

I Can See Clearly Now

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This story is autobiographical in nature
have been changed. Some minor distortions have been introduced in order
to clarify the sequence of events,
simplify the telling, or keep anyone out of trouble.

Cue
Soundtrack



*Better get ready, gonna see the light,
Love, love is the answer, that's all right.
So don't you give up now, so easy to find.
Just look at your soul, open your mind'*

Today

There is a special quality to an April night at the northern end of the Sonoran desert. In May days will reach 100 degrees in the shade, by June it will be scorching hot, the plants will wither, shrink into themselves, the chaparral begin its slow fade to straw color.

But in this brief April interlude the land is lush and balmy. The recently departed winter rains and sunny days force the desert into a green explosion, wildflowers, Palo Verde trees swarming in yellow blossoms; Mesquites in white; even the cacti bloom. The clear dry desert air has its light, subtle scents; and day gives way to a stunning arch of stars over the silent land. You can just lose yourself in them, in the desert.

This beautiful interlude, desert spring, passing as it does with the rush of youth, into harsh adulthood, for me has the scent of romance, the aroma of young love.

I often travel there just at this time of year. It is a place of peace.

*And mama hollered at the back door "y'all remember to wipe your feet"
And then she said she got some news this mornin' from up on Choctaw Ridge
Today Billy Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge*

Just before midnight the sliver of a moon is up, barely enough to throw shadows from the Saguaros and creosote bushes but not to illuminate the ground.

I was 19. I was lost in the desert.

Though I graduated high school with honors and several scholarships, I had dropped out of college, not sure what I wanted to do, what I could do. I knew I should have stayed. I couldn't.

Vietnam raged.

John sat behind the wheel of his '50 Merc at the drive-in. Boy Scout, straight-arrow, drum major, Honor Society, handsome, serious, friendly John. We had met by chance, set out for a night together with a mutual desperation we never recognized. We sat and slowly got wasted on rum and snack bar cokes as he railed a displaced anger at the war. I could not understand his rage, his pain. I did not know what to say.

A week later I woke, the curtains billowing a little in the early morning breeze. It was six a.m. I always had a radio playing by my bed, so I heard it in bed. Top of the hour, top of the news.

He'd parked in the desert and ran a hose from the exhaust through a side window.

Later, much later, I found out he was gay. Later, I understood all too well about John.

It was not a good time to be gay. Stonewall was soon to be history, but we didn't know about it, couldn't foresee it in our town, and if we had we'd have laughed. What would a bunch of New York drag queens have to do with us?

And even if I secretly knew I was gay, I could not relate. You'd have to admit you were sick, crazy, immoral. Pervert. For what? Liberation? What kind of liberation could that be? I needed to come out but was not at all ready to bear those costs, to face that part of me that I had so long feared and detested.

The previous fall I had fallen hard in love, with an 18-year-old, an artist, a gymnast, irredeemably straight. He was beautiful and treated me well even after I confessed my disgusting secret to him, and I could not have him. The pain of his untouchable perfection was fresh. He would be my friend but my heart ached for more.

Dan, a close friend had just finished Marine Corps Boot Camp, and was passing through town on the way to a brief leave at his parents' home in another state. We had gone to high school together for a while and then he moved away but we stayed in touch. He had only the one evening, he had to catch an early plane, and being nineteen and invulnerable and reckless we planned to stay up all night, and were looking for some fun.

I borrowed my mother's car.

No matter how terrible the rest of my world, turbulent outside, whirligig inside, the desert promised respite. You could lose yourself, you could pretend to believe in the calm, the quiet illusion. Yet the desert teems with its night creatures.

We drive through the winding streets of a little subdivision on the edge of the desert, on the edge of the city. Coming around bends, my headlights sweep across jackrabbits, feasting on the lush lawns of those who can afford to squander the water, rushing into startled motion. I don't notice red flashes, eyes of coyotes. But I know they are there. Both inch cautiously into human land; moving in silence and tense anticipation. They will depart only with the dawn.

Lives will change this night, as they do every night. But it isn't always so swift, so final. Sometimes the dance is slow. Sometimes you can't tell predator from prey.

Two of the desert's creatures are about to meet. Will either survive the encounter?

*The first time ever I saw your face
I thought the sun rose in your eyes
And the moon and the stars were the gifts you gave
to the dark and the end of the skies³*

I had been in band with Cary for a year, until I graduated. He was only sixteen, tall, fair-haired and blue eyed with a constant mischievous grin. My attraction to his so fine, round butt, androgynous lips and long eyelashes was effectively and carefully concealed. I had gotten drunk with him quite a few times and knew he often had beer or liquor. His Hispanic friend, Juan looked much older than 16 and could buy beer at a bodega where they thought he was 21 and "undocumented" and didn't ask him for ID.

Of course, it was too late to come calling. We stepped quietly through the front yard, skirting a barrel cactus, our shoes softly crunching dry, hard packed sandy earth topped with a thin layer of pea gravel. The house itself was common for newer subdivisions, white painted concrete block, one story, flat roofed with green trim on the wood fascia. Middle class, middle quality, Middling.

In me anticipation growing, amorphous, sourceless, mistaken perhaps for the excitement of Dan's visit, the anticipated buzz of the beer, or the pleasant sight of Cary's fine body.

Or maybe I could smell something.

The front of the house was in moon shadow, afforded cover from even that slight illumination. Reflected moonlight offered just enough to ensure I had the right window. Ever so quietly, I tapped three times, pausing a moment and once, and once more.

Curtains parted, Cary sleepy, puzzled, then recognition and ready grin. The aluminum frame window slides six inches to my right; we begin a short, soft exchange through the screen. A hasty introduction, the problem, and Cary explaining that he had nothing for us now, maybe tomorrow, perhaps we should go to Juan's house.

In the dark, even Cary's face was mostly a blur, so I did not immediately realize who or what I saw when a head popped up, behind his right shoulder. The outline, smaller than Cary, younger, and sudden excitement flowed over me, not sexual, yet stunning, breath-taking, overwhelming. I suppose the air carried his scent to me, but I did not recognize that at the time.

And as I spoke, so did the apparition, identical words.

“Who's that!?”

Cary didn't notice, Dan didn't notice. Though taken by surprise I kept the intensity from my voice. But the electricity in that exchange was mutual as we years later confirmed to each other.

This was no casual query, the confusion of a twelve-year-old boy waking in the night to find his brother conversing with some stranger at the window. This was not 'hey brother, who is knocking on the window,' nor was it 'hey buddy, who is that behind you.'

The need to know, the intensity was out of all proportion.

WHO IS THAT!?

We were smitten, those about us oblivious, but I knew, as surely as one can know, that we were destined to be more than passing images in a dim window. The awkward and wistful dance began, Cary did not make formal introductions, just said “It's my brother.” Within minutes we were gone, the beer foregone, our evening twisted in ways Dan was never to recognize.

Do you believe in love at first sight? A friend of mine thinks it's a matter of pheromones, so perhaps it's love at first smell. Well, love at first sight, or scent, or – whatever – I believe. I do. It happened to me that night.

We did stay up all night, talking, catching up on lost years, sharing our journeys and confused directions. But I, I was holding in my feelings, a wall inside me that I dared not

breach in the slightest. My life was already shattered. I held back the force of change by sheer will power.

I put him out of mind.

1969

I joined the Air Force, following my gymnast heartache on the buddy program, off to Texas, off to an extensive training program, then finally found myself assigned to my home town, the same base where my buddy's father had been stationed. Close to Cary.

Close to Mark.

1970

*Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry
Them good ol' boys were drinkin whiskey and rye
Singing "This'll be the day that I die"⁴*

They had moved, closer in town, close to where I had lived, into an old brown stucco bungalow in a nicer neighborhood, the place a little run down, the boys' bedroom in the old converted garage.

By now he was fourteen, I was twenty.

A car that lives its life in this desert has a distinctive, dried, scorched scent to it, no matter how much cleaning, polishing. Today when I visit I get into almost any car and that smell, the desert sun, brings back the oldies grinding out on the radio, transports me to that time. *Build me up, buttercup. Don't break my heart.*⁵

I had my own time machine, a big cheap '61 Chevy Impala. Cary was a mechanic by inclination, and we indulged our mutual interest in cars, he taught me how to tune it up, set the points, change the oil, the plugs, install new brakes. We did this in Cary's driveway.

Mark's driveway.

I saw him several times every week, yet we rarely spoke, each engaged in our own part of this fear-filled desultory courtship dance. Fearful of discovery, fearful of rejection, fearful of our own, say it ever so softly, *homosexuality*.

Mark was a shy, sweet child, product of a disturbed home. Mother was a mentally unbalanced harri-dan, and Mark often the target for her humiliation and disrespect. I later reflected that this might have to do with his being the only black-haired, black-eyed

member of this blonde blue family. In fact, he bore no resemblance to anyone, surely not Cary, the older brother he adored. They could have passed for Germans, and his skin was dusky, almost olive. Adopted? Product of infidelity? I was not to know, and never dared ask. It would be hurtful to Mark to ask him, and pointless to ask anyone else.

He had long since recoiled from the abuse, withdrawn inward, spirit trembling, light carefully guarded, his self-respect stolen. I understood all too well what that was about. And yet Cary and his two older sisters doted on him, protected him. Loved him.

I was jealous. Of him, of them.

His mother hated me, too. We had so much in common.

Their room had its own door to the back yard, and so I could come in without having to use the front door and there was no more tapping on the windows. On several occasions when visiting Cary she would enter abruptly and sneer, "You need to get out of here."

Cary's father, a music teacher with a local school district, often apologized to me. He was unable to control his wife's inappropriate and unmannerly behavior, she was several times hospitalized, I later discovered, in the psychiatric unit of the local hospital.

I didn't need the explanation. I grew up with a crazy mother. Crazy in a different way, she'd never have done that, but it was all the same, we had so much in common. It was doubtless part of the attraction.

I figured I deserved her contempt as much as he did.

Our casual disregard of each other was an elaborate show, we were intensely aware of each other any time we were in the house together. His face brightened every time he saw me, though we hardly spoke, though it took me years to realize that Mark felt as I did, and no one in Cary's family seemed to catch on. Well, we all were quite the experts at denial.

One day Cary was passing Mark in a doorway as I trailed behind and was shocked to see him grabbing his brother's crotch. Mark jumped in surprise and Cary laughed at that and at my shock, and made a comment that told me he often did that. Of course, he was just teasing the boy. Being a big brother.

A few days later, as I walked past Mark, I did the same.

I was not being brotherly at all.

Though I was living in the barracks, I was usually working swings or rotating shifts. When I had a weekday afternoon off, perhaps once each week, I would park a few blocks

from the high school on a side street along his route home. I would see him walking by; I would honk my horn and drive up to him.

He got to expect me, yet the first time, and every time, he would break into a shy grin, look down and avoid my gaze. The first few times we just talked a few minutes then I drove him home. I'd let him off at the end of the alley that ran behind his house. Neither of us wanted his family to know what was happening. Good instincts.

Later on, we would get a burger, check out the doings at the University, play pool at a bowling alley nearby. The pool hall was mostly empty at that time of day.

I would goose him when he didn't expect it, making it a joke, his brother sometimes present. Then I did it when we were playing pool, pretending it was to distract him, to keep him from making his shot. Though he made a show of protest, he would always expose himself to it in predictable ways, so that in time we both knew exactly when I would touch him. He would grab back. And he would be excited and I was, always pretending it was the same game. And both of us knew we meant – it meant – more.

We spent time together, drinking each other in, being in each other's presence. Being together. Being alone together. Surprising each other by wanting to be together. Surprising ourselves at how good it felt, how safe. We were not worthy. Our play could go no further. We were very immature, we were too shy, unready to take a step.

We were both children.

1971

*Just like me, they long to be close to you.*⁶

I was promoted. Being stationed in my hometown, and barracks space in short supply, I finally had permission to move off base and collect housing allowance, something usually available only to married men.

Military pay was very low, I think I made \$155 monthly before taxes, so it was impossible to do without the housing allowance. I was put on permanent day shifts; no more afternoon visits with the boy.

And I found my humble first home, an 8 x 38 trailer parked aside a grassy lawn, with a washing machine in the outbuilding next door. The bedroom was hardly bigger than the bed with a sliding door to the bathroom, a shower and toilet but no bath, no sink; another sliding door to the kitchenette and next to it a sofa that comprised the entire living room.

This \$85/month gem was behind a complex of small apartments in a not too great part of town, a long ride to work each morning, but only a few miles to Mark.

The first weekend there, Cary came by and brought Mark with him. And Mark was now 15, and had his learner's permit.

Most weekends I would rent a TV and watch football games. Back then you went to the local convenience store and rented TV's for a few days to a month if you couldn't afford to own one. Cary or another friend would come over to have drinks (well, I was 21 now) and watch a game. Once he brought Mark and we both got him drunk. When Cary was in the bathroom, the sliding door pulled shut I began to touch him.

An evening, in August, Mark turned 16 that day. I was at Cary's house, hanging out in their bedroom, when Cary went outside to help his father. Mark came over and began to grab me, and I warned him I'd get hard if he kept it up. Of course I was already hard, but he just said "is that all" I said "keep it up and you'll see" and he did keep it up, then I grabbed him and we were both stroking each other and saying "is that it? Is that all?" just to justify the activity.

Monday night around 8 p.m. there was knock on my door. It was, of course, Mark. He had his driver's license.

I suppose he wanted his birthday present.

1971

*Hello, I love you
Won't you tell me your name?*

I was really, in my heart, a virgin. I had never had sex with someone, never had an experience where I didn't feel furtive and fleeting and dirty. Never been given an orgasm by another person. Never been *intimate* with someone, never mind the acts.

Never felt this way.

I had a number of fearful, tentative, painful sexual contacts in my short life. I had sucked perhaps a half dozen cocks, the first when I was just eleven but never permitted anyone to climax. I had been the victim of an abusive and unwelcome sexual relationship that ended in an aborted rape by an older boy when I was thirteen. It left its severe impression on me, no doubt accounted for much of my guilt and self-loathing. Another boy had angrily rejected my advances, calling me a "goddam queer." A few years later he came looking for it and it was most satisfying to reject him in turn. And I was determined that I was never going to press myself on someone.

I don't think I even imagined the possibility of mutual attraction.

Some of you will understand immediately and some will never grasp the kind of terrified, abused children, age notwithstanding, that we were. Our dance was slapstick, our play a farce. Each acting the only role we could find, denying ourselves, denying the nature of the desires within, the reality of our actions.

We had so much in common. We didn't want anything to happen, didn't want to do anything dirty, wrong, scary. Painful. Didn't want to hurt each other. Didn't want to be intimate, most of all. We had both learned never to let our guard down, for to do so was to expose ourselves to our crazy relatives. We were both so vulnerable, two rabbits in the desert, expecting everywhere the coyote.

Still, we wanted *something* to happen. Neither of us knew what it was that we wanted, and yet like heat-seeking missiles we aimed unerringly for a hot target. And found it. But we had to learn to trust each other and that wasn't to be rushed.

The very first day he could, Mark came to see me alone, at my place. Put it that way, it seems clear what he wanted, doesn't it?

But all I could think was "He's here, I'm so happy." I felt so unworthy, of even his attention, that I was actually surprised when he sought me out, I thought it would always be the other way around. I really could not conceive that he wanted *me*.

There was a time when I could tell you day by day what transpired between the two of us. Each day for weeks was a new step toward a goal that, in hindsight was so obvious, yet while ongoing, a mystery to us both. I could have told every move in exquisite detail. But it's gone now, this is the best I can do.

That first day he took me for a drive, then we had some drinks.

I was big into Vodka Collins and Screwdrivers in those days, easy to drink. I had become, courtesy of the Air Force, an enthusiastic drinker, though I had gotten past the part where I had blackouts and moderated a bit.

No this part of the story is not about a problem with alcohol, the twelve-step will not be our dance.

It's about Alcohol as Baptism. Alcohol as Confirmation. Alcohol as Holy Communion. Alcohol as Absolution. Alcohol as Lubrication. KY taken internally, so to speak.

Alcohol as Denial.

A while later we started to smoke pot instead (too), but for such a time neither could face our relationship, our feelings, and so we abused these sacraments to permit us to hide not from each other, but ourselves. Precisely.

So we were baptized; confirmed; we communed, we were absolved; Mark needed the stuff much more than I, and for much longer. I am sure it was that he had more guilt than even I did. But I didn't understand. Didn't know how desperately afraid and lonely and unhappy he was. Just like me. We had smelled each other out, we knew without being conscious about the quality of this match, and it was unerring.

So that night Mark got a little in him, not much just enough to loosen the inhibitions that were already thin, and we touched.

He began working on his denial strategy by hitting my hand to make me take it away, knowing I would return it at the first opportunity. And for many days we labored over that pattern, crafted it, honed it. I would make the moves, he would rebuff them, knowing that I would come back to it as soon as his attention wandered, and he would let it stay then pretend to notice it, and make me take it away. But oh so slowly it stayed there, longer and longer, less and less objection. And when he did it to me, I had to do the same to make him feel comfortable that it was not something I really wanted him to do, that it was his teasing me, not something he wanted to really do.

He came by every day after, without exception, every evening just after suppertime.

We wanted the nights to be longer, so we devised a new routine. After a time at my place, we would both drive our cars over to his house, I'd wait at the end of the alley, he'd come out in ten or twenty minutes. At the end of the evening I'd drive him home, my hand in his lap. I got good at driving one handed. For some reason he never complained when I touched him in the car. Even before the pajamas.

One evening he came over a second time, in his pajamas, and wanted me to take him to McDonald's but this was before the days of the drive through window, so I had to go in and buy the food for him. While he sat in the car eating, he was unable to defend himself, so I had my hand on him all that time. *Inside* the fly of his soft flannel bottoms. My heart was like a trip hammer at the boldness. He pretended not to notice.

Back at the ranch, several times each evening he would bend over the stove to light a cigarette from the burner; one hand resting on the tacky Formica countertop. I would jab my fingers into his rear, forcing the cloth of his pants and shorts inward, making him jump. He always knew it was going to happen. It was a rule that he had to pretend not to expect it, to allow me my opportunity. It would turn into an excuse to grapple together, he being disadvantaged by the lighted fag. How's that for a pun.

I would reach around to grab his front, then we would be on the tiny, crowded floor, wrestling and laughing and he'd look shyly, out the corner of his eyes, black orbs flashing boyish delight, then away in fear, then back again. And we had to look for that damn cigarette before something got burned.

Eventually he complained that I was leaving dirty marks on his pants, often white jeans, and his mom was going to notice.

Marks on his cock, marks up his ass.

I solved the problem by opening his fly, and grabbing all evening through his jockeys. He protested the inequality of the situation and so I opened my fly too. He protested again, but I reminded him of the night of the pajamas, and though he pretended he had

not known my hand was inside his pants then, he took it as validation for the acts when I insisted it was NOT new, we had a precedent. That was important you see, if we had done it before it was not new and if it was not new it was OK.

Crazy, insane, ridiculous you think. Yes. Exactly. All of that. That was Mark, that was me. Crazy, insane, ridiculous. You do what you can, we were survivors.

*Everywhere is freaks and hairies
Dykes and fairies,
Tell me where is sanity?⁸*

There we stalled for days, because I knew by then it was my role in the relationship to move things forward, I was the designated coyote, but couldn't figure out a way to get into his shorts. You understand? I couldn't just reach in, too queer, too direct, too threatening. Too crazy.

Too real.

I puzzled for days then came up with the solution, but had to be very drunk before it occurred to me.

It was a weekend, I'm sure of that, because we couldn't get too drunk during the week – he had to go home and I had to drive him. Weekdays I had to get up to go to work the next day. So it was a weekend, probably Friday night.

That night we were both very drunk, when I suddenly suggested we take off our pants, get naked and run outside on the lawn.

“If you take off your pants and run outside, so will I.”

Not as risky as might be; the lawn was at least forty feet wide, sloping down from the quiet side street, nearly five feet lower in elevation, to my trailer. No apartment or house had a primary window that faced it, and it was an unlighted area at night. I looked out, shades were drawn.

There was no moon.

Still, I shiver when I think of how dangerous that was. One of the blessings of youth is ignorance. Stupid it was, horribly crazy for an adult a member of the Armed Forces, with a boy. Wisdom isn't a strength for twenty-somethings; we were both about twelve in our heads.

His response was “Take off your pants.”

So I did, first turning off the lights, then I took them off completely, standing before him wearing only my T-shirt, my erection inches from his face as he sat on the couch, in the faint light. My first exposure.

To my surprise, he was very interested, looking closely. Clueless, I was. I thought this was all me; I was the evil homo, seducing the innocent boy. The innocent boy who couldn't look away.

He was getting at what he wanted, in the way he wanted. I understood instinctively, my mother was a masterful manipulator as was his, it was part of our compatibility, I knew all about getting what you want without asking, without being responsible, without taking risk. Our nonverbal communication skills were excellent. We'll be ok, just as long as we don't say it. He knew the dance.

So he did the same and we opened the door and he ran out first, I was close behind, both of us in only our shirts.

*tryin' to get away, into the night
And then you put your arms around me
and we tumble to the ground and then you say:
'I think we're alone now. There doesn't seem to be anyone around.
I think we're alone now.
The beating of our hearts is the only sound'*

Perhaps there was a car coming, and I had to get us out of sight. Or perhaps, I was just anxious to get my hands on him. I tackled him.

And I ended up with my face in that long, long black hair, it flowed down to his shoulders and then further down his back, my hardness against his smooth skin, his clean scent filling me, making me dizzy (or was that the vodka?). My hand fumbling for him. The smell of the winter rye grass. It was October; a chill was in the air.

He lay motionless, unresisting, allowing me to touch him, my arms around him. And there was no sound. A moment of silent safety. A trip hammer again in my chest.

We walked up into the dark trailer, closed the door, sat down and turned on the lights.

We never put our pants back on until he had to leave. And every evening after, we got naked in the same way, but much earlier in the evening, and I would hold and stroke him, and he would touch me. On the way home, I'd open his fly and reach inside his shorts.

For Junior. He never spoke of it as his own cock, just as Junior. Mark never did anything. Junior did it.

And then the moon was up and we ran anyway, fearless, foolish, giggling, daring the world to watch our dance and terrified that it would.

About a year earlier his brother Cary had showed us something he thought quite funny. He showed how two guys can pretend to kiss, one simply places his thumb over the other's mouth and kisses the thumb. Seen from the correct side you can't see the hand; it

looks very convincing, and in 1970, it was very shocking. Mark thought it funny too, and I had grabbed him once and done it, a secret, hot, flash passing between us both as we enacted the gag. A little too close to the Mark, so to speak, and we stopped.

So I did it to Junior. One night I did it with the motor running, foot on the brakes, at the base of his alley, bent over him in the dark. "Junior needs a kiss," I would declare, and he would giggle and cover his eyes in embarrassment, and I would bend over and place my thumb and kiss while he peeked around his fingers.

Then one day of course, I forgot the thumb. He giggled that time too, pretending that I had not done what I had so very definitely done. And then I did it in the trailer. The first few times I tried, he'd pull on my head to get me off. Too queer, too real, too much responsibility to just let me. He wanted me to, just didn't want to seem to want me to. Once I tried while he was lighting the cigarette at the stove. And then one day I just waited him out and he stopped tugging.

Not the first time, but even so it WAS my first. It was the first time I had ever done this with the intention of making someone orgasm. It was the queerest thing I had ever done, and I just didn't care.

"He's gonna," he warned.

I had thought about this a lot. I mumbled, "I don't care." But I did care. I cared that he would care enough to tell me; and he was as I was, sweet and anxious to hurt no one, to do nothing that would offend. His warning a signpost to trust.

And so he did and Junior did and I did. Then there we were, we were past another step. Another precedent set. He grinned, avoiding my eye, embarrassed, pleased.

I sat next to him, and asked him if he would do something for me, and he nodded, to my amazement and delight and I asked him to use his hand, which he did, and to no one's surprise it didn't take long at all.

The next evening he was late and I was in a near panic. I thought he would hate me for being queer, I thought I might never see him again.

Such was my lunacy.

And our little dance went on day after day, or rather evening after evening in that tiny trailer. But I was able to divorce it, to compartmentalize it, to pretend it didn't exist except when he was there.

So his brother continued to visit, I even went over to their house to visit, giving no clue to the whirlwind churning my soul. We kept our little secret very secret.

Cary had a problem. He was 19, working some part time jobs, but his girlfriend was pregnant. Now in 1971 this was not uncommon, but it was not as common as it is these days. This was before Roe v. Wade, so abortion was not an option to even consider, and his parents had married at 19 so he decided to take the plunge. But in 1971 taking the plunge meant living together, not getting married.

This had some impacts on us, because he and his girl would move into the room he shared with Mark, and Mark would move to another room and have no door to the outside. I don't know how he managed to get in and out. It also meant that Cary came to visit with his girlfriend, and that trailer was getting damned crowded.

And I was doing very well in the military, with my Top Secret work, and ignoring the little obstacle of a homosexual love affair with a minor boy, I decided to take an early reenlistment. It meant recognition, and substantially more money, a large bonus and more than doubling my pay as my career field was in great shortage and there were added monthly payments for those who reenlisted.

This enabled me to get a real apartment, one with a pool outside the door, which meant no more dancing in the moonlight for Mark and I, and also meant that a group of coworkers would stop by many Saturdays.

Now that was interesting, I noted it first at the trailer, that if Mark was there and someone stopped by, anyone at all, he would flee the scene. It happened a few times, fortunately we had not gotten down to business, a friend would knock, I'd answer and he would be out the door with a "bye," out the door like a frightened rabbit, so quick I could not have stopped him.

I had a cover story, he was my cousin, his dad was my uncle; since everyone knew I was from that town it worked. One or two friends from town knew Cary, and to them he was "Cary's brother". No one thought it was a problem, only that he was a weird kid. I told them he was extremely shy and uncomfortable around strangers. Duh.

But at our new place, Cary and his girl came by often to visit, unpredictably, and it was no time before there was a problem. A big one.

One night Mark showed up and we had not begun anything except talking a little, when there was a knock on the door, and to my amazement Mark flew out of the room into the bedroom closet.

I was puzzled and opened the door to find Cary and his girl there, I later realized looking puzzled themselves. They came in, and sat down, I made an excuse to go to the bathroom and opened the closet door, telling him to come out, it was his brother. He refused, and I could not figure what to do.

So after a few moments I told the visitors that I had to leave, to see my family, and we all left. As I drove out of the complex, I saw Mark's car parked right next to the entry, and realized they had to have known he was there all along. I drove aimlessly for ten minutes then returned, and told him to go home. When he went out to get his car, it was gone.

I took him home, and he did not come back the next day.

One day later he showed up, having decided the other shoe was never going to drop. Cary or his girl had driven Mark's car home, but said nothing to him when he arrived.

We left our clothes on the living room floor and went into the bedroom.

We had concluded, and he went to get dressed, then out to his car for more cigarettes, then returned to sit on the bed in the darkened bedroom. It turned out to be a stroke of good luck, the only one I was to have that evening, that he was fully dressed at that moment. He was smoking a cigarette and we were talking a little when I heard the door open. I had told him a dozen times to always lock the door. He never paid attention. Someone was in the living room.

In a moment his father's silhouette appeared in the doorway.

"You'd better put on some clothes. Mark, come out here."

He had to call Mark three times before he would move. He actually started toward the closet before he finally went to the living room. How's that for symbolism?

It was my nightmare come true, of course, I later learned Cary had come over and driven Mark's car back already.

I offer to you that no matter how screwed up I was, there is this in my favor: I wanted to protect Mark. And decided on a preemptive strike.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked as I entered the living room.

"Yes. Mark, go out and wait in my car."

"Please don't blame Mark. It's not his fault. It's my fault. It's all my doing."

“What do you mean?”

I was surprised that he was taking this so politely. There was little sense of anger and no feeling of violence.

“This is the first time anything has ever happened like this, and it’s my fault. I’m homosexual, not Mark.”

“Well, why does he come over then?”

“Just to visit, he likes me, we talk, that’s all.” It was what he wanted to believe.

“Thank you for telling me. I have to think about what to do about this.”

That night, wrapped in a blanket, shivering, I did not sleep.

I spent the next three days in total panic. I figured I would never see him again, I was certain I would be reported to my commander and be court-martialed.

His dad turned out to be a pretty nice man, after all. On the third day he dropped off a letter for me. It told me that he had been very concerned about Mark’s drinking, school, and about homosexuality. He said that he would say nothing but I was never to see Mark again, and if he ever found us together, in my apartment or car or anywhere else, he would blow the whistle.

*Starry, starry night
Paint your palette blue and gray
Look out on a summer's day
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul.¹¹*

I burned the letter.

I had returned to working shifts, and was home the afternoon he came by again. He knocked on the door as if nothing had happened.

I wouldn’t let him in. He wouldn’t leave.

I went outside and stood on the porch, mindful of his father’s letter. He answered my questions. I asked, of course, what his father had said to him. “On the way home he just said ‘He leveled with me’ and he never said anything else.” But he too knew how to lie, and it was two years before I heard the whole story.

I told him he was not supposed to come over, that I would not let him in.

I sent him away.

As proud as I am of protecting Mark, I am just as embarrassed to say that at that point I was ready to give him up completely. The only justification I can offer is that I had not yet had time to understand the magnitude of the loss.

No matter, irrelevant. I had not counted on Mark having his say.

For the next five days he sat on my porch every afternoon. All afternoon. He sat guileless, as I crouched inside, wishing him gone, praying he would stay. He sat, waiting patiently for me to give in.

On the fifth day I did.

Love conquers all, doesn't it?

1971

*The lunatic is in my head.
The lunatic is in my head
You raise the blade, you make the change
You re-arrange me 'till I'm sane.*¹²

I have often wondered if that visit from his father had not occurred, what path our relationship would have taken; I am certain it would have been different.

Clearly, even though Mark did a much better job of parking his car so that it would not be seen, we could not take the chance of resuming our previous pattern. We could no longer spend long hours together on weeknights, though we did see each other at least once or twice each week, it was only for an hour or so at the most. Daytime became our usual meeting, either afternoons when I did not work or, more often, weekends.

The real impact was that we had to get to the sex a lot quicker and in that it surely slowed any development of the relationship beyond sexual. We could no longer chance visits to the bowling alley, nor see a movie, nor really go anywhere together in public.

On the positive side, I think Mark came to trust me a lot more. My actions in protecting him had carried weight.

And those five days on the porch, well, the effect there was beyond measure. Mark might deny their significance but I couldn't. He didn't do that, take those risks, just because it was fun or felt good. He was in love.

And so, by extension of the most pure logic, was I. I was filled with love, I could not hold myself behind my walls in his presence, I was in love and I wanted to tell everyone, but I couldn't even tell Mark, he wouldn't hear of it.

For a glorious year we pursued this love affair, never saying it, always knowing it. The sex grew more practiced, diverse, passionate, than ever; and to my amazement he never stopped smiling when he saw me, and never failed to return.

Thus I remember the very moment I really came out, out for the first time; the first of an endless series of comings out; out in its real meaning. I don't know the date, but it was in this year of love, on my couch one specific day at one specific moment.

I was pleasing him, and was feeling pretty good, enjoying the sex, realizing that I had a real sex life in fact, and suddenly it came to me, a ray of sun making its way through the closed blinds by sheer brute force. This was no sin, no crime, no wrong, no perversion. I could not justify it or explain it, but I knew that this was love and it was all right, and so was I. I knew with a driving conviction that this love could never be a wrong thing. Could not be evil. Could not be dirty.

For the moment I did not extend this revelation to all gay people, to homosexuality in general, to just any acts; it was reserved for the nonce to us, to our sweet dance. The rest might be perverts, probably were, but not us. Our love was pure.

You might think it made things easier, but in the end it made the stresses of being in the closet ever more intolerable. I did not want to hide our love.

The booze was out most of the time, too, though not if we really had an entire Saturday together. We began to play strip poker a lot, though to my frustration he almost always won. But I've always said it's a game nobody loses.

He brought the cards from his house. I kept that pack for twenty years.

1972

Do this – Don't Do That, Can't you read the signs? ¹³

1971 passed, Nixon went to China, and the Air Force had new plans for me. I was going overseas for 18 months.

I had been promoted again, and with the longer enlistment I was targeted for shipment to Turkey. Well, Vietnam had not ended when the orders came, and though it was not a plush assignment – I had hoped for Italy or England– it was not a bad one as such things went.

But for another reason it was very sad indeed. Though I had ten months advance notice, it was still dreadful. We had a trial separation as I had to go to Washington, DC for training in advance of my assignment, I was gone for a month. I was twenty-three.

I had thought of letting him use the place, but figured that was a recipe for problems. And how much time could he have spent there without detection? So I let a high school friend use the apartment and when I returned he told me that Cary's brother had come by several times. I guess he forgot, or maybe he wanted to see if I was really gone. Or just couldn't stay away.

As to the move, Mark said nothing, pretended he didn't know, didn't care that I was going. Why would it matter? There was nothing between us, we didn't love each other, we didn't have sex every time we laid eyes on each other. Nothing going on here.

That made it so much more difficult for me, but what could I do? Marry him? Take him with me? Ask my command to cancel the assignment so I could stay with my teenaged boyfriend?

On the other hand, moments were exquisite. I spent long hours softly memorizing his body by touch and taste, storing his scent and his face in my heart.

He would still not let me kiss him, though. Just too queer. I marked him with hickeys that would have been a disaster had they been discovered. But then, I didn't think anyone was looking in those places but me. Those coyotes seemed far away.

He turned seventeen. Nixon was reelected by a landslide.

The Chevy was gone, I had more money and figured a change of car would lead to fewer chances of getting caught anyway. I was due in Turkey two days before the New Year, 1973. I had to leave two weeks earlier to get cross-country, they were shipping my car from New York to Turkey, so I spent Christmas with a sister in Boston.

He didn't show up for the last week before I left, an unprecedented absence. I took it as his way of dealing with it, not wanting to say goodbye.

I didn't know when, if ever, I would see him again.

It was a lonely Christmas.

*The lunatic is on the grass.
The lunatic is on the grass.
Remembering games and daisy chains and laughs.
Got to keep the loonies on the path. . . .¹⁴*

The thing about 1973 is how much my life paralleled Richard Nixon. The year started out OK, pretty good, but it sure went to hell pretty quickly. For him, it started out with his inauguration. A week later Vietnam effectively ended. After that . . . Well, I had one good spot at the very end of that year and he didn't.

As for me, I was stationed at Incirlik, a NATO base near Adana, a large city. The Mediterranean coast was just an hour away, beautiful wide white beaches with water so clear a boat might seemed to float on air. The coastal plain is hot and dry in summer, wet and mild in winter. I even saw cacti. The climate is very much like the desert I knew.

Eating on the economy was very cheap, and the food universally delicious. Of course you had to get past the fact that you might not know what you were eating. But there is always adventure in travel. The Turks are very friendly people, very proud and most hospitable.

I roomed in the barracks with a coworker I'd know in the desert, and we had shared an apartment when we went to Washington, DC for our training. He had arrived a few months before me, and I quickly settled down. We had as friends another airman and his wife and daughter, and spent much of our free time in town, at their apartment. Weekends we would go out to dinner, or to the NCO club with them, perhaps play charades at their apartment.

After just three months, my roommate and I were both sent for more training, this time to Italy, an Italian air base south of Rome. We spent eight weeks there, I graduated first in my class, lost some weight, visited Rome and Naples on the weekends. On the way back we could not find commercial transportation, the embassy almost had to book us to Istanbul on a cruise ship, getting onto Alitalia only at the last minute. We spent a week in Istanbul waiting for space on a flight back to Adana. That was a treat, we were in a luxury hotel. The Bazaar was a delight, exotic, curious. Dinner in the hotel nightclub, with belly dancers for entertainment, Filet Mignon and flaming baked Alaska cost \$7. The third world has its advantages.

But Adana presented its challenges. Boredom.

And of course, this was Turkey, so there was the hashish. I mean that there was no grass, nothing milder, fortunately there was likewise little stronger, and nothing much to do. So we became, not unlike most of the others in our age group and place in life, rather frequent smokers of the very inexpensive and universally excellent hash. My roommate had not known I was smoking marijuana when we were in DC, but I eventually hinted around and he hinted around and we knew.

And when I was stoned, I would often think of Mark. The hash was powerful; once or twice I could actually taste him. I had to keep in control, I surely did not share these fantasies with my companions.

Spring came to an end; and the good part of '73 was over. We couldn't see it on TV, of course, but read about the Watergate Committee. I could tell you everything that happened, but it could only cause pain to others and I think it will be better to focus on consequences not causes. So let us say that drugs, alcohol, and a young man who too closely resembled my lost gymnast buddy led to some very disastrous consequences for me.

Suspension of my security clearance, and from working. Being investigated, actually at one point tailed by a security agent. Isolation. Temptation to betray others. Hating myself. Feeling a fraud, a phony, a liar. Lying, especially painful, to people who cared about me and trusted me and tried to help me.

Missing Mark, missing my cornerstone.

There was a small refrigerator in my barracks room; I took to punching it as hard as I could, leaving many dents. It helped for a while, and did my hand no permanent damage.

And one day I couldn't take it any longer and I drove into the countryside, parked behind a windbreak of trees on a farm road, and ran a hose to *my* tailpipe.

Hello, John.

Once, much later, a therapist maintained this had not been a serious attempt, that people who were serious used guns. Lots of chances to stop yourself. I didn't say anything. I had no weapons. I picked it because I knew it worked. How lethal can you get?

A gaggle of Turkish children came by at an opportune or inopportune moment; a spell was broken. I gave them all my money, then found I could not, would not continue. The sun was hot. I drove to the base hospital.

September 1973

Desert Sunrise

*Love comes to you and then after
Dream on on to the Heart of the Sunrise
SHARP-DISTANCE*

*How can the sun with its arms all around me*¹⁵

Two months later, I was back in the desert, an Honorable Discharge in my pocket, thanks to a very accommodating psychiatrist who hated the military, but I was in the midst of a severe and deep depression, which was to last another six months.

I lived for a while with my brother. I had no job, but savings in the bank. No car – mine was not to arrive until Thanksgiving, in New Orleans. I spent \$150 on a junker, slapped in a new battery and figured it would work for a few months and was cheaper than renting.

No way to contact Mark.

I had made the acquaintance of a couple college coeds when living in the apartment complex, really sweet girls who had proven to be a lot of fun, and knowing where they had moved, looked them up. Just to have someone to see, to get away from my moments of depression, which lasted about 18 hours every day.

Then it occurred to me that if I couldn't call his house, one of them could. I don't know how I explained it, but she called, his mother answered, she asked for him, when he came on she handed the phone to me.

"Mark, it's Phil."

"Phil? Phil WHO?"

* * *

We met that night at the Big Boy restaurant, sat in the car and talked.

I knew the answer, but I asked anyway. It was September, he was eighteen.

"How old are you now?"

"How old do you think I am?"

"Old enough that your dad can't put me in jail any more. And I'm not in the Air Force anymore."

"Where did you go, your landlord said you went to Turkey."

We tried finding a place to park, went to a dark place in a park, but he couldn't when we did and finally I decided to get a hotel room. This turned out to be a good thing.

For the very first time we slept the night together.

It was a joyous reunion, though we had to interrupt it to make a drop off and pick up at his back alley. Then it was 5 a.m. His father was an early riser; I had to drop him at the alley again.

After, I drove to the edge of the city. The desert was beautiful that morning. Not the green of spring, this was late September, but the monsoons and heat of summer were both past. I sat on the hood, cocooned for a few moments in peace and contentment and the remembered warmth of his sleeping body. I watched dawn light turn pink, sky turn blue, silver edging sparse clouds, until the sun finally rose above the mountains, shedding the cool of the night, wrapping me in silent warmth.

I spent that entire day in a daze, I was in love; we were in love. Still in love. The coyotes were at bay.

He told me that on the phone I sounded exactly like a friend of his, so I should just call and pretend to be him. For six weeks we met as often as I could afford to rent a room. We had more sex than we had ever had, cuddled, touched, spoke softly to each other, slept. Peaceful, secure, safe. These moments were the few when my depression didn't overwhelm me, when I didn't feel suicidal again. It was only when I could smell him, feel his warmth next to me, that I felt real, whole.

I had come by this time to understand some of Mark's problems with all this. He loved his family and his mother as much as I hated mine. Whereas I wanted nothing more than to be apart from mine, he could not imagine being parted from his.

He loved me too, but he feared he might have to choose. And a terrible choice, one he could not make. He wanted to keep our relationship going, just as it was, safe, secret. He wanted me to be in his closet with him – no, he wanted to be in my closet with me. But I was shedding that aspect of myself, not so much just yet, but soon it was to happen.

The next problem came when I found a job.

1973 October

The Saturday Night Massacre I remember well, it had dual significance for me. While we didn't know it at the time, it meant the eventual downfall of Nixon, of whom I was no fan at all. No more was Mark, one of those things we had in common. My family was inveterate New Deal New Frontier Democrat. One of the few things we really had to talk about was politics, in which he was naive but liberal. And it was still the Sixties in a way. His brother once said he'd rather be dead than own a Cadillac.

The other significance was that I left the next morning on a flight for Washington DC.

Mark didn't say goodbye.

My new job was in the suburbs, and I was there for three or four months of intensive training and then reassignment; where we didn't know. I lived in a townhouse with three other trainees.

In my memory I break my days there into three parts.

Work time which was tolerable; I was receiving some very good training and was always an extremely good student, eventually recognized as the class leader. I was able to function during the days.

Roomie time, which was sometimes pretty good, I met new music, got along with most of my roomies, watched TV, went to restaurants, had my first Chinese food. Taught my boss to inhale an experience that led me to believe Clinton years later. Took my first hits of acid, peyote, reds, hash oil J's. This is not something, by the way, that a severely depressed individual should be doing, the trips were bad, almost disasters. I was not always able to function in roomie time, but I was able to hide it.

Depression time when we went to bed, when I was alone, when they weren't looking. I woke up at 4 or 5 every morning, common of depression. They had no idea how depressed I was. I had hooked up with Audrey, a psychologist at the local hospital, and she helped me make it through the nights. Once I slept on the floor of her apartment. One weekend she made me go into the hospital, she was afraid I was going to run my car into a bridge abutment. She saved my life. And helped me hide my desperate circumstances from my employer. At that time the only hope I had in life was my job, she understood.

I had my housemates pick me up at the hospital Sunday night but couldn't let them see me in the psych unit, so I signed out against medical advice, went downstairs, waited in the lobby, told them I had been hospitalized for ulcers. Their shock at my haggard appearance was obvious; they believed it.

And through all this were phone calls to Mark. I couldn't have a real conversation, talk to him at home, just make a contact if necessary, but we had set up some plans before I left. I got a post office box for him, and the number of a phone booth a few blocks from his house. It's not there any more.

We set it up for me to call at a certain time on certain days, and usually that worked; if not I'd call at home to set up the next time. All through those days I spoke to him two or three times a week just to hear his voice, let him know without saying it that I loved him.

Without saying it because the calls were made from the kitchen of the townhouse. There was so little that I could say. But we still talked for hours. Well, too, he didn't want me to say it. It was true and we both knew it, but he didn't want it said.

I started to send him some money now and then, not much ten or twenty dollars, to be sure he had money for phone calls, or whatever. I was well paid and didn't mind, but he

finally told me to stop. I had known people who used me for money, took advantage of my generosity. Mark and I would not do that to each other. He didn't want this to be about me paying him for anything. Of course he didn't say that.

We had so much in common.

At Thanksgiving I flew to New Orleans, picked up my car, drove up to Washington. It took most of the weekend; it kept me busy. I didn't miss my family; I missed Mark.

When I got back to DC, before my roomies returned I opened the trunk, pulled out the hose and cut it into small pieces.

Christmas 1973

*And so I came to see him to listen for a while
And there he was this young boy . . .
Strumming my pain with his fingers . . . Killing me softly with his words . . .*¹⁶

Toward the north end of the beltway, in Silver Spring, near the University of Maryland campus was a head shop. I suppose it's long gone, strip-malled away, supplanted by a Spencer's or a Subway.

It was distinctive for several things, one being a large, old-fashioned cash register that was actually functional though coated with the remains of hundreds of melted candles of all colors. I would buy blacklights, posters, incense, pipes. The incense memorable because the shop reeked of it; it burned constantly, the pungent sweetness permeated everything. I loved going into that store, it was so very real, it had such a sense of place, and the heady odor was the best part. I've probably been in fifty head shops since but never another that I remember with affection.

They also had a selection of T-shirts, and I bought one for Mark. Nothing spectacular, it was gray, had a stylized silk-screen of a rather well built shirtless man seated on a throne, but his head was an eagle's or bird's. It had something of an Aztec look to it.

I don't know why, I just thought he would like it. What I liked most about it was that the shirt held the scent of that shop, of all that incense, I hoped it would last until he got it. I suppose I felt like I was sharing my experience of this place with him.

I wrapped it up as a Christmas present in a box with silver foil wrapping and a gold string. I had not gotten him presents before because there was no way to explain them, but I figured "who'd notice a T-shirt?" And he didn't have to wear it if it was a problem.

They shut down training for a week at Christmas. A snowstorm hit the Washington area. We barely got to the airport for the snow, but the ride back to the desert was fine and I was in a great mood for once.

I had thought ahead, and made reservations at a hotel for five days, the rates are very low during Christmas week. While I was staying at my brother's I expected to spend my nights with Mark.

It was the 23rd as I recall, when I arrived, and that afternoon I met up with him at the alley, and then drove over to the hotel. We had a view of the central patio and the pool, fairly plush furnishings. It was much nicer than the places we had been using before. We had a drink, I think it was Seven and Seven, but just one.

I was bursting with joy at the sight of him, and I could tell he was happy too, though he didn't admit it. He was all smiles and grins and shy looks away at his feet. So, even though I had thought I would wait, I pulled out the gift package and gave it to him.

“I don’t want anything.” He was such a strange kid, it was like giving something to a nine-year old, he couldn’t wait to open it, and yet as he tore the paper, “I don’t want anything.”

When he saw the shirt, he continued in the same way, telling me it was OK, but it really wasn’t something he’d ever wear. “You don’t really know me, you know, you don’t know what I like. This is nothing like what I like, I don’t wear stuff like this at all. I wouldn’t ever wear this.”

He clutched it tightly.

“That’s OK, you don’t have to wear it, I just thought you might like it.” I was not that disappointed; my expectations were not high. “But smell it.” I told him about the head shop.

He gave me a look and held the material to his nose, and he didn’t say anything but the shirt still held that scent; and he smiled at it. And he continued to deprecate the gift; at the same time he was taking off his shirt and putting this one on without ever acknowledging his behavior.

I was nonplussed by this dissonance between words and action; but in retrospect it was often his pattern, just like hitting my hand to make me take it away when he knew I would bring it back. Wanted it back.

*I'd like to know if your love
Is a love I can be sure of
So tell me now, and I won't ask again
Will you still love me tomorrow?*

*Tonight with words unspoken
You say that I'm the only one
But will the spell be broken,
When the night meets the morning sun? ¹⁷*

We had been sitting at the edge of the bed, and once he had the shirt on, he immediately laid back on the bed next to me, and started touching my arm with his, not using his hand, just lightly contacting me. I took this for a signal.

When I had him undressed, all but the shirt, he stopped me from taking it off. Didn’t say anything, just moved so I couldn’t get it off.

It was quick and intense for him, it had been two months after all. I was not in a hurry to have my own pleasure, and he was now completely relaxed anyway. I undressed and pulled the covers over us, with my arms around him, his back to me, spooning comfortably. We lay there for a bit, not talking, just being together. The scent of the shirt commingled with his, mine, held us gently.

Then he rolled over onto his stomach, something quite unusual. And I thought for a moment and as I did his legs imperceptibly parted, and he spoke and I knew then.

He whispered so quietly I could barely hear him, "I didn't get you anything."

I had no lube, no condom (well, this was pre-AIDS; we were virgins), and most of all, no experience of intercourse except pain. I had only saliva and gentleness.

But there was only pleasure and it was very much mutual. We spent nearly three hours at it playing, experimenting with our Christmas toy. I marveled his obvious feelings, and sought to please him ever more. He was almost paralyzed with his own enjoyment, he wouldn't verbalize it but there was no doubt. That day, for the first time we made love instead of just loving each other.

I had reached the core of him. Finally.

I've never had another experience quite so wonderful, a partner more appreciative, an encounter more tender. When we finally stopped he sighed his contentment as I held him, savoring this wordless Christmas present he gave us.

He wore the shirt home.

I left on December 29th. My New Year's/going away present was our first kiss.

1974 – January

*I see a bad moon rising
I see trouble on the way
I see earthquakes and lightnin'
I see bad times today¹⁸*

On my trip up from New Orleans, I had picked up a huge box of fireworks in South Carolina, and we had a New Years' Party. The police were very entertained by the display, the Roman Candles were particularly spectacular.

And then it was 1974. Training was coming to a close and we were advised of the postings available to us.

This was the time when I caused him the most pain, I hope the only pain, in our relationship. I plead ongoing youth, ignorance, insensitivity, but not intention. I don't know what I would have done had I really understood, but I did not understand and I did what I did.

Only two postings made any sense, Los Angeles, because it was close, and Baton Rouge, LA. The latter would have been a really poor choice, but it had one thing going for it. Mark had been born there. I spent a lot of time on the phone asking him where he wanted to go. Of course, I wanted him to come and live with me in a fairy tale world, in my closet with me, not knowing quite yet that I was going to close that closet. I was the one who didn't want to see reality this time.

He didn't want to go anywhere.

Maybe I did get it, but figured he'd change his mind. I don't know anymore, I just knew that I expected to live my life with him, and he had to move, and I was sure he wanted that too.

And even today I think it's what he wanted, but I had really not understood the hold his family had on him. And I did not understand how unfair it was to face him with this choice, but I had my own issues, my depression, my blinders.

The strain on him was intense, but I never saw it, I just saw the results. He was telling me to pick wherever I wanted to go, told me not to take Louisiana. He never said, "I'm not going." He didn't want to hurt me either.

And of course if he came to live with me, there would be no hiding THAT from his family, there was no chance he would keep this from them. He was not the kind of kid who could even take off for a weekend and go to another city, it was just too out of character for him.

And so February came and I had chosen Los Angeles and prepared for the cross-country drive, first to the desert to clear up unfinished business and get my property, then on to Los Angeles. I can't recall now how sure I was he would come with me.

On the way, I picked up a hitchhiker. I was going up an on ramp at night, I had just had my final appointment with Audrey, we had focused on closure for a few sessions, and I was actually feeling better, stronger, than I had in a while.

A blur to my right and it was a cold night, and it was the seventies, we didn't know about serial killers yet. I stopped and picked up Paul, who was twenty and rather nice looking, and going nowhere in particular.

And so I had a traveling companion, though he eventually turned out to be on the run from the law, wanted in Colorado for selling acid. Well, that wasn't so bad, this was the seventies. Everybody was a drug dealer in those days. He was good company all across the nation, a much longer trip than anticipated because we hit bang into the oil embargo; he ended staying at my brother's with me. He had jumped bail, and needed some respite, and then he took my urging, and turned himself in.

He turned out to enjoy male companionship more than I had anticipated; I figured out the score, knew what was available, appreciated him. But I would not be unfaithful to Mark.

His presence for that week in the desert made it difficult to fully pursue things with Mark. Maybe my subconscious made me drag him there just to give me a diversion; maybe I knew where Mark was coming from.

An evening came when I was with Mark, trying to figure out what we were going to do, dealing with his hurt feelings, he was hitting the sauce again because of the pressure I was putting on him.

That particular evening he accused me of planning to tell his father about us so that he would be kicked out and have to come with me.

A year or two earlier, who knows, he might have been right. But loving him had changed me, I was better than that. I knew myself better. I could not hurt him. In fact, the thought had flitted across my mind, once, and been instantly dismissed. I would not entertain such a thought and I told him so.

Lying with his back to me, drunk, crying, his voice breaking with pain he at long last told me what happened after his father found us together that night two years earlier. The next day his mother had told his brother, his sister, all the neighbors. He told me, sometimes he just wished he could go to sleep and never wake up.

And I was so angry, I was speechless. **HOW DARE SHE!** I wanted to confront her, I wanted to rip her apart with my bare fangs, to defend him in all his vulnerability! I had had no idea; never conceived of the pain she had caused him.

I knew one more thing. I was not going to hurt Mark; I was not going to manipulate him. We loved each other, and I believed love conquers all.

It doesn't you know.

That night I realized for the first time how hard I was making things for him, how much he was tied to his family. Despite what she had done, he loved her, could not conceive of leaving his family, being rejected by them, walking away from them.

And on that last night we slept together, and he put his leg over me and held me, and I held on.

I too was crying, for I knew what it meant for me.

We said goodbye in moon shadow under a Palo Verde tree.

1974

Los Angeles – February

*I can still feel the breeze
That rustles through the trees
And misty memories of days gone by
But we can never see tomorrow¹⁹*

The move was simple enough, and I quickly found an apartment in the Wilshire district, a flat on a block of Normandy street that was routinely used as a movie set to represent New York city.

It was a difficult time for me. I did not know the city, I did not know anyone there, except, curiously, Mark's oldest sister, who lived in the San Fernando Valley and was pretty much on my "do not call" list.

I was still depressed and at moments suicidal, but depression has a natural cycle to it, and even bad events don't necessarily keep you down. Mine had been running full tilt for almost eight months and it just began to run out of steam.

And then too I knew it was time to come out for real, I was almost twenty-five.

I figured the way it worked, you went to a gay bar and found someone to love. Or got laid. Well, I wasn't clear on the details.

A few years later a friend asked me "When you go someplace new, how do you find a gay bar?" In the 70's you bought a guidebook that listed them. But just then, I didn't know how it was done, and one day I walked past a place, during the day, and saw photos posted outside.

OK, so I didn't know the difference between a gay bar and a drag bar. Lots of people still don't. I went in late that evening, got too drunk, and was basically petrified, terrified. No one there looked like Mark. Smelled like Mark. No one I wanted to even talk to.

I don't know how I found about the Gay Community Center, it was on Wilshire in an old house in those early days, but I heard about it. To any young person of today it will probably sound silly, but I know that my experience was a common one in that time. I drove around the block past it for days, too afraid to stop and walk up. There was a sign. GAY. But I did, eventually manage to do it, one sunny afternoon, and there I was, gay and out. Well, OK it took a while to get to that point, but in six months I was a much happier guy, with a fair number of friends. I watched the impeachment hearings from my bedroom. Not always alone. I knew where the gay bars were and knew how to get laid. Knew that it was OK even if it wasn't love. But it was not the same, it did not feel like love. It never filled me up. I missed him so.

I wrote to Dear Abby but she never answered me.

*I'd like to help you in your struggle to be free
There must be fifty ways to leave your lover²⁰*

I started to talk to him on the phone again.

No, I wasn't stupid, I didn't think he would change his mind, I didn't even think any more that I wanted him to come to me; I knew I needed someone who was healthier, who was able to be out, who could be more an equal to me. I wasn't over him, but I knew what the ending of our story looked like.

I still loved him, I needed to know what he was doing, to see how I could help him find happiness, you don't walk away from someone you love even if you break up.

And so when I came to town for a visit with my brother, I asked him to come out to dinner with me, and for once we did go somewhere together, somewhere public. I picked one of the nicest restaurants in town, because he was still special to me.

Now, I had no intention of more, I just wanted to see how he was doing, see his face again. So I was not ready, when I stopped at the alley to drop him off, for what he said.

Cary had moved out at some point, Mark was back in the old garage room. And he had told me that he had redecorated the room, with psychedelic rolling black lines and white, purple and black paint. I hadn't paid much attention.

But as I was saying good night to him, he said, "Aren't you going to come in and see the room?"

I was taken aback, of course. It was late, but what a risk he was taking, I knew I was certainly not welcome in that house, much less his bedroom. But I would do almost anything to please him, and he was sure that his father was in bed and would not know.

And he seemed so eager for me to see it. I was naïve, I thought he really wanted to show me the room. He wanted sex, of course. He had craftily tricked me into his lair; maybe there was a bit of coyote in him after all.

It was a hot night; summers in the desert are like that. As I touched him, as we made the practiced love of old lovers, I told him I loved him. I told him I would *always* love him.

He did not understand. I knew it was the last time. I could no longer be his rabbit.

I was a man.

I left as the sun rose, kissing him farewell in his sleep.

Our long national nightmare ended. Nixon resigned on his nineteenth birthday.

Epilogue

I saw Mark once more.

In 1976 I went back to college, I spent three years back in the desert, head of the gay student alliance, prominent in the town, made the newspapers a time or two. I fought a peaceful fight for gay rights. I picketed Anita Bryant. I started a gay peer-counseling program at the University and worked a suicide hotline. I spoke to endless groups that needed so see a real live queer. Those days are past, everyone knows someone now.

But I never told Mark I was there, never looked him up. I did not think it was fair and I did not think I could or should again be a part of his life.

In 1979 I had a job offer, a serious step upward to a management position, starting in September; back in Los Angeles. And his birthday was just then, he turned twenty-four; I was thirty. And I figured he could not misinterpret my intentions if I called him just before moving.

I hired a singing telegram service to drop a package at his house, some photos I had taken of him, sure he would know who had sent it. I included a message, wishing him a happy birthday saying "I'm in the phone book if you want to look me up." It was not signed.

He called. He told me the telegram was the best birthday present he'd ever gotten. I asked if he wanted to get together for a drink.

It was a disaster. We met, but he thought I was trying to renew the relationship, then that I wanted him to move again with me for my new job. At first he asked if we could be just friends, since I lived in town but I told him no. I didn't realize it, didn't explain to him that I was just trying to get to know how he was doing. It ended with him angrily telling me not to call him again, not to look him up. Not to keep confusing him.

I walked away feeling badly, but thought, "He'll change his mind, I'll call him in a year or two."

But I never did. I put it off year after year, and finally decided that at some point you have to let people live their lives as they will. And so I did.

My mother died in 1986. I had come to know I loved her, and learned to overlook and forgive her craziness. On Memorial Day I went to visit in the cemetery, there was a flag on her grave and it didn't belong. I picked it up and walked about to find a better place for it.

Three rows away I saw John's grave. It shocked me, I had not known he was here.

I gave him the flag, he had fallen in battle, deserved it. Now and then I look up his pictures in the yearbook. When I'm in town I visit him.

I never again had a love like Mark. No one smells like he did. Maybe you only get one of those.

My life held more love, a partner for ten years and I loved him. He was, and our relationship was, as weird and wonderful as Mark in their way, but we never had that kind of passion. His journey took him elsewhere.

Eventually I decided I wanted to have children and had eight foster children. I adopted one, he is twenty-one; he wasn't even born when Mark and I last met. I love him to pieces and he has given me two beautiful grandchildren and made me proud. My life is not perfect, but it has been happy.

Mark. I have always, I will always, I do still love you, even if it is only my memory of you. I hope your life has been full, and happy, for you deserve it, you deserve all the sweetness and kindness the world has to offer. Whenever I feel down, whenever I doubt my own goodness, I think of you and of how honorably and passionately we loved, and I feel good.

And when April comes upon me,
I go to the desert to find you again.
Safe, beyond coyotes and rabbits,
Safe in the moon shadow of a Palo Verde,
The desert is a place of peace.
I can see clearly now.

*I can see clearly now The rain is gone,
I can see all Obstacles in my way
Gone are the dark clouds That had me blind
It's gonna be a bright, Bright, sun-shiny day.*

*I think I can make it now, The pain is gone
All of the bad feelings have disappeared
Here is the rainbow I've been prayin' for
It's gonna be a bright, Bright, sun-shiny day.*

*Look all around, There's nothin'
But blue skies Look straight ahead,
Nothin' but blue skies*

*I can see clearly now, The rain is gone,
I can see all Obstacles in my way
Gone are the dark clouds That had me blind
It's gonna be a bright, Bright, sun-shiny day.²¹*

Postscript: This story is done, though life may still have some surprises for me.

The Soundtrack

The reader should presume all of the following lyrics are copyright, the author is not smart enough to find all of the appropriate copyright information.

¹ *Crystal Blue Persuasion*, Tommy James & the Shondells

² *Ode to Billy Joe*, B. Gentry

³ *First Time Ever I Saw Your Face*, Roberta Flack, Ewan MacColl

⁴ *American Pie*, Lyrics and Music, Don McLean

⁵ *Build Me Up, Buttercup*, *The Foundations*, *Tony Macaulay*, *Michael D'Abo*

⁶ *(They Long To Be) Close To You*, The Carpenters, Richard Carpenter/Roger Nichols/Paul Williams

⁷ *Hello, I Love You*, Words and Music, The Doors

⁸ *I'd Love To Change The World*, Ten Years After, Alvin Lee

⁹ *I Think We're Alone Now*, Tommy James & the Shondells

¹⁰ *I Hear You Knockin'*, Dave Edmunds

¹¹ *Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)* Lyrics and Music, Don McLean

¹² *Brain Damage*, Pink Floyd (Waters)

¹³ *Signs*, recorded by Five Man Electrical Band.

¹⁴ *Brain Damage*

¹⁵ *Heart of the Sunrise*, Yes, Anderson-Squire-Bradford

¹⁶ *Killing me Softly*, Roberta Flack, words and music, Norman Gimbel & Charles Fox

¹⁷ *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*, Roberta Flack, *Quiet Fire*; words & music Carole King & Gerry Goffin Screen-Gems EMI

¹⁸ *Bad Moon Rising*, Words/Music, John Fogerty, Creedence Clearwater Revival

¹⁹ *How Can You Mend A Broken Heart*, Bee Gees, B. Gibb /R. Gibb

²⁰ *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover*, Lyrics and Music, Paul Simon

²¹ *I Can See Clearly Now*, Johnny Nash