

THE BOY WHO WOULD NOT BE

SYDNEY STREET PUBLIC didn't have middle school, so for grade seven I started at Central Public in downtown Cornwall. It was one of the oldest schools left in the city, with newer boxy wings added on to the sides. I was so nervous the night before I started that I had what my parents and I thought was the flu. That sick feeling of chills, near fainting, and my stomach rolling over like a shoe in a washing machine would follow me into later life. It was a fever of anxiety.

My parents had me lie on the couch in the living room while they watched *Porky's* on TV. The young men saying words I'd never heard were a small distraction from the bucket my mother placed next to the couch. I felt like I might throw up at any moment. Every guy in the film who wanted a blowjob more than a girlfriend didn't help, but I remember the young men were something of an awakening, even if I didn't understand much of what they were talking about.

Within the first few days of being at Central, I met the first great love of my life, Dana. Standing on the pavement of the school grounds, he showed the other kids how he could flip his

lower eyelids inside out, rest his square, silver-framed glasses on those lids, draw in his chin so it was buried in his neck, then speak in a funny voice. His impression looked like Beaker from the Muppets. My first thought was, *Here's someone who'll be my friend.*

Dana was great company. The first time I visited his home, a giant four-bedroom doctor's house on a large corner lot, he put Jane Siberry's *Speckless Sky* album on the record player. Then Falco, then Prince. He could play every instrument under the sun. To honour Wham!, we recorded our own Weird Al-type song, "Bake Me Up Like a Pogo." He tried to teach me drums and break dancing. We watched *The Outsiders* lying on the white shag carpet in his TV room and sobbed together at the end. Sitting on the piano bench next to him, I learned the opening bars to the theme of *Phantom of the Opera*, which is the only piano I've ever learned. I can play that bit to this day.

My parents separated—though it was short-lived—when I was in grade seven. After years of screaming and dish-throwing and pouring beer down the sink, we sold our home, and my mother moved with my sister and me into a two-bedroom apartment. I remember distinctly that after we moved, Leica (pronounced *Lisa*: my mother was still drugged from her labour when the nurse asked her how to spell it) and I went back to the house to visit Dad. She and I sat on the couch, Dad in his Lay-Z-Boy, and in the awkwardness of that moment, all of us sitting stiffly in our seats, I felt the formality of this unnatural visit—a *visit*; families who live together don't visit.

In that moment, I realized I had nothing to say to my father. None of us had any idea what to talk about. My own father, suddenly, so clearly, was unknown. I was eleven at the time.

About half a year after moving out of one house, my parents reconciled and we all moved into another, one with a very middle-class in-ground pool, in the east end of Cornwall where I began high school at St Lawrence. Dana and I both went there for the French immersion program.

My troubled home life continued as Dana and I became better friends. When he and I were in grade ten, my parents kicked my sister out of the house because of a dispute over her boyfriend at the time (who later became her husband, Rolland), then a month later my parents split up for the last time, and my mother and I moved into another two-bedroom apartment.

Within a year of that move, my mother had a new partner, with whom we promptly moved in. I was generally a wreck at this time. I'd come out to myself and entertained fresh ideas of suicide. I couldn't eat supper without having to lie down part-way through the meal because I felt sick to my stomach. I'd breathe and relax for five minutes and then return to the table to continue eating.

These were hard days—the usual, confusing, fag teenager kind. I was a wonderful mix of desperate, confused, enraged, and terrified. One random afternoon in my emotional soup, my mother and I had a fight over something inconsequential. All my resentments about growing up in a tumultuous home boiled over. We had a rip-roaring argument in which I screamed so loudly I lost control of my mouth—I felt drool

pour down my chin, and I spat as I yelled. I could barely stand up, my body shook so violently. After we'd both said the cruellest things we could think of—I hope that's as cruel as we could get—I charged into my room. My mother followed a minute later, threw garbage bags at me, and told me to pack. She called my father to come get me.

Dad was living with Leica and Rolland then. They had a spare room, and Dad had needed a bed after a split with a girlfriend. This was during his own period of suicide attempts, which Leica mostly kept secret from me.

I slept on Leica's couch for two weeks until I wrote my mother a letter to explain that I was struggling with suicidal thoughts. It was as close to a coming-out letter as you can imagine, though she didn't catch on to that part. She finally phoned and invited me back home to live with her and my stepfather. It was the last fight we ever had. We cleared the air, I guess, so the years since have been good ones. Having said my piece, I could forgive her.

Not longer after this mess, the safety and playfulness and camaraderie I felt with Dana, the thrill of him, translated into romance. We were seventeen. It was a bumpy start for us because he fell in love with me at precisely the same time he began dating one of our best friends, Michelle. She was the date; I was the secret. Dana had the heartbreaking idea that he could love me but date her because we were two different genders, so what he did with me didn't affect his relationship with her. If I had been a girl, he admitted, he'd have to tell her, but something about the gender divide, and being queer in the

late 1980s in a small town, made him think we were fine if kept a secret.

I didn't mind the secret part as much because it was safe-making, but I was much too monogamous to share the great love of my life. I wasn't about to break up with him either—I was accustomed to difficult emotional attachments. So after a few months of torturous negotiations, when my friends wondered aloud why the hell I was so reactive to Dana's relationship with Michelle, whom I also loved dearly, I gave Dana an ultimatum.

Dana chose me. We were together for four years in total, from the ages of seventeen to just before I turned twenty-one. I went from being a virgin at the start of our relationship to having the kind of mind-blowing sex you only get when you're young and starting out, when your sexual synapses are firing for the first time, waking up each tiny point of contact your skin has with the world, whatever it touches—bed, finger, air. We had sex for six hours at a time, three orgasms each, crawling slow and slippery as snails over each other's skin, five or more days a week. Sex, I came to believe, was a place of safety. It was a place where I wasn't alone.

Those years of emotional paddleball were accompanied by puberty, when the sense of difference I felt from the other boys went from being a big secret buried in my thoughts to hard evidence, literally. Erections hit at the worst times when boys were around: playing in the grass, being tackled, in the locker room, the bathroom, standing in front of the class. The shame of being attracted to men and the panic that I might be

found out made desire a trap. I felt betrayed by my body, which quickly translated into a fear of it.

Worse still, in my mid-teens, acne hit. I suffered with acute acne on my back for ten years because I refused to go to the doctor. (When I did finally get medical help, the acne specialist said, “Oh my god,” when he saw my back. The official term on my chart was the charming Latin phrase *acne vulgaris*.) If I accidentally hit an inflammation, I was in severe pain, nearly to the point of passing out. But I told no one. It was a simple, debilitating fear. Nobody saw me shirtless, let alone naked, for a decade. Even Dana was banned from seeing my back for the four years we dated, including the two we lived together. Sex happened in the dark or in the daylight only if I wore a shirt. We never discussed it.

I weighed a whopping 125 pounds between the ages of sixteen and twenty, and I was six-foot-one. I was a young, fey, gay guy, a poor excuse for a man by the measures of masculinity in my small town. I was so thoroughly ashamed of my body, so fearful of it and afraid to be seen in it, that any new place made me anxious. I rarely used public washrooms; I could spend a ten-hour day out of the house without peeing. I was uncomfortable with my own sweat, so I avoided almost any activity that would make me perspire. At the worst times, I even felt panicked in line-ups, because people could see me. I was trapped, with no practical way to be invisible.

Dana was a saint, I can see in hindsight. He had so much patience with me.

Our four years together were a blessing, because he made it clear that he loved me unconditionally. We didn't break up for a lack of love but a lack of compatibility. Realizing we did sex way better than marriage, we began translating our romance into friendship, which means we broke up but had sex together for another six months.

Part of the complication was that the season we broke up, I lived in Cornwall for a summer job but travelled back to Toronto to visit my friends there. Dana had been my best friend through high school, so where else would I stay when I was in Toronto but with him? I promised myself I'd get out of the emotional amusement park as soon as I moved back to the city for school and had a new place. I needed to get on with my romantic life. (I had a decade of mostly unsatisfying short-term relationships to look forward to.)

On my last trip to Toronto to apartment hunt in the summer of 1992, I crashed with the ex for a week. I'd found a place to live, so on my final night in his apartment we both knew this was it, the end of the end. We quickly landed in bed together and fucked languorously. I travelled every inch of his body, memorializing. Every fleshy piece held our history—his armpits, slim arms, and meatier legs, a small patch of chest hair, and the smooth skin behind his ear, his dick that we'd agreed was the same length and girth as mine, his hairline, smooth broad shoulders, and the dusting of hair in the crack of his butt all were made museum pieces, scrapbook pages, mnemonic devices of our four years together.

After an hour of rolling around, Dana asked if I wanted to try something new.

“New?” I asked. I think my head must have cocked to the side. What hadn’t we done before? He reached into the side-table drawer and pulled out a black three-tiered dildo, each bump more intimidating than the last. The final night that my first boyfriend and I slept together was our first night with toys.

“I bought this,” he said with a crooked smile.

Without missing a beat, I thought, *I knew you were missing me.*

“Okay, I can try it on you,” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

He smiled shyly. “I’ve already used it. I want you to try it.”

I looked at the stout silicone pole, gulped, hesitated, gulped again, and agreed. He wrapped the black dildo in latex and then lifted my legs to rest my feet on his shoulders.

He began working on me. He rolled it in circles, wiggled it back and forth, pushed, grunted, and teased me with it until, what must have been twenty minutes later, I felt my hole stretch as if I were about to birth a baby elephant and silicone bumped against my ass cheeks.

“I’m at the base?” I asked, sighing with relief.

“That was the first hump,” he answered with a smirk.

I invented a new form of incredulity, to match the moment. Half an hour later, we finally had the whole thing inside me. I felt like he’d impaled me on an obelisk. A monument to our relationship. Endorphins did somersaults through my blood. My heart felt like its valves were trying to stretch in competition with my sphincter. It was incredible. My body was incredible. Our love, even on the cusp of this heartrending breakup, was incredible.

When he pulled it out, I'd never felt so alone.

"Want more?" he asked.

I could only nod my head.

He lowered his hand toward my butt, without the obelisk, and slipped a few fingers inside me, then a few more, until I felt a peculiar collapse. The pressure on my hole vanished as though his hand had shrunk. I shot him another surprised look.

"I have the whole thing in there," he said, which was a phrase far simpler than its implications.

I looked down to see his arm pointing toward my perineum; his hand disappeared inside me. I was a hand puppet. When he started to wiggle his fingers, I thought, *That settles it.*

Half an hour later, we traded places. When I was buried to my wrist inside the man I'd never have sex with again, I was pure amazement.

Let's take a pause with my hand inside him for a moment to try to explain for those unfamiliar with fisting the particular mystery of this sensation.

A nurse I used to drink with once described to me his first day on the job in cardiac care, when he saw a man's chest opened and a doctor manually pump the man's heart in his palm. My hand felt just as otherworldly, like I'd slipped it right inside a ventricle, enveloped in the living warmth of Dana's body. Here was a new means of studying human behaviour, with touch. It was the same magic of communion that Helen Keller must have felt the first time she recognized a word on her hand.

To recognize an object through touch is called haptic perception. (Not that I recognized what I was touching; I was haptically illiterate.) The concept of extended physiological proprioception, according to the all-knowing Wikipedia, is that “when using a tool such as a stick, perceptual experience is transparently transferred to the end of the tool.” Wrap your mind around the notion that with a hand inside another person, both parties experience proprioception—he is the tool that extends from my hand, and I am the tool extending from his ass.

Fisting altered my sense of inside and outside, of the body’s border, or the borders of selves. To date, fisting is my best experience of the embodiment of the profane and the sacred. Our vulnerability in that moment was complete, encompassing, thorough. Love is never more acute than when your interior is in the hands of another.

That anal handshake has remained the most intimate of my sexual experiences. The blurring of the borders of my self—the fusion, the mirroring—was juxtaposed with a keen awareness of that other person, that sentience I trusted with my own.

Now I remove my hand from Dana’s ass to widen the conversation a little, if you’ll indulge me a moment more.

Many years later, after that most intimate wave, we’ve seen the rise of Internet porn. A trove of fisting images are now easily at your digital fingertips. The web has brought fisting home. I’d bet my foreskin that a large majority of young gay men raised after the invention of the Internet see sexual acts online before

they engage in them. You learn by watching videos how to fist before you meet the man who first puts his hand inside you.

Most electronic fists wear leather cuffs and torn denim. The receptor's ass hangs over the edge of a black sling strung up with chains. The handsome man, buried to the wrist, calls his horizontal partner "bitch," "faggot," "whore," "slave," etc. Fisting, as demonstrated in porn, is predominantly a product of domination. It's not like I expect to see much of the real world in porn—or all their dicks would be five or six inches—but the contrast between my fisting experience with that of the porn world is incongruous. And illuminating.

Why aren't these moments of intimacy intimate? Why are these extraordinary circumstances reduced to physical exteriors, to exertions? Why does the emotional moment in porn get reduced to control, with the bottoms as receptacles of aggression? (As viewers, we aren't invited to involve our hearts or heads, just our bodies.) Is the baseness of the act hardwired? Why can't men be vulnerable in porn without being dominated or dominating? Why is it all about the beast, the animal, and not the personality? Why is our choice of beast never a lamb? Why don't the fisters use their free hand to smooth the hair of the bottom, tucking strays behind his partner's ear, holding the side of his head in his unlubricated palm?

My best friend, Colin, has complained that once, during a hookup, a Vancouver, BC, man spoke to him with a Brooklyn accent, saying things like "Suck dat big dick." The dude took on the accent only once they started fooling around. "Canadians don't talk like that," Colin wanted to say. "You're talking

in a porn accent.” Sex talk has become a poor byproduct of US-dominated porn tropes. It’s as ubiquitous as small-town white boys parroting inner-city black rappers.

And maybe it’s petty, but isn’t it worth asking, as a purely aesthetic critique, why all slings are black? What’s wrong with lavender, teal, baby blue? Think about pink, which could add such a nice glow to pasty skin. Don’t say, “Black masks the colour of shit,” because porn is full of pale sheets and nobody thinks anything of it.

If Susan Sontag, in *On Photography*, is correct in saying that, “in teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing,” then what do fisting videos tell our young gay men about intimacy? What is excluded in their right to observe? What are the vocabularies of gay male sex evidenced in our representations of it?

I’m not asking us to censor SM porn, which is hot, or condemning the use of domination as a tool for getting off, which is also hot. I’m asking for balance. I’m inviting us to be the men who insert our hands in another with the awe inherent in that moment. I’m asking for the love fist. I’m asking for the rubbered hand of tenderness.

A good portion of the magic that made Dana family—still family, always family—is his complete disinterest all those years in what a man is or isn’t. Dana wanted to be Dana, which offered such a comfort to me, who for so many years didn’t want to be himself.

In the year after we broke up, Dana began wearing dresses, first at home, then out in the world. She began a transition from fag to lesbian. More or less. She was always bisexual, but after she transitioned to woman she had monogamous relationships exclusively with women. You'd think that knowing her for ten years, during four of which we were lovers, I'd have had some sense, but I didn't. We were both feminists; we saw how misogyny and homophobia were both gender-based prejudices. We called ourselves queer when few people wanted to be. The only small hint I could have had about her gender was that when we went to shopping malls, Dana couldn't tell whether a clothing store had men's or women's clothes. She always wanted to go into Suzy Shier, thinking they had men's jeans. Ironically, Dana began to wear women's clothes the same time I did, except she was trans and I was, hmm ... exploring.

Living in Toronto during my early twenties, I carried around a thoroughly debilitating shame for my body that was the exact size and shape of it. Much of that shame was both homophobic and gendered. Regardless of where you learn it, pretty much everyone is taught at a young age to fear being gay. (Despite the It Gets Better Project and anti-bullying strategies, which didn't exist when I was growing up, gayness remains *the* schoolyard taunt.) For those of us who are queer and those of us who think we might be gay, which includes those of us who have had gay thoughts, those of us who stumbled alert from a same-sex reverie, those of us who enjoyed a touch by a person of the same sex, been intrigued by someone gender variant and maybe stared a little too long, or even taken pleasure in the

presence of a person with the same gender signifiers, it was not “the other” on the playground who we were taught to fear but ourselves.

Fear of one’s self. That’s got to mess anyone up. In our years together, Dana and I patted ourselves on the back for doing a damn good job of overcoming the social stigma of being same-sex cocksuckers and fudge-packers. Like other queers in the western world, we’d done a solid job of coming out and demanding to be counted as equal, regardless of what we did behind closed doors.

In those early years of being out, I grew more and more aware that our homo fear wasn’t as tied to a sexual stigma as it was to a question of gender. In our great sexually liberated movement, we may have been proud to say whom we had sex with, but repeatedly I witnessed how the other men among us were loathe to risk losing cultural influence by being “faggy.” To be “femme” was a great weakness. They could love a butch, even if she was a woman, unless she wanted some of their cultural power, and then they weren’t so sure. They scratched their heads with annoyance and disbelief at those of us on the spectrum of trans. Straight-looking/straight-acting became a mantra for gay men in the early 1990s (and the sentiment, if not the language, is thriving more than two decades later). Queer women embraced the butch and the femme and the spectrum in between in a way gay men haven’t dared. The women amongst us aren’t risking a loss of the gender-power they never had.

One evening in August 1992, the power of femininity revealed itself to me when, as a lark to celebrate my best friend Paul's birthday, he and I decided to do drag and go out to the bars. Everyone had always said I'd make a beautiful girl, so it was time to find out.

I put on a curly blonde wig and an orange A-line dress ... and the clouds parted, and the sun shone down, and I was gorgeous.

Everyone said so.

I felt it, through to my bones.

I realized the first time I put on a dress that my chicken legs, too often mocked, now looked enviably thin. My slim waist, long arms and neck, my love of colour, my humour, my ability to mix and match, my love of sewing and hair-styling, of bobbles and shoes and shoulder bags, all suddenly fit well into one terrific soft-lensed portrait of femininity. I was committed to drag in that instant because it allowed me a means to celebrate my 125 pounds. In a dress, all the gender terms were suddenly reversed, and I fit. Drag gave me a means to celebrate the limp wrist, for it was no longer limp but feminine. That faggy women's lib empowerment—wherein others judged me as a gender success—disappeared the moment the dress was unzipped.

The next day, though, I could tell that a little piece of me liked a little bit more of me.

Eight or nine years into her gender switch, Dana said that she couldn't wait for me to transition too because I was already becoming my own kind of genderqueer. By the end

of my twenties, I was painting nail polish on my thumbs to go with the skirts I wore to work at my part-time job at the UBC Bookstore. Given the option, most things I bought were pink. I pierced my ears. I hung out with mostly queer women. And I owned more pairs of heels than your average pageant contestant.

I thought about Dana's observation for a long time.

For our years together, through high school and into my early twenties, clothes had been my security blanket, my disguise. When I was twenty-seven, a therapist once asked me to describe the steps I took to dress that day, and I talked for ten minutes about the outfits I'd tried on, what I'd hoped they'd do, and how I'd hoped they'd function, until finally settling on what she saw before her.

Clothes had been a tool for disappearing. If I was expecting to be out for the day, I couldn't leave the house until I was satisfied that what I was wearing was appropriate for work, the poetry reading, and the dance club that night. It was debilitating. Some mornings it took me an hour to figure out what to wear. If I came home before going out again, I could spend another hour once more choosing the right clothes.

It wasn't so much that I was obsessed with the clothing, because I hated the small range of colours in men's clothes (brown and black and grey and blue, sometimes green) and I hated most men's wallets and shoes and belts (in brown and black and grey and blue, maybe tan). I was obsessed with fitting in. Clothes were my only route to confidence, even though I resented most of the options in menswear. If I wasn't going

to act the part, I thought I could avoid scrutiny by dressing the part.

The kind of masculine behaviour I'd been offered in my small town came with tying cats' tails together and hanging them over a clothesline, snapping the necks of birds, or breaking pretty much anything that could break just to watch it break. Masculinity, in my experience, had been destructive and mostly solitary. Violence could be done in packs, but it was an act of solitude as a rejection of what is; it divided you from the world. I had had enough of that in my family life.

I think that Dana, having come out as trans, recognized that I was undoing my gender colour by colour. Trying to reconcile my paradigm of manhood with my love of the feminine was confusing. Loving all things girly, I felt like I was trans, but I was also happy being male, just not being a man. I didn't like what manhood offered me.

To reconcile these oppositions, a short time after Dana spoke with me, I told people I was transitioning. I was a Male-to-Male trans guy. MTM. I imagined that second male was a man of my own devising.

Although I abandoned the term publicly, I've carried it around as a reminder. MTM has been productive for remaking what I think a man is, what I want a man to be. As a continuation of the fresh perspective I had when I finally admitted to the world that I was gay, so I could throw off the burden of what a straight guy was expected to be, thinking of myself as MTM was a further relief, as I could abandon what it meant to be a man.

Pretending to be straight had been so bloody boring, but pretending to be a garden-variety man was even more limiting. In coming out I wasn't just seeking the freedom to do in the bedroom what I wanted and with whom; I was after the celebration of my whole self, the whole complex person I had hidden away in there. After MTM, it was clear that the biggest bonus in being gay was abandoning the prescribed rules and rituals of being "a man." If I felt like it, I could wear pink. I could be tender in public. I could cry at movies. Paint my nails. Read Paglia. I could jump for joy on the street corner. Kiss men hello. Use colourful adjectives. Be polite. Admit my fears in public. Be kind and sensitive.

Because I live that "gender edit" on the street as the proverbial man in pink pants, folks shout "Fag!" out their truck windows at me. They are creating a separate category for what I am, a subset of man. They recognize that my gender is a performance, a failed performance. I don't fit their narrative of that gender. The threat I pose, whether they are conscious of it or not, is that by performing a different myth, I reveal that their gender is a myth too. Their gender is also theatre.

One of the biggest bolts of insight to strike my flagpole didn't occur to me until grad school: fags can still be men. So simple and obvious, but that insight had eluded me in my early life because I had created another category of man to accommodate fagdom. The two categories felt mutually exclusive to me. The thought that they overlapped stopped me in my tracks in a stairwell. I lost my balance perched above the remaining steps. It was like I was looking at one landscape from two

perspectives, trying to establish that they weren't different scenes. I was a man. I was a fag. Fags could be men. Men could be fags.

From that day forward, the queeniest guy in the world was still a guy (if he wanted to be) and therefore my definition of a man had to be broad enough to encompass him. When I considered all the different types of men out there, it became a lot harder to say what a man was. Two decades later, the category of fag has proven to be just as kaleidoscopic. Trans men, butch women, and genderqueers of all types and textures might identify as fags. If we're paying attention, we can see how the short-hands we've used to label genders and sexualities are about as articulate as playing charades with your hands tied together, in the dark.