level, with tables overlooking the dance floor through a large railed-off opening in the floor. I followed him up the stairs. It was surprisingly quiet up there; the music seeming to be very directional, and well away from the balcony where we found a table it was possible to have a conversation without shouting yourself hoarse.

He held out his hand and said "Steve." I shook it, and told him my name.

"So, having fun?" He smiled as he said it, as though he knew the answer.

"Sure. Haven't danced so hard in ages. It's a cool place. I didn't know what to expect. I mean, I don't get up to the city much."

"Yeah? I wouldn't live anywhere else."

We chatted easily, small talk. He told me he worked for Apple Computer as an account executive for the Newton. He was 32. I admitted I thought he looked much younger. He said he worked quite hard at it, not to stay looking young especially, but to keep in shape. You had to nowadays. I told him I was at school, but left it ambiguous as to what type, and that I lived in the South Bay. I mentioned my interest in the visual arts, and he told me about some of the cool things Apple are doing with computer graphics and animation.

The PA started to play The Shamen's *Ebenezer Goode*, and Steve said "Hey, good segue. Do you want some X, it'll keep your strength up."

I must have looked puzzled. He explained.

"Don't you know this song? It's a paean to the wonderful dance-enhancing effects of Ecstasy. What do you say?"

I hesitated. Was he trying to sell it to me? Would he try to rip me off later if I took it? I knew a little about Ecstasy, that it was a stimulant, popular in the rave culture. Steve took a couple of small white chalky-looking pills out of a tiny tin container. He put one in his mouth, tilted his head back and swallowed. He held out his hand, the other pill nestling in the palm.

"Come on," he said, "it's my only vice. It can be yours too. Here."

What the hell. I'd played it safe for too long. It was time to live a little, and besides I'd decided I could trust Steve. The whole atmosphere of this place was changing my perception of what fun was. I took the tab from him, placed it on my tongue and washed it

down with a swig of Coke.

“Atta boy. Now let’s boogie!” He leaped up from his seat, and headed off down the stairs, glancing behind to make sure I was still with him. We penetrated the throng and thrust ourselves onto the floor. It was wild. The sounds and colors took on a whole different dimension. If I closed my eyes, I could still see swirling hues around me, and the music seemed almost tangible, as though I could reach out and grab the notes as they hurtled past. I felt a slight nausea, but that gave way to a general sense of well-being, a bit like a cannabis high, but more intense.

The evening passed speedily after that. I danced mostly with Steve, but we went our separate ways now and then. I saw him embrace a guy, biting the man’s neck as he threw his head back in apparent ecstasy.

At last the DJ took the pace down and put on a slow smoochy number. I saw Steve looking around for me, and we met in the middle of the floor. I put my hands on his shoulders and rested my head against him, enjoying his hardness, as though he could protect me.

“So, you’re a bottom then?”

I had no idea what he meant, but said “Uh huh,” anyway. As it turned out, he was wrong; I’m either.

He put his hand under my chin so our faces were almost level. His face was very close to mine, and was moving closer. Our lips touched, gently at first, but soon I felt his tongue dart into my mouth. I could taste the beer he’d been drinking, and felt the roughness of his stubble on my chin. I had a flashback to my kiss with Sabrina the night before. This was different though. It was so much more physically exciting. I was overcome with a hungry passion, and worked frenziedly at his mouth. My hands felt his hard chest through the many small holes in his shirt and moved down to his taut stomach. He pulled away, grinning. “Let’s go to my place; it’s only a couple of blocks from here.”

I followed Steve, calming down slightly as the chill San Francisco air robbed me of the warmth I felt in the club. We climbed the three flights of stairs to his apartment. It was tough going now the X was starting to wear off. I glanced around his room. It was sparsely decorated, just an unmade bed, a cream-colored futon, some drawers, a large closet stretching across one wall, various items of clothing on the floor, and a wall festooned with posters: guys on bikes, black guys with white guys, the multi-colored Warhol of Marilyn Monroe, and a Madonna. I passed on the Warhol; I found most of his work tacky and his color-sense unsympathetic to the eyes. Steve noticed me staring at the Madonna poster, and he said: “A great gay symbol, yeah?”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. Take a seat.” He motioned at the futon, and sat back on it himself. “There’s the obvious stuff that she does like getting it on with her back-up singers in the videos, but have you ever noticed what some of the male dancers get up to in the background? She brought homo-eroticism to the MTV generation.”

“Oh.”

“Of course, there’s a bit of a backlash against her now. People are saying it was all just exploitative chic, and that *Sex* book was definitely a homophobic pile of shit.” He glanced at my awed expression. “How old are you Larry?”

“Seventeen,” I replied, immediately regretting my spontaneous honesty.

Steve laughed. “Hey, real jailbait! Well, I guess no-one’s forced to be you here. I thought you were pretty young. You attracted a lot of attention tonight. Lucky there was quite a bit of new talent in, otherwise you would have been surrounded by swarms of horny queens! So how long have you been on the scene?”

I had no idea I’d caused that reaction, but I then I’d been too busy enjoying myself. “Er, I’m not exactly sure if I’m on the scene, as such. I decided about a week ago that I was, you know, gay. This is the first time I’ve been out to a club or anything.”

“Really? God you’re brave. When I first came to terms with where my true interests lay - and I was older than you, nineteen and a half - it took me years, literally, to do anything about it. It seems stupid now, all that worrying and panicking over nothing. It’s better now. I’m 32 and I’ve been happy with the way I am for about seven years. Even now I’m only half out at work, you know, a few really close friends there know. That’s still the toughest part. But listen to me gabbing. Come here and give me a kiss.”

I’d been staring at Steve, mesmerized. He seemed so self-possessed. I couldn’t keep my eyes off his handsome face as he talked, except when they strayed down to his broad chest and shoulders, the dark hairs on his chest visible through the holes of his vest. I moved over to him and we started to kiss again. Soon he stood and led me over to the bed. We lay on it facing each other, he stroking my hair, I resting my hand on his hip.

“Just tell me to stop anytime you want to. This is your first time, yeah?”

I nodded.

“Well, in the words of the great cliché, I promise I’ll be gentle with you.”

He was too. He pulled off his top and pants and helped me with mine. We embraced nakedly, and I enjoyed for the first time the feeling of a firm male body against mine. His caresses were gentle at first, becoming rougher as our excitement grew. I’d never realized before that it was possible to feel so aroused. Every nerve ending in my body tingled with pleasure as his busy hands and mouth and tongue worked all over me. He slowly moved down my body, kissing and licking around my public hair for a deliciously long time. When he finally took me in his mouth I couldn’t hold on any longer, and I exploded in a pulsating, burning orgasm. I lay, exhausted and almost tearful from joy, and Steve re-appeared. He kissed me and I tasted the salty tang of my own fluids.

We lay there for a while, recovering.

“My! And how was that?” he asked, redundantly.

“Incredible,” I said.

“Good. Fancy returning the favor?”

I didn’t need to be asked twice. I don’t suppose I was very good; I just tried to copy what Steve had done to me, but he seemed well enough satisfied. Afterwards we lay in each

other's arms, dozing. He started to stroke my face and I glanced at his eyes.

"You know there's a lot more to queer sex than that?" He seemed more serious now.

"Well, yeah."

"I didn't want to push it this time, with you being such a neophyte and all, but you'll have to decide where you stand on it. I can be a lot of fun, but this goddamn AIDS thing has made it so much more risky than it used to be. You didn't even ask me if I was HIV+, and I assumed you weren't, but you'll have to get used to asking, and being asked."

I must have looked worried, and he paused, stroking my hair reassuringly.

He continued: "Of course, your best bet is to find a long-term partner, but you know the answer to the question 'What do gays do on their second date?'"

"No."

"'What second date?' There's still a lot of sleeping around goes on. It seems to have increased again after the initial scare of AIDS died down a bit. I think it's because there's a feeling of resentment in the community now. No-one seems to be coming up with the answers, we all have friends and lovers who have died from it, it almost seems inevitable that *we're* all going to die from it, so what the hell, let's screw ourselves to death. I tested negative after my last partner, he was called Steve too, developed the symptoms, and I'm determined to stay that way. You should be too. Get yourself educated, don't believe what people tell you unless it's someone you trust or you've seen it backed up with reliable gay literature; there's lots of it out there."

I had to ask. "What happened to Steve, your partner?"

"He died. It was just over a year ago. He went down hill quickly after it was diagnosed. He refused any treatment, just went back East to die. That hurt the most. He didn't want me there, but I guess he was trying to spare me the pain of seeing him go through it. I miss him a lot, even now. I think that's why I preach a bit to kids like you. The least I can do is to try and educate. Steve didn't have the benefit of that when he contracted it; the virus wasn't that well known back then. I think it's going to force me to come out fully soon. I want to educate, be part of the positive force in the community, try to turn the tide again, away from the negativism. I can't do that while I'm still living half my life in denial.

"Listen to me! I should be telling you what a wonderful life you've chosen for yourself. Sorry. I always come down a bit after a sex and X high. Listen, do you want to stay the night?"

I was tempted, but I was also starting to panic about getting home before daybreak. I didn't exactly have a curfew set, but I didn't want to push my luck either.

"Thanks, but I should be getting back. My parents think I'm seeing a girlfriend who lives nearby, and I ought to get back before they panic and call the cops or something."

"OK, sure."

We got dressed in silence. Steve's seriousness had dissipated some of the magic; I felt pensive.

Steve smiled and said, "Well, look, you take care. I'll be seeing you around."

I must have looked disappointed. Not even an exchange of phone numbers or "Will you be in town next weekend?"

Steve's expression became grave again. "Look Larry, remember what I said about second dates? It was a blast tonight, but you don't want to be hanging around with an old fart like me. You'll find your own scene down there in the Valley. Check out some of the clubs in the South of First area in San Jose, that's a happening place. But hell, if you need any help or even a chat, you know where I live, right?"

"Sure. Well, thanks Steve. Take care."

"Yeah, you too." He gave me a last hug and closed the door.

My mind was reeling as I drove back to the south Bay. Looking back on the evening, I felt my mood improve again. I was excited, elated, complete. I had an identity. I was Larry, 17, straight A's student, homosexual, and proud of it.

The next day, after sleeping in much later than usual (I even missed Hibernia Beach), I met up with Sabrina again. This time our rendezvous was The Printer's Inc. on California Avenue. She wanted to know everything, so I told her. She was slightly concerned about the Ecstasy. Her older brother had been through some rough times because of drugs, and was just getting on to the right side of recovery. She'd seen him a bad way, and it had frightened her. I tried to explain that X wasn't addictive or toxic, and practically impossible to OD on, but didn't press the point, probably because I agreed with her on this sensible Sunday afternoon, but the previous night it had been so different.

It was entertaining watching her face as I described the sex in explicit detail. She listened raptly, with just the occasional interjection of "Ugh!" and "You didn't?" She was pleased for me though; I could tell that. We talked about her date, which had been with, to use her words, "a dick-brained freshman from Stanford," whom she'd met in Stacey's. I felt sorry for her, but knew she'd meet the right guy sooner or later.

We finished our coffees. She reached out and put her hand round the back of my neck and gave it as squeeze.

"I'm really pleased for you Larry."

"Yeah," I replied, "so am I."

The rest of the semester and the summer vacation flew by. I had some flings, some one night stands, nothing too serious. I got to know the SoFA scene pretty well, and slowly became less paranoid about people I knew seeing me hanging out down there. I didn't say anything to my parents though. I'm sure they suspected something, if only from my modified clothing, but they didn't mention it, and neither did I.

I never saw Steve again in person. I went to the Pleasuredome a couple more times but didn't see him. I even took Sabrina there once, because it turned out that straight women were welcome. A lot of "normal" women prefer gay clubs to all-straight venues, because they don't have to fend off over-enthusiastic men all night when all they want to do is dance and hang out with their girlfriends. The one time I did see Steve was on the Channel Two news. He was leading a protest against SF General Hospital's AIDS

treatment center's budget cut, so he must have decided to come out fully in the end. He looked fired-up and angry, and I felt proud to have known him, even briefly.

Soon it was time to be a freshman all over again. Berkeley's great. It's a really cool scene. There's a faction who wish it was still the 60s, and live in a tie-die oblivion, but most of the guys I've met have been real dudes, straights and gays alike. I keep in touch with Sabrina on email. She's met a medical student and loves him deeply, she says. I'm glad for her, but sorry for the loss of some of the closeness that existed between us. It has a sad inevitability about it.

I first saw Alex walking along College Avenue on the third weekend of my first semester. I'd been digging around for CD bargains in the record stores, and he was checking out the market stalls for a new jacket. Even from a distance I could tell he was queer. I'd developed that ability over the summer. He was tall and slim like me, but dark, not fair. His face was almost impossibly attractive and as I walked toward him, checking him out, I became aware of his full kissable lips and the bottomless wells of his deep brown eyes. They looked up from the cheese-cloth shirt he was fingering and met mine. He noticed my Tower Records bag, nodded at it and said "Got anything good?" I opened it, being careful to let him see the issue of *The Advocate* that I'd just bought, and said, somewhat brazenly it seems now, "Sure, the new Erasure. Wanna come over and listen to it?" He did, of course, and we became lovers that afternoon.

Now, six months later, we stand in front of my parents' front door, waiting to be invited in. My father opens the door. I look for signs in his eyes: hostility, acceptance, anything. He looks from me to Alex and back to me again. He smiles a warm welcome and holds out his hand for Alex to shake. And I know it's going to be all right.